



Sea of Faith
Sea of Faith Network in Australia
BULLETIN

MAY/JUNE 2015



photo: Robin Ford

Gynea Lily, in a Sydney garden

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

E X P L O R E
religion faith meaning

EDITORIAL

The 2015 Conference, *Religion in Education*, so long in prospect, was successfully realised last month. This *Bulletin* contains John Carr's opening remarks as co-ordinator of the planning sub-committee, and Kevin Bates final keynote presentation. More transcripts will follow in the next *Bulletin*.

Also featured is a *Meditation on Jihad*, prompted by Rodney Eivers' *reflection on Jihad* in the March/April *Bulletin*.

I had previously chosen not to publish some items on Islam because I found them too confrontational for the *Bulletin's* style. It was a difficult decision. Had I perhaps contradicted SoFiA's declared aim of encouraging "non-dogmatic discussion of religion, faith and meaning", or suggested that in some areas there was only one acceptable opinion in the *Bulletin* or give the impression that Islam should be protected from scrutiny?

This raises an important question. Where does SoFiA's 'promoting open discussion' end and consideration for the feelings of others begin? The *Bulletin* would be amiss if it didn't explore Islam as a vital topic of our times. But how should it do it? What

should be the guidelines? The article in this *Bulletin* shows, I think, how this can be done. I should be grateful to hear of readers' views.

As you will see on the next page, the new management team is up and running with projects to take SoFiA onto its next phase. All comments on the way forward for SoFiA will be gratefully received.

Thank you to those who provided copy for this *Bulletin*. Recently I have received fewer items from members. Perhaps I didn't remind members of relevant deadlines sufficiently. Or perhaps members have used up their backlog of thoughts and are waiting for the next inspiration.

With content from the conference I am set for a while, but perhaps I should look again at how we acquire material for the *Bulletin*.

In the meantime, Victoria is the nominated group for the July/August *Bulletin*. I'd like to publish near the end of July, so it would be good to receive copy by 20 July if possible.

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Management

AGM

At the Annual General Meeting of 23rd May 2015 the following positions were filled:

President: Rodney Eivers

Treasurer: Rodney Eivers.

Management Committee Members:

Peter Robinson

Glen Beasley

Greg Spearritt

Rachel Matthews

Lyndell Ford

John Carr

Lyndell Ford subsequently offered to take on the role of Treasurer, but her formal election to this role has yet to take place.

These roles are supplemented by technical support from Rachel Matthews (General Secretary), Cordelia Hull (Membership Secretary) and Greg Spearritt as (Website Manager). Since the AGM, Jim Norman offered to develop and monitor the Sofiatalk group and probably a Facebook page.

From the President, 13 June 2015

I hope that this will be the start of a regular contribution to Sofiatalk, the e-mail chat line of Sea of Faith in Australia Incorporated. It will cover both managerial and philosophical issues related to our aim of promoting the "open exploration of religion faith and meaning".

This week, rather than getting too 'philosophical' I will look at how we might use the medium of Sofiatalk.

If you are unfamiliar with SoFiA, you can learn about our aims and activities from our website <http://www.sof-in-australia.org>.

Tiers of electronic communication.

People associated with SoFiA will have varying degrees of involvement with the organisation. Accordingly, the following levels of electronic (mainly) communication are proposed:

Tier 1 President: administrative matters such as authorising payments and issues of confidentiality. Mostly one to one.

Tier 2 Management: voting members of the committee who fulfil our responsibilities as an incorporated body. From time to time others may be consulted.

Tier 3 Extended management: Management Committee plus other interested people. Sometimes philosophical issues arise in the decision-making process and this tier will share them more widely, for example with the convenors of our Australia-wide small groups.

Tier 4 Public: a revitalised Sofiatalk and a proposed Facebook presence. These will provide

a philosophical exploring role. For this to work and supplant Tier 3 as a medium for philosophical engagement we shall need to have most, if not all, Tier 3 members sign on to Sofiatalk.

Tier 5 The SOFIA website <http://www.sof-in-australia.org>. the public face of SoFiA. This describes what SOFIA is about, notifies coming events, publishes and archives articles, and also has a blogging component which Web Manager, Greg, would like to see more people make use of.

Invitation to others to join Sofiatalk.

I would encourage you to invite friends, colleagues and anyone else you think may be interested to give Sofiatalk a try. There is no cost and no limitation other than that you meet the standard conditions imposed by Yahoo and the conventions of civil intercourse. People can get a feel for what goes on with SoFiA Inc and may or may not go on to become members of the Association.

Options for Joining Sofiatalk –(Jim Norman)

- 1 send an email to Jim Norman at jnor2070@bigpond.net.au asking to subscribe or unsubscribe from the Sofiatalk mailing list
- 2 or send a blank (no subject, no message) email to sofiatalk-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.
- 3 or navigate to the Yahoo! or Yahoo7! Websites, and then click on More and scroll down to Groups.

Feature

Via Brisbane Groups

Jihad: a Meditation

In the last Bulletin Rodney Eivers reflected on Jihad – here Phil Roberts meditates on the same topic.

This meditation is sparked by an essay from Rodney Eivers in the March/April *Bulletin*. To begin, I will discuss briefly the meanings of jihad and the possible application of one of these meanings in our own lives. After that I will turn to the public face of jihad in international conflict, including the radicalisation of people in our own community, and offer some thoughts on how we might respond. Overall I will argue that jihad has certain positive aspects which each of us would do well to adopt and which should inform our opposition to the aggression of violent extremists.

The different meanings of jihad

Jihad is an expression of one of the great beauties of Islam; its unswerving commitment to righteousness – the righteousness which it finds in God or Allah. The word 'Islam' in fact means submission to the will of God.

The Islamic Council of America in its website (<http://islamicsupremecouncil.org>) tells us that in the purely linguistic sense jihad means 'struggle' or 'striving'.

In a religious sense, as described by the *Quran* and teachings by the Prophet Muhammad, 'jihad' has many meanings. It can refer to internal as well as external efforts to be a good Muslim or believer, as well as working to inform people about the faith of Islam.

If military jihad is required to protect the faith against others, it can be performed using anything from legal, diplomatic and economic to political means. If there is no peaceful alternative, Islam also allows the use of force, but there are strict rules of engagement. Innocents – such as woman, children, or invalids – must never be harmed, and any peaceful overtures from the enemy must be accepted.

Military action is therefore only one means of jihad, and is very rare. To highlight this point, the Prophet Mohammed told his followers returning from a military campaign: "This day we have

returned from the minor jihad to the major jihad," which he said meant returning from armed battle to the peaceful battle for self-control and betterment.

More often we hear the terms 'Greater Jihad' and 'Lesser Jihad'.

John Renard, in *The Handy Islam Answer Book* (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 2015, p. 213), tells us that jihad means struggle for justice in every facet of life. This idea of struggle is central to the culture which gave birth to Islam. "If for Buddhists, to live is above all to confront the reality of suffering, for Muslims to live is first to *struggle*, to strive all out." The struggle to survive in a harsh social, economic and natural environment is paralleled by the spiritual struggle, which Muhammad saw as the battle between our spirit or higher self and our ego or baser self. "Warriors of the spirit must take up the sword of self-knowledge against the fiercest enemy of all, their own inner tendencies to evil and idolatry" (Renard, p. 272).

The jihad of personal striving, in Muslim tradition, may take many forms. According to Renard (pp. 214-15):

Although the tradition does not feature the notion of 'self-denial' quite the way some Christian traditions do, the concept of 'struggle' or 'striving' is multifaceted. One Hadith [according to Wikipedia, Hadith are "... reports of statements or actions of Muhammad..." Ed] tells how a young man told Muhammad how desperately he wanted to join his fellow Muslims in defending the faith. Muhammad asked whether the young man's parents were growing old. When he said they were, the Prophet told the youth to consider taking care of them as his jihad. Jihad includes even the smallest and most insignificant action, so long as it represents genuine effort, and every struggle and sacrifice made "in the way of God." Thus, expressing the truth, exhorting others to act justly, discouraging injustice, and sacrificing one's

own resources and even one's life, if necessary, are part of meritorious struggle.

Jihad is not only a struggle in the ordinary sense but a struggle for justice – justice of all kinds – and an exercise of discipline, both personal and communal. It is also potentially something that encompasses the totality of a person's being.

The utility of jihad as a concept for us

Though we in our predominantly Christian or post-Christian society come from a different culture with a different world view and different life circumstances, jihad, in its spiritual meaning, has a number of aspects that we might each subscribe to, whether or not we regard ourselves as people of faith.

Consider first the greater jihad, or jihad as personal striving. We would all, I hope, warm to its humanity, the multiple ways in which it puts itself at the service of other human beings and in general terms the promotion of virtue. The requirement for devotion to God will be alien to some, but not the practical and life-enhancing ways in which this devotion is expressed. Other aspects of jihad which deserve our respect are the discipline entailed, the absolute commitment to effort, and the nurturing of self-knowledge in regard to personal weakness. A point of difference for some will be the idea of life as an endless combat. To some extent our society can never escape this paradigm – we talk routinely about fighting addictions and fighting crime – but there are numerous other approaches to life (life as learning, as fun, as a balancing act, and so on) which are equally valid. These are matters of individual difference; what is right for some may not be right for others.

Turning now to the lesser jihad, or public conflict, ours is one of the fortunate societies that have reached a relatively civilised position, preferring peace to war. Peace is one of our primary values; and if we go into armed combat, it is ostensibly, at least, to maintain other values, such as protection of the weak and protection of our own life and property. We have a Commonwealth department of defence, not a

department of war. Being a democratic society, we look for some kind of democratic process before making any commitment to armed combat. We also affirm the need to "legitimise" such a commitment, through reference to international law, international treaty obligations, and decision making by international forums such as the United Nations. Errors may still occur, for decision-makers are sometimes loose in their idea of legitimacy, but on the whole we tread the path of virtue and try to do the right thing. In doing so, paradoxically, we are engaging in our own form of jihad, or what we might call a jihad *against* violence.

Getting inside 'their' skin

I wish now to consider in more detail the thought processes that lead to the lesser jihad, with its proliferation of armed combat, terrorist activities, suicide bombings and human rights abuses.

There is widespread recognition that we in the West don't properly understand what drives people – some Islamists – to commit to violent jihad. Clearly, the existence of the lesser jihad as part of Muslim tradition is only part of the story. There are reasons of the mind and the heart that go well beyond the core teaching which, as the Islamic Council of America and many others have observed, is constrained by the moderating influences of due process and respect for others. Seen one way, we are looking at pure evil, a hatred for other people that is so intense as to be beyond understanding. However, this is a simplistic and somewhat holier-than-thou view which leads us nowhere. Karen Armstrong, in her book *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (London, Bodley Head, 2014), has argued persuasively that the aggression of a modern jihad terrorist has much to do with political, economic and cultural factors, and that this violence is in part a response to perceived previous wrongs. Islamic State's manifesto *This Is the Promise of Allah* (Al Hayat Media Center, 2014) gives plenty of support for this view, talking extensively and passionately about a past where (p. 4)

...generations ... were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect.” (found on <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2014/06/with-this-declaration-of-khilafah-it-is-incumbent-upon-all-muslims-to-pledge-allegiance-to-the-khalifah-ibrahim-and-support-him>).

At this point it is worth noting also the views of the historian Bernard Lewis who gave us the phrase “clash of civilizations.” Lewis has identified a number of cultural differences between Islam and the West which constitute an ongoing barrier to understanding (*Notes on a Century: Reflections of a Middle East Historian*, London, Phoenix, 2013, ch. 9). Muslims, for example, tend to identify themselves with their faith much more than Westerners. People outside this faith tend to be seen in monolithic terms as the unbelievers or 'infidels', regardless of individual or national differences. The Muslim faith is also more closely linked to worldly power than the Christian faith, which (for example) separates duty to God from duty to Caesar. And Muslim society places a much higher premium on honour, with a corresponding abhorrence for any kind of shame, especially at the hands of people of different belief. These of course are generalisations, but they are I think helpful.

Below the level of generalisation there are many personal histories that are also telling. There are instances where the terrorist has had his or her own life, or the lives of associates, damaged in past conflict, to the point where revenge is a very real motivation. And even where the previous wrong has been more at the level of community or society, it is still real. In our own society, in Australia, the problem becomes much more complex, for distance is a factor, introducing additional motivations. In some cases we may be looking at people alienated from society for a range of reasons not directly related to religion, for whom Islam just happens to present itself as an answer. Indeed there may be some instances where people have gravitated to violent jihad through a very logical, rational train

of thought, one which makes perfect sense to them (if not to us) in light of their own values, life experience and perceptions as to what jihad entails. Research has shown that, while some violent extremists come from disadvantaged backgrounds, others are well educated and integrated into society.

As rationalists in the Sea of Faith, many of us – probably most of us – have difficulty understanding religious fundamentalism even within the Christian tradition. How much more of a challenge do we face in understanding Islamic fundamentalism. To proceed, we need to exercise humility and, based on this humility, caution. To underline this point I quote from the Egyptian novel *Palace Walk* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991) by Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz. One of the more engaging characters in this novel is a young man called Fahmy, a law student committed to opposing the British occupation of Cairo in 1919. He is described thus (p. 131):

His laughter was a smile and his anger a frown. Yet his profoundly calm character did not diminish the sincerity of his emotions or the steadfastness of his zeal.

Fahmy experiences risk to his life during street demonstrations and, reflecting, finds a new exhilaration and purpose in living (p. 356):

During the last four days of his life he had lived a life of far greater scope than he had ever known before. His only comparable experience had been in shadowy daydreams. It was a pure, lofty life, ready to sacrifice itself in good conscience for the sake of something glorious, a goal worthier and more exalted than life itself. It did not care whether it risked death, which it greeted resolutely and attacked scornfully. If it escaped from death's clutches once, it returned to attack again, shunning any consideration of possible consequences. This life always had its eyes fixed undeviatingly on a magnificent light and was driven by an irresistible force. It submitted its fate to God, whom it felt encompassing it like the air.

And so on. Here we are taken inside the mind of an intelligent, rational person known for his calmness and self-control, who nevertheless is fully convinced, heart and mind, that death for an

ideal is right. We might say that Fahmy was immature and wrong-headed – indeed he is later corrected by his father on the Quranic meaning of jihad – but this piece of fiction shows us where some extremists get part of their inspiration. The urge to kill and injure and humiliate is not explained, but the urge to fight and if necessary die is. We must remember too that in the culture of the Middle East, sacrifice has been seen not only as a duty but also as a lynchpin in the push toward progress. Sacrifice in the West is something comparatively watered down, at least in modern times.

An important point to note is that, in the mind of militant jihadists, both types of jihad - the Greater and Lesser – are to be pursued jointly. The combatant jihad may have, or seem to have, predominance, but the jihad of inner virtue is expected too. The Islamic State manifesto *This Is the Promise of Allah* makes this clear when it says (p. 8): “You will be facing fitan (tribulations) and hardships of many different colors. ... The worst of these fitan is that of the dunyā (worldly life).” In practice this seems to be belied by behaviours such as the rape of women and girls, but it is part of the manifesto nonetheless.

A counter-jihad

Whether or not as individuals we are comfortable with involvement in yet another war, the hard reality is that we in Australia, and the West generally, are categorically targets of Islamic State enmity. Islamic State is waging its current offensive mainly in the Middle East, in order to establish itself as a nation there, with borders; but this is not the endgame. *This Is the Promise of Allah* states (p. 6) for example:

By Allah, if you disbelieve in democracy, secularism, nationalism, as well as all the other garbage and ideas from the west, and rush to your religion and creed, then by Allah, you will own the earth, and the east and west will submit to you. This is the promise of Allah to you.

Today, it says, the nations of kufr (infidels) in the west are terrified and the flags of Shaytān (Satan) and his party have fallen. The manifesto begins with a very explicit promise based on an

interpretation of the *Quran* 24:55, where purportedly

Allah has promised those who have believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession [to authority] upon the earth ... and that He will surely establish for them their religion - this being the purpose for which the swords of jihad have been unsheathed.

If Islamic extremists have launched a form of jihad against the West and indeed anyone who offends their own idea as to what is right, logic dictates that we respond with our own campaign – our own counter-jihad. Regrettably, in established public discourse the term 'counter-jihad' has become the property of extremists of the opposite persuasion – far right people who are against Islam and Muslims en masse. This is akin to the hijacking of the word 'fundamentalism', which wrongly connotes a lot of things that are not actually fundamental. Properly speaking, 'counter-jihad' should mean simply a movement that opposes the Islamic (lesser) jihad. The issue then to consider is one of method, in other words exactly how we oppose that jihad.

At this point I think it is instructive to take account of the nature of the assault we are under. Zainab Hawa Bangura, the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, has spoken recently (3 June 2015) on ABC Radio National about the systematic atrocities committed by Islamic State against women and girls, saying that this is part of an *all-out multi-pronged strategy* – military, economic, social and technological – the like of which we have rarely seen before. In other words we are seeing the holistic nature of violent jihad at work. An equally holistic response, she argues, is needed in reply.

On the front line, Australia, together with other nations, has committed to military support which might be described as firm but restrained. The principles underpinning this commitment are threefold: to do what is necessary to defend Australia and Australians; to support global peace by maintaining international security; and to contribute to international efforts to remedy a humanitarian crisis. This action has been taken in

the full knowledge that the military engagement is likely to last many years and will be draining in all sorts of ways; yet the virulence of the jihadist threat is such that there seems no realistic alternative. Arguably there is a degree of moral legitimacy about this commitment that was somewhat questionable in earlier campaigns.

This is not the place to be debating some of the associated measures, especially legislative measures, which accompany (or may accompany) the frontline commitment. For us, as people interested in matters of faith, however, it is worthwhile taking note of the more community-focused measures, as Rodney Eivers in his article did. Broadly, the emphasis here in Australia is on prevention and early intervention. There are various initiatives such as the *Countering Violent Extremism* (CVE) programme which, as responsible citizens, we should support. A useful source of information here is Cat Barker's *Australian Government Measures to Counter Violent Extremism: A Quick Guide*, issued earlier this year by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library (http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/Quick_Guides/Extremism).

Elements of the CVE programme include, for example:

- working with communities so they can identify and help prevent people from moving down the path of radicalisation to violence
- addressing online radicalisation and reducing the impact of terrorists' use of social media by helping people develop the digital skills needed to critically assess terrorists' claims and promote alternative messages online
- developing materials and services for mentoring, counselling, education and employment of people who might be at risk.

The Living Safe Together website (<http://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au>) gives further information on government and community initiatives, state by state, with advice on how to get involved and how to find out more.

The question of radicalisation of young people is a difficult one, with multiple dimensions, starting apparently with some disconnect from current circumstances – family, community or society – then moving to an embracing of Muslim ideals and finally a commitment to action based on a perception of those ideals. Rodney Eivers has turned his spotlight onto the idea of challenge, which arguably is central to the attraction of jihad. The argument is that we need to divert people at risk from a harmful challenge to one that is beneficial. The trick would be to divert away from a militaristic challenge to one framed in personal terms – overcoming personal demons through some discipline, for example, or helping needy people (other Muslims perhaps) in the community. Success would not come easily, for young people as a class, young men especially, are drawn to physical combat – witness the popularity of war games and body contact sports; but there are other types of struggle that could be promoted instead. The Quran itself (90:11) uses the language of steep ascent, for example, which could be placed into a context of peaceful social or political action. There is plenty of scope here for some creative problem-solving.

At the end of all this, there is the question of what we as individuals can and should do. Such is the nature of things that most of us are, or feel, very much at the fringe of the whole vexed issue. We feel frustrated, perplexed and disempowered, all at once. Yet with a little exercise of the imagination and the will, we can create our own opportunities to act. We can find our own channels for speaking truth and enlightenment, and extending the hand of friendship to other people of goodwill, in this case Muslims. At all levels, the ending of extreme violence demands extreme humanity, self-knowledge and commitment to effort – all characteristics of the greater jihad. Surely, no effort should be spared in the struggle for truth, and care for our fellow human beings.

2015 Conference

Conference Introduction: Context, Theme and Issues

Presented at the SoFiA 2015 conference Religion in Education by John Carr, co-ordinator of the planning sub-committee

On behalf of the Conference Planning Sub-committee, I welcome you to the 2015 SoFiA Conference. Over the years our conference themes have often focused on the intersection between religion and other aspects of life and culture –recently we’ve had ‘Religion and Ethics’, ‘Religion and the Arts’ and ‘Religion and Sex’. This year’s conference brings light to bear on the intersection of religion and education – our theme is ‘Religion in Education: Children, Ethics, Faith and Meaning’.

We particularly welcome those who are not members of SoFiA and for their sake I shall provide a very short explanation of what it is. SoFiA comprises people who have an interest in religion, but it is not a religious organisation and only some of our members would call themselves religious. Its purpose is to enable *the open exploration of matters of religion, faith and meaning*. We have no other platform; we do not campaign. All of our members do, of course, have beliefs, views, opinions and prejudices, but as an organisation we do not push these in the public arena. If, as individuals, we are motivated to campaign on behalf of a political, philosophical, social or religious position, then we join an appropriate activist organisation. Many of us, therefore, are also members of religious denominations; or of anti-religious organisations; or of organisations like Amnesty, Greenpeace or Doctors without Borders. Our members are encouraged to explore, clarify and share their views, but we are expected not to be dogmatic. The only thing we are dogmatic about is not being dogmatic.

Nevertheless, it would be dishonest to say that SoFiA members do not hold many roughly similar positions on issues. The majority tend to hold liberal or progressive views on political and social issues – and on religion. They believe that religion is an important and integral part of most

cultures and, for many people, it is an essential part of their psyche. Sea of Faith members are respectful of all faiths; they do, however, become concerned when they perceive that religious groups have an undue influence, and when religious views or rules are being imposed on other people. Overwhelmingly, they do not believe that a theocracy is an ideal or, even, a bearable system of government. I think that most Sea of Faithers would, for example, have objected when, in the recent debate on infant vaccination, it was revealed that parents’ religious beliefs were being allowed to trump medical considerations.

So, to return to this year’s conference theme: Religion in Education. At the present time, we are confronted by two paradoxes. First, the 2011 census revealed that more than 20% of Australians say they have ‘no religion’. Yet, at the same time, religious organisations appear to have an increasing level of influence and control in some domains, including education. The last four Prime Ministers, for example, have all found it politically effective to provide generous funding for religious schools and for a National Chaplaincy Program. They have all sought the approval of Hillsong and the Australian Christian Lobby, even Julia Gillard, an atheist.

And the second, much wider paradox? Over the last ten years, extremist religious groups around the world have become more assertive and violent, and this has had impacts in Australia. It’s not only violent acts themselves, but unfortunate reactions to them, such as extreme polemic from fringe politicians, anti-Muslim rallies and matching anti-anti-Muslim rallies, and attacks on churches and mosques. The paradox here is that while everyone agrees that religious prejudice and ignorance can and must be overcome by education, we have comparatively few truly objective programs in religious

education in the country. It is this issue that will be the main focus of the conference.

Predominantly, the focus in the conference program is on the place of religion in Australian school contexts, that is, primary and secondary schools. It is acknowledged that much, perhaps most, of the faith development of the young takes place in the home and family, and in the wider non-school community. Several of our plenary sessions and workshops are concerned with aspects of these diverse contexts. However, the focus of the conference overall is on religion in schools, which is where objective, evidence-based religious education is most likely to take place. Roughly a third of Australian children and young people now attend non-state schools, most of which are owned and conducted by religious organisations. This situation has arisen relatively recently, the number of non-state schools and proportion of students attending them having increased by almost 50% in the last 20 years. Until the 1960s, governments provided very little funding for non-state schools in accordance with the dominant view in the country since the late 19th Century that governments should fund only schools that were secular and free. Federal funding began in earnest only when it was recognized that many Catholic schools could no longer survive without some government support. Further substantial funds for all systems were provided in the 70s and 80s for essential schemes to provide adequate science laboratories and libraries. In the decades since, both major parties have expanded schemes for funding non-state schools. Commonwealth and the States now provide a significant proportion of both capital and recurrent expenditure for non-state schools. Many secularists and supporters of state schooling regret this, but there is no way that either major party can return to a no-state-aid policy.

So, what are some of the specific issues that cause members of SoFiA and similar organisations to be concerned?

Most important, there is concern that many of the newer schools are owned by

relatively extreme religious denominations, whether Christian or non-Christian. Given the potential divisiveness of extreme religious views and activities in the world today, there is a danger that children will not understand or respect members of other religions. The religious instruction and faith formation they receive may leave them with an elitist view and this may be exacerbated by the exclusion of children and teachers of other faiths. Furthermore, academic, evidence-based curriculum, especially in science and history, may be subordinated to received, scripture-based, sectarian beliefs. Such schools are also exempt from the anti-discrimination laws, so may refuse to employ teachers or enrol pupils who belong to certain categories. In the 2011 Australian census, Australians claimed allegiance to 34 different religions, the five 'world religions' and 29 others; the 61% of Australians who claimed to be Christians were spread over 82 different denominations. I do not know how many of the non-world religions and non-mainstream Christian denominations run schools, but there are undoubtedly quite a few. Now, diversity is in general a proverbial 'good thing' and, overwhelmingly, Australians appear to be quite accepting of the diversity in the control and philosophies of non-state schools. I suspect, however, that they have little knowledge or appreciation of what the aims and curricula of the more extreme religious schools are. From time to time, a media story breaks telling of Creationist courses in fundamentalist Christian schools or, as recently has happened in Islamic schools in Melbourne and Adelaide, there are claims that extreme Islamic policies on arts, sports and gender have been instituted. These revelations usually cause a brief media storm. As far as I know, there are no Scientologist schools in Australia, or Paganist schools, or Atheist schools for that matter. But I think current government laws and policies would allow them and would provide government funding for them. What a storm there would be if any such groups, reviled by other groups, did set up their own schools!

Some of the issues arising from the increasing importance of religion in the wider society and in schools were listed in our original conference flyer, and an up-dated list of them is provided at the back of the room. Most of these will be raised in the keynote and workshop sessions, but we have ensured that the conference is not predominantly negative. It is the second paradox that many of the sessions address – the urgent need for objective, evidence-based courses for children and young people on religion, on religions and on ethics. The level of debate on religious issues clearly shows that adults need such courses, too. Whatever their own religious background, politicians and journalists often demonstrate an abysmal knowledge of religion. For adults, a regular program of Radio National's 'The Spirit of Things', 'The Religion and Ethics Report' and 'The Minefield' would be a good start. But there are in fact several excellent courses on religion and

ethics for children and young people already. The irony is that they are either not available to or not accessed by most young Australians. Three of our keynote speakers are associated with such programs. This evening, Garth Read will be talking about his involvement with a major progressive religious curriculum project many years ago. Tomorrow morning, both Anna Halafoff and Peta Goldberg will be telling of their more recent involvement in a range of such programs. We had hoped to have someone here from another worthy program, the New South Wales Primary Ethics course but were not successful. We have, however, printed out the curriculum framework for this program and copies of it are available in various ways during the conference.

On behalf of the Conference Planning Subcommittee and the Management Committee of SoFiA, I wish you a happy, enjoyable and informative conference.

2015 Conference

Post-Conference Reading

by John Carr

Suggestions for further reading on the conference theme were provided in the SoFiA Bulletin last year and again to participants at the Conference. For people who might wish to follow up on the main issues aired at the Conference, three of the main references are provide here. The best exploration of the full range of relevant issues is available in:

Marion Maddox, *Taking God to School: The end of Australia's egalitarian education?* Allen and Unwin, 2014.

Two books which deal with parental selection of schools for their children are:

Chris Bonnor and Jane Caro, *What Makes a Good School?*, NewSouth Publishing, 2012.

David Gillespie, *Free Schools: How to get a good education for your kids without spending a fortune*, McMillan Pan, 2014.

Copies of these are held in most municipal libraries.

Points of view

Two thoughts

by Bill Hendry

Thought 1 An Interesting dilemma

My philosophy suggests that I should support all worthwhile belief systems, perhaps even including ones that attract criticism for not adapting to modern needs. What we need is choice from as large a range as possible so that

(a) individuals have a better chance of finding a system that appeals to them and (b) so that there is competition within an evolutionary fitness regime i.e. systems that fall below sustainable numbers in terms of popularity, are naturally

eliminated. We've already seen what happens when social systems choice is restricted.

In my area is a local congregation whose members appear to be very worthy characters -- the sort of folk who maintain excellent standards. I have already visited one of their meetings and was very impressed with their dignity, reverence and dedication, as well as their speaking skills on the microphone. Although I can't see myself ever joining the group based on belief alignment, I want to live out my philosophy by showing genuine support. However, I can't agree with the way they attempt to bolster some of their (essentially) literal interpretations of the Bible by appealing to Science.

A more extreme form of this tendency is apparent in Creation Science where supporters confuse Reductionist Methodology, with its underpinning of objective data, with cultural stories or 'poetic' writings. There's no apology needed for the promulgation of stories such as are found in the Bible. Over the last 4,000-odd years they have served the societies well: Richard Dawkins would call them successful Memes, which like the belief systems referred to above, stand or fall on the basis of their adaptive fitness. Science, Technology, Consumerism and Materialism might be leading the world down an unsustainable path, but this seems to be an inevitability and viable solutions still could be

found within the operating parameters of this post-Renaissance Weltanschauung.

History has shown what appalling outcomes occur if objectivity is disallowed and I can't see how Creationism could ever be taught as a viable alternative to (or even replacement for) Science. Cultural stories have their own strengths, having provided our ancestors with obvious success in weaving viable lifestyle paths, and for this, and on this basis, they need to be acknowledged. Their Truths are different in many ways from the Truths of Science and the two should not be confused. There's little doubt that we, as a species, need behavioural directions and these can easily be abstracted from Bible (or similar) stories. Their power though, is undermined, if they are going to be conflated with Scientific statements. Writers like John Shelby Spong have argued quite convincingly that the language of the Bible (for instance) should not be interpreted through modern (Western) eyes. There's no need to find rationale for some stories, such as miracles – they represent the conviction and awe of the writers.

So, in short, on the one hand I must, and do, support quality belief systems but, on the other, I think that if their proponents appeal to Science in an attempt to show they're 'right', they seriously weaken their own stance.

Thought 2 Religion in education

I recently decided that the word 'religion' should be redefined, following more closely its original etymology. So, for me, it now means 'return to embracing (the whole)'. That frees the word from its layers of bias and prejudice and in its place I use 'belief systems'.

'Religion' I see more as a process whereby we humans gather knowledge and experience, creating ever more accurate existential generalisations, in an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of unsound decisions, with the ultimate aim of surviving as an individual, social group, culture or even species.

In previous eras, before the popularisation of post-Renaissance scientific methodology, people had no other option but to generate 'stories' (similar to Richard Dawkins's 'memes') that explained observed phenomena and provided, more pertinently, guidelines for what's today called 'morals' or 'ethics', often strong suggestions for behavioural responses that optimised health, welfare and basic survival. This is a new state of affairs in the long history of life on this planet. All other life forms have already worked out how best to survive their particular environment, with that information embedded in their genes. Since we have the 'power' to override these 'natural imperatives, we need pretty

strong guidelines to give us appropriate directions....and this is essentially the history of 'religions' (belief systems).

Questions now arise as to what constitutes the basis of an effective injection into the human psyche of moral codes, whether through ancient, but powerful stories, replete with appeals to almighty godly beings (often anthropomorphically represented); through effective educational programs steered by the hope that empirical evidence and intellectually deduced social paradigms will point us in the right direction; or whether we already have inbuilt, the intuitive mechanisms that will allow, ultimately, this species to survive. And for me, survival is the bottom line!

So what do we teach in schools? Well, given that all belief systems are localised attempts to provide sustainable behaviour, and since they are all pointing in the same direction,

we can do a number of things: look at the wonderful variety of stories that have evolved; look at the history of defence of those stories (and perhaps why); look at theories concerning future success without such metaphoric parables, based, I suppose, on some sort of theoretical heuristic process; and at a practical level, allow kids (especially) to feel comfortable with the stories they bring from their respective home environments. This is highly idealised, since prejudice is always(?) going to be a stumbling block, but I have personally worked through such a process in my own 'spiritual' development, and apart from those belief systems that seem to be counter-productive, actively support all stories, which gives me a wonderful sense of freedom and an appreciation of the human condition. Essentially, I call this whole area 'Philosophy', the core elements of which could (should?) be taught in schools.

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

18 June 2015

Hans Strichow (Author, "*The Grand Order of Design*")
"*Our Ultimate Purpose in Life.*"

16 July 2015

John Noack ([John's review](#) of Don Cupitt's "Reforming Christianity")
"The Joshua Cult and the Gospel Jesus."

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.

2015 Conference

Education, funding and ideology: the Australian experience

*presented at the SoFiA 2015 Conference: Religion in Education by Kevin Bates DipT(Sec) BA
GradDipLabStud MIR JP(Qual) President, Queensland Teachers' Union*

ABSTRACT: The commitment of the Australian government to funding competing education systems from the public purse is almost unique to Australia. Following the abandonment of the Gonski school funding model by the Abbott/Pyne government, this presentation will contend that the fixation on ideology over education will see another generation of Australian children suffer from disadvantage in education and therefore life: an opportunity squandered.

Before I begin this presentation I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we gather, the Bundjalung Nation, and pay my respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.

Good morning and welcome. Thanks for inviting me to address this conference on an issue that is of great importance to the teaching profession, to the students that our profession serves with great dedication and to education both within Australia and internationally.

About me

But first, a little about me. I was born in to an Anglo-Celtic family with tenuous links to the Anglican church. I was baptised in that church, largely because I didn't have any choice in the matter, and after a very brief interlude in Sunday school at a young age parted company with established religion on what was a mutually agreeable basis – I also believe that the lay teachers were happy to see the back of me. From those early years I have felt compelled to question and interrogate the established wisdom that I was being asked to assimilate and I like to think that my current profession as a teacher and union leader came about through a strong desire to engender in others a love of learning and of questioning all things as a path to enlightenment and fulfilment.

I was educated in a state primary school and state secondary school in Redcliffe to the north of Brisbane. My first qualification is in secondary school teaching where I majored in history and geography. My undergraduate degree focussed on comparative religious studies and government as I was not allowed to continue my

studies in history because of university regulations. These studies canvassed a broad range of faiths and philosophies in the western, middle eastern and eastern traditions.

I began working for the Queensland Teachers' Union full-time in 1994 and in the intervening years I have completed two post-graduate qualifications in labour studies and industrial relations. I am now the State President of the union representing 43,000 state school teachers and principals and TAFE educators in Queensland; I am a member of the Executive of the Queensland Council of Unions representing more than 370,000 union members in Queensland; I am a member of the national Executive of the Australian Education Union representing 200,000 workers in government schools around the nation; I am active in the democratic forums of Education International, the world union of teachers, which represents more than 30,000,000 teachers and school workers across the globe (we hope to recruit China to this cause soon which will swell our numbers by a further 5,000,000).

The democratically determined policy of the Queensland Teachers' Union is that no government money should be provided to non-government schools.

This disclosure has been about ensuring transparency in the comments and assertions I am about to make and to help you to understand the formative experiences in my life that have led to the development of such a world view.

I must also be clear that, unlike my colleague keynote speakers, I will not be looking at the issue of religion in education per se. Instead, my address will look at the impact of

religion on education: particularly as it pertains to the funding of education which is of course a fundamental pre-requisite for the operation of education facilities such as schools.

This is a weighty topic and to deal with it fairly in the time available I will need to make a number of assumptions about content. I want to flag at the outset that these assumptions are in many ways gross generalisations. I do not adopt the mantle of an academic whose material is research based and written with scholarly impartiality. I am in some ways hoping to encourage discussion by being a little controversial on this Sunday morning.

I have referenced a number of useful sources, many of which are available on-line, that will provide ample scope for self-guided research and exploration of the issues raised should you be so inclined.

To set the scene I intend to take a few minutes to outline some fundamentals of the Australian education system. These assumptions will inform and shape the remainder of the presentation. As an educator to the core, the scaffold I create in this opening will support the propositions I will then make about the key issues of funding, ideology and the future of education in Australia. Finally, lest I leave you burdened with a depressingly negative conclusion, I want to outline the actions of state school teachers (particularly through their unions), students, parents and the community at large to create hope for a better future for the children of Australia and the nation as a whole through a school funding model that delivers equity by targeting disadvantage wherever it exists.

Who controls Australian education?

The founders of our nation contemplated that education would be a state issue. The Constitution is constructed thus and for much of the modern era state's delivered education for their citizens relatively untroubled by the Commonwealth.

Even pre-federation education was provided by a mix of state-run, publicly funded government schools and independent schools

such as the Grammar schools funded by a mix of public money and fees. I will deal with school funding in much greater detail in a moment.

Historically then, Australians experienced education via different providers. Governments and various churches were key players in these systems and they each brought particular perspectives to the delivery of education within the schools that they controlled. Ultimately we are faced with three separate and distinct schools systems.

However, the true growth in this diversity of education systems can be mapped from the 1970s when political changes delivered significant potential for growth in public monies allocated to all three school systems.

I must also declare that the Queensland Teachers' Union is not now nor has it ever been affiliated with any political party and I am not a member of a political party.

In terms of control of education I also assert that the main Christian religions exert considerable control on all education through their influence on political parties. The Australian Labor Party and the union movement from whence it sprang are significantly influenced by the Catholic Church. Australia's largest politically affiliated union, the SDA, is a blatantly Catholic organisation. In my own union I am somewhat outside the norm by my non-Catholic origins.

The conservative political parties, let's call it the LNP for convenience, are for the most part heavily influenced by the churches of both mainstream designations but the emphasis remains on the protestant tradition. While the Australian Christian Lobby is not the only player in politics it is a very significant one. The most recent LNP government in Queensland was stacked with candidates selected by and from this group resulting in an extreme, partisan policy foundation delivered by such high profile individuals as Tim Mander of the Scripture Union.

The exception here is the Australian Greens who, it would appear, have remained free of influence by any particular faith based group.

OECD figures reveal that Australia is unique in that 30% of students are educated in

government funded, non-government schools. The established churches exert significant influence in both the Catholic school system and the so called independent school system and through these platforms over policy making and implementation in all schools. I sit on many forums as the representative of 43,000 teachers and principals who serve 66% of the student population, about 550,000 children in Queensland, where my voice is matched by Catholic school representatives and independent school representatives who respectively represent about 20% and 14% of the remaining students. Many argue that this influence is disproportionate.

In summary then, control of education in Australia is theoretically vested in the states but is in fact shared between the states and territories, the Commonwealth, the Catholic Church and a group of 'independent' schools many of which are Anglican and Lutheran but with increasing numbers of fringe religious groups such as the Exclusive Brethren.

Who funds Australian education?

FACT: Australia invests less in education that most other countries in the OECD.

Just as control of school education is meant to be a state issue, so too is school funding. Along with health, education represents a significant proportion of state government expenditure. In Queensland; these two portfolios currently represent about 50% of the total state budget, consuming about \$25 billion annually. The states have no capacity to fund this expenditure from the revenue streams they have available to them. Taxes collected through the progressive and more equitable income tax system and the regressive and largely inequitable GST regime are redistributed to the states by the Commonwealth to fund these services.

Since the 1970s the federal government has also begun to provide increasing amounts of tagged and targeted funding to the states for education. Yesterday you heard a reference to the Howard government's values education program. Few people realise that this program

and the requirement for all schools to have a flag pole and fly the Australian flag were actually conditions attached to the then funding arrangements for schools known as a quadrennial funding agreement and under Labor federally morphing into the National Education Agreement. Monies were used to compel compliance with specific, and I would argue ideologically driven, programs with dubious educational benefits.

Programs such as the secondary science facilities program, laptops for schools and Building the Education Revolution (the halls for schools program and largely credited with being responsible for saving Australia from the GFC) all represented billions of dollars of additional investment by the federal government in schools, an area of state jurisdiction. These programs carried less ideological intent but shared one other characteristic with the likes of the donkey/flagpole values initiative. All of these programs involved tax revenue being distributed to all schools, regardless of the system to which they belonged. Government and non-government schools receive government funds to do the business of educating Australia's young people.

An issue of great significance in education is the proportion of money distributed to the various school systems. While this contention is hotly contested by non-government schools, a disproportionate amount of the additional Commonwealth money is distributed to the non-government sector and for every dollar spent by a state government in a government school a percentage is automatically allocated to non-government schools by the states through nexus funding arrangements. This has been controversially demonstrated in Victoria with the newly elected Labor government legislating to provide an amount equivalent to 25% of all money spent on government schools by the state government to the non-government schools sector – the largest proportion of which will benefit Catholic schools. I will return to this issue later.

Finally I must also recognise that parents also make significant financial contributions to their children's education in all three sectors.

So, state schools are for the most part funded by the states from monies provided to the states by the Commonwealth from tax revenue. Private schools are, to a very large extent, funded by Commonwealth government funds, parent contributions and state government money.

An interesting twist in this story is the outcome of the National Commission of Audit ordered by the Abbott government when it came to power. On the theme of smaller government, the Commission recommended that significant waste in education spending could be avoided by the Commonwealth ceasing all involvement in the education sector, ceding its powers in respect of non-government schools to the states. This recommendation sent shock-waves through the non-government school sector and led to the Minister, Christopher Pyne, making the extraordinary statement to the Australian Christian Schools Forum that the Abbott government felt a "strong emotional connection" with the non-government schools sector and that they would not be accepting that recommendation. Food for thought when you can compromise the fundamental premise of the economic rationalist approach to small government for the sake of a single, privileged sector of the community.

What principles underpin the current Australian school funding model?

While not an original concept, I contend that the ideal of free, secular education envisaged by our nation's founders has never truly been realised. Indeed, to our great shame schools have grown to represent some of the most divided and divisive institutions in our community by embedding and exacerbating inequity in an already unequal community.

Significantly, schools in Australia must also operate on a not-for-profit basis. I will also return to this issue later.

However, these principles remain in legislation in each of the states in one form or another. We must ask then why it is that we have strayed so far from such a lofty ideal.

It may seem overly simplistic to say that the churches have influence on the political parties and processes of Australia but there is no other obvious rationale. If our political parties had remained free from or able to resist the influences of religion in policy setting then it is entirely possible that the beginnings of the massive injection of government money into non-government schools in the 1970s would never have occurred.

The Howard years saw a massive blow-out in government funding to non-government schools. The SES funding model, based in a large part on the socio-economic status of the community in which a school was based saw glaring inequities deeply embedded. Kings College in Sydney, famous for its multiple swimming pools and rifle range, was the recipient of millions of dollars in extra funding while state schools in desperately poor communities got little or no increase at all.

In 2010 the Gillard Government promised a review of school funding. This came about because of a decades-long campaign by the Australian Education Union to argue that the SES funding model (and its predecessors) was unfair and unconscionable. This was, in essence, the private school versus public school debate that dominated funding for all of that time.

When the Review of the funding of schooling finally got under way in 2011 it took a radical look at school funding and re-imagined the possibilities in an astoundingly simple way. Known to the community as the Gonski review, this comprehensive process was led by David Gonski, doyen of the conservative community and Chairman of the Australian stock exchange. It is hard to imagine what possessed Kevin Donnelly and others to describe David Gonski as a left-winger but perhaps that says more about Kevin Donnelly.

You will be pleased to know that I do not intend to recount the four year-long review

process, public campaign and eventual government response. Instead I assert that the debate over school funding was categorically determined by the Gonski review and the findings called for a sector-blind, needs-based funding model that ensured equity of access to educational opportunities regardless of a child's postcode, family background or where they went to school.

The Gonski panel recommended funding be distributed to schools on the basis of a school resourcing standard (a basic grant needed for the school to deliver a high standard of education) and loadings based on the needs of the students, not the power and privilege of the parents, their political influence or their capacity to pay. The panel's recommendations, if realised, would have invested billions of dollars more into education with the vast bulk (85% in the case of Queensland) going to state schools. Not because state schools were being privileged over non-government schools but because they were where the students with the greatest needs are schooled. 85% of indigenous students, 78% of students with disability, 83% of students in remote and very remote areas, 79% of the poorest students and 68% of students with English language proficiency issues.

The education union movement and many others in the community, especially the national parent representative group, contend that the debate is over. Government funding of schools is corrupt and needs to be changed. Just as a quick aside, the alternative view being pushed is that spending more money in education will make no difference to students and what we need to do is just get better teachers. The correct response in polite company is that spending more money in the wrong places won't change a thing. What Gonski argued compellingly however is to ensure that we invest more money where it is needed.

The Gillard government immediately dropped the ball on this once-in-a-generation opportunity to resolve the school funding issue. As a consequence of what was for a large part political fear of the power of the non-government school lobby PM Gillard promised

that no school would be single dollar worse off initially. This meant that the massive boost in private school funding under the Howard years would be preserved until the Gonski reforms allowed others to catch up. Even with this failing, hopes were still high for a positive outcome.

The 2013 election saw the Coalition facing a significant voter backlash against its ongoing refusal to commit the changes to the school funding model as imagined by Gonski. In the last days of the campaign that party made its "unity ticket" claim saying that no matter who you vote for the Gonski funding reforms would be delivered. The rest, as they say is history; the most recent federal budget not only failed to deliver the money needed to fund the Gonski schools funding reforms but reversed the decades old indexation system an action that will result in a cut of \$30 billion in funding for education over the next 10 years.

So what now!

The battle over school funding is not over. The community is rallying once again in the lead-up to the next federal election to campaign for the major political parties to commit to the implementation of the full Gonski: nothing less will suffice.

Since the Gonski report's release the situation in Australia has worsened. The OECD reports that Australian schools are the almost the most inequitable in the developed world. The OECD's most recent report (just a few days old) measures the impact of equity, focuses on the basics of education and economic prosperity, and the outcome is a complete vindication of the findings of the Gonski review.

Why then do the LNP Coalition and the Labor party refuse to commit to this opportunity to turn around our education system and maximise the return on their investment in education.

At the risk of sounding like a Marxist, it is quite simply global capital. Education spending world-wide represents an untapped multi-trillion dollar profit source. Only a fraction of 1% of this

massive pool of money is accessible by private companies to exploit for profit.

The Charter-School movement in the US, Free Schools in Sweden, and Academies in the UK are all focussed on this one eventual outcome: the marketisation of education and the exploitation of the taxpayer investment in the future of our communities for profit. Don't believe me?...you need only turn your mind to the current deplorable situation in TAFE in Australia to see the truth of it.

Vocational education and training is a vital third element of the education narrative. Victoria has led a charge to become a fully contestable market with all government money going into the vocational education and training market to be divided up amongst providers through a tendering process or via competitive recruitment of students. Two names have been repeated over and over in the media: Vocation and Evocca. Both companies have been exposed for claiming tens of millions of dollars in government payments for courses not delivered to students who cannot afford to pay or, in the worst cases, will never be able to complete the study despite accruing massive debts through VET-FEEHELP the VET equivalent of HECS. The total VET budget in Victoria blew out by some \$400 million while almost \$1 billion was cut from TAFE colleges. All of the additional money went into the pockets of shareholders. Vocation is a publicly listed company that has had to repay more than \$20 million in fees collected from government because it failed to deliver the courses to students while delivering \$200 million in profits to its owners. Some 9000 qualifications awarded by one provider, including many in aged care and child care, have had to be withdrawn as the students actually didn't complete the required study or assessment. This has left students and their employers in an invidious position as they have to pay to have the students redo the study.

The assistant Minister for Education in the UK's conservative government owns a chain of 24

for profit schools! The largest individual tax-payer in Sweden is the owner of a chain of for-profit schools that is now looking to expand into the UK.

The profit motivation must not be underestimated. The previous Queensland LNP government quietly adopted a report from Independent Schools Queensland that would have seen the government relinquish all responsibility for state schools in favour of becoming a purchaser of education services rather than a provider of education, effectively privatising the entire school sector in Queensland. The first steps involve removing the legislative prohibition on profiting from education and a number of states including Queensland have been preparing for this eventuality.

The forces of global capital are circling ready to pounce on the greatest pay-day in history. Companies such as Pearson (a publishing firm) are now the providers of standardised testing around the world, including in some states of Australia where they provide the NAPLAN test. This same company and others are now setting up for-profit, low-fee, low-quality schools in developing nations where they exploit the poorest of the poor to advantage their shareholders.

This is an issue for our country because all schools, regardless of the system of religious affiliation, stand between these companies and profits and they stand to lose as much as the state schools I have dedicated my life to defending.

I will leave you with this thought. The future of education in Australia is at an historic juncture. We must act now and act together to protect our schools, to fund our schools equitably and then and only then is the debate about the teaching of religion in schools likely to have any real importance.

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2015 Conference

Workshop on Exploring Worldviews

run by Jon Cornish at the SoFiA 2015 Conference Religion in Education

We sat in a circle and tried to share something very personal about us, the 'way we see reality', or 'our worldview'. This is no easy task, and our worldview probably cannot be put into words in such a short space of time. Our worldview is formed throughout our life, being shaped by our experiences and how we have chosen to deal with those experiences. There are as many worldviews as individuals. Formally, worldviews can be defined as:

...a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic make up of our world. Very few people are

aware that they hold a particular world-view. They assume that the way they see life is that way everybody does. Their assumption is that what they see is reality. (Raeper, W., and Smith, L. (1991). *A Beginner's Guide to Ideas*, Oxford: Lion Publishers).

Educational institutions need to be inclusive when dealing with worldviews, thus both atheistic and religious worldviews need to be taken into account. To be clear, this means that meaning and purpose can be developed by all people and that all people can live ethical lives. This is an empowering and encouraging way

to allow students to develop and explore their understanding of the world and their place and role in it.

I am not one for 'labels', they tend to paint people into corners, however, there is some value in pointing out that not only is there atheist or theist positions, there are pantheist, panentheistic, agnostic, gnostic, existentialist or deist worldviews for starters. These formalised theological/philosophical names tend not to be overused in school situations, but could be useful within the introduction of the unit. Many students are unaware that there is more than the superficial and head cracking dualism between theism and atheism.

All religious perspectives are based on a Two World Worldview, whilst atheistic views regard reality as a One World Worldview.

Further, given that the world of sensible reality is not in question, common to both Worldviews, the key issue is over the second world, referred to as: 'More Beyond', or 'Infinite Void', or the 'Unbroken and Invisible One'. These are normally explored through popular culture, such as a study of the film: *The Truman Show* or through story. The approach to the Two World Worldview I take at the beginning is an exploration of Platonism and Christianity.

One way to explore a Two World Worldview is through story. As an example of a Two World Worldview I used a story called: *ne plus ultra to plus ultra*. available in *Australian stories for the heart* (2002) Strand Publishing Sydney pages 43 – 45, *More Beyond* by Gordon Moyes

Postlude

Testing Traditions and Liberating Theology, by Val Webb (Morning Star Publishing, 2015)

reviewed by Dr Noel Preston AM

Noel Preston is a retired Uniting Church minister and an ethicist formerly Associate Professor at Queensland University of Technology and Griffith University. (n.preston@griffith.edu.au)

Testing Traditions and Liberating Theology may well be the best volume to come from Val Webb's prolific key pad - and that is quite a rap! Her primary audience is the inquiring lay person. In Val's own words, she

wrote this book because I meet so many people that either know very little about the development of theology within their church tradition; or else have left their church because what they hear there makes little sense to them, or is even harmful to them. Like Richard Dawkins' attacks on Christianity, they only know one version and have no idea that theology has actually changed considerably over the centuries and keeps on changing.(p.1)

This is definitely a commendable and readable text "backed by serious, inquisitive scholarship", as its dust cover asserts. My copy will be passed on to my critical thinking son-in-law and then it may become a second hand

Christmas present to my local pastor! It is also amenable to group study with questions for discussion following each of its twenty chapters.

The valid assumption underpinning Val Webb's interpretation is that the true test of religion is how it sustains and nurtures good living "here and now". Much of the book is an historical survey of the development of (Christian) theological ideas. As such, it will be a great eye opener to many, and an enlightening refresher to others. She demonstrates how theology moves from the dogmatic and systematic to the contextual – liberation and feminist theologies that emancipate theology from ivory tower seminaries and continue to test the traditions of ecclesiastical institutions and provide a theological framework for engaging contemporary moral questions and public policy as well as personal empowerment.

Adopting the style of the teacher rather than the polemicist, Webb does not labour her own preferences, though they are well implied. Her theological perspective is informed by process theology and relates to a pan-en-theistic understanding of the divine. As such the traditions informing twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich rather than those of Karl Barth support her contextual approach. Along with this she passingly endorses the contemporary importance of interfaith dialogue, indigenous spiritualities and eco-theology. Indeed, one of the most significant chapters in *Testing Traditions and Liberating Theologies* is the final one, “Living our theology on the planet”.

Along the way Val speaks to her own denomination, the Uniting Church in Australia (pp.231ff). In particular she questions the adequacy not just of ancient creeds but *The Basis of Union* document as well as the structure and content of its denominational theological faculties. Her passion is for lay theology (not that she suggests current theological seminaries in Australia overlook this). Because of this passion I found her omission of reference to biologist Charles Birch obvious and unfortunate, for Birch is arguably Australia's most eminent twentieth century lay theologian and process philosopher, and a Uniting Church affiliate. That said, Val herself qualifies for that title in the new millennium.

Epilogue

Creeds: Progressive and Secular

by John Carr

This has also been posted on the SoFiA blog (<http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php>). Any replies sent to the Bulletin will be printed here and sent for posting on the blog too.

In recent years some liberal and progressive congregations have drafted new Christian creeds; ones more in keeping with their own 21st Century beliefs than the Nicene Creed from the 4th Century. In the Chermside group of SoFiA, we once devoted a session to exploring some of these. As far as I can recall, the ones discussed all came from Uniting Church or Catholic parishes.

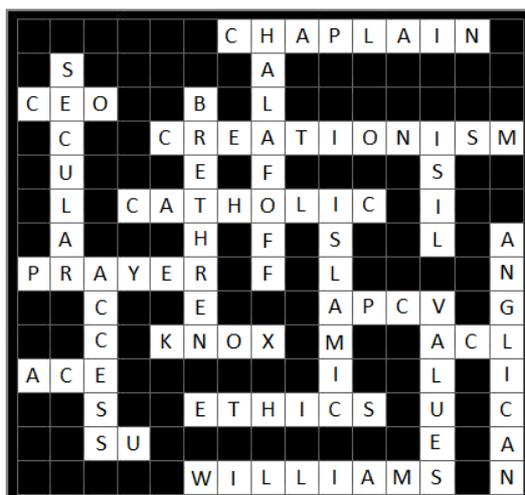
Perhaps members of SoFiA would like to share examples of such ‘modern’ creeds here. They may not have even been written as ‘creeds’, but may be extracts from literary texts. In the seventies, one of my Senior English classes decided that John Lennon’s *Imagine* was their creed. If you don’t know of any existing contenders, you may be prepared to try your

hand at writing your own. If you do, I suggest that you keep it to creed length. We don’t want a sermon or another Thirty-nine Articles.

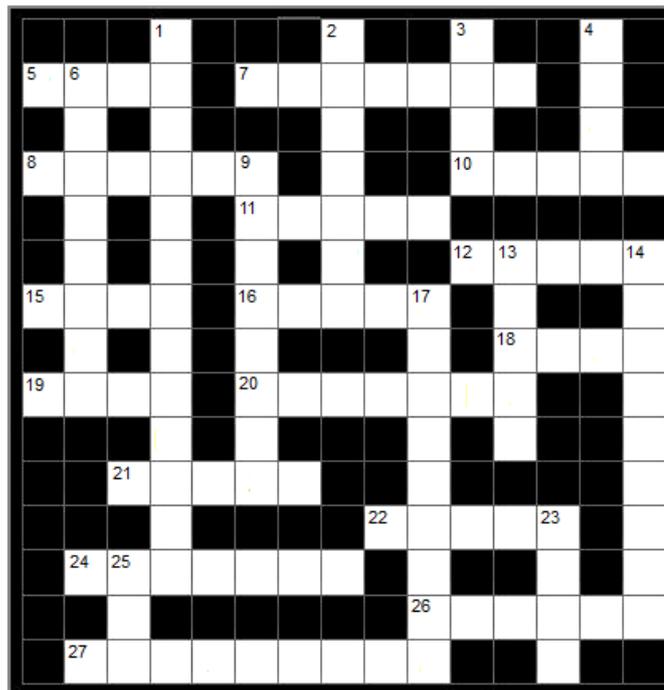
To get the discussion started, I offer what I believe is a really moving secular creed, the last paragraph of Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos: The story of cosmic evolution, science and civilisation*.

For we are the local embodiment of a Cosmos grown to self-awareness. We have begun to contemplate our origins: starstuff pondering the stars; organised assemblages of ten billion billion billion atoms considering the evolution of atoms; tracing the long journey by which, here at least, consciousness arose. Our loyalties are to the species and the planet. *We* speak for Earth. Our obligation to survive is owed not to ourselves but to that Cosmos, ancient and vast, from which we come.

SoFiA Crossword #16



SoFiA Crossword #17 Prepared by Greg Spearritt



Across

- 5 The topic of C.S.Lewis's first popular book on Christian doctrine, a topic revisited after his wife's death in *A Grief Observed*
7. Scholar of the late Middle Ages who produced a particularly influential version of the cosmological argument based on God as First Cause
8. Mortal
10. Nationality of the philosopher Cicero
11. Student of Socrates
12. Type of virtue which is the main concern of political philosophy
15. Author of the seminal work *The Critique of Pure Reason*
16. Image behind the understanding of 'being' which allocated all God's creatures a fixed place (before Darwin messed things up)
- 18 Truly
19. Location of the LHC, built in part to investigate the 'God particle' (Higgs boson)
20. Prominent atheistic philosopher of the 20th century
21. Theological position which maintains that God as Creator does not interfere with the workings of the universe
22. Religion of the influential 11th-century philosopher Al-Ghazali
24. Major type of theology based on reason and experience of the world
26. Prominent 'new atheist'
- 27 Philosopher of the 4th-century BCE who infused Christian doctrine with neoplatonism

Down

1. Cultural and intellectual age emphasising reason and individualism in Western Europe
2. Credited as the founder of Buddhism
3. English bishop who brought the Death of God movement to public notice in the 1960s (init.)
4. Philosophical school in Hinduism: a holistic way of life with self-development techniques for body, mind and spirit
6. Term coined by Karl Jaspers to describe the period of 800–300 BCE when new ways of thinking emerged independently in India, Persia, East Asia and the Greco-Roman world
9. Ancient Greek philosopher who argued that the universe was governed by the laws of chance without the need of divine intervention
13. Country hosting the world's oldest continuously-operating university
14. Chinese sage born in 479 BCE
17. Influential European philosopher whose key ideas included the will to power and the death of God
23. Influential atheistic political economist of the 1800s
25. One of the 4 classical elements in ancient Greek philosophy and science

Theme: Religion and Philosophy

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.

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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)

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.....