



Sea of Faith  
Sea of Faith Network in Australia  
**BULLETIN**

MAY/JUNE 2016



photo Robin Ford

By an entrance porch, Lane Cove, NSW

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

Recent *Bulletins* began with management items. This *Bulletin* is different. I've filled the first pages with reflections and explorations. It's not that management activities aren't important; after all there is the AGM (with a mini-conference) on 25 June 2016 to bring to your attention. No, it's just that I wanted to highlight our core activities; that is exploring issues of religion, faith and meaning.

I hear people say that "All religions are basically the same". A program I listened to last night on Radio National was just one example. Rodney Eivers challenges this with a blunt identification of fundamental differences, in this case between Christianity and Judaism. It still rings in my ears. Next, John Carr suggests ways of looking at intercessory prayer. Then John Gunson analyses what the term 'God' might mean in a 2016 SoFiA context.

I've included items to do with two like-

minded groups. The first provides details on the upcoming *Common Dreams Conference*. The second (of particular interest to those in NSW), is a brief note on the Eremos Institute. There are links to these organisations on our website. If you know of a like-minded group that would like to publicise an event in the *Bulletin* (or even write something for it) please let me know.

The final article in this *Bulletin* is a meditation on Lantana and Bellbirds.

I plan to get the next *Bulletin* out by the end of July. I wonder what will appear in my inbox by then. Please send contributions by 20 July if possible (it can be later if you let me know it's coming or it is short).

Robin Ford

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Views expressed are those of each author and  
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## The Ethic of Jesus

*Rodney Eivers revisits a 2002 article and provides his latest response.*

Grace is one of those beautiful words of the English language which has long had a special theological connotation. My dictionary defines grace (theologically) as "the free, unmerited favour and love of God." By extension this has come to mean the spirit of God working in human beings when they show free unmerited favour towards other human beings.

The topic is linked to an experience which provided a mental jolt to me a couple of years ago. Is unconditional love, incorporating a strong thread of forgiveness (unmerited favour, to use the foregoing expression), really the ideal for human relationships? Christians and non-Christians alike, in Western society at least, have tended to assume that it is.

Over and over again when Christians are criticised one finds that they are not being criticised for being lovers in the Jesus sense, but because they do not live up to the ideal they preach. They are being hypocritical. In these instances, the secular critic seems to be conceding that although Christians may not live up to it, unconditional love is still the ideal above all.

That has certainly been my own position. I may find myself out of step with the vast apparatus of structure, tradition and belief which has grown up around two thousand years of Christian history; I may dismiss the supernatural stuff as plainly incredible in this scientific age. Nevertheless, in seeking to provide some security and purpose in life I have always consoled myself with the thought, "Well at least, no thinking and compassionate person can challenge the ethic of Jesus."

Two years ago, however, I did meet such a challenge in a way that had not previously occurred in my adult life.

It arose when I read a report in the British Sea of Faith Magazine (May 2000) of an address by Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok at a Christian-Jewish

Sea of Faith service in Manchester Cathedral, England.

Rabbi Cohn-Sherbok had been asked to speak his mind as truly as he could and despite some trepidation on his part he appears to have done so. The bulk of his talk challenged the uniqueness of Jesus in history, especially claims to the nature of Christ as the second person of the Trinity. He expected, probably correctly, that this would not cause much of a ripple among the people at that gathering because many of them would also have re-thought these issues.

But then the Rabbi went on to say:

Possibly some of you, perhaps even the majority, find in Jesus' message about human relationships a source of spiritual truth. Jesus does not have to be the Messiah or God incarnate for him to be a great teacher of wisdom. But does he have something of great significance to say to all of us? Are Jesus' words meaningful to me?

Was Jesus right to think that we should love unconditionally, that we should help everyone no matter what the cost to ourselves? Was he correct to tell us that we should love our enemies? Or that we should forgive no matter what the circumstances? For nearly twenty centuries, Christians have taught that they should live up to these religious ideals. But can we? And have Christians themselves done so?

Cohn-Sherbok went on to relate his experience that Christians, much the same as any other people, have not lived up to these ideals.

This, of course, does not prove that there is anything inherently mistaken in Jesus' teaching. But it does illustrate that the Christian community has not and does not live up to its moral principles. And to my mind, it is not surprising that this is so. I believe Jesus was mistaken in encouraging his followers to lead lives of self-sacrifice. This is a moral error. It is unrealistic to think that human beings will ever be able to live selflessly. Humans are not designed to live in this way. The vast majority cannot. And history illustrates that most Christians do not.

But not only are Jesus' moral precepts unrealistic, they actually distort human relationships. In the gospels, Jesus tells his followers that they should love all human beings, even their enemies, and that they should forgive seventy times seven. In other words, we are to be active participants, whereas others are to be the object of our concern. Paradoxically, in this way we actually diminish human beings. They become faceless, two-dimensional.

The Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber ... cautioned against turning other people into objects ... Yet this is precisely what Jesus encourages us to do.

Let me put the matter in a different way. All of us wish to be treated as adults, and we want others to behave in an adult fashion. But if we follow Jesus' teaching we infantilise other human beings. If we are to love others unconditionally, and forgive them for whatever they do, then these agents have ceased to be autonomous, responsible moral agents.

In my view we should abandon Jesus' ethical prescriptions and substitute instead a more mature framework. In place of selfless giving we should act on the principle of reciprocity. In other words, human relationships should be guided by mutual concern, give and take. All giving should be balanced by the desire to receive. We should act so that in every relationship there is an equal rate of exchange. Parents should expect their children to give as well as receive. Husband and wives should act similarly towards one another. One partner should not do all the giving, and the other all the taking.

I am suggesting therefore that Jesus' teaching about selflessness be replaced by the principle of give and take. If we give, we should expect to take. And if we take, we should expect to give.

Why should this have shaken me so much? It happened, I think, because I have every reason to respect what Dan Cohn-Sherbok has to say. Although I may not often succeed in doing so, I do seek to be aware of my own biases. What the Rabbi says seems to make a lot of sense. While at times stumbling along and having to work my way around the practical difficulties, I have still kept the Jesus ideal at least as a principle with which to direct life's journey. Here is someone, not antagonistic to a spiritual view of life, who says I have got it all wrong.

I have pondered a lot on this over the past two years but, for now, have come back to my original position.

These are some of the thoughts which have led me back to the conclusion that ultimately the Jesus ideal is the one worth pursuing rather than the principle of reciprocity, or tit-for-tat, which Dan Cohn-Sherbok advocates:

The biggest problem in give and take in actual relationships is the different perception by each party as to what is fair or just. That is, as to the point at which the giving stops and the taking begins. I see this at the level of international relations as well as those of an intimate nature. Internationally, for instance, it seems ludicrous that a country as economically and politically dominant as the United States should expect reciprocity in giving and taking with countries as poor and weak as Afghanistan or Iraq. Perhaps this principle of give and take is at the heart of the problem of establishing peace between Israel and Palestine. This sort of attitude can lead to the sort of victim mentality on the part of the relatively weak which can bedevil relationships.

In the intimacy of marriage, too, so much strife is caused because the partners have different understandings of what is fair. Between countries there are cultural differences which exacerbate these misunderstandings. In marriage there are the inherent differences between men and women to complicate matters.

Who makes the first move? Who is going to be first to give? Once the process of reciprocal exchange has begun at what point do the parties agree that the giving stops and the taking begins?

Regrettably, not all human beings (or countries for that matter) are fortunate enough to be physically or mentally able to be treated as mature adults and maintain a relationship of equals. There is a tremendous range of expressions of the transition between our being fully mentally capable and (at the extreme) the various stages of dementia and eventual complete bodily helplessness.

Far from wanting always to be treated in an adult fashion I am happy to be treated as the object of someone else's concern and sympathy

from time to time, and to be at peace with it. To be always on guard for reciprocity in my relationships can become very wearing.

Loving, as against being loved, has therapeutic value in itself. Even for the weaker party in a relationship, an act of love (such as forgiveness) makes that person the initiator. This gives him or her a sense of power, or at least control' over their own life, compared with seeing themselves as the disadvantaged victim.

So the love ideal turns out to be not so impracticable after all. At the extreme it means dying for someone else, and there have been, of course, inspiring, classic cases of this occurring. And at the day to day level there are common sense responses to the sticky problems that can arise when adopting this philosophy.

For example one has to care for one's body and mental condition to some degree if one is to be of any use to anyone else. Even in marriage, to the extent that it is a self-centred condition, I have argued to myself that I could not be a 'complete person' without the satisfaction that marriage and family bring. And if I am not a complete person I am less able to give to others.

The *agape* love which Jesus stands for is, at one level, simplicity itself. At other levels, as many have found down through the ages, it has a complexity which adds tremendously to the spice of life.

As for me, until something better comes along, I'll choose love.

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Point of view

## Intercessory Prayer

by John Carr

On the basis of past discussions within SoFiA, I assume that most SoFers do not believe that intercessory prayer has any direct physical effect. Non-theists and Progressive Christians alike generally do not believe in a personal God who can or will intervene in the material world to make it rain, cure a diseased body or rescue people buried in an earthquake.

At a recent meeting of the SoFiA CBD Group, the topic was *Belief in a Higher Power: Does it help us in time of trouble?* The idea for this session came from reflecting on the 12-Step Alcoholics Anonymous Program, which has been adopted and adapted by other counselling agencies. The original AA Step 2 said that the founders "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity", while Step 3 said they had "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to God as we understood him".<sup>1</sup> Why, we asked, in this day and age, is it necessary to believe that we need the help of a Divine Power to overcome psychological or behavioural problems, especially in what are predominantly secular organisations? When we looked at the research, we found that NGO (non-government organisation) counselling agencies

actually make very little use of the 'Higher Power' clause. They might pay lip service to the notion, but the programs they conduct overwhelmingly employ mainstream psychological techniques like Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. God quickly disappears from the scene.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of our discussion, we naturally widened the ambit to consider the continuing role of intercessory prayer in Christian liturgies. Across the spectrum — Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, Baptist, Pentecostal, Mormon — intercessions still hold a central position. In some denominations, services may be given over entirely to prayer — formulaic, incantatory or extempore.

How do those SoFers who are church-goers deal with this? Do they simply ignore what is going on or pay close attention and suffer a heavy load of cognitive dissonance? And what about those who are in some kind of leadership position, where they may have to pray publicly? Good examples of 'godless prayer' have been given by Bishop Spong and others, but how is it dealt with in everyday circumstances by our members? Two of those present at the meeting

were prepared to report on their own experience as 'deputised intercessors'.

'Johannes' is a member of a congregation where several volunteers are rostered to present the Intercessions during the Sunday Eucharist. Over a period of many years he has gradually modified what he says to keep faith with his changing beliefs. He still follows one of the basic models of 'the prayers of the people' as set down in *A Prayer Book for Australia*. In order, there are: prayers for 'All Peoples'; 'The Church'; 'Those in Need'; and 'The Faithful Departed'. Each of the first three of these segments is in two parts — giving thanks for outcomes and for the people who are working to achieve them; and actual prayers of request.

When it comes to subjects, Johannes overwhelmingly chooses matters of social justice. Generic vices are denounced — violence, greed, arrogance, anger, sloth and so on — and virtues are praised — service, humility, compassion, patience and courage. Broad categories of people, especially leaders and workers, are named, such as politicians, clergy, carers, the homeless, the poor, the oppressed, the grieving, the isolated and, of course, the sick. In positive references, individual organisations and people may be named, though rarely in negative ones. Segments often end with a reminder that *we* are the ones who must work to achieve desired outcomes, just as *we* may be to blame for bad outcomes. Johannes sometimes refers to "God in us" and cites Jesus' teaching as the touchstone, not Christian beliefs, 'God's Plan' or the need for a 'Saviour' to atone for our sins. He never prays for better weather or cures for the sick.

Not surprisingly, Johannes finds this occasional duty fairly onerous. He composes all the prayers himself using the model referred to above. The other intercessors on the roster make considerable use of existing prayers, usually customising them for current circumstances. When Johannes has suggested that he should stand down from his role, members of the congregation urge him to continue. Even more orthodox intercessors whose prayers are radically different from his say they like them.

The second member who spoke at the meeting was 'Freya', who serves as a volunteer hospital chaplain. The only patients she sees are ones who have expressed a desire to have a religious visitor and have specified her denomination.

As a Hospital Chaplain, Freya feels it is essential to interact with the patients in a caring, compassionate, supportive and non-judgemental way. While she does not believe in the material efficacy of intercessory prayer, she is acutely aware of how much value some patients place on it. Hence, she has had to balance the tension between these two competing views while at the same time being able to pray with the patients in an authentic way. In doing this, the prayers are focussed on issues of pastoral care, rather than simply asking for healing miracles.

When she is asked to pray, she does so by praying 'with' the patient, often encouraging them to join in common prayers, such as *The Lord's Prayer*, and to share what concerns them most about their current situation. She acknowledges that as humans, our bodies do not last forever, and that sickness is an inevitable part of the human condition, not a divine punishment for past wrongs. She prays for skill and compassion for the doctors, nurses and all hospital staff caring for the patient. She acknowledges the fears and worries of the patient, and prays for their peace of mind, and relaxation, encouraging them to mentally hand over their treatment and care to the hospital staff. She prays for strength, patience and peace of mind for the family of the patient (often with the family present when they are visiting). Hence, the visit with the patient is primarily a pastoral encounter, one where Freya responds to the specific emotional needs of each patient.

In both cases, it seems, the official 'pray-ers' are acting in a pastoral role within a community of people who share many common values, experiences and practices. The prayers are an extension of everyday talk amongst friends — warm, thoughtful, reflective, reassuring. Though both invite reflection and self-assessment, the prayers in the liturgical context

have a more challenging edge. Don't wait for God

to do it; you've got to do a bit yourself!

<sup>1</sup>. See

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve-step\\_program](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve-step_program)

<sup>2</sup>. For a recent Australian study, see the thesis of Dr Fairlie McIlwraith:

<http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:199924>

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**Response**

## **SoFiA and God**

by John Gunson

I was prompted to write this by two articles in the March/April *Bulletin*; the first from our President, Rodney Eivers, and the second, a letter from Valerie Birkett.

Rodney's article refers to the recent series of responses in the Bulletin to the question "Where to for SoFiA?" As one who contributed to that discussion I am inclined to respond positively to Rodney's suggestion that even if some of us have benefited from a long association with SoFiA and perhaps no longer need it we should continue to belong and support it for the sake of others who are "in transition" between religious orthodoxy and some more credible understanding of "faith". His proposal for a special membership deal to facilitate or encourage this makes a lot of sense.

Valerie's letter points to some ways of making the transition to a more credible understanding of what 'God' means. Her helpful comments, however, seem to contain a confusion between two different understandings of the 'God' concept, if I am reading her correctly.

She quotes Jerry Stinson that "God is a word symbol or metaphor for the best and most enduring values of humanity", and goes on to flesh this out thus :

God as the goodness within each of us; God as love/care /compassion ... God in you helping me.  
God in me helping you ... .

With this I agree, and I am sure that our mentor, and the inspiration of our movement, Don Cupitt, would also.

The earlier part of Valerie's letter, however, suggests that what she is referring to what can be described as a 'panentheistic' understanding of God. From my reading of the literature this is a misunderstanding. She lists a

number of well known authors as proponents of panentheism, but while this is true for Spong, Borg, Webb, Parkinson and Bodycomb, it is not a correct description of Geering, Holloway, or Armstrong.

I will return to panentheism shortly, but first I will set the scene with a comment on the implications of Rodney's and Valerie's remarks for the future of SoFiA.

When I was an active member of a Christian church and a newcomer joined us on a Sunday, he/she was warmly welcomed, but almost never was any attempt made to introduce the newcomer to what this church was about, or what it stood for, such as giving them a brief pamphlet setting out the fundamentals of Christianity and this particular church's program.

If we are a "staging post" or "transition group" for people, would it not be useful to have available a brief pamphlet for newcomers setting out the facts (from Rodney's article) about our beginnings and our purpose, and a short article about Don Cupitt and his liberating ideas (principally from his seminal books, *Taking Leave of God* and *The Sea of Faith*.) Of course we are not bound to those interpretations of 'faith', religion and God, but they do constitute the impulse for our origins. I suspect that among our members, and especially newcomers, there would be those who have never heard of Cupitt or read his books, and would be grateful for a synopsis of his key ideas.

For me, and I presume for SoFiA, the reason SoFiA can be a helpful "transition experience" for those breaking free from "conventional religious orthodoxy" is Don Cupitt's two fundamental ideas. The first is that metaphysics (the study of a supposedly non-

material aspect of life) is no longer a credible way of trying to understand the world (whether in academic circles or in the secular community at large). The second is that the idea of a 'realist' God is likewise no longer credible or sustainable. All new members of Sofia should be enlightened about this much at least.

Now I will return to Panentheism. This is, I suspect, almost impossible to explain or unravel in a brief paragraph or two.

Valerie's letter suggests that it is a name or label for the non-realist view of God that she espouses in the latter part of her letter. In fact it is the very opposite. It is espoused by writers like Spong, Borg, Webb, Parkinson, Bodycomb and many 'Progressive Christians' precisely as a desperate way to hang on to a 'realist' view of God that appears to be in tune with modern science, especially quantum physics.

Panentheism suggests that God is a 'process' God, not a fixed material reality, but like matter/energy a fluid life-force or energy that permeates all of creation, not directing it, but seeking to persuade it (or us) to be and do the good. Unfortunately for progressives there is absolutely no evidence for this at all, but simply the convenient assumption of a parallel between a discredited metaphysical idea of God (theism) and quantum mechanics.

The evidence of evolutionary biology puts paid to any idea that 'God' is in everything or that everything is in 'God'. If you want to believe in any sort of God active in creation then that God cannot be a God of love, compassion etc, but rather the author of millennia of suffering, death, competition for life and resources, indeed a food-

chain in which we prey on and consume each other. Those who espouse panentheism simply do not understand evolution.

Panentheism is a concept popularised by Alfred North Whitehead (a polymath and later leading philosopher) and his fellow Christian disciples like John Cobb Jr and Charles Birch. It is a leap of faith by Christians wanting to hang on to a 'real' God, but it (like all metaphysical ideas) has no credibility in philosophical circles and academia. The writers Valerie alludes to have much of value to tell us, but not their explanation of God. Panentheism, with theism, is a wonderfully appealing concept, but it flies in the face of our contemporary scientific understanding of our world.

Rodney's article also raises the issue of how we in SoFiA communicate with the public at large, especially those "transitioning" from religious orthodoxy. How can we let them know that SoFiA exists and can be a useful place or resource for them?

Perhaps we need a workshop on just that theme, or at least an invitation through the *Bulletin* for contributions to that end. The Melbourne group, for instance, is full of interest for the fairly small and static membership that continues to enjoy discussions about religion and 'faith' issues, but its existence is I suspect largely unknown outside that group, and its members have long since 'transitioned' beyond orthodoxy

John Gunson's book, *God, Ethics and the Secular Society* has recently been published as an ebook, and is available from most major distributors.

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Response

## Letter to the Editor

Lesley Bryant

Dear Editor,

I was interested to read about MOOCs in the *Bulletin* for March/April 2016. I did a wonderful course called *Think 101x: the science of everyday thinking*

<https://www.edx.org/course/science-everyday-thinking-ux-think101x-2>

There is a report about it at

[https://uqx.uq.edu.au/filething/get/519/THINK101x\\_Course%20Report.pdf](https://uqx.uq.edu.au/filething/get/519/THINK101x_Course%20Report.pdf) which lists the topics covered. I have a biological science background and have not done any psychology but found this

course a wonderful introduction. I especially liked the way they explored things. One was why we continue to believe what we believe, even in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary! Another was how so called wine tasting experts were not much better than novices in a simple experiment. And I thought the final assignments, where participants we asked to upload videos explaining what they would do to bring about change, were inspiring.

Cheers

Lesley

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Announcement

## 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 - [sofmelb@yahoo.com.au](mailto:sofmelb@yahoo.com.au)

16 June 2016

Alex McCullie (Tutor, [Centre for Adult Education](#))

*Charles Darwin's Legacy: Scientific and Religious*

21 July 2016

Paul Murchison (Author, ["Who is this God?"](#))

*Christ, Calvin and Eternal Torture*

18 August 2016

Willy Vloedmans ([Spiritualist](#))

*Meta-Physics and Spiritual Consciousness*

## Like Minded Organisations

*An occasional series by the Editor*

### Common Dreams

Common dreams is an alliance of Australian and New Zealand kindred organisations which promote the study, discussion and implementation of Progressive Christian and other progressive religious streams of thought and action.

It organises *Common Dreams* conferences every three years. The *Fourth Common Dreams Conference* will be held in Brisbane 16 – 19 September 2016. The theme will be *Progressive Spirituality: New Directions*. Eminent international, Australian and New Zealand speakers will explore aspects of contemporary progressive spirituality including indigenous and inter-faith expressions of spirituality.

To find out more, visit <http://www.commondreams.org.au/>.

### Eremos Institute

Eremos Institute is an inclusive organisation promoting dialogue on matters of faith, belief and spirituality within an Australian context. It has groups in the Sydney/Blue Mountains area as well as Wollongong, Mudgee and Newcastle. All members receive *Eremos* magazine, which includes articles on contemporary, social and environmental issues, and personal explorations of faith.

In the March/April *Bulletin*, Andrew Bush suggested a book group for Sydney SoFiA members. For activities like this, Eremos has a selection of books (multiple copies) that can be borrowed (for a fee).

For more information, go to <https://www.eremos.org.au>.

Eremos has offered \$10 off a new Eremos membership to all SoFiA members (email [membership@eremos.org.au](mailto:membership@eremos.org.au) by 30 June 2016 and say you are a member of SoFiA.)



**EREMOS**  
EXPLORING SPIRITUALITY IN AUSTRALIA

Notices

**Mini-conference and AGM**  
**Saturday 25 June 2016**  
**Verandah Room, Fox Hotel**  
**71-73 Melbourne St, South Brisbane**

10.30	Registration and Morning Tea
11.00 - 12.00	From <i>Sanctuary</i> to <i>Stop the Mosques</i> : A multi-media collage and quiz
12.00 – 1.00	Lunch
1.00 – 2.00	<i>Islam in Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century</i> Faiza El Higzi, Manager of the Romero Centre:
2.00 – 3.30	SoFiA AGM

For financial members of SoFiA, attendance at the function, including morning tea and lunch will be free. Non-members will be asked to pay \$30..  
RSVP for catering purposes to John Carr [johncarr@ozemail.com.au](mailto:johncarr@ozemail.com.au).  
For the President's review of topics for the AGM see the March/April *Bulletin*.

**Annual Subscriptions to SoFiA Are Now Due**

**To maintain your membership**

Please either:

- a) make a deposit to SoFiA Inc BSB 032 085 a/c 446904 with your name recorded on the transaction with the word 'subs'
- or
- b) mail a money order or cheque (made out to SoFiA Inc) to PO Box 1309 Upwey Vic 3158.

Reminder: The bank account details are !NEW! again for 2016

**Subscription rates for 2016**

See the back page of this *Bulletin*

**Minimise paper work**

There's no need to complete a membership form if your contact details and *Bulletin* preference (posted or email attachment) remain the same. But if they have changed, or you no longer wish to remain a member, please let me know at:

[cordeliamary@gmail.com](mailto:cordeliamary@gmail.com)

(or send a note to PO Box 1309 Upwey Vic 3158).

**Any Questions?**

If you are unsure about any of the above, please contact me.

Cordelia  
Membership Secretary

Review

## *Digitalia*

This is the Editor's review of what is happening on the SoFiA website, the SoFiA blog, *sofiatalk* and Facebook. See the SoFiA website [www.sof-in-australia.org](http://www.sof-in-australia.org) for instructions and links on how to access *sofiatalk* and the SoFiA Facebook page.

SoFiA website [www.sof-in-australia.org](http://www.sof-in-australia.org) : This headline caught my eye: *Hey, minister, leave those texts alone* (The Age, Melbourne) May 27 2016. As I anticipated, it reported that a Victorian Government minister had ordered that some potential school texts should be reviewed before including them in the reading list because they might disturb others. The article rehearsed the usual arguments in this long-standing conundrum.

SoFiA blog at [www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php](http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php) (also accessible from the website): I found an intriguing brief comment and a link supplied by Greg Spearritt. He writes (05 April 2016): " [Religion a power tool?](#) Has religion (at least in part) been a tool for social elites to enhance their power? It's a common perception, but now there's some **evidence** from a rigorous scientific study". The link took me to an article in the *Brisbane Times*. It was a depressingly familiar story of power structures within communities.

Facebook Sea of Faith in Australia: Jim Norman forwarded an announcement of the book: *Made On Earth - How the gospel writers created the Christ* by Loraine Parkinson. He responded with this comment: "Looks worthy of being added to my bookshelf. I've always felt that the evangelicals behind the 'What-Would-Jesus-Do' seminars failed to make the distinction between what Jesus would do and what their 'God' would do.

sofiatalk No new postings this time.

In the Gaps

Ockham's Razor on Radio National Sunday 29 May 2016 was fresh and uplifting. It was titled *A century of healing* and described what is necessary if we are to heal the earth and ourselves. If you didn't hear it you might like to access it from the ABC Radio National website. Here is the link:

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/ockhamsrazor/a-century-of-healing/7432738>

Supplied by Robin Ford

## A Philosophy of Lantana and Bellbirds

*Charissa Smith's meditation on Lantana and Bellbirds provides a fresh context for Henry Kendall's classic poem.*

### A question

The creator has given us lantana and bellbirds. How do we use them and admire them?

### Getting rid of lantana

All the poison in the world does not get rid of lantana; hacking it out with a mattock after slashing works, but is highly labour intensive. Anyone engaged in using common poisons on lantana is exposing themselves to a severe health hazard. The Government lantana *Dieback* has worked to a limited extent.

### Using Lantana

Lantana has uses as an anti-tubercular medicine; a topical spay is antifungal and antibacterial. And lantana provides cover for small birds.

### Toxicity of lantana:

All over the east coast of Australia we are beset by the continual growth of lantana, which is poisonous to cattle and other animals. Its

beautiful flower might be white, pink, purple, orange, and an orange firey colour (which is the most poisonous variety).

The Droughtmaster breed of cattle and camels have special gut bacteria which allow them to process the lantana, particularly the young shoots which sometimes are the only green thing growing. However they can get foot swelling and mild liver toxicity if they eat too much, Goats are also somewhat resistant to poisoning provided they have no more than 10 % of lantana in the diet.

### Lantana and Bell Birds

Lantana spreads when the rest of the bush gets dieback. Lantana suits bell birds and they then drive away other birds that would have eaten the insects that are associated with dieback. So, along with the glorious song of the bell birds, and the echoes falling from Henry Kendall, comes the Lantana with its amazing root structure which spreads out like a web under the ground so that all the plants are connected.

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Epilogue

**Bell Birds**

by Henry Kendal

By channels of coolness the echoes are calling,  
And down the dim gorges I hear the creek falling:  
It lives in the mountain where moss and the sedges  
Touch with their beauty the banks and the ledges.  
Through breaks of the cedar and sycamore bowers  
Struggles the light that is love to the flowers;  
And, softer than slumber, and sweeter than singing,  
The notes of the bell-birds are running and ringing.

The silver-voiced bell birds, the darlings of daytime!  
They sing in September their songs of the May-time;  
When shadows wax strong, and the thunder bolts  
hurtle,  
They hide with their fear in the leaves of the myrtle;  
When rain and the sunbeams shine mingled together,  
They start up like fairies that follow fair weather;  
And straightway the hues of their feathers unfolden  
Are the green and the purple, the blue and the golden.

October, the maiden of bright yellow tresses,  
Loiters for love in these cool wildernesses;  
Loiters, knee-deep, in the grasses, to listen,  
Where dripping rocks gleam and the leafy pools glisten:  
Then is the time when the water-moons splendid  
Break with their gold, and are scattered or blended  
Over the creeks, till the woodlands have warning  
Of songs of the bell-bird and wings of the Morning.

Welcome as waters unkissed by the summers  
Are the voices of bell-birds to the thirsty far-comers.  
When fiery December sets foot in the forest,  
And the need of the wayfarer presses the sorest,  
Pent in the ridges for ever and ever  
The bell-birds direct him to spring and to river,  
With ring and with ripple, like runnels who torrents  
Are toned by the pebbles and the leaves in the  
currents.

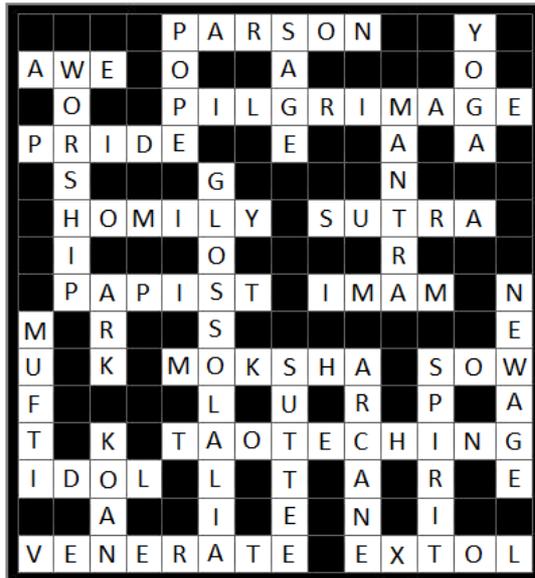
Often I sit, looking back to a childhood,  
Mixt with the sights and the sounds of the wildwood,  
Longing for power and the sweetness to fashion,  
Lyrics with beats like the heart-beats of Passion; -  
Songs interwoven of lights and of laughers  
Borrowed from bell-birds in far forest-rafters;  
So I might keep in the city and alleys  
The beauty and strength of the deep mountain valleys:  
Charming to slumber the pain of my losses  
With glimpses of creeks and a vision of mosses.



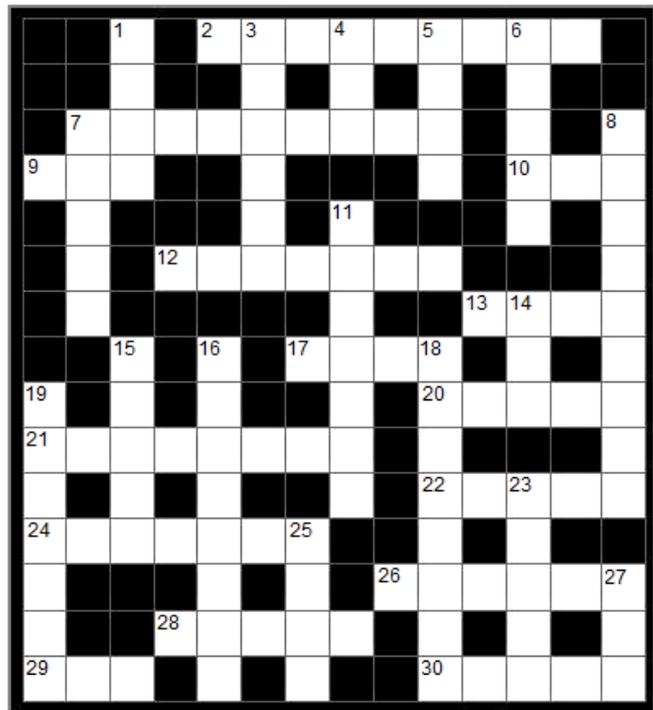
Photo by Robin Ford

After a shower

**SoFiA Crossword #22**



**SoFiA Crossword #23** Prepared by Greg Spearritt



**Across**

- 2 Movement originating in the 19<sup>th</sup> century proclaiming the imminent return of Jesus
- 7 Scientology leader
- 9 School of Buddhism emphasising *zazen*, sitting meditation
- 10 Bhikkhuni
- 12 Pope
- 13 Consumer business described in the mid-2000s as America's fastest growing religion
- 17 National Australian ecumenical church body (init.)
- 20 Babylon
- 21 English groups in the 1700s and 1800s aiming to purify the C of E of all Roman Catholic practices
- 22 Pledge of fidelity
- 24 Institutions commonly targeted for influence by religious groups
- 26 Head-covering veils
- 28 Spiritual struggle
- 29 Division of the psyche which mediates between inner and external reality
- 30 One of Moses' key accoutrements

**Down**

- 1 The fish's tax contribution (Mtt 17:24-27)
- 3 Ecclesiastical role for women reportedly under consideration by Pope Francis
- 4 Penultimate Israelite Judge, succeeded by Samuel (acc. to Samuel 1)
- 5 Where Gautama found enlightenment
- 6 Denomination of Islam
- 7 Birthplace of Muhammad
- 8 God willing
- 11 A district under supervision of a bishop
- 14 Long-running bible study program (init.)
- 15 Wife of Abraham
- 16 Malcolm Turnbull's current and Bill Shorten's original religious affiliation
- 18 Refrains from indulging
- 19 Missionary
- 23 Politically prominent American Christian
- 25 Guide for the Magi
- 27 Religious/philosophical movement inspired by Don Cupitt (init.)

## Sea of Faith in Australia

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

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

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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 or 0408 193 872)

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

**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).

**Sydney** Under consideration. Contact: Lyndell and Robin Ford (02 9427 7078)

**Toowoomba** Monthly on a Monday night. Contact Greg Greg Spearritt [sof@a1.com.au]

### 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 032 085 A/c 446904 ref your name) or cheque (payable to SoFiA).			

Signature.....