



Sea of Faith

Sea of Faith Network in Australia

BULLETIN

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2015



photos Robin Ford

Full size, complete and fully assembled Stonehenge, Esperance, Western Australia

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

This elegantly slim *Bulletin* contains much food for thought.

John Carr describes how New Age groups in the UK have appropriated ancient structures. This was stimulated by his recent tour of monuments in Britain.

John Gunson continues the conversation on "Quo vadis SoFiA?" (*Postlude* page 13). He recognises that SoFiA has helped many of us become comfortable with how we think about religion, faith and meaning. But, he asks, how has this impacted on the way we live our lives? What do we do next? I hope you will respond with copy for the *Bulletin* next year.

And talking of copy, the supply from SoFiA groups has slowed. John Gunson's article has set me thinking. Should I be braver?

The rumbling topic for the last few years has been what to make of Islam. As I write, this

has been intensified by terrorist attacks around the world.

Can the *Bulletin* offer something useful in these circumstances? Can it say something that is new? Well, we can harness the direct but considerate approach that SoFiA members take to deep questions of meaning. I invite you to provide reflections on your current thinking. They might be questions you have, conflicts that you are yet to resolve, values that you take as fundamental, insights that have enlightened you, encounters that have given you hope. It would be a modest yet constructive contribution.

Of course, articles on other topics are welcome too.

Merry Christmas

Robin Ford robinford@a1.com.au

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Views expressed are those of each author and
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New Age Appropriation of British Prehistoric Sites

by John Carr

The invasion of prehistoric sites like Stonehenge by hordes of New Age devotees has been the subject of many media reports in recent years. The most spectacular event occurred before the Summer Solstice in 1985, when hundreds of revellers were confronted by large squads of police. Twenty-four of the injured were hospitalised and 537 'travellers' were arrested. Journalists dubbed this event 'The Battle of the Beanfield'.

The ancient and prehistoric monuments of Britain and Ireland have attracted a great deal of interest in the wider community of the British Isles for at least the last 200 years. When they became the subject of post-Enlightenment scientific and historical study, the publicity attracted a large variety of responses: upper and middle class 'tourists' began to visit; writers like Walter Scott incorporated them in their novels; and people of a spiritual or philosophical persuasion sought to relate their own identity to that of the ancient people of the 'Isles'. In particular, groups in Scotland, Ireland and Wales sought to emphasise the continuity of their identity with that of the ancient 'Celts', often in opposition to the dominant 'Anglo-Saxons' of South-East England. In the 19th and early 20th Centuries, movements like Neo-Druidism acquired a degree of respectability.

Recent Manifestations

The kinds of activity and underlying beliefs evident since World War 2 can be seen as a continuation of those of earlier generations, though the number and variety of devotees have grown considerably. The New Age Movement is extremely pluralistic and the members of different New Age 'denominations' undoubtedly differ in the nature of their interest in the prehistoric sites. Most New Agers believe that mind, body and spirit are interrelated. One of the common factors, therefore, appears to be the

belief that the prehistoric monuments are 'sacred sites', special places where the physical world meets the spiritual world. Compared to the 19th



photo John Carr

a pilgrim at Stonehenge

and early 20th Century devotees, they are less concerned with matters of identity, whether personal or national, though they may well have a strong belief that they are continuing an ancient spiritual relationship with *the place*.

On some occasions, groups of visitors have been motivated by more contemporary interests and causes. For example, peace activists and environmentalists have sometimes been dominant. Generally, however, individual visitors and most groups seem to be motivated by personal spiritual concerns unrelated to current political or social issues. In recent years well over a million people have visited Stonehenge alone each year.

The British prehistoric site phenomenon has something in common with the wider recent popularity of pilgrimages. Consider the worldwide interest in the Santiago de Compostela journey and, for Australians and New Zealanders, visiting Gallipoli on ANZAC Day. The sites, significance and demographics may be different, but participants share the feeling that

the journey and the visit are rewarded with a profound spiritual experience related to the place. Surprisingly, many modern pilgrims have no conventional religious faith and, in some cases, would deny having any belief in the spiritual.

The Monuments and their Builders

Until well into the 20th Century, many of the accepted 'facts' about the history of the ancient monuments of Britain and the peoples who built them were, we now know, wrong. In the past, without the benefit of modern scientific knowledge and methodology, even archaeologists and historians published serious misconceptions, some of which are perpetuated to this day in the popular media and are still widely accepted by many visitors. 'Everyone' knows that the Druids built Stonehenge! The first major stumbling block that had to be overcome was the literal interpretation of the Genesis myth; it is impossible to make sense of the evidence if one is restricted to a 6,000 year Ussherian cosmos. The widening acceptance of the concepts of deep geological time and natural selection of biological species was followed by new branches of science like palaeontology and genetics. The development of powerful microscopes and procedures like carbon-dating and DNA analysis have brought a precision undreamed of even a hundred years ago.

There is still a great deal that is unknown about the early inhabitants of the British Isles and the structures they built, but some of the basic facts are clear. The Isles were populated by *Homo sapiens* only after the end of the last Ice Age, from about 8 000 BCE, that is, in the Late Mesolithic Age. Organic artefacts from this era, such as timber buildings and clothing, have generally not survived, though evidence of post holes can be found. Most of the stone buildings that are the focus of this article were constructed during the Neolithic Age, between approximately 4 000 BCE and 1 500 BCE. Many of these, like Stonehenge, were built in successive stages, sometimes centuries apart, by communities of different cultures, who may not have known

what the original purposes of the buildings were. Some of the well-known monuments, as well as modifications to older ones, date from more recent times — the Bronze Age (1 500 to 800 BCE) and the Iron Age (post 800 BCE). Earlier buildings were often abandoned but sometimes they were appropriated by successive populations for new purposes. While the exact original functions of the prehistoric monuments may never be known, it is assumed that ritual, funerary, residential and defensive functions were the most common. In keeping with the assumption that successive populations of most prehistoric peoples were pantheistic, it is not surprising that some structures appear to be located in places and with orientations related to features in the landscape. Others are clearly oriented towards the sun or some other astronomical body, sometimes with great precision.

The peoples of Britain and Ireland before the Roman occupation – the Ancient Britons and Irish – had crossed from the European continent in waves throughout the eight thousand year post-Ice Age period. Their immediate homelands were in present day Portugal, Spain, France and the Benelux countries, though some could have come from present-day Germany and southern Scandinavia. In the early millennia they could have walked across, as the Isles had not yet been cut off by the rising sea levels. It is not known how violent the migrations were but, as early numbers were small, there was plenty of room for newcomers.

The extent to which past migrations led to population replacement, rather than to integration and assimilation, is a central issue in current research, not only for prehistoric times but also for more recent ancient and post-Roman history. People of my generation were brought up with the idea that the 'Angles, Saxons and Jutes' either killed or drove out the indigenous Ancient Britons, with the result that the English are predominantly Anglo-Saxon, while the Welsh, Scots, Cornish and Irish are 'Celtic'. Genetic research reveals that, while there is a broad ancestral distinction between the populations on

either side of the historic divide, the difference has been wildly exaggerated. In the direct paternal line, the combined genetic footprint of Anglo-Saxons and Vikings across the British Isles is often only 5 to 20% and nowhere is it more than 40%. Even in England, most people almost certainly had some Ancient Briton ancestors.

Furthermore, the Ancient Britons were not genetically 'Celtic'. In fact, it is now recognised that the Celts were never a homogeneous people and did not invade Britain in large numbers in the millennium before the Romans came. Scholars now restrict the term 'Celtic' to the cultural and linguistic domains. Celtic culture and languages spread to Gaul and the Isles, but there were no 'Celts'.

The Druids (Ancient British scholars and religious leaders who were a major problem for the Romans) spoke Celtic languages but probably had a long genetic history in Britain. They did not build Stonehenge or most of the other monuments that have survived, but they may well have used them, appropriating them for the rituals of their own culture.

My Contact with New Age Use of the Sites

I recently enjoyed a three week tour of Prehistoric Britain conducted by Odyssey Travel. We visited some 50 prehistoric sites – standing stones, stone circles, brochs, barrows and tombs of various kinds, hill forts, and dwelling places. These were spread across the Shetland, Orkney and Outer and Inner Hebridean Islands, South-Western Scotland, the English Lake and Peak Districts, Anglesey, South-Western Wales and the areas around Bristol and Salisbury. The focus was on archaeology and the inferences that can be drawn about the peoples who built the structures.

In the early, more northern, stages of the tour, we saw little evidence of a New Age presence, though I was not looking for it at that stage. Visitors to the area are increasingly well catered for with museums and interpretative signs and centres. However, these sites are still quite remote and the weather is usually cold, wet

and windy – as it was for our own visit. Nevertheless, it may be that they do attract New Age visitors at the Summer Solstice, especially if the weather is good.

As we moved south, we began to see signs that the sites had recently been visited by devotees. Trees and fences were festooned with fading ribbons and wreaths of flowers and ears of cereal. Wreaths and sheaves of flowers were lying on half-buried stones and, in underground sites, there were used tea-lights and streaks of candle-grease. To our untutored eyes, the offerings appeared to have Wicca connections. More unusual items



photo John Carr

festooned offerings



photo John Carr

Wicca offering

we saw included a 'love padlock' ('Russ and Tina, 1/2/15') on a fence by a tomb and, deep in a crevice, a small glass sphere with a white image of a fairy inside. By a standing stone in a church precinct, there was a pet rabbit in a wire

enclosure, which has been decorated with a ribbon and a floral offering.

At most sites, we encountered no visitors with a spiritual interest – as far as we could tell. However, as luck would have it, we were at Avebury and Stonehenge during a bank holiday weekend and the New Agers were present in large numbers. At Avebury there was a group of women dressed in robes, with small wreaths in their hair and, at Stonehenge, we shared the early morning full access time-slot with a large group of meditators from Mumbai. They played some meditative music on a CD player and knelt in a circle quietly chanting. One local guide told us that she has heard a didgeridoo being played on occasions, apparently a 'spiritual' instrument of choice. She also said that she had once come across an Australian woman sitting in a tomb chanting and carefully distributing sand on the floor. The sand was, the woman claimed, "from Uluru".

Our encounters with devotees were extremely short and the only ritual activity that we saw, apart from that of the Mumbai meditators, was the use of pendulum dowsing. This entails dangling a large crystal on a short chain in front of a stone. If the spirits are in harmony, the chain begins to spin. One of our guides had been experimenting with dowsing herself. Using the bicycle-spoke method familiar to Australians searching for artesian water, she demonstrated the sensitivity of the spokes within a stone circle. Several of us in our party tried this for ourselves and, despite my failure with this device at home in Australia, I immediately had great success, though I don't know whether it was water or a spirit that I had contacted. In any case, I intend to offer my

services to Clive, Gina and Twiggy in the hope of making my fortune.

Religious Appropriation

Religious and other forms of cultural appropriation are often regarded negatively by educated people in the West. The kinds of New Age rituals and other activities that are the subject of this article also suffer some derision because of the general image of the New Age Movement. However, religious appropriation has a long history. As we have seen, prehistoric British communities appropriated the ritual sites of their predecessors. Much later, Christians rebadged pagan festivals and constructed churches inside Roman and Greek temples (two in the Roman Forum alone); Muslims converted churches into mosques (Santa Sofia in Istanbul); Christians built a cathedral inside the great mosque in Cordoba; European Australians have appropriated Uluru and other indigenous sacred sites; and so on. Accommodations made in both old and new religions are often very complex. The many forms of what is popularly (and often erroneously) called Voodoo in Africa and America are examples of such religious syncretism, which

results from two religions colliding and reaching a degree of rapprochement. Closer to home, Aboriginal smoking ceremonies have recently begun to be included in Christian ceremonies. SoFiA members will think of many other examples.



photo John Carr

meditation group at Stonehenge

It is probable that the peoples appropriating the sacred sites of earlier inhabitants generally do not have a complete understanding or appreciation of their original function or significance. In the long term, appropriation may not have serious

repercussions, but simply add to the complex cultural matrix. In the short term, insensitive appropriation may cause great offence to an invaded people. Indigenous Australians are particularly upset by ignorant incomers' appropriation of aspects of their culture. There have been no complaints from our Neolithic British ancestors, however, so the activities of the New Agers appear to do little harm and attract only the mild amusement of non-believers. Those

of us on the Odyssey tour were part of this ourselves. We too were at least pilgrims, knowledge-oriented pilgrims perhaps, but nevertheless often affected by the historical spirit of the sites.

Further reading

Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Britain*, Yale, 2014.

Neil Oliver, *A History of Ancient Britain*, BBC, 2011. (Book and DVD series)

Review

Digitalia

This is the Editor's review of what is happening on the SoFiA website, the SoFiAblog, sofiatalk and Facebook. See the SoFiA website 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 In *Religion News* I learnt that Young Earth Creationists are building a full-size ark in Kentucky. It will be 155 metres long (510 feet). It is unlikely to have sea trials (*The Guardian*).

SoFiA blog at: www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php (also accessible from the website) Greg Spearritt reported on correspondence with a Queensland Scripture Union employee involved in training school chaplains in issues of sex and gender diversity. This person acknowledged that spirituality and religion were risk factors for LGBTIQ kids. Greg had nothing but praise for those in the conservative Christian camp who are prepared to change their thinking in this area.

Facebook Sea of Faith in Australia If you haven't already come across it, look up the open-hearted postings on what to do when the way a church speaks no longer makes sense. Some have continued to find meaning in ritual and tradition; others have left and are grieving the lost sustenance, meaning and happiness that "certainty-based religion" can provide.

sofiatalk What strategies might we use when countering the dogmatic but naïve contrarian. You could try saying "Look, if you want to convince people, you at least have to know who said it; who was the writer or speaker or what was the web-site where you found the information." The proposer didn't know if this did any good, but felt that it helped you feel better. Or you could be more passive because "... the relationship with that person, even though that person be a relative stranger, is more important to me than getting my point of view across." But watch out, it is nevertheless possible to find yourself saying "...nothing at all, but still managing to get people's backs up and yourself thrown out of organisations."

In the gaps

Sundial of Human Involvement Australian Botanic Garden, Mount Annan

supplied by Robin Ford

In his article on page 3, John Carr concludes: "While the exact original functions of the prehistoric monuments [of the UK] may never be known, it is assumed that ritual, funerary, residential and defensive functions were the most common."

In contrast, the use of this set of standing stones is clear. According to the Australian Botanic Garden website, it is a rare type of

sundial. The instructions tell you to stand at a precise point on the figure of eight "analemma" (the point is determined by the date). You then read the time from the position of your shadow relative to the stone hour-markers.

This beautiful structure is dedicated to the memory of Winifred Macarthur Onslow, who lived nearby. It is a gift to the Australian Botanic Garden from her daughters.



photo Robin Ford

Sundial



photo Robin Ford

analemma



photo Robin Ford

analemma and stone hour-markers

Review

UC Forum (formerly UC Lay Forum)

number two in a series on like-minded organisations, by Robin Ford

The opening page of the website for this group <http://ucforum.unitingchurch.org.au/> is headed *Open Discussion on Progressive Christianity*, with a subheading *Open Dialogue and Inclusive Action in the Uniting Church in Australia, and with friends of the UCA*. I had some difficulty navigating the site — it seemed to behave differently each time I visited.

I did find the following posts:

- What might the new face of the church look like? - a brief summary of an article in The

National Catholic Reporter and a link to their website,

- an update on *Common Dreams 4* (Conference), 2016.
- Book reviews - the latest a review of *How Jesus became God* by Bart Ehrman, reviewed by Peter Fensham,
- various correspondence,

I also found an interesting list of progressive resources (I didn't find SoFiA among them), and it might be worth visiting the site just for exploring this list.

Review

ABC Lateline, 28 10 2015

Discussion with Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz, Authors of *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue*

explored by Robin Ford

I was alerted to this program on ABC by a historian friend. Sam Harris is billed as a "famous atheist" and Maajid Nawaz is billed as a "one-time radical with Hizb ut-Tahrir who went on to found the anti-extremist think tank Quilliam Foundation".

According to Sam Harris, the purpose of the dialogue was:

... to find a pragmatic strategy for moving forward. I think we both recognise that there's really an excruciating problem both within the Muslim world — with the Muslim community worldwide and within open civil society in speaking about this problem. And so we're dealing with really a failure of conversation about how to engineer a spirit and program of reform within Islam and this problem is immense and many-layered.

As he sees the problem it is:

...to find moderating voices who can credibly sketch a path toward reform where we can have a real spirit of secularism and liberalism within the Muslim community.

As Maajid Nawaz saw it:

...the only realistic, pragmatic and intellectually sound way forward is for all of us to unite around secular, liberal, human rights, democratic values and believe in their universality and call for them whether we're calling for them to be applied upon non-Muslim white men or brown Muslim people.

You can find out more in the transcript which I found at this address

<http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2015/s4341076.htm> It is well worth reading.

My historian friend had another comment. He was disappointed that the two authors didn't refer to Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. I had not come across his name before, so I looked him up on Wikipedia. I found a full and complex life (17 October 1817 to 27 March 1898). For example, the entry includes:

Believing that the future of Muslims was threatened by the rigidity of their orthodox outlook, Sir Syed began promoting Western-style scientific education by founding modern schools and journals and organising Muslim entrepreneurs. Towards this goal, Sir Syed founded the famous Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) (earlier known as

Anglo- Muhammadan Oriental College) in 1875 with the aim of promoting social, scientific, and economic development of Indian Muslims.

He also was a Muslim reformer:

He published many writings promoting liberal, rational interpretations of Islamic scriptures.

However, his view of Islam was rejected by Muslim clergy as contrary to traditional views on issues like *jihad*, polygamy and animal slaughtering. Clerics of

the Deobandi and Wahhabi schools condemned him harshly as a *kafir*. In face of pressure from religious Muslims, Sir Syed avoided discussing religious subjects in his writings, focusing instead on promoting education.

Reforming Islam is clearly a risky activity.

The Wikipedia article provides many leads for further research. Perhaps a *Bulletin* reader would like to follow them up and educate us all?

In the gaps

The Common Touch

When Greg Spearritt supplied these photos of plants in seed he gave their Latin names.

Can you supply their common names?
(Answers on page 11)



Actinotus Helianthi seeds



Caustis blakei seeds

Review

Separating religion and government in the Muslim world, ABC Radio National Religion and Ethics Report, with Andrew West (Wednesday 25th November 2015)

reviewed by Robin Ford

This six-minute segment was an interview with Dr Naser Ghobadzadeh, who is Research Fellow, Institute of Social Justice, Australian Catholic University; and the author of, *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State*, Oxford University Press (2015).

I found the radio program interesting, if a little abstruse and tricky to follow in places.

Perhaps someone might like to review the book and enlighten me? But it does cost £51.00, so readers might instead prefer to follow the link to the Radio National program <https://radio.abc.net.au/programitem/pg0J7OzAdV> and listen to the interview.

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 - sofme1b@yahoo.com.au

17 December 2015

Dr. Joanna Kujawa (Author, "[Jerusalem Diary: Searching for the Tomb and House of Jesus](#)")

Mary Magdalene and the Gnostic Gospels.

18 February 2016

Carl Turney

Love: Saint Valentine and his Day.

17 March 2016

Ron Suter ([New Life Books & Archaeology](#))

China's First God.

Review

Call for reviewers

We have a review copy of Don Cupitt's latest book *Ethics in the Last Days of Humanity*. Would anyone like to review it for the *Bulletin*?

Answers to botanical quiz on page 10
Actinotus Helianthi The common name is Flannel
Flower
Caustis blakei The common name was less consistent
on the web, but those suggested include Foxtails,
Curlewings, Koala Fern.

Announcement

Where to for SoFiA? — a bus trip

There is nothing new to report on this planned trip, but here's the earlier announcement in case you have missed it.

If you have not indicated your interest, now would be a good time to email Greg Spearritt.

2016 SoFiA Bus Trip

National Conference on Wheels?

A bus trip to the Central Queensland Sandstone Belt is gradually firming as an option for interested SoFiA members in 2016. No details are fixed as yet, including dates, but preliminary details are as follows:

- Proposed dates: Sunday 14th to Friday 19th August, 2016
- Itinerary: Depart Toowoomba Monday 15th, travel via Taroom and Injune to Carnarvon Gorge National Park (one day, two nights spent at Carnarvon Gorge) then back to Toowoomba via Roma
- Themes: natural history and Indigenous issues (historical and contemporary)
- Accommodation: we anticipate being able to offer different levels depending on the preferences and available funds of travellers (single room, twin share, triple share, with or without ensuite etc).
- Cost (a very preliminary estimate!): from \$350 per person to \$1050 per person, depending on the type of accommodation opted for. This is exclusive of food costs: travellers will pay their own wherever we eat. There may be a non-refundable deposit required at some point, but that has yet to be decided.

Numbers will inevitably be limited. If you are interested, please let us know (even if you've done so previously) so we can get an idea of the numbers we might be dealing with. Once we have a firm proposal, those who express interest in this way will be offered first refusal on seats if we end up with too many applicants.

If you don't know much about the area we're intending to cover, check out Google Images for Carnarvon Gorge. Google Earth might worth a squizz too. The Queensland Department of National Parks, Sport and Racing (sport and racing??) has good online information on the Carnarvons also.

Email address for expression of interest: sof@a1.com.au

Greg Spearritt & Glen Beasley

Where to for SoFiA? — a contribution

John Gunson continues the recent discussion of this topic

Phil Roberts took up the question in the last issue of the Bulletin, following Robin Ford's earlier article. SoFiA's stated purpose is "to explore religion, faith and meaning", and Phil quoted "our stated aim of 'seeking a radical re-appraisal of past religious traditions in order to meet today's spiritual challenges'."

I guess that for any one of us that ought to be a limited goal. After a thorough exploration (and of course an ongoing interest) perhaps we should be impatient to move on to tackling today's challenges.

Phil seems to suggest this, and I quote:

SoFiA itself will inevitably have a limited life, as all associations do, but our values will remain — values such as the rigorous pursuit of truth, concern for others, and attachment to whatever might be regarded as 'the ultimate'.

I think Phil is right, though talk of "the ultimate" as among our values is a concession to religion that no longer makes sense in our contemporary world.

The discussion is timely for me because over the last year or two I have been giving serious thought as to whether to continue membership in SoFiA.

Why is that? Certainly I have enjoyed and benefited from SoFiA. But, SoFiA, by definition, it seems to me, was and is meant to be *an agency of transition*, not an end in itself. It is to help those of us rethinking "religion, faith and meaning" to respond to Cupitt's challenging ideas, and to help one another move on to relevant, contemporary ways of expressing what was once to be found in the thought-forms and practices of religion and a past age.

Cupitt wrote his two seminal books 30 and 35 years ago, *Taking Leave of God* (1980), and *The Sea of Faith* (1984). By the time I joined SoFiA some 10 or more years ago I had long since read Cupitt, and with his (and many others') help moved to a new position of clarity for myself, and

had actually set this out in a book titled *Learning to Live Without God* (currently revised and available as an ebook under the new title of *God, Ethics and the Secular Society*). Greg Spearritt kindly gave it a positive review in the *Bulletin* of November 2008. In those early years I enjoyed the stimulation of ideas in the *Bulletin* and the local group, and contributed a number of articles, and a workshop at an annual conference.

I joined SoFiA to benefit from the wisdom of others on the same journey, anticipating that my new conclusions about religion, faith and meaning might be challenged and refined or changed by insights which I may have overlooked or been unaware of. I am grateful for the debates, opinions, insights and authors drawn to my attention through SoFiA.

No doubt one day there will be the possibility of new breakthroughs in thinking, and I hope I will always be responsive to new truth. So I keep reading and grappling with this field of enquiry, whatever its source.

SoFiA, I believe, should have a future if it is continuing to attract new participants in the journey of re-thinking religion and faith, especially by introducing them to Don Cupitt's challenging thinking about the end of realism in religion, and the death of philosophy and theology as relevant disciplines.

For those of us who have been part of SoFiA for say 5 or 10 years it is perhaps time to move on. *The purpose of faith is to inform how we should live*, rather than to engage in an endless search for truth. What we think or believe or understand is pointless unless it issues in our actions and behaviour. Religion and church are dying because they have become places of comfort rather than communities of action.

Greg Spearritt will, I am sure, forgive me if I quote from his 2008 review of my book, which I think makes the point :

It is not possible to do justice to Gunson's 'ethical ecology' here. Suffice it to say that it has inspired me to think, and – who knows – *possibly even to act*. ... [my italics]. I'll have to think hard about whether I could contemplate *doing 'church' again, even in this stripped down secular form.*" [my italics].

I understand Greg's reluctance, but I'm afraid that's where we need to be.

SoFiA is a wonderfully comfortable place to be as we discuss *ideas* of "religion, faith and meaning". I would hope its purpose is to help us sort them out into something that can guide and direct our lives in *living the truth* we have discovered, and then encouraging us to move on into the ethical action community whose purpose

is to do the truth and encourage and sustain us in applying it to the great ethical and political issues of our day, whether we stay in SoFiA or not. And indeed, in order to move on, we may have to pioneer and create the new ethical community for ourselves.

How to arrive there, along with some positive ways forward, are presented in *God, Ethics and the Secular Society* which is available as an eBook via Amazon, ibooks, Google and Kobo, and will shortly be available in a print version through the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria or direct from Morning Star Publications, Northcote, Vic.

Will I resign and move on? Who knows? I'll have to think about it some more!

Epilogue

Snowstar Institute

from Valerie Burkett (edited)

In the September/October. 2015 *Bulletin* Robin Ford refers to the Snowstar Institute and asks if anyone has information about it. I am sure many people would have contacted him but I thought I would present the following.

At the last Progressive Christian Network of Victoria meeting I bought a book by David Galston: *Embracing the Human Jesus — A Wisdom Path for Contemporary Christianity*, published by Polebridge Press. [David Galston is the Academic Director of the Westar Institute and the Ecumenical Chaplain at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, where he is also an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy. *Ed*]

Maybe a paragraph from the Acknowledgements in David Galston's book could be of interest,

The people of the SnowStar Institute of Canada also need to be thanked. I started this Institute with two friends, Chris Kraatz and Del Stewaft, as a forum for free and progressive thinking in religion. We have benefitted as an Institution from a close and cordial relationship with the Westar Institute. In the context of SnowStar, I have had the opportunity to present some of my thinking and to receive the critiques of its members. It has been a great joy in my life to be part of the SnowStar

community, and I thank the people of SnowStar very much.

Also, the following are taken from the back cover of David Galston's book:

Smuggling Jesus into Christianity will be hard but exciting work, and David Galston is a clear and lively guide who knows just how much is at stake.
Don Cupitt

[this book is a] thought-provoking study of the historical Jesus that not only demonstrates a wide acquaintance with the relevant literature but also manifests much original thought. Lloyd Geering

Where many scholars see an end-time prophet not well-suited to today's world, David Galston finds a human Jesus who inspires honesty in the practice of Christianity. Virtually all scholars understand Jesus to be part of the wisdom tradition, says Galston. And like other ancient purveyors of wisdom, Jesus has much to offer the contemporary world. In *Embracing the Human Jesus*, Galston combines academic theory and basic Christian experience to offer a simple model that will help communities take the historical Jesus back to church.

I hope the above is of some interest.

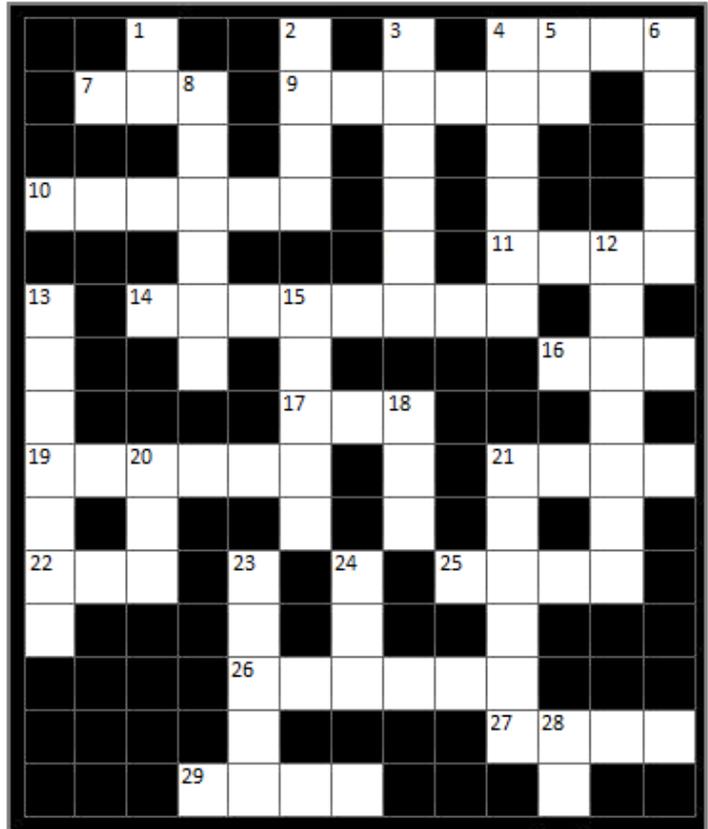
Best wishes to you,

Valerie Birkett

SoFiA Crossword #19



SoFiA Crossword #20 Prepared by Greg Spearritt



Across

4. Prayer
7. Number of canonical gospels with birth narratives
9. Followed a command
10. Predecessor to the Gregorian calendar
11. Founder of Christian Science
14. A requirement for Roman Catholic, but not Orthodox, priests
16. Mother of all mothers
17. Non-ordained
19. Persian/Roman god born of a virgin on December 25
21. Fortune
22. Female religious
25. Gospel in which the angel Gabriel appears to Mary
26. Liturgical season preceding Christmas
27. Pilgrimage (Islam)
29. Pope who issued a papal bull against Martin Luther (name, number)

Down

1. Christian sect which rejects the celebration of Christmas (init.)
2. Korean businessman and messiah claimant
3. Muhammad's destination in his flight from Mecca in 622CE
4. C of E clergyman ordained in 1725
5. Set of uncoordinated instinctual trends
6. Pagan symbol associated with the Sun god which was appropriated for the Christian festival of Christmas
8. Church Father who opposed the celebration of Christ's birth
12. Adherent
13. Country of origin of the Christmas tree tradition
15. Religious tradition in which circumcision is commonly practiced
18. Yes (Mtt 5:37 KJV)
20. Approximate percentage of the Gospel of Luke taken up by the birth narratives
21. Century from which evidence of the observance of Christmas dates
23. Unmerited divine love/assistance (Christianity)
24. Bible translation completed in 1611 (init.)
28. Common era' in the old money

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)

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)

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