



Sea of Faith

Sea of Faith Network in Australia

BULLETIN

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2016



Outdoor taps in a dry land
(SoFiA bus trip to inland Queensland, August 2016)

Photos Robin Ford

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

What's my mood as I finalise this *Bulletin*? It's Christmas-tide, obviously, which announces the holiday season. It's the Summer Solstice, where languid relaxation is tinged with unspoken melancholy as the days shorten. It's the New Year (by convention) with all of its possibilities. Later on the holidays will conclude with the compromised celebration that is Australia Day — Sydney-centric and undeniably linked to dispossession on the one hand, yet celebrating the start of a grand project on the other.

In this eclectic *Bulletin* John Carr writes on Political Correctness, Rodney Eivers explores what is meant by the 'Kingdom of God', and David Miller briefly elucidates what it means to be agnostic. There are two articles

with a Christmas theme. And the regular items include, as a Postlude, Beryl Myers' thoughts on the soul, and Greg Spearritt's crossword (with its seasonal references).

You will also find details of the new membership arrangements. \$20 for 10 years is terrific value — see page 3 opposite and the back page (page 16) for the full story. Subscriptions are due 1 January 2017.

As always, I should be delighted to receive copy for the next *Bulletin*. The nominal deadline is 20 January 2017.

Merry Christmas and a stable New Year.

Robin Ford

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Views expressed are those of each author and
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Management

Membership Application/Renewal

We have a new fee structure. There are two main objectives:

1. encourages membership
2. reduce administration effort

Details are on the back page. That announcement is reproduced here; the back page also includes a form and the payment options.

Sea of Faith in Australia Inc.: Membership Application/Renewal New Fee Structure (AGM 2016)

From January 2017 SoFiA will have a single membership category.

The fee is \$20.00 for ten years (non-refundable).

Those who joined at or after the June 2016 AGM will have already paid for the ten years from January 2017.

The standard method for delivering the *Bulletin* is email. Paper versions are available on request at no additional charge (see below).

If your details have not changed there is no need to fill in this form. Just send your payment as described on the back page, being sure to identify it as "SoFiA subs" with your name.

Management

Paper Bulletins And The New Fee Structure

The standard method for delivering the *Bulletin* is by email attachment. 57% of members receive it this way. You might like to consider changing to this method — it gives you colour!

Paper *Bulletins* are still available on request; if you currently receive paper *Bulletins* this will continue. To minimise administrative

effort there is no charge for this service, however, SoFiA does incur expenses in the process. If you would like to make a donation towards these expenses, typical costs are:

print and deliver a copy of the *Bulletin* \$4.50
(about \$27.00 per recipient per year)

Point of view

On Political Correctness

by John Carr

The term 'Political correctness' appears to have been in occasional use as a mildly derogatory term in some political circles for many years. Within factions of the Communist Party, for example, the policies and language of other factions might be attacked as 'politically incorrect'. In the beginning, perhaps, 'politically correct' was used positively by purists to assert the inerrancy of their own factional fundamentals. By the 1990s, it had been adopted for negative use by conservatives for a wide range of progressive or left wing language, policies and opinions that they considered stupid

or offensive. Typically, the chosen targets are seen as ridiculously extreme – laughable, even. In daily conversation and the media, opening gambits like, 'I know I'm not politically correct, but ...' have become a cliché.

At the outset, I acknowledge that I am generally in favour of politically correct language. I endorse policies that require the use of gender neutral language in publications. It is absurd to continue to claim that 'the male embraces the female' or that 'God' has to be 'He'. Incongruous terms like 'manpower' and 'male nurse' and statements like 'Man invented fire' can easily be

avoided. I also endorse policies and laws that try to prevent vilification of groups within society. This is a complex area, currently the focus of much heated debate in this country over the future of Clause 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act. When it comes to comedy and satire, I believe that a useful rule of thumb is, 'You can ridicule up but not down'. The rich and powerful are fair game, but the poor, weak and derided are not. Jews, Gays, Red-heads and the Disabled may safely make jokes about their own kind, but others had better be very careful. This is not an absolute criterion, if for no other reason than that the relative advantage and disadvantage of categories of people may not be clear-cut. Are mothers-in-law, obese people and the Irish still fit targets? Tasmanians? Should Queenslanders still be protected from cruel jests as the least educated and cultured of Australians, or are they now so clearly superior in arts, sciences and manners that they need to be brought down a peg or two?

Words do hurt and discriminatory language may contribute to a general climate of persecution and vilification of disadvantaged minorities. The Jews suffered this worldwide for centuries, so that the Anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust had become normalised. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, in Britain, the USA and Australia, as in Germany, one could make sweeping denigratory comments about Jews without anyone else batting an eyelid. In some contexts within Australia, it is still safe to bemoan the 'lavish special treatment' accorded to refugees or the 'inability of Aborigines to hold their drink'. And it is not only that cruel words can cause pain to the targets, for derision may be only the beginning of a cycle of escalation. Ridicule can lead to alienation, which can lead, in its turn, to anti-social behaviour, even violence.

I also acknowledge that there are limits to my own acceptance of the 'rules' of political correctness. From time to time, a spokesperson or committee ordains a measure that is so extreme that it appears to be a joke. To be fair, sometimes the reported measure *is* a joke or, more commonly, a hoax. You mustn't celebrate

Christmas in kindergartens! We must call it 'milkless tea' not 'black tea'! Ban gendered toys! And so on. The shock PC news hoax is now so common on some TV programs and the internet that it was even satirised on the Simpsons, when Principal Skinner announced that Pizza Day was henceforth to be known as 'Italian American Sauced Bread Day'. Both political correctness and political incorrectness are easy to satirise.

The people who give political correctness a bad name by going too far have one thing in common with those who mindlessly attack it: they are over-zealous. They usually have a simplistic understanding of the field they wish to protect, or only view it from one narrow perspective. For many years, for my sins, I was a curriculum developer in one of the more contentious school subjects, English. One of our many areas of debate was the need to cater for the diversity of children – their home languages and cultures, their abilities and disabilities and so on. I was very much in sympathy with this policy and ensured that a large number of related concerns were dealt with appropriately in everything we wrote. The problems arose when 'special pleaders' demanded that unreasonable account be taken of particular minority needs. With regard to identifying the 'modes' of language, for example, the range had already been widened beyond the traditional 'reading and writing' to include 'speaking'. Logic suggested that we should add 'listening' to the set. So far, so good! But then advocates for the vision and hearing impaired demanded that Braille and Auslan should also be included in the list of language modes. Ultimately, account was taken of these concerns in appropriate ways, but we did not include the two special modes in every list. To do so would ensure that even teachers accepting of a degree of political correctness would have gone berserk. Something similar has happened recently as the list of the same-sex attracted has grown from 'Gay and Lesbian' to the alphabet soup of LGBTIQ. Of course, this initialism is more inclusive, as its advocates intend, but the result is a camel, not a horse. The

'ordinary person' will not remember, let alone adopt it. And they will scoff.

Other spheres where the battle between well-intentioned inclusiveness and common sense is being fought out are Health, Safety and Privacy. The combatants in these have a powerful

weapon — the Law. I'm sure all SoFers have favourite anecdotal evidence to present here. Feel free to air your opinions and prejudices. But, please, try not to be too pure or zealous. There are enough fundamentalists in religion without adding to their number in secular domains.

Responses

Response To John Gunson's *Bulletin* Article *What Is Sofia For?*

David Miller

In his last talk at Melbourne SoFiA, the late Rev Canon Dr Nigel Leaves lamented that SoFiA had failed to live up to its promise. It was still nothing but a talk-fest. It had not become the new religion of life. Or even an "ethical community", as John Gunson so succinctly put it in the *SoFiA Bulletin*, Sep/Oct 2016.

I have a different attitude. In an open group, like Melbourne SoFiA, we find there are diverse and often conflicting viewpoints on most issues. Following our discussions of the big

questions of life, involving a variety of possible solutions to present-day social and environmental issues, each participant is free to decide to take action, if they wish, by joining one or more of the dozens, hundreds or thousands of action-groups around each issue.

In my opinion it is these action-groups themselves that are John Gunson's "ethical communities". Or, if he prefers, they are the "gathered fellowships", "ecclesia" and "churches".

Review

Holiday Reading And Viewing

Lesley Bryant recently met her friends David Bunton and Helen Stacey Bunton who live in Strathalbyn, SA. The occasion was the launch at Dorrigo, NSW, of Glennis Johnston's book Turning points of the spirit They told Lesley about their small group that has enjoyed studying progressive books and videos. Here is their description of the group, and the books and videos they have discussed.

Our discussion group *Questions of Life and Faith* takes place fortnightly (Tuesdays) in our home. The schedule is: 7pm tea/coffee, 7.30 discussion, 9pm finish.

It grew out of a Bible Study group at St Andrew's Strathalbyn Uniting Church. It now includes a couple who don't attend church because of earlier traumas, and two who drive an hour each way from Adelaide because they liked what they heard about our topics!

We have alternated between DVDs and Books.

Books we've studied include:

The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions by Marcus Borg and NT Wright — a conservative and a

liberal, as friends, giving their own views and commenting on each other's views, on eight key topics about Jesus.

Falling Upwards: A spirituality for the two halves of life by Richard Rohr — those with quite a bit of life experience would probably appreciate it most.

The Spiral Staircase: My climb out of darkness by Karen Armstrong — the story of her struggle to re-adjust to the world after 7 years as a nun, and how she eventually found her calling as a writer.

We shall certainly propose Glennis' book *Turning Points of the Spirit* as one to consider for future discussions.

Most DVD series we've used are from the website: www.livingthequestions.com (Resourcing progressive Christians):

Living the Questions — an open-minded alternative to studies that attempt to give participants all the answers; instead it strives to create an environment where participants can interact with one another in exploring what's next for Christianity. It features thirty acclaimed scholars, theologians and other experts.

Painting the Stars: Science, religion and an evolving faith, by Bruce Sanguin.

The Jesus Fatwah: Love your Muslim neighbour as yourself — Includes Christian and Islamic

scholars. We were lucky enough to have as a discussant an Iranian asylum seeker who grew up in Islamic culture.

We have also used some talks from *Evolution and Christogenesis* by Ilia Delio — a Franciscan sister with a PhD in science and a further degree in mediaeval theology. She talks on God = Love as the creative energy of the cosmos, alluring us all to the future. More details may be found at www.omegacenter.info.

And I'm hoping we can soon discuss the latest DVD series by John Dominic Crossan — *Violence Divine: Overcoming the Bible's betrayal of its non-violent God*. (!)

Point of view

Melbourne's Agnostics Group

David Miller explains why he calls himself an Agnostic Atheist.

In my role as Secretary/Convenor of Melbourne's Atheist Society (www.vic.TheAtheist.net), I have found that I irritate those among my atheist colleagues who are our hard-liners, by labelling myself as an "Agnostic Atheist".

This self-description began a few decades ago at a church seminar at the Augustine Centre when a chap told me he was an Agnostic Christian. He explained that he *believed* God existed, but he did not *know* that God existed. He said that all science could tell

him was that, as yet, there is no, or insufficient, evidence for the existence of God.

I replied that I had a similar viewpoint, but the other way round: I 'believe' that gods and ghosts do not exist, but I cannot 'know' that. My belief makes me an Atheist. My lack of knowledge makes me an Agnostic.

I, therefore, loudly declare to all and sundry that my atheism is a 'faith-position'. This, likewise, irritates my hard-line atheist colleagues. They seem to regard 'faith' as a dirty word.

Groups included in the emails from David Miller include:

Agnostics Group — *for those wishing to discuss the pros and cons of agnosticism*

Philosophy Forum

Existentialist Society -

www.existentialistmelbourne.org

Rationalist Think Tank -

<http://www.meetup.com/melbourne-rationalist-think-tank/>

Central Victorian Atheists And Freethinkers

Gathering - www.meetup.com/cvaf_gathering

Sea Of Faith Network In Australia (SoFiA) — *promoting the open exploration of religion, spirituality and meaning*

www.sof-in-australia.org/local-group-meetings.php?pageid=16

Vic Skeptics -

www.vicskeptics.wordpress.com/events

Humanist Society Of Victoria (HSV)

<http://vichumanist.org.au/public-lectures/>

Australian Skeptics Convention

<http://convention.skeptics.com.au/>

The Kingdom Of God

Rodney Eivers considers the meaning of a common phrase.

A letter I wrote to the editor of *Journey*, the monthly magazine of the Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia, was published in the October 2016 issue. I reproduce it below, including the original opening paragraph (removed by the Editor) which is a verse from a hymn by Charles Wesley. This verse sets the context of the point I was making:

Even now we think and speak the same,
And cordially agree;
Concentred all, through Jesu's name,
In perfect harmony.

So go the words of one of our favourite hymns.
But Christians have rarely cordially agreed for long periods of time.

One can go back to Paul, James and Peter at Jerusalem and Antioch, to Martin Luther and the Pope.

Even Charles Wesley who penned the above lines found that he and his brother John disagreed so much with Anglican orthodoxy that it led to the rise of Methodism of which we in the Uniting Church are the heirs.

So, difference can be productive. Indeed it may well be vital when it comes to adaptability. Christianity has a history of adaptability. It is needed in this turbulent social era when Christianity is under attack from sources such as secularism and the devastating effect of people losing their trust and commitment to institutions.

Adaptability is what 'progressivism' is all about. So I welcome *Journey's* venture (August 2016 and responding letters, September 2016) in bringing to our attention the different paths that we follow. They highlight current contrasts within our denomination about our understanding of what underlies the Gospel.

So let's openly share our different views on the way forward. In seeking to further the Kingdom of God in today's needy world may we then with Charles Wesley confidently declare:

He bids us build each other up;
And, gathered into one,
To our high calling's glorious hope
We hand in hand go on.

I submitted this letter in response to an earlier issue of the magazine which had attracted some criticism because it had published, virtually side by side, articles, one promoting a 'fundamentalist', creationist version of Christianity, and the other a 'progressive' Christian approach as typified by theologian, Val Webb.

I received very little feedback on this letter and was unaware as to whether it had struck a chord with anybody or not.

What stood out, however, was that in every case, where there was a response, curiosity was expressed about my use of the term 'Kingdom of God'.

One writer (let's call him, John) went to the trouble of sending me a letter by Australia Post.

Dear Mr Eivers,

...I read monthly "Journey". I do this because I am interested to read the thoughts of others on matters that really concern them. I read with interest your contribution "To the Editor" on Page 18. I had to move on, however, from the part about "Christians have rarely cordially agreed for long periods of time" and the "Adaptability is what "progressivism" is all about." As well as, "They highlight current contrasts within our denomination about our understanding of what underlies the Gospel." You would agree that Jesus the Christ was the greatest teacher who was ever on this earth, yet today the majority of people who have any interest in spiritual matters really are not sure who he was, not an historical person, maybe mythical, certainly not important to the people of today.

I came to the part, "In seeking to further the Kingdom of God in today's needy world."

Would you inform me, What is "the Kingdom of God?"

Yours sincerely

John H.....

This has given me reason to explain further what I mean when I use the term "Kingdom of God". First all we have to recognise that these

are only words. And they are the words used in English by the writers of the King James Authorised version of the Bible to translate the concept expounded by Jesus as expressed by the Gospel writers.

Quite a few people quibble with these words in relating to this concept. "King" implies a patriarchal society. Kingdom, represents autocracy, even dictatorship which our western liberal societies (notwithstanding the likes of Donald Trump) recoil from. Some would substitute, the 'domain' or 'republic' of heaven. While I have some sympathy with the rationale behind these suggestions I think, in the end, because of the familiarity of the Christian public with "Kingdom of God" and the way we all have our individual interpretations of other religious terms anyway, we might as well stick with what is familiar. As far as I can tell, none of the other suggested terms are likely to catch on anyway compared with the succinctness of "Kingdom of God". For people familiar with the Jesus story I deliberately use that term. For a more secular audience I would probably speak in terms of "A good world".

That aside, however, what do we mean by Kingdom of God? What did Jesus mean by Kingdom of God? We have to remember that Jesus was a man of his time, of the 1st century of the common era. He would not have been aware that disease was caused by bacteria and viruses; he would have assumed that the universe was made of horizontal layers (up, down, and we in the middle); he would not have been aware that the Earth moved round the Sun rather than vice versa. He could not have been an atheist because up till about 200 years ago, even in enlightened Europe, nobody was an atheist. Everybody assumed that the world was controlled by supernatural forces. That is just the way it was.

Within these parameters Jesus conceived or focused on the persona of God as a loving father (an image has problems especially for women who have had to cope with patriarchal domination and domestic violence). When we use the latest scholarly analysis to separate out the pre-Easter Jesus, the itinerant preacher, from

the post-Easter creation of Jesus the Christ we find that he presents an attitude to life which is pretty down to earth.

His view can be summed up as the instituting of unconditional love as the fundamental rule of interpersonal relationships, a rule that runs through to a viable organisation of society. Not all would agree that loving your enemies is a viable organisation of society. Some of you will have read my paper, *The Ethic of Jesus – is it all it's cracked up to be?* which is a response to the conclusion that Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok reaches. He insisted that reciprocity is a more functional approach than unconditional love. Commentator Stephen Fry is another public figure who has expressed the view that love is impracticable as a feature of a working society.

But back to the "Kingdom of God". A close member of my family has been an active church-goer all his life (interestingly, his own parents were not church-goers). He presumably finds fellowship in his weekly attendance at church services but is not one to discuss doctrinal issues. Indeed he would probably be uncomfortable discussing, or even being made aware of, the many issues of belief which have racked and bedevilled Christianity over the years. After thinking about the above letter, however, while we were enjoying a Sunday dinner, I asked him.

What do you think Jesus meant when he talked about the Kingdom of God?

He did not answer the question directly but replied.

Well I have heard people say, that "We create our own hell here on Earth". And it is certainly not up there in the sky, because when you are cremated there is nothing left...

The conversation proceeded a little with no clear definition being provided. Discussion concluded with something along the lines of, "Well it is our job to make life good for people around us".

So to me this was very interesting. Does this mean that our preachers expounding the importance of belief with its undercurrent of acceptance of the supernatural, are presenting

something from which a large proportion of people, even in the pews, has moved away from?

The question put to me by John and others would be something like,

In this 21st century, what do you mean by "The Kingdom of God", the phrase used by that 1st century Jew whose teaching has underpinned the growth of western liberal democracy?

to be continued

Point of view

The Trouble With Christmas: Part One

In this article Andrew Bush takes a fresh line through the New Testament Christmas story — or rather Christmas stories — and hopes to stir up discussion. He will conclude it in the next Bulletin, but why wait until then to send your thoughts to the Editor? Response please by 20 January 2017.

Christmas is the most celebrated and popular festival in the Christian Church's year. More people attend Church on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day than any other Christian festival or any other time during the year. Christmas is supposedly the celebration, commemoration, and story of the birth of a baby boy, Jesus, by his mother, a virgin, named Mary, fathered by God, the Holy Spirit. This is a very brief summary of what is written in two of the gospels in the New Testament (Matthew and Luke) and celebrated each year. In a more detailed form, it is what is in the creeds of the Church, especially The Nicene Creed, and it's what the Church, meaning the Christian Church, celebrates at each Christmas. But, is it all that we are told in the New Testament? And is it true? Or is there more? Is it a metaphor, or a myth?

Paul was the earliest writer included in the New Testament, though some modern scholars now assert that only six or seven of the twelve Epistles, or letters, of Paul actually contain any words that are authentically, genuinely, and originally of Paul. Most of the letters were written well after Paul's death, which occurred in the seventh decade of the first century.

Of all Paul's Epistles, the *Epistle to The Romans* is the one in which Paul states his own theology and beliefs most clearly, especially about who he believed Jesus was. One reason for this is that Paul intended to continue his missionary travels to Gaul and Spain, and was seeking the strong support of the Roman followers of Jesus. This epistle to the Romans was, in part, his statement of his beliefs about Jesus. Paul states his belief briefly, but clearly, in

Chapter I, versus 1 to 4. Here, Paul states, unambiguously, that he believes Jesus was the "designated Son of God", and attained this exalted position by adoption; not by his birth, but at and through his resurrection. In Paul, there is no Christmas story, and no virgin birth.

Mark was the second writer in *The New Testament* to deal with, and state, his belief about Jesus, and who Jesus, was. In part, Mark agrees with Paul, but Mark describes a different timing. To Mark (as with Paul) Jesus was the Son of God, by adoption. But Mark parts company with Paul as to when this adoption took place; he affirms that Jesus became the Son of God at and through baptism by John the Baptist. Again, there is no Christmas story in Mark's gospel; and effectively there is no resurrection in the Gospel of Mark either (scholars have asserted that the original Gospel ended before verse 9 of Chapter 16, which means before any mention of a resurrection). Verses 9 to 20 of chapter 16 are said to be a latter addition. Both Paul's Epistle and Mark's gospel indicate that Jesus is (or was) the Son of God by adoption; they differ as to when Jesus was adopted.

In the New Testament the third writer to deal with this question of who Jesus was, is the author of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew gives us two very different metaphors, myths, or stories. In fact there are possibly three if the story of the wise men of the east is separate, not part of the Christmas story.

At least two of these three stories can't be accurate or true — perhaps none of them are — and especially not literally true. Matthew's first story is found in the first seventeen verses of

Matthew Chapter 1, and this takes the form of the genealogy of Jesus. Through this genealogy Jesus is said to be of the tribe of Abraham, and a member of the House of David, though many more generations of Jesus' ancestors are mentioned. Also said to be true and vital, through this genealogy, is that Jesus is Jewish. If he did not have a Jewish father, meaning a Jewish earthly father, he would not be Jewish. Of particular note here, if this story is true, is that Joseph is Jesus' father, meaning Joseph is his biological father, not God, the Holy Spirit. One needs to read these first seventeen verses of Chapter One of Matthew's Gospel to grasp this. Many scholars complicate this by considering Joseph to be an archetype composite character, not a real person.

But Matthew, too, complicates matters by proceeding straight to his second metaphor and myth, or story (Chapter 1, verse 18 to verse 25). This is the first appearance chronologically of the Virgin Birth story, and it shows remarkable parallels with the virgin birth story of Alexander the Great. Alexander was the second son of his father (Philip of Macedon) and mother; their first son was also called Philip. If the Pseudepigrapha [non-canonical writings purported to have come from biblical characters, Ed] and its details are accepted and correct, Jesus was also a second son; his brother, James, being five years his senior, as the Pseudepigrapha makes clear.

Virgin birth myths and stories were neither uncommon nor unknown in the Hellenist, or Graeco-Roman world, as the Alexander the Great story shows. Amongst the many articles and papers that I have accumulated over the years, I have a list of characters from the ancient Hellenistic or Graeco-Roman worlds of some seventy to eighty people, all of whom were said to have been "born of a virgin". This was a description that was never meant to be taken literally, or read as being literally true. It meant that a person so described was extraordinary and outstanding; as both Alexander the Great and Jesus were, though in very different ways, as I shall expand upon later. All this is vital when

thinking about Jesus and the New Testament, and Christmas.

Whilst we certainly don't know all, or even most, of the real authors in the New Testament, the one author we know who was not Jewish by birth, was Luke; he was Greek born, with a Greek father and a Jewish mother (he may have become Jewish by conversion). The majority of the authors seem to be Jewish by birth, and Jewish people tended to communicate by and in metaphors, myths, and stories. In this context a metaphor or myth is a story where the truth that the story is seeking to convey is what is important, not necessarily the literal truth of the story itself. Yet, as the Church grew increasingly non-Jewish, metaphors, myths and stories, such as that of the virgin birth, increasingly became understood as being literally true. To my mind, this seriously limits their meanings.

What then did "being born of a virgin" mean in the ancient Hellenist or Graeco-Roman cultures, and what should it mean now? This is a key question. As hinted at above, it essentially meant nothing more than (or other than) that the person so described was extraordinary and outstanding. Alexander the Great was extraordinary and outstanding as a leader and ruler, and as a military strategist. Jesus, in a very different manner, was, arguably, an extraordinary and outstanding person through his intuition, his perception, his sensitivity, and his understanding of all people and their aspirations and needs. In this he was amazing and unmatched. His ability to bring out the best in people was absolutely extraordinary and outstanding. But of itself did this make Jesus the son of God? No. And again, No! It was the early Jesus Movement that built a complete and complex theology of Jesus being sinless because he had no earthly father and was the son of God (who was his father). My interpretation and understanding of the motives here is that the Jesus Movement was seeking authority, influence, and power — if not absolute authority, complete influence, and total power — through making Jesus into God's son. I believe that the early Church did this to make it more difficult to question this new doctrine.

Here, I should note that it is my understanding there was no church, or ecclesia, before the time of Constantine. Prior to this there was a movement, the Jesus Movement, of many small communities, and Constantine changed this by endeavouring to create a far more united, single organisation, with one central authority figure, initially himself.

Before I turn to the Gospel of Luke, I want to make one final comment about Matthew, and his chronologically first mention of the story of Jesus virgin birth. Matthew's virgin birth story

occurred approximately fifty-five years after Jesus' crucifixion, in about 85 CE, (though scholars continue to argue about the date of its authorship). If Jesus' virgin birth was an integral part of the biography (or story) of Jesus, and was known as being part of the Jesus story from the beginning, is it likely that it would have been omitted from the earlier writings (or any of the earlier stories that were told) about Jesus? I think not.

to be continued

Point of view

...By Seers Foretold

Most of our seers didn't foretell the result of the 2016 US presidential election. Wise men in the New Testament did better: they found a new king by following a Christmas star. Robin Ford wonders what we can hope to predict and what will always remain a mystery.

We do like to know what the future holds. But what can we hope to predict?

Three wise men foretold the arrival of a new king (Andrew Bush comments on this elsewhere in this *Bulletin*). The carol *The Angel Gabriel* puts it this way:

Thy Son shall be Emmanuel, by seers foretold
Most highly favoured lady, Gloria!

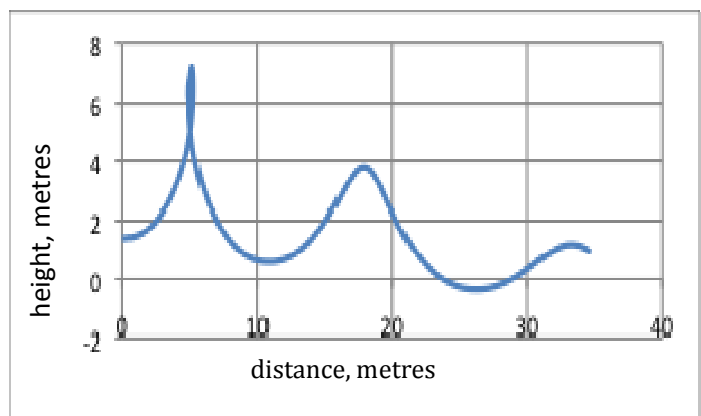
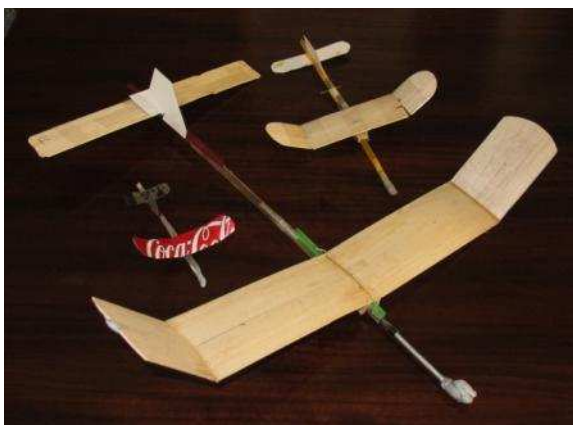
We three Kings of Orient Are tells us more about these international astrologers. They authenticated the child by veneration, and by gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Today, business asks government to provide 'certainty'. As if they could! They often rely on 'economic modelling'. It's what our present-day seers use when foretelling, but it's

not always successful, as the wash-up from any Federal budget forecast makes clear. Then there is modelling the weather or climate; the Bureau of Meteorology has just bought a new supercomputer to improve its predictions.

There are simpler things to model. I've been predicting the flight path of model gliders, using a spreadsheet. It helps me make better gliders, but mainly I do it for fun.

Like the meteorologists, I use a time-stepping method. Starting from the glider's current speed and direction I predict where it will be a tiny increment of time later. Then I repeat the process for the next time step, and so on. If the time step is too big I get inaccurate results — or maybe nothing at all.



Three experimental gliders and a predicted flight shape when launched at twice the steady glide speed.

When time-stepping is used to predict the weather, Wikipedia says the steps are about one to ten minutes depending on whether you are going for a regional or a global prediction. For forecasting a week ahead this doesn't add up to very many time steps, but the killer is that you also have to divide the globe up into segments, maybe 10 km square. There might be a billion to analyse at each time step. It works well for near term predictions. Beyond a week it gets problematic. No wonder they need supercomputers!

Delegates at the climate change meeting in Marrakech needed predictions for the biggest of pictures. Or, at the very least, they needed answers to 'What if' questions. For example, "What if we don't include human-generated greenhouse gasses, can we still account for historical changes in temperatures?" and "What if we do nothing; what do models say about future global temperatures then?"

It's contested of course. Claims that we can predict future climate often seem to start unhelpful arguments. Unexpected events, for example volcanic activity, might knock our prediction off course (just like a gust during a flight trial of a glider). But it's the best foretelling we can do.

What about economic modelling? It seems removed from my time-stepping experience, but it surely takes us from one contested space to another. When modelling weather or climate we deal with unchanging physical laws. When modelling an economy we are dealing with human behaviour from the start, so as well as the intrusion of unexpected events we have variations in public and economic mood to consider. I cut the economy modellers a lot of slack; but I don't take their results too literally either.

Even inaccurate models can show us possible futures. When we need to act they provide stories to guide us. Of course,

mathematical models are not the only ways we can prepare for the future; literature, religion, TV soaps, reality shows, or art — even theology — can integrate a view of the past with possible scenarios for the future to illuminate the present moment.

But in the Christmas story the characters I delight in are the shady visitors from the East with their arcane practices. Theirs is the land that would, through mathematician al-Khwarizmi, give us the cipher zero and the place-holder notation for numbers (units, tens and hundreds). Without these, mathematical modelling would not be possible.

I haven't forgotten my initial questions: What can we know? What will remain a mystery? Elsewhere in this *Bulletin* David Miller describes agnosticism as it relates to God. He holds a firm position as an atheist but acknowledges limits to knowledge; that is, limits to what it is possible to know. He is an Agnostic Atheist. I think modelling is like this; there will always be limits to what we can predict. I am an Agnostic Modeller.

But there is a lot we *can* know — and predict reliably. As I write we have had a 'super-moon'. This was predicted. Similarly if you are going to the beach or going sailing you can look up the time of high tide in tables or on the internet. Right now the summer solstice beckons, and we can reliably predict its date and time. We can be certain that from then on the days will grow shorter; at the very moment we splash through the ocean, summer has peaked and the daylight hours will be in decline. Australia Day will come and its punctuation mark will lead us towards the reflective times of autumn and Lent. The relentless round of the seasons will continue. All of this we can predict.

But right now it's time to live in the moment; it's time for sunshine and fun — including, for some of us, working up spreadsheets.

Review

Digitalia

This is the Editor's review of what is happening on the SoFiA website, the SoFiAblog, Facebook and sofiatalk. See the SoFiA website www.sof-in-australia.org for instructions and links on how to access the SoFiA Facebook page and sofiatalk.

SoFiA website www.sof-in-australia.org : We can't avoid a Donald Trump connection! I found this comment from the Guardian (27 November) in Religion News:

Donald Trump should be given the benefit of the doubt in appointing people associated with the far right, racism and alleged antisemitism, the leader of one of the US's leading Jewish organisations has said. Jack Rosen, president of the American Jewish Congress, told the Guardian: "I think the president has the right to choose his own people and we should take a look-and-see approach."

Is there more that we can do anyway?

SoFiA blog at www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php (also accessible from the website): The latest post is an intriguing promotion for the conference *Refuting the theology behind extremism* scheduled for 13-14 October. It describes it like this

This conference aims to explore the causes of radicalisation from theological as well as sociological perspectives with an objective to offer authentic theological responses and sociological understandings of literalist/selective religious interpretations and radical narratives.

Does anyone know how it went?

Facebook Sea of Faith in Australia: Rather than pick on a particular thread, I'll note the conversations stirred up by Jacob Andrade. Has our Facebook page taken off?

sofiatalk I found no recent postings.

Announcement

SoFiA Victoria

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

20 December 2016

Dr. Colin Goodwin (Independent Scholar)

Intellectual Respectability and Christian

Doctrines: A Reappraisal of Thomas Aquinas.

16 February 2017

Carl Turney ([Sunday Assembly](#))

Love: Saint Valentine and his Day.

16 March 2017

Tim Harding ([Australian Skeptics](#))

Europe's Dark Ages.

Postlude

The Soul

Beryl A, Myers

We have used this word for many generations, eg "the dear old soul"; "soul destroying", "music for the soul"; "soul searching" etc. We think we understand what is meant, but do we? It would mean that it is a part of a person. But it cannot show up in an X-ray or scan. So how do we know everyone has a soul?

Twenty-odd years ago, I was in a yoga exercise class and a woman there believed that 'God' (as we were taught), really meant not a Deity to be worshipped, but "the God that is within us all". I was not awake to the various religious philosophies at that time. Now thinking of "the God within", is that a euphemism to mean it is our soul? On the other hand, is the soul an alternative word for the 'Spirit'?

We have all heard of the 'Mind, Body and Spirit Festivals'. 'Mind' and 'Body' most people understand — but 'Spirit' seems a bit spooky to some people. The only religion that talks freely and believes in 'Spirits' is the Spiritualist church.

But where do they put the 'Soul'? I understand the Spiritualist churches believe that a spirit takes a caring interest in the living, especially relatives and friends. To what extent is that idea accepted by people (religious or not)?

Take a cooking analogy: If I add a little vanilla essence to a cake mix, it will enhance the flavour of the whole cake. So perhaps the soul or spirit of a person is like the essence, it flavours and enhances our true being. Whereas the body is just the result of heredity and how we look after it, the mind (not just the physical brain) is created and altered by our reading, learning and experiences. That leaves the soul/spirit, If we all have one, when do we acquired it and does it enter into an embryo at conception or half way through the baby's development in the womb, or at the time of birth?

I would be most interested in what other SoFiA members think about the Soul or Spirit..

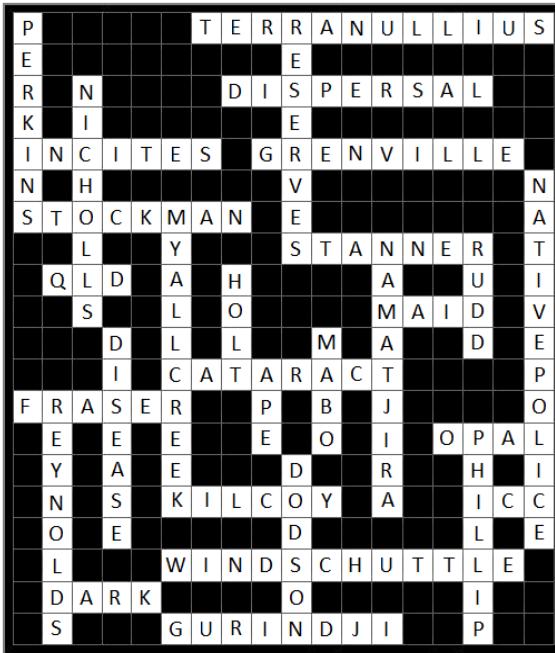
Epilogue

A Sense Of Absence

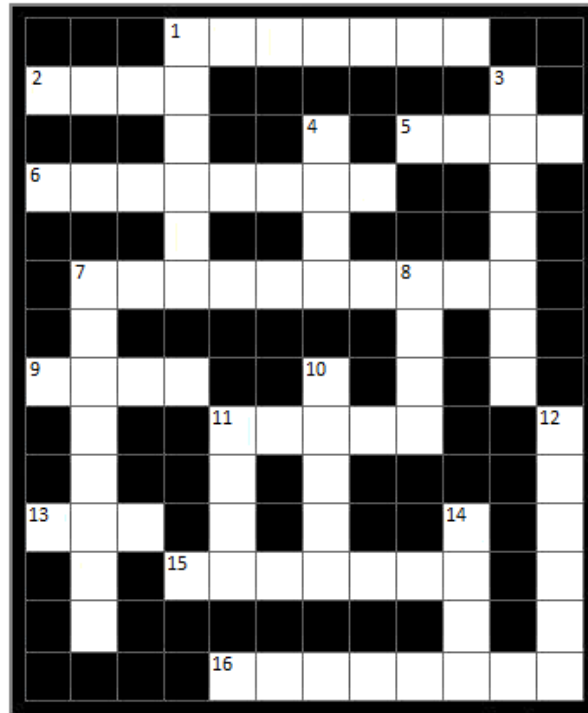
Robin Ford, December 2015

And is it so? That long ago I knew
How Christmas ran in that post-conflict space.
Where demobbed soldiers made it to be true
That sacrifice leads to a better place.
Or maybe I've imagined a connection
Between my world of now; their world of then.
A line drawn from the year of my conception
Through world of boys to world of older men.
A Christmas morning, and a hopeful Queen,
A board-game gift to celebrate a climb,
When men walked where no other men had been
And oranges and nuts meant Christmas time.
Sweet Cambridge carols, and a cup of tea,
A shortbread biscuit, Mum and Dad. And me.

SoFiA Crossword #25



SoFiA Crossword #26 Prepared by Greg Spearritt



Theme: Christmas and associated festivals

Across

1. Country in which Santa became permanently jolly (and obese from imbibing too much Coca-Cola)
2. The colour first associated with Christmas
5. Symbol of the Trinity (because of its triangular shape) commonly used at Christmas
6. Christmas season
7. Roman feast, elements of which (such as gift-giving) came to be incorporated into the celebration of Jesus' birth
9. Joyful Christmas song or message
11. Author of the poem A Visit From St Nicholas (which begins: 'Twas the night before Christmas'...)
13. That which the Christian God is said to have become at Christmas
15. Indian god considered to have been born on December 25
16. Jewish Festival of Lights

Down

1. Coming
3. Country of origin of the modern Christmas tree tradition
4. Site of the human alienation from God for which the advent of Jesus is considered a solution
7. European country in which observance of Christmas was officially abolished from 1640 to 1958
8. The only Gospel which features a manger in its birth narrative
10. Egyptian deity often depicted being fed by his mother, Isis (an influence on the symbol of the Virgin Mary with child)
11. One of the composers of Silent Night
12. Century in which Saint Nicholas, Greek bishop of Myra, lived
14. Gospel lacking a birth narrative

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.

Contact: mail: **14 Richardson Street, Lane Cove NSW 2066**, email: **sofnetwork@gmail.com**
 web: **www.sof-in-australia.org**, blog: **www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php**

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

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

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

Brisbane CBD 2nd Sunday, 1pm to 2.30pm. Contact:
 Rachel Matthews 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).

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

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

Sea of Faith in Australia Inc.: Membership Application/Renewal New Fee Structure (AGM 2016)

From January 2017 SoFiA will have a single membership category.

The fee is *\$20.00 for ten years* (non-refundable).

Those who joined at or after the June 2016 AGM will have already paid for the ten years from January 2017.

The standard method for delivering the *Bulletin* is email. Paper versions are available on request at no additional charge.

If your details have not changed there is no need to fill in this form. Just send your payment as described below, being sure to identify it as "SoFiA subs" with your name.

Name(s).....

Address.....

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

	<i>Bulletin</i> delivery	number	each	amount
Membership (10 years)	email/post		\$20	
Donation				
Total paid on line, (BSB 032 085 A/c 446904 ref your name) or by cheque (payable to SoFiA).				

Signature.....