



Sea of Faith

Sea of Faith Network in Australia

BULLETIN

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2015



photo: Robin Ford

Flags outside a US Coast Guard station in New England, Massachusetts;
11 September 2014.

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

In this *Bulletin* you'll find the last of the items from the 2015 SoFiA conference, *Religion in Education*, including Jim Tunstall's *Rapporteur's Impressions*.

You'll also find part 2 of Jonathan Rutherford's article on the Gospel of Mark.

Phil Roberts' response to my reflection on *Dover Beach* opens up the topic 'Where to for SoFiA?' I'd welcome your thoughts and I'll pass them on to our digital platforms so that the conversation can take place there also.

On page 9 I summarise traffic on our

digital platforms since the last *Bulletin*.

And talking of 'Where to?', on page 18 you can read the latest on the proposed bus tour of the Central Queensland Sandstone Belt, tentatively proposed for Sunday 14th to Friday 19th August, 2016.

The nominated group for the next *Bulletin* — the final one for 2015 — is the Sunshine Coast

Robin Ford robinford@a1.com.au

CONTENTS

Features

Understanding the Gospel of Mark, part 2, J Rutherford (11)

SoFiA Conference 2015

NAPLAN and *My School*: A genuine improvement to school education in Australia or a wasteful and sometimes harmful distraction? G Collins (3)
Sea of Faith in Australia 2015 Conference, *Religion in Education*: Rapporteur's Impressions, J Tunstall (8)

Reviews

Digitalia, R Ford (9)
Progressive Islam (Continued), R Ford (10)
Snowstar Institute, R Ford (10)

Responses

Where to for SoFiA? A Response, P Roberts (19)
A Response to *Where to?* in 16 Words, D Miller (21)

Regular items

Announcements (9, 11, 18)
In the Gaps (10)
Postlude, J Carr (21)
Epilogue, R Ford (22)
Crossword Puzzle, G Spearritt (23)

SoFiA *Bulletin* is produced every two months
Editor Robin Ford, robinford@a1.com.au
Layout Robin Ford, robinford@a1.com.au
Views expressed are those of each author and not necessarily those of the Editor or SoFiA.
Copyright remains with the author.

NAPLAN and *My School*: A genuine improvement to school education in Australia or a wasteful and sometimes harmful distraction?

Garry Collins wondered if the connection of this topic to the conference theme of Religion in Education might seem tenuous. But it raises fundamental ethical questions of choice; and choice that often involves religious schools.

This article has been developed from a workshop presentation delivered at the SoFiA conference on the Gold Coast in May 2015. The abstract outlining the session was as follows:

A legacy of Julia Gillard's tenure as federal Minister for Education is the current system of NAPLAN tests and the associated publication of results on the *My School* website. Some see this duo as providing necessary accountability and enabling parents to exercise informed school choice. Others, including many who work in education, consider that the unintended negative consequences of this regime significantly outweigh any benefits it might deliver.

What is NAPLAN?

The acronym NAPLAN stands for the National Assessment Program, Literacy and Numeracy. This program involves tests of literacy and numeracy administered by ACARA (the Australian Curriculum, Assessment & Reporting Authority), a federal government instrumentality. The tests are conducted in May each year but since they are taken only by students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, individual students undergo the battery of tests only every second year between Year 3 and Year 9. Results are published on the *My School* website.

An important point to note is that NAPLAN involves census rather than sample testing. That is to say that the intention is that the tests will be undertaken by all students rather than just a sample that is deemed to be representative of the whole cohort. By contrast, the OECD's tests known as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), which are often reported in the papers in conjunction with news about NAPLAN, are sample tests. The NAPLAN tests

commenced in 2008, so that 2014 was the first year that a student cohort had gone through all four stages of the tests.

While NAPLAN can be categorized as a census test, it is not of course true that absolutely all students in the target year levels will complete the tests. Apart from situations of illness and the like, a growing number of parents withdraw their children from participation as a protest against what they see to be the negative effects of the program on schooling in Australia.

What do the NAPLAN tests seek to measure?

As the title of the program indicates, NAPLAN tests aim to provide a measure of student achievement in the areas of literacy and numeracy. There is no doubting that these provide the foundation for academic success in general but we need to look at the details of what is involved.

There are four components or domains of the NAPLAN tests. These are numeracy, reading (ie reading comprehension), writing, and what are termed language conventions. The writing element requires students to complete a piece of writing in 40 minutes in one of two specified genres in response to some prompt material. The two genres that have been used are narrative and persuasion. ACARA used to specify which genre would be targeted in each year but, in response to concerns expressed about schools "teaching to the test", that was changed in 2014 and students now do not know in which of the two genres they will be required to write until the day of the test. Another change this year was

that the prompt material for Years 3 and 5 was different from that provided for Years 7 and 9.

The language conventions paper covers the areas of spelling, grammar and punctuation. Interestingly, these are also 3 of the 10 criteria used to evaluate performance in the writing task so that, in effect, these areas of student learning are probed twice. As a former English teacher I am probably more interested in and concerned about these areas than the average citizen. Even so, given that NAPLAN measures performance in only a narrow slice of the whole school curriculum, I suggest that it needs to be asked why these areas are measured twice. Is it that this double focus reflects the importance of spelling, grammar and punctuation relative to all the other things that we would wish young people to learn in Australian schools? I suspect not and suggest that it is because they are relatively easy to measure in isolation.

The fact that they are measured in isolation is a problem in itself because it can reasonably be argued that these aspects of learning about language are only of significance to the extent that they contribute to effective reading and writing. In addition, as with other aspects of NAPLAN, too much can be made of the results in media reporting. In September 2012, the Brisbane paper *The Courier-Mail* reported the apparently shocking truth that more than 80% of the state's Year 3 students could not accurately spell the word 'vegetable' in that year's tests. The admittedly facetious letter-to-the-editor that I submitted on that occasion is shown below.

NAPLAN spelling results

The Courier-Mail is to be congratulated on fearlessly disclosing the disturbing news that more than 80 per cent of Queensland Year 3 students could not spell the word 'vegetable' in this year's NAPLAN tests (*Kids don't eat vegies, can't spell them either*, 22-23/9/2012).

It is to be hoped that Education Minister John-Paul Langbroek fully appreciates the gravity of the situation and requires schools to include special strategies on the spelling of 'vegetable' in

their improvement plans. Documented evidence of success in teaching the spelling of 'vegetable' must also be part of the annual performance reviews that teachers will have to undergo in future.

Armed with this valuable diagnostic information, teachers will be able to include repeated sessions on the spelling of 'vegetable' in their teaching programs in Term 4.

It is frightening to contemplate what might have happened to our future economic prosperity and societal well-being had this spelling scandal not been exposed in time.

What do NAPLAN results mean?

In ACARA's *Update* for December 2014, the CEO, Rob Randall, wrote the following:

Earlier this month, we published the 2014 *NAPLAN National Report*, which provides nationally comparable data on the 2014 results for each NAPLAN test domain: numeracy, reading, writing and language conventions (spelling, and grammar and punctuation).

The report showed us that overall student achievement has remained stable for each year level and most domains.

During the workshop at the SoFiA Conference, I asked participants to consider what is reasonable to infer from the second sentence above. When it says that "overall student achievement has remained stable", could this otherwise be expressed as "has plateaued", "has shown no improvement", "has stagnated"? If, after 8 years of NAPLAN, the results are not trending upwards, is it reasonable to deduce that this high stakes, standardized testing regime is not really contributing to overall improvement in Australian schooling?

In the December 2014 *ACARA Update* Rob Randall also wrote:

Publishing these data on *My School* contributes to accountability and discussion about school improvement.

In the workshop I posed these questions:

- Is the word 'accountability' just current shorthand for finding someone to blame? Might it not be more productive to focus on supporting teachers and schools rather than operating with a mindset concerned with apportioning blame and allocating penalties for perceived shortcomings?
- Do we need NAPLAN and *My School* to discuss school improvement?
- Does this invest NAPLAN results with more meaning than is warranted?

What use can/should parents make of NAPLAN information?

The December 2014 *Update* quoted above went on to say:

Such open and transparent provision of data helps parents to see how the school their child attends, or plans to attend, is performing academically relative to other schools in their local area. It also helps them to compare their school's performance with others of a similar level of socio-educational advantage, no matter where that school is in the country.

The first sentence of the quotation above prompts a couple of questions:

- Is school academic performance separate from the ability, effort and achievement of individual students?
- Should parents select schools on the basis of NAPLAN score averages?

A letter-to-the-editor relating to the issue of school choice follow.

School choice and the national good

Like ACARA Chair Barry McGaw, I also went to school in Queensland and sat for public examinations at the end of Years 8, 10 and 12. As McGaw recalls, results were published in newspapers (*It's no longer personal, but more is possible*, *Your School*, 21-22/6/2014).

What McGaw does not make clear, however, is that there was not the focus on school choice that prevails today. Students in my final year class at a state primary school in 1960 went on to private secondary schools if their parents were quite well off, while the rest of us

went to the nearest state high schools. The choice of which school was largely dictated by family traditions for private schools, and the most convenient public transport arrangements for state schools. There was none of the current frenzy for choosing the 'best school'.

Perhaps the most important part of McGaw's article is the statement that: "Overall, it is clear that schools with the more advantaged students generally achieve better results".

Having our secondary schools increasingly stratified according to parental income is unlikely to be in the best interests of the nation as a whole. Sadly, it seems that fewer and fewer Australians are genuinely interested in our cherished national ideal of a fair go for all.

If NAPLAN data on the *My School* website indicates that an apparently comparable school in another city is performing better than the one that one's children currently attend, what exactly should responsible parents do with that information? For most people, selling up and moving to that other city is not a realistic option. And is complaining to the principal really likely to effect any immediate improvement in the educational experience of the children concerned?

Opposition to NAPLAN

In the April 2015 ACARA *Update*, CEO Rob Randall wrote:

As NAPLAN 2015 approaches, we again start to hear the same sweeping statements and assertions questioning its value – in spite of numerous independent reports and parent testimonials declaring NAPLAN's value.

Since there is continuing opposition to the program, much of it from professionals who work in education, perhaps there is a good case for saying that there is indeed a problem.

Mr Randall went on to write:

The debate about NAPLAN's value is one from which we should move on. NAPLAN has been supported consistently by education authorities, policy makers, school authorities, principal

associations, parents and students. NAPLAN development costs amount to a fraction of one per cent of education expenditure. The data we get are invaluable.

My response to the first sentence was that, by contrast, many who work in education think that the country should *move on* from our current obsession with testing, *move on* from NAPLAN itself, **move on** from another unproductive fad copied from the USA.

It might be valuable, but what does NAPLAN cost?

Randall cites just development costs. What about administration and *My School*? It is also reasonable to ask why he did not cite a dollar figure which has been reported to be in the vicinity of \$10 million per year.

What does the national English teacher association think of NAPLAN?

The Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) is the national umbrella organisation unifying the autonomous English teacher associations that exist in each of the states and territories. Its current official position on NAPLAN is as follows:

AATE acknowledges the value of suitable data on student learning achievement to guide teacher planning.

However, because of the widespread misuse of NAPLAN average scores as measures of the effectiveness of whole schools and/or individual teachers, we consider that, at present, the program is probably doing more harm than good to Australian school education as a whole.

The current situation with NAPLAN is that of standardised tests having unintended negative consequences when they are inappropriately made high stakes exercises for schools.

The proposal to move to on-line administration of the tests will improve some aspects but our basic objection will still remain.

School marketing

One of the slides that I used during the SoFiA Conference workshop included a display advertisement from my local free newspaper promoting Ferny Grove State High School. I was

not seeking to make any specific point about the school in question – I taught at Ferny Grove State High School for over 20 years and think it is a fine school – but simply to illustrate the pressures that schools feel themselves under these days to devote time and resources to marketing.

This display advertisement just happened to catch my eye in scanning the local paper shortly before the SoFiA Conference. It is not an isolated or unusual example. Often when I go to the local cinema I see slick, professionally produced video advertisements by state primary schools in the area proclaiming their educational virtues and exhorting wise and caring parents to enrol their children.

I cannot see how this development is an improvement for the country and at the SoFiA conference I posed the following question:

"Wouldn't the resources that schools currently feel they have to invest in marketing be better allocated to actual education?"

Sometimes it is hard not to get the impression that newspapers like *The Australian* strongly support NAPLAN because it helps provide opportunities for them to sell advertising space to schools. Because the *My School* web site has been adjusted to make it difficult to generate school leagues tables, *The Australian* has produced its own web site called *Your School* and annually issues a lift-out which claims to identify the nation's top schools.

Market place competition might produce overall benefits in many areas of national life but I argue that the provision of quality schooling to all children – not just the offspring of parents who make particular choices – is not one of them. The letter below highlights some of the issues here.

School choice and the national good

John Black makes some interesting points about how changing demographics are affecting patterns of enrolment in the nation's schools (*Demographics change the schools game, 7-8/12*).

According to his analysis, many parents are using NAPLAN score averages as a measure of school effectiveness, something that the tests were never designed to do.

Unfortunately, he fails to mention that greater parental choice may be good for segments of the population but bad for the nation as a whole if the result is to produce a two-tiered school system in which the better motivated and supported students are increasingly concentrated together thus depriving residual schools of the influence necessary to create cultures conducive to learning.

Education policies need to serve the overall national good rather than just promoting the interests of some members of society.

The opening screen of the *My School* web site includes this sentence:

On this site, you can quickly find statistical information about schools of interest to you and then compare their resources and performance with similar schools across the country. (my underlining)

This clearly shows that people are encouraged to see NAPLAN score averages as a measure of whole-school effectiveness. The tests were never designed to do this. A quotation probably wrongly attributed to Albert Einstein is relevant here:

Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts.

A deliberately provocative question

In the session at the SoFiA Conference, participants were asked to consider how long it had taken them to overcome the negative effects of their own second-rate schooling. As the title of this section indicates, this was intended to be deliberately provocative. My point was that if official pronouncements about the benefits of NAPLAN, and related aspects of contemporary schooling like formal statements of professional standards for teachers, are fully embraced then it would be reasonable to conclude that, judged by today's standards, the school education experienced by conference participants would have to be deemed as second-rate. I hasten to add that this is not something that I actually believe. While some aspects of things can always be better, I have a high degree of overall satisfaction with the education that I received at Ascot State School and then at Kedron State High School in the 1950s and 60s.

AUTHOR/PRESENTER

Garry Collins is a retired high school English teacher and department head. He remains involved in education as a sessional tutor in teacher preparation courses at The University of Queensland and as president of the national English teacher association, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE). He taught mainly in Queensland state secondary schools and, on two separate year-long exchanges, in high schools in the US and Canada. As a teenager he was an Anglican altar boy who, for a time, seriously considered training to be a priest. That idea now seems bizarre to him and his Christian belief did not survive his undergraduate years..

Sea of Faith in Australia 2015 Conference, *Religion in Education*: Rapporteur's Impressions

by Jim Tunstall.

My task as a *rapporteur* at this conference was not an easy one. At the outset, I gained the clear impression that there was among participants a great diversity of ideas about the theme of the conference, *Religion in Education*. By the end of the conference, I felt that while participants' ideas about the theme had shifted to some degree, the diversity had persisted.

I felt that participants had brought with them a wealth of knowledge and experiences that had been gained throughout their lives and that they were quite prepared to share these with one another. Generally, their knowledge and experiences seemed to have been acquired through family life, attendance at Sunday school and church, and religious instruction classes at school. Sometimes, these had been acquired vicariously, that is to say, through anecdotes and commentaries provided by participants' children and grandchildren. In a few cases, they had been acquired through some form of teacher training (for Sunday school or religious instruction).

What participants shared with one another tended to be positive and mostly un-critical recollections of what had engaged their attention when they first became curious about religious ideas and the significance these might have in their lives. Participants felt that such ideas were clearly significant (or, at least, seemed to offer answers to significant questions), and there seemed to be an acceptance that these should in some way have a place in education, whether provided at home, at church or at school.

There seemed to be fairly widespread acceptance among participants that religious

ideas, whatever these might seek to encompass, would be best dealt with in the environment of schools. Many thought 'church schools' would tend to be more effective in this regard than government schools. On the other hand, when faced with questions about the exact *nature* of a curriculum program in schools, or the *scope* of the religious ideas to be included, there were few specific proposals put forward.

Participants considered that the *nature* of a school curriculum program would need to be determined by those who were experienced in the work of curriculum development. They also considered that the *scope* of the religious ideas to be included in such a program would be dependent on the *overall purpose* of the program. As far as *overall purpose* was concerned, participants seemed to accept that there were at least three possibilities:

- development and enhancement of one's own faith commitment;
- development and extension of one's understandings about religion/s and their significance in one's own spiritual life;
- development and application of one's moral and ethical attitudes and behaviours in relation to oneself and others.

In summary, at this conference, I found that there was diversity from beginning to end. By the end, however, I realized that this diversity was merely the beginning of a much-needed on-going conversation around the theme of Religion in Education.

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 for instructions and links on how to access sofiatalk and the SoFiA Facebook page.

SoFiA website www.sof-in-australia.org There's too much to summarise here, but this link from *Religion News* caught my eye. It is to an article in *The Guardian* with the headline: *Why it was the world wide web that finally did for the Anglican communion* by Giles Fraser.

SoFiA blog at: www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php (also accessible from the website) I found links to *Can atheism be a spiritual path?* and the announcement of a book *Secular Prayers*. There was also a posting on the Abbott/Turnbull change-over, and some announcements.

Facebook Sea of Faith in Australia I found links to articles on: women and ISIL, Jimmy Carter, liberal Islam, PM Tony Abbott and the Christian right, religion and violence. And some announcements.

sofiatalk Topics discussed included refugee policy; PM Tony Abbott and the Christian right, the latter morphing into politics and atheism.

Announcement

Explore the Jesus Journey

Saturday 3 October 2015

Editor's note: The Bulletin publication schedule means that this will be too late for many readers. It has been advertised on other SoFiA platforms. I've included it because it's an interesting series of topics.; If any reader attends, I would welcome a review for the Bulletin.

Redcliffe's *Living the Questions* Group hosts Dr John Bodycomb and Dr Lorraine Parkinson (retired ministers of the Uniting Church) for a day of seminars. Topics are:

Twilight of the Gods Examining the spread of 'non-religion' in western societies.

How did Jesus of Nazareth become Jesus the Christ? The make-over that changed the world.

Your Eureka moment Exploring spirituality.

Contradiction and confusion in the Church: Two distinct 'gospels' have become conflated.

WHERE? Redcliffe Uniting Church Hall, cnr Anzac Ave and Richens St., Redcliffe 4019. Plenty of off-street parking is available.

WHEN? Saturday 3rd October 2015; Registration 8:30, talks start at 9:30

COST? \$25 (includes light lunch; morning and afternoon teas).

BOOKING: online at <http://www.trybooking.com/ITRX> or

<http://www.trybooking.com/153917> or phone Ian (3284 3688) or David (0409 328 447).

Bookings are essential for catering purposes

Review

Progressive Islam (Continued)

by Robin Ford

When I found the website of Muslims for Progressive Values (July/August *Bulletin*) <http://www.mpvusa.org/> I signed up for their newsletter. There's not been much traffic. I received a newsletter in August and an email this month that wished me:

A Happy Eid-ul-Adha!

The August newsletter reported a newly established website for the Australian branch of Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV) <http://www.mpv-australia.org>. It is an interesting site to explore. For example this statement was prominent:

Any interpretations of the Quran or *Hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) that

contradict the divine message of Love, Kindness and Mercy are incompatible with Islam.

And I was surprised to find a section on interfaith families (under the 'education' tab) with links to a range of resources. It included this invitation: "We hope you will seek out our MPV community as your spiritual home."

All-in-all a website full of surprises.

Now, according to this article (link posted by Jim Norman on the SoFiA Facebook page) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/zaher-kazmi/is-liberal-islam-answer> I have to worry about my reasons for being interested in all this!

Review

Snowstar Institute

by Robin Ford

I came across this organisation by chance. I knew nothing of it before I looked at its website <http://www.snowstarinstitute.org>. The words I found there were very familiar. Here's a sample:

What is SnowStar?

The SnowStar Institute is a community of communities, an inter-disciplinary network, a safe space, where seekers from all persuasions can come together to respectfully and courageously examine, research, honour, celebrate, and debate

the historical and progressive theologies of their own religious traditions and those of others.

SnowStar promotes critical thinking and mutual respect for the world's richly fascinating and sustaining belief systems and traditions, while giving equal voice to humanists and agnostics.

The contact address is Ontario, Canada.

Does any reader have more information on Snowstar?

In the gaps

From the 200th edition of the *ABC Science Show*

An ironic idea from Andrew Denton (as I remembered it):

"...fundamentalist moderates going around the world massacring anyone who can't be made to see both sides of an argument."

supplied by Robin Ford

Announcements

SoFiA Victoria

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

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

SoFiA Victoria email - sofme1b@yahoo.com.au

15 October 2015

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

Platonic Zen: An experimental way to find God.

19 November 2015

Annette Lowe ([Carl Jung Society](#))

"The Origins of Religion."

17 December 2015

Dr Joanna Kujawa

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

"Mary Magdalene and the Gnostic Gospels."

Feature

via Victoria Group

Understanding the Gospel of Mark

This is Part 2 of a talk given to the Melbourne Sea of Faith by Jonathan Rutherford. Part 1 was published in the July/August Bulletin. If you missed Part 1, you can access it from the website.

Meaning & Purpose of Mark's Gospel

1. Promoting Paul's Gospel

See Part 1.

2. A Polemic against the Jewish faction of the early Church

Mark is not just promoting Paul's gospel. He is also engaging in polemics against the Jewish oriented Jerusalem Church.

As I explained earlier, some within the Jerusalem church were insisting that the gentiles

observe the Mosaic Law in order to become fully fledged Christians. In *Mark*, the twelve disciples are representative of Jewish oriented Christians. In his letters, Paul also explicitly names the three leaders of the Jerusalem Church, or 'pillars' as he calls them: Peter, James and John. In *Mark*, the three pillars known to Paul become the three leading disciples of Jesus also named Peter, James and John.

As anyone who reads *Mark* closely will notice, the three pillars as well as the twelve

disciples, continually "misunderstand and lack faith in Jesus" (Dykstra, p110)

A classic example of this occurs when Jesus teaches the disciples that they must welcome "little children" (9:42-48; 10:13-16). In direct disobedience, a few versus later, the disciples prevent little children from coming to Jesus. Jesus responds, not for the first time, by getting very upset at them (Mk 10:13-16).

Mark is not actually making a literal point about Jesus' attitude to little children. The 'children' represent the gentiles (Dykstra, p111-112). Mark would have been inspired to use such symbolism by Paul, who frequently referred to his gentile congregations as children who have been adopted by God through Christ (eg Gal 3:26; 4:19). Mark's allegorical point is that the Jewish faction of the church, as represented by the disciples, is actively hindering the gentiles from full communion with Christ, by trying to make them conform to Jewish laws and customs.¹

It is significant that Judas is the one who ends up betraying Jesus. The name Judas is a Hellenized version of the Hebrew name 'Judah'. This is Mark's way of saying that the Judean Christian church was responsible for betraying the true spirit of the inclusive Pauline gospel.

The Parable of the Sower

The role of the disciples in *Mark* is beautifully summarized in the parable of the sower, told by Jesus in Mark chapter 4. Mary Tolbert has shown the main parables in *Mark* function as condensed summaries of the overall plot.

¹ The message is reinforced through the parable that Jesus tells immediately following the children episode. Jesus famously declares: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, ^{ll} to the unquenchable fire" (9:43). Challenging words indeed, but not because Mark/Jesus wanted people to chop their hands off! The metaphor is directed at the Jewish oriented church. And the message is that they might well have to be cut off, if they continue to act as a barrier to full gentile participation.

The parable is about a sower who sows seeds and each seed falls in different places with different results. I want to focus on the seed that falls on rocky ground. Jesus says:

Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. (4:5-6).

Further on, Jesus explains that the seed fallen on "rocky soil" is like the people who, hear the word and immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. (4:16-17).

This is actually a perfect summary of what happens to the disciples throughout Mark's narrative. In the beginning the disciples respond to Jesus' call very enthusiastically. They immediately drop their fishing nets and follow him (Mk 1:18; Mk 3:13). But from that point on everything goes awry. Immediately after the parable, they are seen to lack faith in Jesus, as they cross the stormy Sea of Galilee (4:35-41).

At the last supper Jesus predicts that all the disciples will 'fall away'. The verb used for 'falling away' is exactly the same as the one used to describe those like 'rocky soil' in the sower parable. And, of course, Jesus' prediction comes true. The very next evening when the Roman guards arrest him, the disciples, rather than show faith in Jesus as he taught them to do, flee in terror. When trouble and persecution arise, the disciples fall away, just as the parable predicted.

While all twelve disciples are 'rocky', one is singled out as particularly rocky – this is, Peter. It is no coincidence that Peter is Greek for 'the rock'. Poor old Peter is the epitome of a 'rocky' disciple. He can never get it right. He refuses to accept that Jesus must be crucified – the very essence of the gospel according to Paul – and to which Jesus responds by calling him Satan (8:33). Some scholars try to temper this by pointing out that Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, but the recognition is more significant for what it lacks. Peter crucially fails to recognize Jesus as

the 'son of God,' which as Dykstra notes "can hardly be an oversight given the title 'Son of God' features so prominently in the prologue of *Mark*" (Dykstra, p.120). Ironically, the only human character to recognize Jesus as the Son of God is the Roman Guard, immediately after Jesus has died (15:39).

Most serious of all, Peter is revealed to be an outright hypocrite. At the Passover meal, Peter declares that even though all the others might 'fall away' he will never do so (14:31). But, Peter does fall-away, and far worse than anyone else. He not only fails to stay awake at Gethsemane (14:32-44), he alone denies Jesus three times in the courtyard, before the cock crows (14:66-72) – and this, despite the fact that Jesus had earlier warned his disciples to keep alert for the cry of the cockcrow when waiting for the lord (13:35). To add insult to injury, Peter's denial of Jesus before the maids of the high priests is carefully contrasted with Jesus' self-declaration as the Son of God before the *actual* high priests (14:53-62). Peter's betrayal, in other words, amounts to a denial of Jesus as the Son of God.

Jesus teaches that anyone who wants to follow him must deny him and take up his cross (8:35-36). But Peter ends up doing the exact opposite. As Michael Goulder rhetorically asks:

Can you think of anyone in the Gospel story who wanted to save his life, who refused to come after Jesus and take up his cross, who did not deny himself but instead denied Jesus? Well so could Mark (Goulder, 1994, 18).

Ironically, it is the unknown gentile, Simon of Cyrene, not Peter, who *literally* takes up Jesus cross (15:21).

The question is: why did Mark single out Peter as such a poor disciple? If *Mark* is an allegory, what is the message? The answer goes back to Paul and his dispute with the Jerusalem leaders. In Galatians 2, Paul is recounting his version of the dispute, and singles out Peter for

rebuke. Paul accuses Peter of "hypocrisy" because whereas once he had shared fellowship with the gentiles, now he was refusing to do so under the influence of the leadership in Jerusalem (Gal 2:11-14). It seems likely therefore, that Mark's portrait of Peter, the 'hypocrite,' is a reference to the conflicts between the apostles Paul and Peter, as recounted in Paul's letters.

3) A polemic against the Judean Jews

I have argued above that *Mark* is polemicizing against the exclusivist, insular, Jewish faction of early Christianity. But Mark's gospel also functions as a broader theological polemic against the Judean Jews as a whole.

Mark's gospel is a tale of how the Judean Jews rejected Jesus. Every major Jewish group in the story rejects Jesus. His own hometown "takes offense at him" (6:3). The fickle Jewish masses demand to have him crucified having only a week earlier praised him like a Messiah on his entry to Jerusalem (11:8-10; 15:6-14). And, of course, the Jewish religious and political authorities plot to have him arrested and killed (3:6). Even Jesus' very own Jewish family suspects him of being mad (3:21). In chapter 6, Jesus himself sums up the complete rejection of his own people: "Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house" (6:4-6)

Mark's message, however, is not simply that the Jews rejected Jesus. Recall again that *Mark* is written in the aftermath of the Jewish-Roman war and the destruction of the temple. To see the significance of this, we need to closely analyze the allusions that Mark makes to the Jewish scriptures, or the Old Testament. There is actually a distinct pattern to these allusions. Here is a table constructed by R.G Price (Price, 2014), which lists most of them. A large proportion – about a third - refers directly to passages about God's coming judgment and punishment of Israel (Price, 2007). I have bolded these passages.

Scene	Reference	Subject of Reference
The Proclamation of John the Baptist	Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40; 2 Kings 1	Judgment of God on Israel; Comfort to Israel for fulfilment of punishment through destruction; Identification of Elijah
The Baptism of Jesus	Isaiah 11; Isaiah 42	Identification of God's servant
Jesus Calls the First Disciples	Jeremiah 16	Punishment of Israel
The Man with an Unclean Spirit	Isaiah 65	God's people don't recognize him
Jesus Heals a Paralytic	2 Kings 5	Elijah/Elisha healing miracles
The Purpose of the Parables	Isaiah 6	Punishment of Israel
Jesus Stills a Storm	Psalms 107	Identification of the Lord
Jesus Heals the Gerasene Demoniac	Isaiah 64	Punishment of Israel
A Girl Restored to Life and a Woman Healed	1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4	Elijah/Elisha healing miracles
Death of John the Baptist	2 Kings 2	Transfer of Spirit from Elijah to Elisha
Feeding the Five Thousand	2 Kings 4	Elijah/Elisha feeding miracles
Jesus Walks on Water	Isaiah 43	Identification of the Saviour of Israel
Feeding the Four Thousand	2 Kings 4	Elijah/Elisha feeding miracles
Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection	Isaiah 53	Suffering servant
The Transfiguration	Daniel 12	Description of eternal life and shining like a star for the righteous
Temptations to Sin	Isaiah 66	Description of punishment for opponents of God
Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem	Zachariah 14; Zachariah 9; Psalm 118	Identification of the ruler of Israel
Jesus Curses the Fig Tree and Clears the Temple	Hosea 9	Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
The Parable of the Wicked Tenants	Isaiah 5	Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
The Destruction of the Temple Foretold	Isaiah 13, 14, 19	Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
The Desolating Sacrilege	Daniel 9, 11, 12	Admonition of the Jews, Destruction foretold
The Coming of the Son of Man	Isaiah 13, Daniel 7	Destruction, Punishment of the world; Coming of an eternal ruler
The Anointing at Bethany	2 Kings 9; 1 Samuel 10	Anointing of the ruler of Israel
Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus	Amos 2	Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
The Passover with the Disciples	1 Samuel 10	Preparations for kingship
Jesus predicts his Betrayal	Psalms 41	Invocation for revenge against transgressors
Peter's Denial Foretold	Zechariah 13	Wrath against betrayers

The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus	Amos 2	Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
Jesus before the Council	Isaiah 53; Psalm 110; Psalm 35	Suffering Servant; Prayer for deliverance from enemies; Prayer for retribution on oppressors
Jesus before Pilate	Isaiah 53	Suffering Servant
The Soldiers Mock Jesus	Isaiah 50	Suffering Servant
The Crucifixion of Jesus	Amos 2; Psalm 22; Amos 8	Judgment on Israel; Prayer for deliverance from suffering; Admonition of the Jews, Punishment of Israel
The Burial of Jesus	Isaiah 53	Suffering Servant

The Destruction of the Temple and the Fig Tree:

A powerful example of this is found in Mark's Temple Scene, which is enveloped within a strange little story about a fig tree.

Mark 11:12-21 (edited)

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. 14 Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it. 15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. ... 20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

The scene begins with Jesus doing something very odd: he curses a fig tree for *not* producing figs, even though figs are out of season! Then a very angry Jesus famously storms the temple overturning the tables and denouncing the moneychangers. The next day, Peter points out that the cursed fig tree has withered to the roots. All this is very strange until you understand that the entire fig tree and temple scene is part of an extended allusion to Hosea chapter 9, which is a fiery Old Testament text about God's coming judgment on Israel (See: Price, 2007; 2014).

Here is the passage in Hosea.

Hosea 9: 1-17 (shortened):

1 Do not rejoice, O Israel; do not be jubilant like the other nations. For you have been unfaithful to your God; ... 7 The days of punishment are coming, the days of reckoning are at hand.... 10 When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your fathers, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree. 15 Because of all their wickedness in Gilgal, I hated them there. Because of their sinful deeds, I will drive them out of my house. I will no longer love them; all their leaders are rebellious. 16 Ephraim is blighted, their root is withered, they yield no fruit. Even if they bear children, I will slay their cherished offspring. 17 My God will reject them because they have not obeyed him;

From lines 9:1; 9:7 you can see that this is a passage about God's punishment. The text reads:

Do not rejoice o'Israel for you have been unfaithful to your God...the days of punishment is coming.

Further on, in verse 10 this dark picture is contrasted with the founding fathers of Israel who are likened to the "early fruit on the fig tree". This passage has clearly inspired Mark's own fig tree scene, except notice how he has reversed the imagery. In Mark, unlike Hosea, the fig tree *does not* bear early fruit, hence why Jesus curses it. In Mark's eyes Israel, unlike in time of the founding fathers, is no longer 'ripe', because she is no longer faithful.

In verse 15 we read: "because of their sinful deeds I will drive them out of my house" (11:15). This text has clearly inspired Mark's temple scene. Finally, in verse 16, we have the haunting metaphor in which a disobedient and

unfaithful Israel is compared to a "withered fig tree, bearing no fruit" (v16). This corresponds to Jesus and the disciples finding the cursed fig tree "withered" outside the temple (Mk 11:21).

There is no way all these similarities can be a coincidence; especially given Mark's allusions to the Hosea passage are made in the same order.² The entire temple/fig tree scene in *Mark* is very clearly a direct and deliberate allusion to Hosea 9. This, I need to stress, is just one of several similar examples running through Mark's gospel (See R.G Price, 2007; R.M Price, 2011, Turton 2004).

How do we interpret this? As we have seen, *Mark* was written in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem. But Mark was not just writing *after* this event, he is also providing a theological commentary on *why* it occurred. As we have seen the narrative is a tale about how the Jews rejected Jesus and the text frequently alludes to Old Testament passages about God's coming judgment on Israel. As R.G Price has argued, Mark is effectively saying that the destruction of Jerusalem was God's punishment on the Jews for their unfaithfulness. In the view of Mark the Jews "had brought the calamity of the Roman war upon themselves" (R.G Price, 2007), through their disobedience and unfaithfulness to God.

How had the Jews been unfaithful, according to Mark? Once again Mark shared the view of Paul. Paul preached that faith in Christ was God's new mode of universal salvation for all, both Jew and Gentile. But, as Paul reveals in his letter to the Romans, the early church struggled to convert the Jews to the new faith (Romans 9-11). Paul, quoting scripture, accuses Israel of being a 'disobedient and contrary people' (Romans 10:21). Mark shared this view and thought the destruction of Jerusalem was

God's resulting punishment for their lack of faithfulness.

Mark also shared Paul's theological explanation for why the Jews had rejected Christ. To see this we must return to the parable of the sower. After telling the parable, Jesus pulls the disciples aside and explains the purpose of the parables. He says.

To you has been given the secret^[a] of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables;¹² in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.

So, according to Jesus, the purpose of the parables is actually to *prevent* 'outsiders' from understanding the gospel. This passage has stumped Christian scholars for centuries! The key to understanding it is Paul's letter to the Romans.

In Romans, Paul is grappling with how God could have allowed Israel to reject the gospel. Paul's answer is that this was God's plan all along. God foreordained that the Jews would reject the gospel while the gentiles would accept it. This in turn would make the Jews jealous, so that, eventually, many of them would accept the gospel and be saved. To illustrate this point Paul loosely quotes a passage from Isaiah, which reads:

God gave (the Jews) a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear, down to this very day.

In Mark's parable scene, Jesus says virtually the same thing. The eyes that don't see and ears that don't hear, in Paul, parallel the seeing but nor perceiving and hearing but not understanding, in *Mark*.

The relationship between these two texts is particularly clear because both Mark and Paul reverse the original order found in Isaiah where the 'hearing' is followed by the 'seeing'. It appears, therefore, that Paul has used the Isaiah text in his letter to the Romans, and then Mark, drawing on Paul, has placed the words in the mouth of Jesus. Mark further illustrates the point throughout his narrative: the Jews are mostly irresponsive to the message of Jesus, whereas

² Although, when alluding to Old Testament passages, Mark sometimes reverses the order in which each line originally appeared, usually as a deliberate way of making an ironic point. A classic example is his use of the Psalms in the crucifixion scene - see Mk 15:24-39 compared with Psalms 22:1-30. For commentary see R.G Price, 2007.

the gentiles are responsive. For Mark, following Paul, God had hardened the hearts of Israel (Rom 11:7). And yet in spite of this, neither Paul nor Mark doubted that the Jews were individually and collectively responsible for their own choice to reject the Gospel.³ This was why God was now punishing them through the destruction of the temple.

You may, understandably, be concerned that this interpretation of *Mark* is effectively anti-Semitic. This is a misunderstanding. Mark is actually working within a long Jewish tradition of self-criticism. As R.G price points out,

One of the overarching themes of the Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament is the lack of faith of the Jewish people and how their god's wrath would destroy the Jews because of their lack of faith (R.G Price, 2007).

Furthermore, Mark's interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem as God's punishment was a popular one among hellenized Jews. The Jewish historian Josephus, for example, interpreted the event in exactly the same way, albeit more explicitly through historical-political writing, rather than allegory (Sanders, 2001, 47). Finally, it is likely that Mark shared Paul's view that God would ultimately ensure that the Jews would be reconciled to Christ (Rom 11:26). As a Christian, Mark would have believed there was hope for God's chosen people.

Conclusion

As many commentators have noted Mark's narrative is full of irony. Perhaps the ultimate irony is that the gospel begins by announcing itself as concerned with the "good news of Jesus Christ" (1:1). But a close study of the symbolism, metaphors and literary allusions suggests it contains very *bad news* – at least for the Judean Jews and the Jewish oriented Christian church. As we have seen, as well as promoting the Pauline

Gospel, *Mark* is a biting tale of judgment and criticism against both these groups.

Mark concludes his gospel with a final challenge to the Jerusalem church. The focus is on the three women at the tomb. A mysterious young man informs them that Jesus has risen. The women are instructed to go tell the disciples that Jesus can be found in Galilee (16:4-8). As I mentioned earlier Galilee is symbolic of an inclusive Church, open to all both Jew and Gentile, and based on 'faith in Christ' alone. This was the gospel that Paul preached. To follow Jesus, the Jerusalem church must go to 'Galilee', by following the example of Paul and embracing the inclusive universal church.

References

1. Adamczewski, B (2014). *The Gospel of Mark: A hypertextual commentary*. Peter Lang.
2. Carrier, R (2014). *On the historicity of Jesus: Why we might have reasons to doubt*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
3. Marcus, J (2000). Mark – Interpreter of Paul. In [New Testament Studies](#) Vol 46, Issue 04, pp 473-487
4. Price, R.G (2007). *The Gospel of Mark as reaction and allegory*. Self published. Available online at: http://www.rationalrevolution.net/articles/gospel_mark.htm
5. Price, R.G (2014). How a Fictional Jesus Gave Rise to Christianity. Self published. Available online at: http://www.rationalrevolution.net/articles/fictional_jesus.htm
6. Price, R.M (2011). *The Christ Myth Theory and Its Problems*. Cranford, New Jersey: American Atheist Press.
7. Sanders, E.P (2001). *Paul: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
8. Tarzari, P.N (1999). *The New Testament Introduction: Paul and Mark*. Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.
9. Turton, M (2004). *Historical commentary on the gospel of Mark*. Self published. Available at: http://www.michaelturton.com/Mark/GMark_index.html

³ As E.P Sanders has shown, most Jews, including Paul/Mark, held firm to two fundamental theological convictions, even when they were in tension. First, that God was sovereign and controlled the course of history. Second, that humans were responsible for their own actions, including obedience and disobedience to God (E.P Sanders, 2001, Ch 5).

Announcements

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 Response

by Phil Roberts

Robin Ford in *SoFiA Bulletin*, July/August 2015, raised questions about the future of the Sea of Faith in Australia that demand discussion. The starting point is an elegant and quite beautiful poem, *That Which Binds Us*, expressing a conviction that, despite the perhaps inevitable ebbside bemoaned by Matthew Arnold, the Sea of Faith remains with us, and while we join together in shared respect for this sea, we are in some way putting up a sign of hope for the future. But is this all, asks Robin? Is it enough? Can and should we do more?

My first thought was that this is all too hard - a topic where we face the impenetrable, much like the physical oceans that surround us. And yet we cannot in all honesty duck the issue.

There is a problem

The broad issue identified by Arnold in the 19th century and Don Cupitt in the late 20th century is clearly not diminished, despite some significant developments over the past 150 years, for the human spirit is still floundering with issues of faith, in the West at least. This malaise is not limited to the churches. Indeed, SoFiA in 2015 seems to be at the pointy end of the problem in a number of ways. On the plus side, we have what Robin calls a feeling of “safe space”, a sense of fellowship, and a range of activities with high quality content. However, our membership is not large, it is ageing, and the geographical spread of active groups seems to have declined in recent years. Our public profile is low and it is questionable whether as an organisation we are having any impact in pursuing our stated aim of “seeking a radical reappraisal of past religious traditions in order to meet today’s spiritual challenges.” It is small comfort that traditional churches are themselves in decline. To use another nautical metaphor, we seem to be like a boat that wants to be out moving on the ocean but has inadvertently found itself in still waters, becalmed.

Some contributing factors

Factors contributing to this state of affairs can, I suggest, be found in the very nature of our field of interest, the society we inhabit, and our own constitution and practice.

Our field of interest. Our focus on failure in religion as a core concern makes us inevitably small, for religion itself is unfashionable. Cupitt identified technology, entertainment and fundamentalism as problems, but there are others. In a highly secular and materialist age, issues of religion, faith and meaning are inevitably a minority preoccupation. Not many people would see a supposed crisis in religion (Cupitt’s words) as a major crisis in society. Faith is not sexy, and even ethics has to struggle at times to have a presence in public discourse.

The society we inhabit. We live in a society where there are many threats or perceived threats to existing ways of life or social groups or institutions. In the face of such a barrage of demands for our attention, most of us have developed a switch-off mentality, no doubt out of sheer self-protection. We join causes selectively, and in many cases not as regular activists but simply to register our interest or concern. As with media organisations, anything perceived as non-headline simply slips out of our view. Religion makes headlines, to be sure, but not in a way that is of direct concern to SoFiA; and while society at large may be happy that churches exist, for churches bear some of the welfare burden and are a reference point on ethical issues, this does not mean that people feel a need to become involved with faith issues to any great depth. In the unlikely event that they do, there is a marketplace, in which SoFiA is just one of a number of faith-minded groups promoting fresh ways of thinking.

Our own constitution and practice. Our cause, defined as “seeking a radical reappraisal of past religious traditions in order to meet today’s

spiritual challenges,” is undeniably worthy but lacks a hard edge. Being pluralists, we lose the sharp focus of bodies such as the Christian Fundamentalists who advocate something more definite, that is, strict adherence to a literal reading of the Bible. Our core value – freedom of thought – is not so attention-grabbing. Put metaphorically, a shark commands more attention than a seal.

At the risk of inviting some fire, I also venture to suggest that our patterns of thought may have become a little too rigid. We may be too stuck on the icons of Cupitt, Geering and Spong, none of whom are now particularly new. This may be a reflection of some stagnation in the wider world of thought, a kind of pause in which we await the rise of a new generation of thinkers with the potential of taking us in a new direction, and exciting a fresh round of spiritual debate. In that regard, the West’s current efforts to fathom Islam do not really ‘cut it’.

Moving forward

My suggestions are couched within a personal framework of acceptance, appreciation and commitment, which by the way is the structure I use for my own personal practice of faith.

Acceptance. We have to accept that, most likely, we will always be on the margins of thought. And we have to accept our inherent limitations, spelt out above. Society will not change, and established religious organisations have too much invested in their current structures and practices to be readily moved to change. In any case, they have such significant challenges from other directions that the gentle pushing by SoFiA and other progressives is not likely to bear much fruit, at least in the foreseeable future.

Appreciation. Acceptance does not condemn us to eternal pessimism and bleakness of spirit – far from it. Thankfully it is in the nature of humankind to be balanced in our worldview and our view of particular issues. We have reason to appreciate the good health that, small as we are, we enjoy — the range of thought, the

determined pursuit of truth, the good fellowship that Robin’s poem refers to, and the respectful environment we maintain. We should also appreciate the fact that we are not alone, for there is a lot of good work going on outside SoFiA.

Commitment. Having geared ourselves up with these positive thoughts tempered by realism (that is, acceptance of certain ongoing limitations), we’re ready to move on to the last stage, which is commitment. Three ideas come to mind.

The first is that we forget about being too self-referential and simply commit to promoting whatever values that our organisation agrees to embody. 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’. Second, I think we should commit to being as diverse as possible, paying more attention to thought from outside the Christian tradition and challenging our worldviews with non-Western perspectives. Third – though this runs partly counter to the first idea — we look to new ways of raising our organisational profile. Here we come back to our Editor’s question, or challenge: “The safe space we have created and nurtured is of great value to us. It might be of use to others. How can we best share it?”

There are ways of raising profile if that’s wanted, eg keeping in touch with the Religion and Ethics department of the ABC, asking churches and other groups if they’d like to have joint activities, and making ourselves available to assist in university teaching programmes, perhaps in small-group seminars. Sea of Faith in the Churches (SoFiC) in the UK is just one interesting example of what’s possible (<http://sofn-sofic.blogspot.com.au/2015/03/sofic-day-conference-2015-sea-of-faith.html>). Of course, all this requires time, energy and a critical mass of suitable people to drive such approaches, which might be a Catch-22.

Conclusion

I sometimes hear professionals of one kind or another say they look forward to the day when they no longer have to exist as such, for that will be the time when their goal is accomplished. That will be the time when everyone has perfect teeth and ignorance is banished from the face of the Earth! We too have to look forward to the day when we are no longer necessary – the day when, to quote our own words, “a radical reappraisal of past religious traditions in order to

meet today’s spiritual challenges” has been achieved. In default of that too-far horizon, we might be able to look forward to a time when there is a clearly discernible broadening of discourse in the wider faith community, and reforms reflecting a more modern view of spirituality. And in an even nearer future, wouldn’t it be nice to at least establish some synergy with one or other of the other faith groups who are also seeking a more enlightened future?.

Response

A Response to *Where to?* in 16 Words

by David Miller

Irony Upon Irony:

The receding tide of faith has been replaced by the tsunami of fundamentalism.

Postlude

SoFiA Activities

John Carr has taken on the task of Group and Member Liaison.

This is an edited version of a letter that he prepared for potential convenors of new groups.

Contact John <mailto:sof@a1.com.au> if you would like to start a group in your area.

From the July/August *SoFiA Bulletin*, you will see that the Management Committee is exploring additional ways to promote the organisation. As part of this objective it is considering how it can help members to gain more from their membership.

Currently, only about half of our members participate in either conferences or the activities of local groups. While we value having other members and assume that they are content to participate only through receiving the bi-monthly *Bulletin*, we hope to provide other avenues for their involvement. Since SoFiA exists to promote "the open exploration of religion, faith and meaning", discussion amongst members is the lifeblood of the organisation. We are seeking to promote this in two ways.

First, we are expanding and enhancing our social media sites:

- **SoFiA Web-site** More information about SoFiA and about conferences and groups can be seen on our web-site, www.sof-in-australia.org . Here you will also find recent editions of *SoFiA Bulletin* and our public blog-site. To join in a discussion, simply click on a link to a recent thread on the right hand side of the home page. You can also start off a new discussion thread. The Webmaster is Greg Spearritt.
- **sofiatalk Yahoo Group** This is an email discussion group for SoFiA members. To receive the posts and participate yourself, you will need to register with Jim Norman, the Moderator. To do this, send an email to him at jnor2070@bigpond.net.au .

- **Sea of Faith Facebook** If you already have a Facebook account, go to the 'Sea of Faith in Australia' page and ask to join. Your application will be dealt with by Jim Norman.

Second, we hope to expand the number of local groups within SoFiA. Ideally, this is the way that members will get most benefit from their membership. Where numbers in an area are very low, groups may not be viable, though some of the oldest and most active groups are operating with relatively few members. The contact details for existing groups are given on our web-site, www.sof-in-australia.org. (Click on 'Events' and then on 'Local Groups'.)

If there is no group near you, it may be possible for you or another member to start one. Would you be interested in doing this yourself, or would you consider joining a group if one was started in your area?

Even if there are only a couple of members in an area, they may wish to be in contact with each other by phone or email, or arrange to meet occasionally to chat about some of the issues that are raised within SoFiA forums.

Please contact me <mailto:sof@a1.com.au> if you would like to discuss any aspect of SoFiA – its history, objectives, or activities – as well as our current initiatives.

Epilogue

A Picture of Grief Cape Cod, Massachusetts 11 September 2014.

by Robin Ford

Near where the cover photograph of this *Bulletin* was taken, we came across a small group of relatives and friends of Neilie Anne Heffernan Casey, who died in the twin towers attack on 11 September 2001.

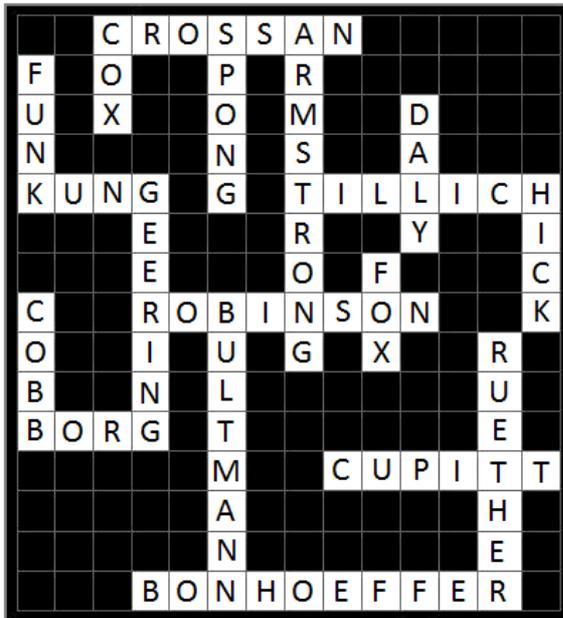
In restrained grief they sat beside a bronze memorial, talked to anyone who stopped, and handed out a card in remembrance. On the back of the card was the quotation below.

We are all molded and remolded by those who have loved us, and though that love may pass, we remain, none the less, their work...

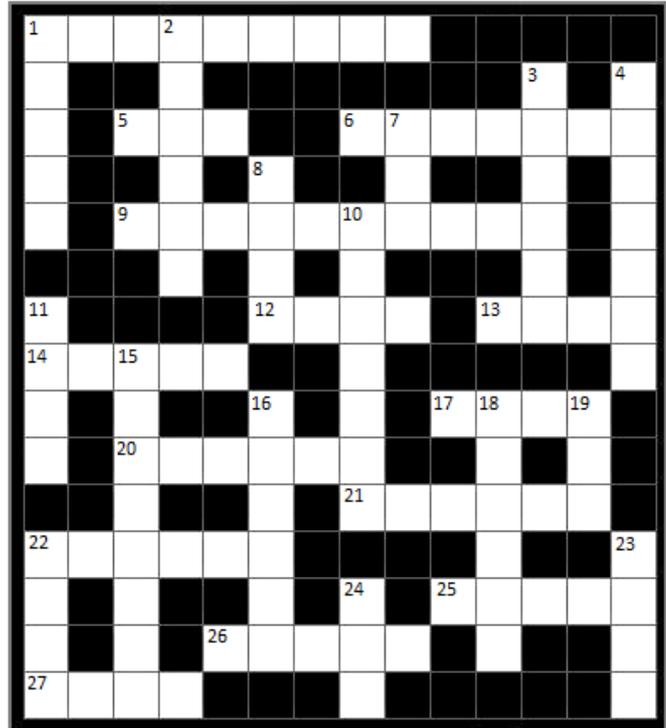
No love, no friendship can ever cross the path of our destiny without leaving some mark upon it forever.

Mauriac

SoFiA Crossword #18



SoFiA Crossword #19 Prepared by Greg Spearritt



Across

1. Collection of biblical books not considered authoritative by Protestants
5. Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law; considered first Caliph by Shiite Muslims, who trace the lineage of imams through him
6. Long, narrow, enclosed porch, usually colonnaded or arcaded, crossing the entire width of a church at its entrance
9. The practice of finding the hidden significance of things
12. Teacher
13. Not a hand (1 Cor 12:15)
14. Yours, à la the King James version
17. You, à la the King James version
20. The second most holy city (Islam)
21. Liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth
22. Messianic name chosen by Vernon Howell, leader of the Branch Davidians
25. Spiritual struggle
26. Practice of charging interest
27. Location of Moses' first aquatic adventure

Down

1. Separatist group of Mennonites known for shunning modern culture and technology
2. Protestant theologian who preached the total depravity of humans
3. Native religion of Japan
4. Interpreter of scripture
7. Common form of religious expression throughout history
8. Role of Saul (according to the Books of Samuel, if not necessarily history)
10. Patriarch of the Torah
11. The fundamental particle in ancient Greek philosophy (e.g. Democritus)
15. Everlasting
16. Voluntary contributions or levies
18. Candidate in the Canning by-election unhappy about media scrutiny of his family's religious beliefs
19. Home nation of faith-healing fraud Peter Popoff (exposed in 1987 by J. Randi)
22. Meditative tool of Zen practitioners
23. First garden
24. Chest described in Exodus

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sunshine Coast Contact: Marion Kleinberg (07 5479 0905)

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

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

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

Name(s).....

Address.....

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

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

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

Signature.....