

World Views on the Macro and Micro Scale

*A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Keith Suckling, Warden
at the Society's Gathering at Scargill, July 2015*

I was glad to hear in David Gosling's talks at this Gathering his experience of aspects of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam which he shared from his periods of time in South Asia. It should not have been a surprise, but it was still very striking to see the differences in the world view of these cultures almost at first hand. We are of course familiar with the concept of world views and the conflicts that can arise when they come in close contact. The readings we have heard this morning give us a scriptural context. The story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11.1-9) can be seen as the point at which world views began to diverge. More significantly, Jesus points out to his disciples that the world view which he represents is fundamentally different from that held by the wider society in which we live (John 14.22-15.1).

It is a familiar picture, but sometimes small events bring the real situation into closer focus. Early in 2014 I received a completely unexpected invitation from the Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney to come to Fraserburgh in north-east Aberdeenshire as Priest in Charge of St Peter's Church. It was the kind of email which demanded taking very seriously and after a period of discernment and the necessary visits Helen and I moved to Fraserburgh in October. There was a very strong sense of being led by the Holy Spirit, of which more towards the end.

Shortly after arriving I made contact with some local schools and some weeks later this was followed up by a request for a discussion with a sixth year student who was working on a project on assisted dying. Legislation was in progress in the Scottish Parliament at the time (although it subsequently failed). I had a good discussion with the student and she was grateful to hear a point of view which was new to her. She had carefully gathered views from her own circle, family and friends, and it seemed that most of the opinions she had heard came from a utilitarian and pragmatic perspective. We are familiar of the idea of a conflict model between religious world views and secular ones, but on the basis of this and related experiences, I think we need to replace it with the ignorance model. It may not be too extreme to suggest that in the Venn diagram of these world views there is practically no overlap.

And still the regular traffic of confused debate continues. The challenges of natural disasters and suffering remain, God is accused and answers are demanded, but we can only have a debate when there is some common ground to work on. Fundamentalist atheism is no longer respectable intellectually but still dominates media discourse. All these factors and developments suggest that the ground in which we operate has slowly been shifting and now is quite different from what it was 30 years ago when the ideas of forming SOSc were taking shape. If people don't know what Christianity is they are not going to be particularly bothered about the subtleties of the science/religion debate. But the fact that some people pop up here and there who obstinately try to live fully within the

world view of a religion but who also accept and indeed celebrate the kind of data that the secular world needs to rely on sometimes stops the secularist short. Yes, amongst others, we are those people.

Christianity has to recover by people wanting to be part of it. You join a club, a sport or a society because it seems attractive to you. You don't know everything about it at the time but you are prepared to give it a try. But it's got to be attractive enough - to raise interest and curiosity. To those who follow a different world view, we are, using the word in a different way, curious people, but maybe we are ones who raise enough interest so that it gets to be followed up at some time in the future.

This continues to be our role in SOSc, and it is exactly as the aims of the Society were conceived 30 years ago. Perhaps some of the wider church is beginning to pay more attention. We continue to be, as I said two years ago, the data and the evidence. Or, put a little differently, we are and we inhabit and we have to remain the common ground, the more visible the better. In fact, we are getting some response to our publicity. In the past six months there have been more email requests for information about the Society with a view to membership than ever before. There is the unmeasurable but real trickle effect of people who have come into contact with our members telling others about us. Those of us who use social media can have an encouragingly wider impact.

Having made a major and unexpected move in the past year, and starting off with an agenda in mind containing far more things that could be done than are possible, I'm quite clear that we as a Society also have to continue to expect to be led. It's that peculiar partly proactive and partly reactive state where we try, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to synthesise all sorts of inputs, some specific and defined, some vague and hardly sensed. It's one that sees opportunities as they appear and, after appropriate discernment, takes them and manages to make progress without needing to have all the milestones defined in the way that we did for the kind of drug discovery programme I used to lead. Fuzzy. Often challenging to the scientific mind.

We can only be effective in taking the opportunities that offer themselves to us if our primary response is to God and to God in creation. This is what we share today as we celebrate the Eucharist with a eucharistic prayer from Operation Noah. I've talked mostly about the outward role of the Society, about our world view and others. But now as we worship together, this is the internal strength of our community. The real sense of community is never stronger than at this point in the Gathering. All that we stand for is enhanced and deepened and as always, I feel warmed and greatly encouraged by our time together.