



# Sea of Faith

Sea of Faith Network in Australia

## BULLETIN

JULY/AUGUST 2015



photo: Robin Ford

Walking with Grandma

The SOFIA website and archive of articles: [www.sof-in-australia.org](http://www.sof-in-australia.org)  
The SoFiA blog at: [www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php](http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php)

E X P L O R E  
religion faith meaning

## EDITORIAL

The initiatives outlined in the May/June Bulletin are under way. In addition to the web site and blog, the *sofiatalk* yahoo group has been re-launched, and we now have a Facebook page (page 3). So the question for me is: "How do we make the best use of these communication media?"

It will take some time to work this all out, and some things we try will work better than others. I'm making a start in this *Bulletin* by including a segment on what is happening in SoFiA's on-line presence (*Digitalia* page 17).

But whatever the medium, we still need copy, and this *Bulletin* has a wide range.

From the 2015 Conference on *Religion in Education* we have reports on the first three keynote presentations.

From the Victorian members we have Part 1 of a fascinating exploration of the origin of Mark's gospel (don't overlook the first footnote), and a companion piece on the background to St Paul. Part 2 of Mark will be in the next *Bulletin*. Also from Victoria is a summary of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's book *Heretic*, on reforming Islam.

Then there's... Well, I'll leave you to find the rest out for yourself.

No group is nominated for the next *Bulletin*; it's Editor's choice. I've got part 2 of Mark as a start. All contributions gratefully received!

Robin Ford [robinford@a1.com.au](mailto:robinford@a1.com.au)

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### CORRECTION

In the May/June Bulletin Peter Robinson was listed among the members of the Management Committee. This was incorrect.

Management

## SoFiA's Electronic Presence

*SoFiA has been present on the web for many years through its web page and blog, maintained by webmaster Greg Spearritt. We have also had an email group, sofiatalk. Jim Norman has re-launched sofiatalk and created a Facebook page too. In this article Jim describes how these resources work together and how to access them.*

The first point of contact for most people who want to know more about SoFiA is probably our web site [www.sof-in-australia.org](http://www.sof-in-australia.org) found, for example, by a Google or Bing search. If they decide to join, in most cases they would have the *Bulletin* delivered by email. Also, from the website they might have noted the sofiatalk email list and joined it by following the instructions under the *About Us* tab.

To open up SoFiA to those who mainly inhabit social media sites, I have now formed the *Sea of Faith in Australia Group* on Facebook. To access this you will need a Facebook account of your own, from which the *Sea of Faith in Australia Group* can be found by doing a search from the menu choices down the left hand

column. It is currently a 'closed' group which means that only Rodney Eivers (President) and I can authorise people to join. I may change this to 'public' once I can be sure that I am able to block people who come with ill intent.

Of course, all of these are optional; you can choose what suits you. For example, you might be quite happy to get the bi-monthly *Bulletin* in the mail and have nothing to do with computers or the internet at all. Or you might choose to participate only in the sofiatalk email list, which does not even require being a paid up member of SoFiA.

Whatever you choose, we aim for a vibrant network, with discussion flowing and membership thriving.

Management

## Positions Vacant

### STATE OR REGIONAL CONTACTS

We need volunteers to welcome newcomers to SoFiA and to provide a contact point for current members. This is especially the case where members may feel isolated and do not have the opportunity to gather in face-to-face groups. We have had state 'contacts' from the beginning of SoFiA and would like to reinstate them, and extend the principle to regional contacts.

If you are prepared to be a contact for your state or region, please email the President at [eiversrh@telstra.com](mailto:eiversrh@telstra.com)

### ADMINISTRATOR/SECRETARY

We are also looking to employ someone to provide administrative services to back up and extend the activities of the Management Committee. This person would need to have some office skills including being comfortable with electronic media, especially e-mails. She or he, however, in this administrative role, would not need to be familiar with the SoFiA ethos and conventions, but of course having a share in our aims would be a bonus. If someone with experience or enthusiasm, or both, were prepared to volunteer her or his services that would be ideal; however payment for the position is also possible. We envisage an initial time commitment of half a day per week. The administrative role would take over some of the responsibilities now undertaken by our General Secretary, Rachel Matthews and Membership Secretary, Cordelia Hull. For further details please contact the President, Rodney Eivers [eiversrh@telstra.com](mailto:eiversrh@telstra.com).

Rodney Eivers – President, for the Management Committee  
[eiversrh@telstra.com](mailto:eiversrh@telstra.com)

***One step forward, one step back, one step sideways: A forty year journey of RE in schools by Garth Read***  
***Religion, Diversity and Education by Anna Halafoff***

*In this summary of the first two keynote presentations from the 2015 SoFiA Conference Religion in Education, Robin Ford borrows text extensively from Powerpoint slides used by the presenters. To avoid a proliferation of quotation marks, only some of the borrowings are formally indicated; the rest can be inferred from the context.*

Our first two keynote speakers at the 2015 SoFiA conference *Religion in Education* led us through the history of teaching religion in Australian schools before looking at what we might do today.

Garth Read reflected upon his long career in the field. His talk was in two parts: (1) Historical Milestones, and (2) Philosophical Foundations. His personal journey had coincided with the forty-year social and political journey of the title of his presentation.

In contrast, Anna Halafoff is early in her career, but her personal journey is also, it seems, coinciding with a flurry of activity in Religious Instruction and Religious Education in schools. She believes that because of globalisation we live in an increasingly multi-faith and non-religious society, and accordingly our citizens will need cultural and religious literacy if they are to prosper in it.

As both speakers explained, religion in education has been, and still is, a contentious and politicised issue, which is why it turned out to be an excellent theme for our conference.

Garth's starting point was the 60 years from 1911 to 1970 when Christian churches had 'right of entry' to schools to conduct 'Special RE' classes. This church-based 'Special RE' - taught by volunteers - was distinct from 'General RE', which was school-based - taught as a regular part of the curriculum.

Anna started her story further back, during the 1870s, when most colonies, except for Tasmania and New South Wales, moved to 'compulsory and secular' education that prohibited the teaching of religion in school hours. Segregation of students according to their

socio-economic status and religious affiliation was seen as potentially threatening to social cohesion. Instead, education that was affordable and available to all (and that did not teach that any particular person was better or more deserving than another) was seen as highly preferable (Maddox, M 2014, *Taking God to school: The end of Australia's egalitarian education?* Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p31). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the education acts in NSW and Tasmania also enshrined 'free, compulsory and secular' education. Nevertheless, by the 1950s all Australian States had some form of religious instruction in government schools, delivered by religious volunteers.

Debates continued as to how best to teach religion in Australian schools, which brings us to the 1970s. This was a time of reviews — State-based, of course. Anna told us that in the 1970s reviews of RI practices were conducted in Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia and New South Wales. These reviews generally recommended that RI programs be replaced by General Religious Education (GRE), comprising teaching about diverse religions by qualified teachers as part of the curriculum. The Russell Report (Victoria, 1974) made this clear:

While a great majority of Australians make some Christian profession, we nevertheless live in an open and plural society. Our Christian Churches and other religious bodies are free to pursue their various courses, and are respected for their contribution to our personal and national life, but none is 'established'. In such a society the school must be the school and not the Church. It is not

the responsibility of the State school to press for the acceptance of Christian faith or any other faith.

The recommendations of the Russell Report were rejected. In Queensland, the report *Challenge and Change* (1972) had made equivalent recommendations. These were not just rejected; the whole report was buried. For Garth this was not academic research; it was his lived experience and to prove it he had one copy of the report that mysteriously had avoided being pulped. Its recommendations reflect what is now a generally held (professional) view of RE in State schools.

A 1973 review in South Australia (Steinle report) fared better, and by 1975 new activities in Queensland were having an impact, for example the Queensland Religious Education Curriculum Project and work by the Queensland Board of Secondary School Studies.

As Anna explained, the 2000s saw debate increase again — the 'religion in schools debate'. One outcome was that ethics education was permitted as an RI (Special RE) alternative in NSW in the late 2000s; but it was not permitted in Victoria on the technicality that Humanism is not a religion. Organisations were created to participate in the debates, such as the Religions, Ethics and Education Network of Australia (REENA), and Fairness in Religion in Schools (FIRS). And there was controversy over ACCESS Ministries apparently seeing their participation in Religious Education as a 'mission field'. All in all there was a huge amount of media attention in Anna's home state of Victoria.

Anna also told us that a National Curriculum began to be developed in 2008, but it is still in the process of being implemented in stages across the country. Each State is still responsible for how this is occurring, so significant regional variations in education persist across Australia. REENA and ACARA (the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, the agency responsible for the development of the Australian Curriculum) began meeting regularly from 2011. Opportunities were identified for diverse religions, spiritualities and ethics to be incorporated within History, Civics

and Citizenship and in Intercultural Understanding and Ethical Understanding.

But politics is never far away. A 2014 review of the Australian National Curriculum, initiated by the Commonwealth Government, focused on spiritual development and wellbeing, and virtually ignored the need for appreciation of religious diversity. As Anna pointed out, this was despite scholars arguing that education about religions and worldviews could create better understanding of diverse worldviews (whether religious or non-religious), counter negative media representation, contribute to social inclusion and harmony, and equip young Australians with invaluable skills to live and work in increasingly diverse societies.

Rather than recommend more teaching about diverse religions and worldviews the reviewers included as *Recommendation 15* that:

ACARA revise the Australian Curriculum to place more emphasis on morals, values and spirituality as outlined in the Melbourne Declaration, and to better recognise the contribution of Western civilisation, our Judeo-Christian heritage, the role of economic development and industry and the democratic underpinning of the British system of government to Australia's development.

Anna felt that this had taken us back to square one, with the risk of ethnocentrism, relativism, xenophobia and alienation. The controversial and politicised nature of Religion in Education was impeding progress in this field in Australia. She was hoping for more emphasis on Education about Religions and Worldviews (ERW). ACARA has tried to incorporate ERW within various learning areas, including general capabilities for example, but an opportunity was missed when the Australian Curriculum failed to include ERW. There is a chance that more ERW might be included in the next iteration, but for that we might have to wait five years or more. Until then, Anna believed we should focus on the States' roll out of the Australian Curriculum and look for possibilities for incorporating ERW there.

Garth's philosophical reflection helps explain why this area is so contentious. It is dealing with the kind of world we want: "what

living an authentic human life might look like". It is, Garth said, an awesome truth that "man is made by man" or put more poetically, "A turtle knows instinctively how to be a turtle, but a human being has to learn to be human." He saw it as a process that ensures plurality of outcomes, and a process that has not ended. He saw religion and education as two major instruments in the humanisation process. Both are human constructs; we make them and they make us.

Garth believed that RE should encompass interfaith dialogue as a life-long process: "learning about; learning from; learning with". He liked to describe this relationship between different cultural and religious groups as one of critical solidarity — robust relationships marked

by open and honest enquiry and characterised by respect, civility and an expectation to learn. As one of Anna's slides put it "There's not a 'one and only right way' amid multiple truth claims and perspectives".

Both speakers saw a need for a comprehensive program on education about religions and worldviews in Australian schools. As history has demonstrated, holding onto this view in the face of claims from some formal religions and the ideological whims of political parties will require clear-thinking, fortitude, persistence and the building of strategic alliances. It will be a long haul. To borrow Garth's words "It is a continuing process until the end of history; until humanity is dead."

#### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

**Garth Read** is a highly experienced teacher, minister, curriculum developer and tertiary lecturer. He was a member of the Queensland Religious Education Curriculum Project led by the late Ian Mavor in the Queensland Department of Education. In recent years, he is best known for his work in the Interfaith movement.

**Dr Anna Halafoff** is a Lecturer in Sociology at the Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University. Her current and recent research interests include intercultural and interreligious relations,

countering violent extremism and religions and beliefs education. In 2011, Anna was named a UN Alliance of Civilizations Global Expert in multi-faith relations, religion and peace-building. Relevant publications include: Halafoff, A 2006, 'Un-Australian values', paper presented at *UNAustralia*, the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Annual Conference, University of Canberra, Canberra, December 6-8, 2006. and, Halafoff, A 2013a, Education about religions and beliefs in Victoria, *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 172-197.

#### In the gaps

Jokes can be contentious; particularly of the stereotyping genre — blonds, or Polish for example. Here's an Irish joke that perhaps subverts the stereotype.

*A building company is recruiting carpenters and asks each applicant a standard question. An Irishman is next.*

*Question: What's the difference between 'girder' and 'joist'?*

*Reply: Girder wrote Faust and Joist wrote Ulysses.*

supplied by Robin Ford

2015 SoFiA Conference

### ***Learning about and from religion/s by Professor Peta Goldberg***

*In this meditation on the third of the keynote presentations at the 2015 SoFiA Conference Religion in Education, Robin Ford uses Powerpoint slides supplied by the presenter (re-formatted for this medium).*

This keynote presentation set out the thinking behind Queensland Senior High School subjects *Study of Religion*, and *Religion and Ethics*. Syllabuses and teaching approaches were described in a workshop that followed.

The Powerpoint slides I received from Peta Goldberg were exemplary: elegant layout, bold, clear font (Lucida-sans Unicode, mainly 23 point or larger), and only once were there more than eight lines of text below the heading. Although a perfect guide for Peta to speak to, their sparseness left me reading between the lines when I came to write this article. I found myself in a meditative frame of mind.

I had been in the audience for Peta's presentation, but that was six weeks or more ago. I remember how it felt, but not the particular points. I did make some notes myself - just 15 lines in a small notebook. They started with four binary oppositions:

*enfaithing*           => *education*  
*catechetical*       => *educational*  
*impartiality*       => *empathy*  
*phenomenology*   => *dogma*

Then came:

*'Home tradition'*  
|  
*Study this first*  
|  
*have you got one?*

Next I wrote:

*Study of Religions 9% [of the Queensland years 11/12 cohort]  
mainly faith-based schools*

*NSW Society & Culture  
depth study*

*VIC Text and traditions*

Finally I had noted what I took as a statement of intent:

*Religious literacy is part of a comprehensive education.*

How do my notes mesh with the Powerpoint slides? Here are the last two slides; they support my noted statement of intent:

**Toledo Principles**

- ▶ Knowledge about religion and beliefs:
  - Enhance social cohesion
  - Reducing conflicts
  - Essential part of quality education

**Today's world**

- ▶ Religious literacy
- ▶ Social cohesion
- ▶ Pedagogical approaches which are dialogical and reflective
- ▶ Learn about and from religion

But how is religious literacy to be developed? By formal courses, as described in my notes:

### **Study of Religion courses**

- ▶ Years 11 & 12
- ▶ Qld: Study of Religion
- ▶ NSW: Studies in Religion
- ▶ Vic: Religion & Society; Texts & Traditions

### **History**

- ▶ From Catechetical perspective to Educational approaches
    - Gerard Rummery
    - Gabriel Moran
    - Basil Moore & Norman Habel
    - Terence Lovat
- Religion programs should not seek to evangelise but to increase religious literacy

The next three slides suggest an approach:

### **Approaches**

- ▶ Interpretative Approach
  - Critical of simplistic representations
  - Constructivist Pedagogy
  - Involves learner in more dynamic way

### **Religious Literacy**

- ▶ Operational, cultural and critical dimensions
- ▶ ...employ self-critical scholarship. It does not refer “to one’s attitude toward the content..., but to ways of thinking that enable us to recognise the assumptions and bias that we...might impose” (Boys, 2004)

### **Critical Religious Literacy**

- ▶ What knowledge is revered?
- ▶ Whose histories are legitimated?
- ▶ Whose voices are silenced?
- ▶ What religions are marginalised or excluded within dominant discourses?
- ▶ Discover shades of meaning

We once again have the change in emphasis from leading students to be religious to educating them about religions.

Peta's remaining slides explore how we might understand this situation so that we can devise ways of educating our school students. She refers to a number of thinkers and educators. I looked them up with web searches and found many interesting articles that were freely available: you might like to do the same. The names are:

- Gerard Rummery (De La Salle Brother; moving from Catechetical to Educational)
- Gabriel Moran (Professor New York University; being religious versus learning about religions)
- Basil Moore and Norman Habel (strategy for teaching about religion)
- Terence Lovat (values education)
- Ninian Smart (Seven dimensions of religion)

I found the Wikipedia article on Ninian Smart most helpful. It explains that he divided his seven dimensions into "historical" and "para-historical" where parahistorical refers to those dimensions that take the investigation into the experience, or inner lives, of religious people. As he himself wrote:

...since the study of man is in an important sense participatory – for one has to enter into men's intentions, beliefs, myths, desires, in order to understand why they act as they do – it is fatal if cultures including our own are described merely externally, without entering into dialogue with them.

Now back to the beginning of the Powerpoint presentation.

I found the conclusion of the Wikipedia article entrancing. I'll end with its last sentences — another quote from Ninian Smart:

No religion, it seems to me, contains the whole truth. I think it's mad to think that there is nothing to learn from other traditions and civilizations. If you accept that other religions have something to offer and you learn from them, that is what you become: a Buddhist-Episcopalian or a Hindu-Muslim or whatever.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Professor Peta Goldberg is the foundation Chair in Religious Education at Australian Catholic University. She played a key role in the development of syllabuses for the Queensland senior secondary subjects, *Study of Religion* and *Religion and Ethics*. She has written *Investigating Religion for Senior Secondary Study of Religion* (2010) and *Exploring Religion and Ethics* (2012).

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#### Review

### Progressive Islam

by Robin Ford

In the small hours, while listening to the BBC World Service, I heard a female imam talking about an LGBTI-friendly mosque (LGTBI is Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans Gender, Intersex).

That talk, by Ani Zoneveld, can be downloaded as a podcast from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p002vsn4/episodes/downloads>

It led me to the website of Muslims for Progressive Values <http://www.mpvusa.org/> and the Facebook page of the Australian chapter.

Later I came across British Muslims for Secular Democracy <http://bmsd.org.uk/>

More details in the next *Bulletin*.

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#### In Memoriam

### Nigel Leaves

Dear SoFiA Colleagues.

I am saddened to have to pass on to you the news of the death of Nigel Leaves.

Nigel was very important to the Sea of Faith. Our older members will recall that he was the host for the first national Sea of Faith Conference which was held in Perth WA and turned out to be a very memorable affair.

He did not take an active part in SoFiA after he moved to Brisbane, but was a speaker at several of our conferences.

He published two books on the writings of Don Cupitt, and wrote others with a progressive Christian thrust (*Religion Under Attack* and *The God Problem*).

His death is indeed a loss to 'the open exploration of religion, faith and meaning' in Australia and internationally.

Rodney Eivers  
President, SoFiA

Point of view  
via Victoria Group

## Saint Paul: An Alternative Opinion

by David Miller

Why did Saint Paul believe that the Messiah would be a god-man? From where on earth did he get such an idea? I wish to contend that Saint Paul's beliefs were influenced by the Hellenized Zoroastrian religion of the Armenian Empire.

In the traditional form of Zoroastrianism the Messiah was believed to be a human born from a maiden who at some future date would bath in Lake Kasaoya (Lake Hamun on the present-day Iran/Afghanistan border) and be impregnated by the seed of Zoroaster therein. This human Messiah, it is believed, will lead the divine forces of goodness in a final battle to defeat the forces of evil. It will be a great honour for humanity as a whole to have played such a vital role in universal salvation.

So what happened? Why did Zoroastrianism's human Messiah get elevated to god status? The answer seems to be that it was part of the process of Hellenization which followed the conquests of Alexander the Great and the development of the Hellenic empires. Kings were elevated to divine status. So too, therefore, was their Messiah.

Where was Saint Paul born? He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia in south eastern Anatolia. Until a couple of generations before Paul's birth, prior to its conquest by the Roman Empire, this area had been a part of the Armenian Empire. On the Mediterranean coast the Armenian Empire stretched from Cilicia to Ituraea, bordering Judaea. The Caspian Sea was its north eastern border.

When the Parthian Empire (250 BC approximately to 224 AD) finally defeated the forces of the Seleucid Empire at Mesopotamia in 141BC, Parthia's westward push was deflected by the revolts within its eastern border area near the Indus Valley. So Parthia's ally, Armenia, occupied that western area up to the Mediterranean seaboard. But it did not attempt to conquer the Judeans, as they had already

aggressively fought for semi-independence from the Seleucids.

The Parthian and Armenian Empires shared a religion, Zoroastrianism. Although it was their state religion it was not imposed. There was a Hellenized version of Zoroastrianism. Adherents could choose whether to revere the chief deity as either the Zoroastrian 'Mazda' or the Greek 'Zeus'. And, in Hellenistic fashion, the god/man divide was breached. Which meant, in contradistinction to the status of the emperors in the prior Persian Empire, the monarchs of the Parthian Empire were therefore considered to be divine. So, as a consequence, their Messiah had also come to be viewed as divine. He would be a god. And this god was Mithra, the Son within the Zoroastrian Trinity.

Let's backtrack: within the traditional Zoroastrianism of the ancient Persian Empire (549 BC – 331 BC) the Messiah would be a 'Son of Man', a human being who would lead the powers of goodness into a victorious battle against the powers of universal evil, both earthly and heavenly. And his victory would be a great honour for humankind, who were created to be the guardians of the earth, as well as soldiers in the battle to defeat evil.

A Zoroastrian Trinity? How did this come about? The Persian Emperor, Artaxerxes II, reigned from 404 BC to 358 BC. His empire extended from the borders of Greece to the Indus Valley, bordering India. During his reign a Trinity was formed. The Holy Family: Mazda, the Father; Anahita, the Mother; Mithra, the Son. (Some scholars claim that it was Artaxerxes II who had sent Ezra the Scribe to Judaea in 398 BC, rather than his grandfather, Artaxerxes I, sixty years earlier).

Is it possible that the legend which vitally influenced Saint Paul was one from within the Hellenized Zoroastrianism of the Armenian Empire? In their legend, Mithra, the Son in their Trinity intends to incarnate to become the

Messiah. A star will lead the Magi (Zoroastrian priests) to a cave in which the starlight strikes a rock and Mithra will manifest as a toddler.

We know the Gospel version of this story as the legend of the Three Wise Men. Later, when Christianity became the Roman Empire's religion, they became the Three Wise Kings. Why the Gospel narrative writers incorporated this legend into their tale is anyone's guess. These Christians were a tiny minority within a small province, Judaea, on the Eastern fringe of the Roman Empire. Yet they 'borrowed' this legend which belonged to the vast Parthian Empire.

Despite Saint Paul's Pharisaic upbringing, it would have been highly unlikely that he had not been influenced by his Hellenistic surroundings, even unconsciously. The Zoroastrians would have been waiting for their Son of God to become their Messiah by incarnating as a human. Although the Judaic Messiah was to be a human warrior anointed by their God to reclaim their Promised Land, nevertheless, in my opinion, Saint Paul could not help but be affected by this Hellenic expectation and to have translated it into his own Judaic longings.

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## Announcements

## SoFiA Victoria

LECTURES - Thursdays, 7.30pm. Gold coin donation appreciated.  
Lectures are followed by questions, discussion and refreshments.  
All viewpoints are welcome.

VENUE: Carlton Library Meeting Room, 667 Rathdowne Street (corner Newry Street), North Carlton. Melways Map: 2B J2.

SoFiA Victoria email - [sofme1b@yahoo.com.au](mailto:sofme1b@yahoo.com.au)

20 August 2015

Three young adults from the "[PathWays Diversity Education](#)" school program will describe the development of their beliefs. Convened by Rev. Dr. Paul Tonson.

17 September 2015

Dr. William Firth-Smith

*Asian Christianity with particular relevance to South Asia.*

15 October 2015

Dr. Nicholas Coleman ([School of Spiritual Studies](#))

*Platonic Zen: An experimental way to find God.*

Feature

via Victoria Group

## Understanding the Gospel of Mark

*This is Part 1 of a talk given to the Melbourne Sea of Faith by Jonathan Rutherford. Part 2 will follow in the September/October Bulletin*

### Introduction

I initially got interested in *Mark* through my study of the historical Jesus. *Mark* is important for study of the historical Jesus because it is the first gospel written, and therefore the first account of Jesus we have. As anyone with an interest in history will know, that makes *Mark* a very valuable historical source.

As I studied *Mark*, however, I became more fascinated by it as a work of literature. I now have no hesitation in calling it a literary masterpiece. I also have come to the view that, despite thousands of years of scholarship and study, the meaning and message of the gospel have largely been misunderstood.

The conclusion I have come to, along with a few unorthodox scholars, is that *Mark* is a *theological allegory*. *Mark* is an allegory because although it appears to be a straightforward account of the life of Jesus, ‘the content and structure of the narrative are carefully arranged to convey deeper, non-literal meaning’ (Carrier, 2014; 390). This is accomplished through the use of symbolic keywords, ironies and literary allusions (Carrier, 390). According to this view, Jesus is more like the lead protagonist in a symbolic drama designed to communicate non-literal theological meaning and values, as opposed to the focal individual of a historical biography.

My purpose in what follows is not to assess the value of *Mark* as an historical source for Jesus. Instead I want to focus on the possible symbolic meaning and message underlying the narrative. If *Mark* is an allegory, what were the hidden truths he wished to convey? What non-literal messages did the author intend his ancient readers and listeners to pick up on, messages

which have, sadly I believe, been lost in translation?

I must also warn that my intention is not to suggest ways in which *Mark* may be relevant for us today. My interest is in understanding what Mark wished to communicate with his first century audience. This may, or may not, hold relevance to us. For me, it holds minimal relevance, but I still find it fascinating. I also must say that *Mark* could be the subject of an entire course. There is much more than could be said about it, which I will not cover in this article. I am sure I still have much to learn.

With that said, I will argue that there are three central elements to Mark’s allegory:

1. promoting Paul’s Gospel
2. a polemic against the Jerusalem based Christian Church
3. a polemic against the Judean Jews.

Before I elaborate on these three elements, I will provide some context that is important for understanding *Mark*.

### Context

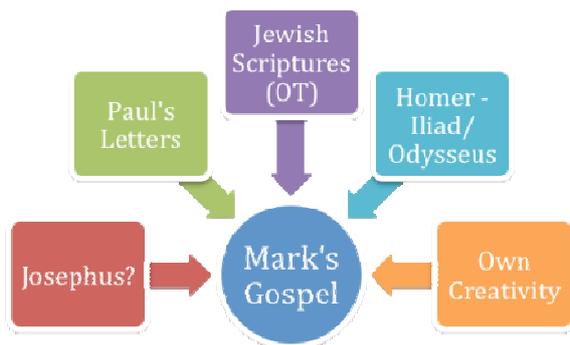
#### Mysterious Composition

We don’t actually know anything certain about who, when or where *Mark* was composed. Scholars have made educated guesses about these things, but very little is known for certain. We don’t even know that somebody named Mark wrote the gospel. This is just a later attribution based on the guesswork of the second century church. The things we do know are entirely based on what can be deduced from analyzing the text itself. Despite this, for convenience, I will continue to refer to the author as Mark (Roman type) and the book as *Mark* (italic type).

## Literary Sources

The dominant view within scholarship is that Mark constructed his gospel out of oral tradition – that is, stories about Jesus that had been passed down to Mark from people who knew Jesus. However, although it is possible that Mark drew partly on oral sources, Mark's main sources, and perhaps his only sources were not oral but literary. That is, Mark primarily drew on pre-existing written sources to construct his gospel. This can actually be demonstrated very clearly by analyzing the themes, ideas and language that were common between *Mark* and the texts he used. Importantly, all these texts apart from one – Paul's letters – originally had nothing to do with Jesus. Mark just creatively used them, in various ways, to construct his own narrative.

Here is a diagram, which illustrates the literary sources used by Mark.



The most important source was the Jewish Scriptures, or what Christians refer to as the Old Testament (OT). Large chunks of *Mark* are based on direct allusions to stories and passages found in a range of texts within the OT (R.G Price, 2007; R.M Price 2011).

Another important source was the letters of Paul. Scholars know that Paul wrote seven letters, which are found in the New Testament (NT). These letters constitute our earliest source of Christian evidence. They were written around the middle of the first century to Christian churches throughout the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Importantly, Mark was writing well after Paul and there are very good reasons for thinking, as I will explain in a moment, that he

made extensive use of Paul's letters to construct his gospel.<sup>1</sup>

There are two other likely sources. Mark very likely used themes and motifs drawn from Homer's classics *Illiad* and *Odysseus* (Macdonald, 2000; R.M Price, 2011). This should not be surprising as Mark would have received a Greco-Roman education in which the teaching of Homer was very prominent. I also think it is quite probable that Mark has drawn on the famous Jewish historian Josephus. This is quite controversial so I have put a question mark against it, and won't elaborate further on it here.

There is one other 'source' in the above diagram which is not a prior literary source, but is very important to mention because it is often overlooked – Mark's own creativity. In my view, the author of *Mark* should be given credit as a competent and creative storyteller. His gospel contains all the elements of a good story including: narration, settings, character development, themes, plots development and suspense. The dominant oral tradition paradigm has often viewed *Mark* as made up of previously unrelated units of oral tradition, which Mark has more or less randomly cobbled together. As Tom Dykstra points out, this has tended to obscure

<sup>1</sup> I would argue that Paul's letters are Mark's main source of information about Jesus. This is itself quite interesting because, as many scholars have pointed out, Paul's authentic letters actually tell us very little, if anything, about Jesus, the man. Indeed, according to the Christ-myth theory, Paul, as well as the early church as a whole, never knew of Jesus as an *earthly* man and instead worshipped a heavenly/celestial Jesus (See eg Carrier, 2014; R.G Price, 2014; R.M Price, 2011). If this theory is correct, Mark actually had *no* information about Jesus of Nazareth – indeed Mark invented Jesus out of whole cloth. In other words, via the creative pen of Mark, the heavenly Jesus of Paul is transformed into the gospel character Jesus of Nazareth. It should be stressed, however, that most scholars who view Mark as an attempt to narrativize the Pauline gospel, as argued here, do not subscribe to the Christ-Myth theory, and accept the mainstream view that Paul knew Jesus of Nazareth, even if he does not tell us much about him.

the way in which *Mark* is a 'cohesive literary work, in which each part is carefully crafted and organized to serve the author's overall purposes' (Dykstra, 2011, 65).

### **The Jewish-Roman War**

Despite the uncertainty around the composition of Mark's Gospel, scholars are fairly sure it was written some time after the Jewish war with Rome. The war began in 66 AD with a Jewish uprising against the Roman Occupation and concluded in 70 AD following a devastating Roman siege on Jerusalem, and the complete destruction of the Jewish temple. Prior to its destruction the temple was *the* central place of Jewish worship and ritual. In humiliating fashion the Romans not only destroyed the temple, but also built a new pagan temple in its place.

The reason we know Mark is writing after the war is that he alludes to the destruction of the temple several times within the narrative. In chapter 13, for example, Jesus says: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (13:2). This suggests knowledge of the temple's destruction and thus that Mark was writing after these events. I will return to the significance of this later.

### **Early Church Politics**

Finally, it's important to understand something about early church politics.

Paul's letters indicate that there was major division and disagreement within the early church (Dyskstra, Ch 2; Tazari, Ch 1). Later works like *The Acts of the Apostles*, attempt to portray a more harmonious picture, but actually we know from Paul himself that fierce disputes were a feature of the church from the outset. You might say the early church was a little like the Australian Labor party!

There was a basic dispute over the mission to the Gentiles – that is, the mission to convert non-Jews. Paul believed passionately that the Christian gospel was open to both Jews and Gentiles, on an inclusive and equal basis. In practical terms, this meant the gentiles did not need to observe key aspects of the Jewish law –

particularly circumcision, dietary laws and the Sabbath - in order to become Christians (Sanders, 2001 p103). While Jews should keep practising the Law, according to Paul it was not necessary for Gentiles to do so. Faith in the saving work of Jesus was enough to guarantee their salvation. As long as they had faith, they did not need to become fully-practising Jews.

Paul, however, faced opposition from a Jewish oriented faction of the church based in Jerusalem – particularly from the leadership, or 'pillars' as Paul calls them: Peter, James, and John. We don't have the writings of this group, so we only have Paul's side of the story, as he recounts it in his letter to the Galatians. According to Paul, the pillars preached 'another gospel' to the one that he was preaching. What he meant was that they were refusing to recognize uncircumcised Gentiles as Christians, or at least as first class Christians, equal with the Jews. While they agreed with Paul that 'faith in Christ' was God's new mode of salvation, they thought the Jewish law also still applied, and that gentile converts should uphold it.

Paul passionately opposed this. His life work centred on spreading the faith to the Gentiles and he believed that this mission would be irrevocably harmed if they were required to observe the Jewish law. For Paul, both Jew and Gentile were part of the *one* church, worshipping the *one* God. As he says, "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek (meaning gentile); the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him" (Rom 10:12; see also, Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11).

Where does *Mark* fit in here? Well, as we will see, Mark takes Paul's side in this dispute. Mark endorses Paul's inclusive gospel for the Gentiles.

### **Meaning & Purpose of Mark's Gospel**

#### **1. Promoting Paul's Gospel**

A key aim of Mark's narrative is to promote Pauline theology and values. As one scholar has put it, "the gospel of Mark may be described as narrative presentation of the Pauline Gospel" (Svartvik, 2000, 34).

Some scholars have gone further by arguing that Mark's gospel, though appearing to be about Jesus, is really a disguised narrative of Paul's apostolic ministry, as he recounts in his letters (Tazari 1999; Adamczewski, 2014). Currently I am not convinced of this. I am convinced, however, of the more limited thesis that Mark is narrativizing Pauline theology.

Mark's Gospel suggests deep familiarity and agreement with Paul's letters (See: Adamczewski, 2014; Price 2014; Dykstra, 2012; Marcus 2000, Tazari, 1999). In *Mark*, Jesus promotes Pauline teaching. For example, like Paul, Jesus takes a liberal approach to the Jewish law. Thus, Jesus engages in table fellowship with Gentile sinners (Mk 2:17; Galatians 2:11-14), he downplays the importance of keeping the Sabbath (Mk 2:23-28; Galatians 4:10; Romans 14:5-6), and observing food laws (Mk 7:18-19; Rom 14:19-20). He teaches that the Jewish law can be summed up with the 'Commandment to love' (Mk 12:28-29; Romans 13:9-10). This idea, that the Jewish law can be 'summed up' by the commandment to love, is found nowhere else in the Bible except Paul's letters.

Mark's narrative also reinforces Pauline theology. For example, Paul's theology is heavily focused on the significance of the cross. According to Paul, God ironically achieved his salvation for humanity through a suffering crucified Messiah. Those who have faith in Christ are also mysteriously united with him, and therefore should expect to share in Christ's sufferings (Rom 8:17), at least until the end of the age when Christ appears (1 Cor 15:35-44). For Paul, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). Mark shared this view and thus, Jesus teaches that the disciples must 'take up the cross' and sacrifice their own life for the sake of the Gospel (Mk 8:35). Furthermore, Mark's entire narrative is skilfully designed to climax at the crucifixion (Marcus, 2000; Dykstra, 2011, Ch 5). For example, the famous messianic secret theme within Mark – in which Jesus insists that people keep his identity undisclosed – is probably a literary technique used by Mark to reinforce the centrality of the cross, where Jesus is finally

revealed to be the suffering sacrificial Messiah (Dykstra, 2012, 95).

The similarities extend to common language and grammar, which can only really be explained in terms of a direct literary relationship. To give just one example, in Corinthians Paul says, "I have made myself a *slave to all*" (1 Cor 9:19). In *Mark*, Jesus says something very similar: "whoever wishes to be first among you must be *slave to all*" (Mk 10:44). The common phrase, 'slave to all,' is found nowhere else in the Bible apart from Paul and *Mark*.

### **Defending the Pauline Mission to the Gentiles**

There are many more parallels,<sup>2</sup> but I want to look more closely at one that is central to the meaning of Mark's gospel. As I mentioned, Paul preached an inclusive gospel, open to both Jews and Gentiles. Mark promotes this message in several ways (Dykstra, 2012).

#### **a) Geography in Mark**

One way Mark does this is through the use of symbolic geography.

Jesus conducts most of his ministry in Galilee. Galilee was known at the time as a region that contained a mixed Jewish-Gentile population. In the OT book of Isaiah, Galilee is referred to as a region that was representative of all the nations (Is 9:1). In Mark's narrative, Galilee is the region where Jesus interacts with both Jews and Gentiles. Galilee is also clearly contrasted with Jerusalem, the epitome of Jewishness, and the place where the Jews reject Jesus (Dykstra, p75). In light of this, it has been suggested that Galilee, in *Mark*, is symbolic of the cosmopolitan Roman Empire as a whole (Tarazi, 1999; Dykstra, 2012).

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<sup>2</sup>Others include: the requirements, struggles and hardships of Christian missions (Mk 6:6-9; 1 Cor 4:11-13; Mk 13:9-13; 2 Cor 11:23-24); agreement about sinful deeds or 'works of the flesh' (Mk 7:20-23; Gal 5:19-20); a common strategy in dealings with the Roman state (Mk 12:13-15; Rom 13:7); similar beliefs about the future resurrection body (Mk 12:25; 1 Cor 15: 35-40); and the need to kept alert for the coming end times (Mk 13: 32-37; 1 Thess 5:1-6).

If Galilee represents the Roman Empire, the Sea of Galilee is a microcosm of the Mediterranean Sea. As many have pointed out, it is very odd that Mark uses the phrase 'sea of Galilee.' No other writer before Mark ever referred to this small body of water as a 'sea'. Some have therefore suggested that Mark was a poor geographer. A better explanation is that the reference to 'sea' is a deliberate allusion to the Mediterranean, which of course was the central strategic waterway of the entire Roman Empire.

Finally, to complete the symbolic metaphor, the boat that Jesus travels on with the disciples, across the 'sea', is meant to symbolize the Christian church (Borg, 2001, 206-9). The sea journeys play a crucial role in the middle parts of Mark's narrative. Jesus and his disciples travel by boat from one side of the sea to the other, first to predominantly Jewish areas, then to predominately Gentile areas (see: Mk ch 4-8). Here it is significant that the disciples are afraid and fearful of crossing to the other side, despite Jesus calming the 'storms' and leading the way.

The underlying message being conveyed through all this symbolism is that the church must follow the example of Paul, who fearlessly travelled across the Roman Empire, in order to spread the gospel to all, both Jew and Gentile.

### **b) Feeding Scenes**

Another key way that Mark's narrative promotes the Pauline Gentile mission can be seen in the two feeding scenes. Most of us can recall the famous feeding miracle in which Jesus turns a few loaves into enough food for crowds of people. There are actually two of these feeding scenes in *Mark*, which at first glance are almost identical. Many have thought Mark must have got confused and reported the same story twice. But this is not likely for two reasons. Firstly Marks' source for the feeding scenes is not oral testimony going back to Jesus, but prior literature such as the very similar tales about Elisha found in 2 Kings (2 Kgs 4:43-44) and the Homeric Epics (See Macdonald, 2000). Secondly when you read the two stories closely you notice several differences, and these turn out to be crucial for

understanding the symbolic meaning Mark wished to convey.

The first feeding scene occurs in mainly Jewish territory. We know this because we are told it takes place not far the hometown of Jesus, which in *Mark* is symbolic of Judea as a whole. In the story the numbers five and twelve are prominent. There are five loaves and five thousand men and twelve baskets of bread left over. As Dykstra points out 'the number five recalls the five books of the Torah, and the number twelve recalls the twelve tribes of Israel' (Dykstra, p.80). These are very Jewish numbers. There are also more subtle indications in the use of language, for example, the Greek word used for baskets is reflective of a Jewish context. So this is a miraculous feeding to the Jews.

The second feeding scene takes place a few chapters later after Jesus has journeyed through Gentile territory. The setting is suggestive of a more mixed Jewish-Gentile audience because some of the crowd had "come from afar" (Mk 8:3). Again the numbers are significant. This time four and seven are prominent. There are four thousand people, seven loaves, and seven baskets left over. Commentators have interpreted this in various ways (Dykstra, 2012; Price, 2007; Tazari, 1999). In my view, the best explanation, consistent with Mark's promotion of the Gentile mission, is that the number four alludes to the "ends of the earth", meaning the whole known world (Tazari, 1999; Dykstra, 2012). This is confirmed even within the text. In *Mark* 13:27 Jesus says, "he will gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens" (13:27) – meaning the whole known world. The number seven represents divine completeness, calling to mind scriptural texts such as the Genesis story with its seven days of creation.

Mark's ordering of the two scenes is significant, first a feeding to the Jews and then a feeding to a mixed Jewish-Gentile crowd. The message being conveyed is that the disciples – who's symbolic significance I will further discuss shortly – must move from a church based on Jewish exclusivism to an inclusive church, as

advocated by Paul. The number of fish in each scene further reinforces the point (Tazari, 1999). In the first scene the disciples find two fish, which is symbolic of their misguided attempt to "preserve two separate communities" (Tazari, p.182). At the second scene, by contrast, we are told "there are a few fish" (Mk 8:7). This represents "undifferentiated individuals, since there is no longer a difference between Jew and Gentile" (Tazari, p.182).

Whether or not you agree with my interpretation, there can be little doubt that Mark intended his readers to interpret these feeding scenes symbolically. This is evident from

the dialogue that takes place between Jesus and the disciples following the second feeding (Mk 8:14-21). Jesus asks the disciples to recall the number of baskets left over at each feeding: twelve baskets at the first, seven at the second. When the disciples predictably fail to understand, an exasperated Jesus cries out: "Do you *still* not understand?" Mark gives us no indication that the penny ever drops. But the question is really addressed to us, the reader. Mark hopes that, unlike the disciples, we will be a little more discerning...

To be continued in the September/October *Bulletin*.

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## Review

### Digitalia

*the Editor's review of what is happening on the SoFiA website, blog, sofiatalk and Facebook*

SoFiA website [www.sof-in-australia.org](http://www.sof-in-australia.org) provides instructions and links on how to access sofiatalk and the SoFiA Facebook page. For those who can't wait to the next *Bulletin* for Part 2, there is the full article *Understanding the Gospel of Mark* by Jonathan Rutherford. In *Religion News* I learnt that the Sydney Morning Herald reported (July 19) Cardinal George Pell has publicly criticised Pope Francis' decision to place climate change at the top of the Catholic Church's agenda.

SoFiA blog at: [www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php](http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php) (also accessible from the website) has a passionate contribution *Is war the answer?* by Rodney Eivers.

Facebook Sea of Faith in Australia includes postings on refugee policy, the evolution debate and reclaim Australia. This page has only just started; how about joining?

sofiatalk has seen discussions on "will the left ever 'get' religion", "logos", a posting of Rodney Eivers *Is war the answer?* (choose your medium) and notes from the latest Management Committee meeting.

## Review

via Victoria Group

***Heretic* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali**

*SoFiA Victoria member Valerie Birkett selected several pages of extracts from this challenging book in the hope that someone might summarise them for the SoFiA Bulletin. SoFiA Victoria member Cordelia Hull has not read the book in its entirety, but has accepted the challenge and hopes the result will give Bulletin readers a taste of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's ideas.*

Ayaan Hirsi Ali claims it is important to be aware that Islam is not just a religion, but a political movement as well. She looks back through its history to note that a change came about when the founder of the religion, the prophet Muhammad, and his followers moved away from Mecca, where they had been 'persuading' or 'inviting' people to accept Allah as their one and only God and submit to Allah's will. They moved to the city of Medina and with that move came a change of tactics. They began to attack those people who would not voluntarily submit to Allah, giving them only two options — submit or die. In Medina, Islam became an expansionist, political movement.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali (AHA) uses the distinction between the tactics used by Muhammad in each of these two cities to distinguish two groups of Muslims manifest today, then adds a third group that she believes is the key to the way forward for Islam.

AHA's first group consists of fundamentalists or what she calls 'Medina Muslims'. This group argues for an Islam unchanged from its 7<sup>th</sup> century version and they take it as a requirement of their faith, in fact their religious duty, to impose that version of Islam on everyone else. Like Muhammad's tactics in Medina, the methods of this group are political.

Her second group, comprising the majority of Muslims, she labels 'Mecca Muslims'. This group is focussed on religious observance but its members are not inclined to practise violence. She points out that for many members of this group, especially for Muslims living in the West, it is often a struggle to remain loyal to the core beliefs of Islam within the context of a secular and pluralistic society. Many in this group feel their only choice is to leave Islam altogether (as AHA herself did) or to join the 'Medina'-type

Muslims and follow their uncompromising Islamist creed which rejects Western modernity outright.

But AHA also posits a third group, much smaller than either of the first two, which she calls 'Modifying Muslims' or Muslim dissidents. This group includes people who believe their religion must change if the 'Mecca Muslims' are to be given an opportunity to keep their faith without suffering severe cognitive dissonance when faced with the differences between the dictates of Islam and their experience in the modern world. She says:

I have come to the conclusion that the only viable strategy that can hope to contain the threat posed by the Medina Muslims is to side with the dissidents and reformists and to help them a) identify and repudiate those parts of Muhammad's moral legacy that stem from Medina and b) persuade the Mecca Muslims to accept this change and reject the Medina Muslims' summons to intolerance and war.

She claims the dissidents stand no chance of doing this without support from the West.

AHA claims there are five elements of Islam that need to be reformed:

**1. Muhammad's infallible status and a literalist reading of the Qur'an**, particularly the parts revealed in Medina. She says Muslims need to understand Muhammad as a real man in the context of his times, and the Qur'an as an historically constructed text.

**2. The investment in life after death instead of life before death.** For many Muslims the afterlife is real; they value the afterlife more than they value life on earth. This belief can be exploited by Islamists to recruit suicide bombers. If Islam was liberated from its fixation on the afterlife it would give its adherents a reason to live and to adapt to life in the modern world.

**3. Sharia Law, the hadith (the traditions) and Islamic jurisprudence.** Beheadings, amputations, stonings and other punishments are not considered barbaric and medieval in Islam; they are part of divinely-sanctioned Sharia law which formally codifies Islam's many rules. Most Muslims overwhelmingly support Sharia law and if it is not state-sanctioned (as in Saudi Arabia for example) it is imposed informally by the local faithful anyway.

**4. The empowering of individuals to command right and forbid wrong.** Commanding right and forbidding wrong operates as a form of religious vigilantism at the grassroots level. It silences dissent and it is all-pervasive in an individual's life because Islam is not confined to the private religious sphere (it encompasses all economic, political and personal life). A core part of Western tradition is that individuals should, within limits, decide for themselves what to believe and how to live. Islam envisages the exact opposite. Commanding right and forbidding wrong is an underlying principle of Islam that leads to every small act, every minor infraction of sharia law, becoming a major religious crime. It leads to family and clerical policing at the local level.

**5. The imperative to wage jihad (holy war).** Jihad is first presented to most young Muslims as a manifestation of the struggle to be a good Muslim, an inner, spiritual struggle. But then it becomes an outward struggle, a holy war in the name of Islam. It justifies suicide bombings and other acts of terrorism. AHA outlines the modern process of recruiting young people into

this form of jihad — social media; playing on youthful desires for fame, identity and respect; etc — but she claims that re-education programs for the individual will not work until it is realised that the central tenets of the jihadists are supported by Islamic doctrine. It is the whole concept of external jihad that must be decommissioned. Muslims must return to the original spiritual interpretation of jihad.

AHA believes the biggest obstacle to effecting changes in the above areas is Islam's suppression of critical thinking. 'Reform' as we know it in the West is not a legitimate concept in current Islamic doctrine. The only type of 'reform' that is tolerated is one that involves a return to an earlier, purer, form of Islam.

AHA believes religious toleration is one of the greatest achievements of the Western world and she invokes the ideas of John Locke that no-one has the right to impose their religious views on anyone else. AHA wants people in the West, Muslims and non-Muslims, to help bring about an Islamic revolution that *counters* the proselytising of the Medina Muslims. She believes that that revolution is coming. She sees signs, for example in the Arab Spring, of a rebellion against authority in Muslim lands. She claims that that kind of rebellion will soon be directed against religious leaders, not just against political leaders.

**Footnote by Cordelia** My own feelings after reading these extracts from Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Heretic* are in the realm of: 'Dream on, lady'. But I guess AHA has at least given us some idea of the enormity of the task Modifying Muslims face, if and when they attempt to reform Islam.

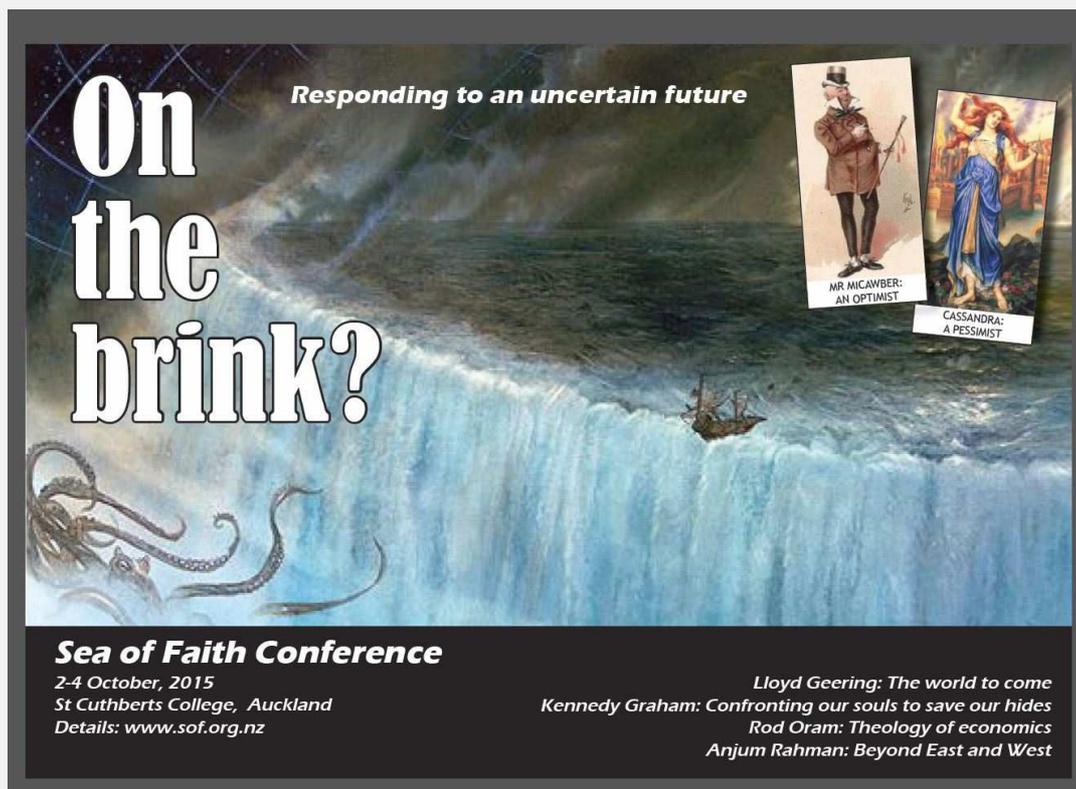
Announcements

### Sea of Faith New Zealand Conference

Auckland, 2-4 October 2015

Full registration for the conference is listed as \$NZ240.00 (including meals except breakfast). Accommodation is separate and can be booked at the conference venue or at nearby motels (list available).

details <http://www.sof.org.nz/>



### Preview

### Suggested Bus Tour of Interior Queensland

#### National Conference on Wheels?

SoFiA Management Committee members Greg Spearritt and Glen Beasley have suggested that SoFiA sponsor a bus tour of interior Queensland some time in 2016 for members and other interested people. Could this also serve some of the functions of a national conference? If you are interested please get in touch with Greg at [sof@a1.com.au](mailto:sof@a1.com.au)

## Micawber or Cassandra? Responding to an Increasingly Uncertain Future

*This insightful piece was written by Laurie Chisholm to preview the SoF NZ 2015 Conference (see panel opposite), but it can stand on its own as a view of the times we live in.*

Climate change is only the most visible and urgent of several interlocking crises: overpopulation, resource depletion, and pollution (terrorism, wars and financial crises are downstream effects of these crises). Although the price of oil is currently depressed at \$US63 a barrel, after peaking at almost \$150 and being over \$100 over the last five years, the oil supply is finite and being used up at an alarming rate. Experts tell us we need to lower atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> to 350 ppm in order to restrict warming to 2 degrees. Beyond this, we are likely to trigger tipping points that lead to positive feedback loops, bringing with them crop failures and a rise in sea level of metres, making millions homeless.

But how to respond? Conference needs to remind us of the current situation, and explore ways of responding to it. The [SoF NZ] March newsletter outlined a variety of responses. The following is another attempt.

**Deniers:** 13% of New Zealanders are climate change skeptics; they deny that climate change is human-induced. Most of the rest of us mostly continue life as usual, as if nothing need change.

**Optimists** trust, like Micawber, that “something will turn up.” Science, so powerful in solving problems, could give us cold fusion (abundant non-polluting energy), or geo-engineering solutions that reverse global warming.

**Pessimists**, like Cassandra, prophesy doom and often, like James Lovelock, regard the battle as already lost. We are too dependent on deregulated capitalism for wealth and growth to live a simple lifestyle and too stupid as a species for concerted global action. But almost nobody wants to listen to such depressing news. Since we can't prevent, the best we can do is mitigate the effects.

**Activists** still hope. They are at work protesting against deep sea drilling, fracking, coal and tar sands oil. They tend to think, “If only we could change the others, everything will be OK.” But extractivist industries exist because there are eager consumers.

**Austerity advocates** hope that by dialling back our own consumption, we can avert the crisis. It's no use prospecting new sources of oil if we are still consuming carbon fuels.

Political moves to address the crisis have been a depressing failure. Negotiations towards a climate treaty began in 1990 but global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are now (2013) 61% higher. Global emissions increased by 5.9% in 2010. A carbon tax was abandoned in Australia and carbon trading schemes are failures, with the market price of carbon collapsing to \$1.06 per tonne in 2012. Free trade agreements are binding, but climate change agreements are voluntary.

Conference will look at what we are facing and explore different ways of responding.

Epilogue

## Where to?

*It is three decades since a TV program and associated book unwittingly gave us our name and founding ethos. How have things changed since then? Here are some thoughts from Robin Ford.*

Don Cupitt used the phrase *The Sea of Faith*, taken from a Matthew Arnold poem, as the name of his 1985 TV series on religion.

The poem's ironic, cryptic tone and its link with Don Cupitt made this phrase the obvious name for a loose association of people wanting to openly explore matters of "religion, faith and meaning". In forming SoFiA they prised open a safe space for their discussions. Among this eclectic group of explorers I found atheists fascinated by religion, agnostics wondering if

they would keep sitting on the fence, and churchgoers who didn't believe in the supernatural.

For me the irony in our name has softened over those decades, and I have moved on from the bleakness of the poem (most of the time). I am content with life as an unfathomable mystery.

So where to next? The safe space we have created and nurtured is of great value to us. It might be of use to others. How can we best share it?

extract from

### ***Dover Beach***

by Matthew Arnold (1867)

The Sea of Faith,  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

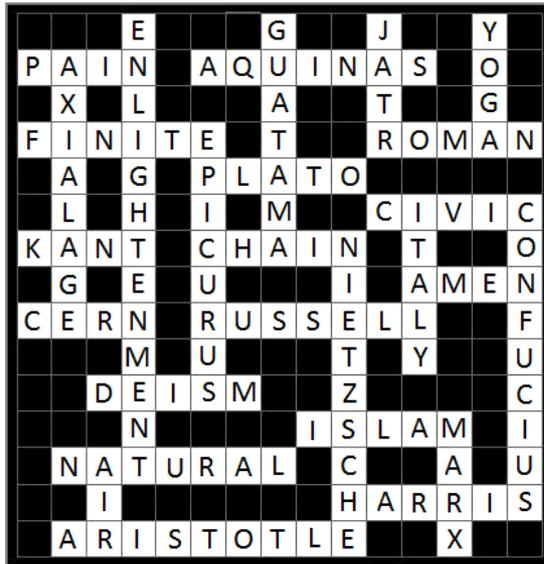
### ***That Which Binds Us***

by Robin Ford

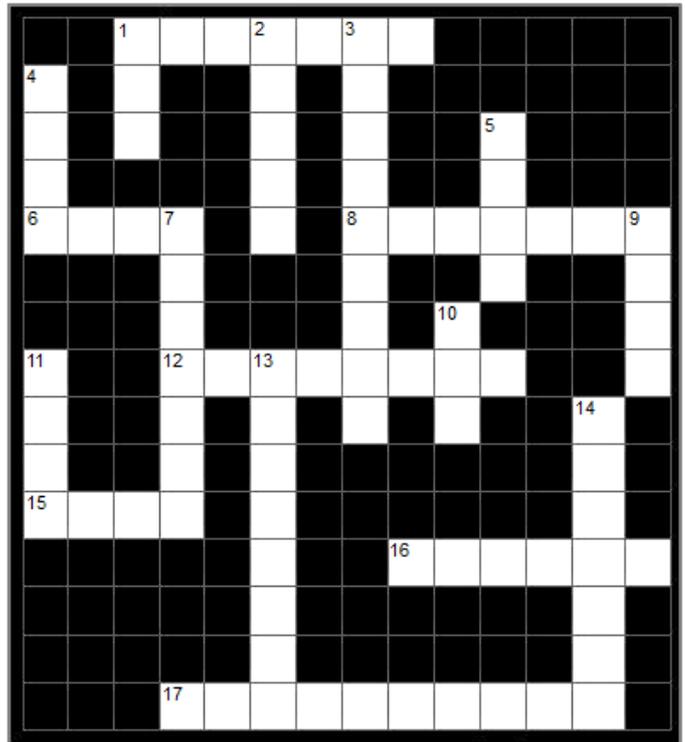
The Sea of Faith was in retreat.  
He sensed it from a pebbly shore.  
No calming waters washed his feet.  
Instead a long, withdrawing roar.  
Alone.  
Bereft.  
No traces left of  
Certainties he held before.

Again the ancient lunar pull  
Surrounds a dream-created land.  
The tide is once more at the full —  
Waves crashing onto time-washed sand.  
They count  
My years.  
Yet hope appears when  
You and I together stand.

**SoFiA Crossword #17**



**SoFiA Crossword #18** Prepared by Greg Spearritt



**Across**

1. Irish-American New Testament scholar influential in contemporary historical Jesus research
6. Swiss Catholic theologian who rejected the infallibility of the Pope and was barred from teaching Catholic theology
8. Liberal German existentialist theologian, author of the 3-volume *Systematic Theology*
12. One-time Bishop of Woolwich, author of the seminal work *Honest to God*
15. Influential American New Testament scholar who died in January 2015
16. Radical theologian whose work in the 1980s was the inspiration for the SoF network
17. German Lutheran pastor and theologian implicated in a plot to kill Hitler

**Down**

1. Harvard theologian central to the Death of God movement
2. A US bishop with radical views on social and scriptural matters
3. Former Catholic nun who has written about many world faiths
4. Founder of the Westar Institute and the Jesus Seminar
5. Female Irish theologian who in 1971 denounced Christianity as irredeemable for women
7. NZ theologian who faced charges of heresy in 1967 for his controversial views
9. Theologian best known for his advocacy of religious pluralism; editor of *The Myth of God Incarnate*
10. Famous proponent of Creation Spirituality
11. Prominent American process theologian
13. German theologian famous for his call to demythologise the bible
14. Catholic theologian and author of 36 books on feminism, eco-feminism, the Bible and Christianity

Theme: Religious Liberals & Radicals of America & Europe

## Sea of Faith in Australia

*promoting the open exploration of issues of religion, faith and meaning*

SoFiA publishes a bi-monthly bulletin and a monthly email newsletter. It organises conferences, public lectures and regional meetings. Through its website it maintains an archive of articles and a blog.

**Contact:** mail: **PO Box 1309 UPWEY Vic. 3158**, email: **sofnetwork@gmail.com**  
 web: **www.sof-in-australia.org**, blog: **www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php**

**Brisbane Acacia Ridge** 3rd Sunday, 7.30pm. Contact:  
 Rodney Eivers (07 3273 2049)

**Brisbane Brookfield** 1st Sunday, 7.30pm. Contact: Helen  
 Mason (07 3870 8565)

**Brisbane Bayside** 3rd Monday. Contact: Judith Bore (07  
 3207 5428)

**Brisbane CBD** 2nd Sunday, 1pm to 2.30pm. Contact:  
 Rachel Matthews (07 3217 9301 or 0408 193 872)

**Chinchilla** 1st & 3rd Thursday nights. Contact: Glen Beasley  
 (07 4662 7738)

**Gold Coast** 3rd Sunday, 2pm. Contact: Eva and Keith  
 Duggan (07 5571 5375)

**Melbourne** 3rd Thursday, 7.30pm at the Carlton Library.  
 Contact: David Miller (03 9467 2063).

**Rockhampton 'Explorers'** Fortnightly. Contact: Dick  
 and Mary Oxborrow (07 4926 2178).

**Sunshine Coast** Contact: Marion Kleinberg  
 (07 5479 0905)

**Sydney** Irregularly somewhere in the CBD. Contact: Lyndell  
 and Robin Ford (02 9427 7078)

**Toowoomba** Monthly on a Monday night. Contact: Jed  
 Perkins (07 4632 0626)

### Sea of Faith in Australia Inc.: Membership Application/Renewal

Name(s).....

Address.....

Email.....Phone number.....

*SoFiA supplies names and contact details to state coordinators/local group conveners for advising about network activities. Please tick if you do not want your contact details disclosed*

Membership category	Paper Bulletin	Email Bulletin	Amount, \$
Individual	\$35	\$20	
Concession individual	\$25	\$20	
Couple (one copy of the Bulletin)	\$45	\$30	
Donation			
Total to be paid on line, (BSB 514 179 A/c 1476115 ref your name) or cheque (payable to SoFiA). Tick if you would like a receipt <input type="checkbox"/>			

Signature.....