



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

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2017



photo Robin Ford

Street tree, Lane Cove NSW

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E X P L O R E  
religion faith meaning

## EDITORIAL

Readers who get their *Bulletin* by email will have received two versions. The content is the same in both but one has the usual two-column layout while the other has a single column (apart from this page and the final two pages). I'd like to know which one they prefer.

Paul Tonsen finds the two-column format awkward to read from the computer screen — there's a lot of scrolling to do. He suggested a single column.

I see his point, and now that more readers have chosen email delivery I will be offering a single column option. If you get the *Bulletin* by email, please let me know which version you prefer and I will send that one in future (by default I'll send single column). If you get your *Bulletin* by post it will be double column as usual.

But how wide should a single column be? According to web sources, it all comes down to the number of characters across a column.

With printed text 50-75 characters is usual (previous *Bulletins* were roughly 50 characters per column).

When reading from a computer screen up to 95 characters per column is suggested. A single column with the usual *Bulletin* margins has around 96 characters, which sounds ok but when I tried it I found I was moving my head from side to side a lot, which was uncomfortable. By trial and error I decided on around 80 characters, which leaves 40 mm margins both sides.

In this *Bulletin*, whatever the layout, there's a wide range of topics and styles, and I hope you'll enjoy them. I've already received articles for the next *Bulletin*. But I can always do with more.

Merry Christmas.

Robin Ford

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Views expressed are those of each author and not necessarily those of the Editor or SoFiA.  
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### Explanation

If you previously received the SoFiA *Bulletin* by post and this time it came by email, it could be that we have not received your 2017 subscription (10 years for \$20.00). Postal delivery can be reinstated when subs are up to date (see back page for details).

## **On the Unbearable Accidents of Being**

*John Carr*

Most people, when researching their family history, have occasional insights into the long odds of their having been born. What if Dad had not taken that job in a faraway town; what if Grandma had not gone to the bush dance; what if Great-aunt Mollie had not died in infancy and her grieving parents had not risked another pregnancy, one that led to the birth of Grand-dad?

But this is not the half of it. For the what-ifs apply to every one of the births of our ancestors. Since 1500 CE, we have all had 10 to 20,000 such happy accidents; since 1000CE, hundreds of thousands. In every one, apparently unpredictable events occurred that enabled the continuation of the story that led to that paragon of Nature — Us. Looking back on all this, it may have the appearance of being planned or inevitable. If we imagine ourselves back in an ancestor's shoes, however, the path to the future will look very risky. This fact has been exploited in a number of time-travel stories and films, where a character has to go back and take action, usually quite desperate action, to ensure that the future does all turn out right for humanity, without prejudicing their own birth.

It is a little odd, perhaps, that genealogical day-dreamers tend to focus exclusively on the positive events, large or small, that they know of or can imagine. But as the death of baby Mollie shows, our good fortune probably depended equally on negative events in past lives. Many of the accidents that led to our birth would have been sad, painful occurrences for our ancestors, as well as for many other people. If my convict ancestor had not committed the burglary, his gormless accomplice had not tried to fence the loot so quickly, and he had not been sentenced to transportation to the ends of the Earth for the term of his natural life, it would have been catastrophic for my eventual conception. I'm sure he would have much preferred to have experienced none of these, but from my point of view they were essential. His son followed him to Australia 20 years later and had a dozen children, of whom number 10 married the man who was my grandfather. Many a close shave for me there!

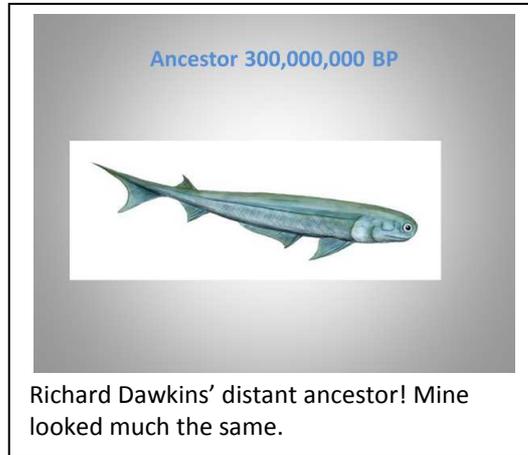
And this is only the beginning of my story or, more accurately, the last couple of chapters of my story. Why stop at relatively recent times, when we have some snippets of knowledge of names and places? The accidents, the coincidences, stretch back, generation to generation, into ancient history and prehistory. Perhaps my Ancient Briton 50<sup>th</sup> great-grandmother was, at 14, rather overweight and could not run very far or fast and was easily tackled to the ground by the hairy young Saxon with bad teeth. Thank heavens! A first partner flattened by a sarsen stone while working with his clan building Stonehenge? I thank my lucky stars, for my 200<sup>th</sup> great-grandmother was now free to couple with the uglier but much stronger younger brother. Two drunken brothers living by the Caspian Sea fought over the girl who spun and wove such beautiful cloth and the smaller one died from the blow with the hand-axe. No worries! The bigger one will die of influenza next year and the craftswoman, my 1,000<sup>th</sup> grandmother will

be free to partner with the tall man from the next village whose Y chromosome I carry.

Enough of this! You can make up your own colourful stories that led to You. But it is a very, very long saga that stretches back through the 200 millennia of the history of *homo sapiens* and, yes, through the four million years of evolution that led to the emergence of our species.

If you have any knowledge of cosmology, you may be able to imagine the infinite number of things that led, in Carl Sagan's terms, to 'starstuff' eventually becoming conscious.

In his excellent illustrated book for young adults, *The Magic of Reality* (2011), Richard Dawkins includes a drawing of his 186,000<sup>th</sup> grandparent. It's sort of fishy. This



would be too much for religious fundamentalists, I fear, for whom 'God the Creator' and 'God's plan' are basic articles of faith. According to them, God may move in mysterious ways, but events of great magnitude are never accidental. For such theists, seeing our very existence as the result of an infinite succession of happy accidents would not only be unbelievable, it would be truly unbearable.

#### Reference

Richard Dawkins, illus. Dave McKean, *The Magic of Reality: How We Know What's Really True*, Bantam, 2011.

#### Point of view

## An Epiphany of Sorts

by Cordelia Hull

A few years ago, I was blind-sided by some news that put me into such an existential dilemma that it (almost literally) sent me insane. It was the sort of situation that leaves a person seeing no way out, no way to help a loved one suffering intense pain, no way to avoid or alleviate further pain to other loved ones in the future.

To add to the intensity of this dilemma I was sworn to secrecy, and to betray that would have only exacerbated the situation. So I could not 'de-brief', as they say, with anyone. I had to make up my own mind to decide which of two, or maybe three, paths I would take. All paths would be painful.

Staggering under the weight of this impasse, unable to see any way forward that was ethical, legal, compassionate and (perhaps most vital of all) effective, something broke through into my psyche.

'God' intervened.

"Ha!" I hear you say, and I totally agree. I don't believe in God either. God was invented by humans to help them explain life, and help them get through the

rough patches, right? Well, let me tell you - this *was* a rough patch. So was it any wonder 'God' eventually showed up?

Despite my disbelief in an interventionist God (or any kind of realist, objective God for that matter), it was precisely at this time that I came to understand more fully how and why people become convinced that God has intervened in their lives.

How else could I have been delivered from the psychic pain I was going through? How else could I have been transported from a position of overwhelming helplessness into a position of hope and strength? Only divine intervention could explain that transition, surely?

God didn't take away any of the objective details of the situation, of course. They were still there and would remain for a long time. But my fear and psychic pain left me — quite suddenly — as if God had turned his face and noticed me, to offer deliverance. After weeks of misery, I felt 'saved'.

"Well, no," said a close friend emphatically, as I described my 'epiphany' to her many months later.

This friend is a no-nonsense atheist/ feminist/communist type who has all the answers, for everything — from God, to the patriarchy, to inequity in the housing market.

"Your epiphany, as you call it," she proclaimed, "was nothing to do with God".

It was obvious to her it was due to the balance of forces in my mind tipping in favour of self-preservation.

And she does have a point. She claimed that because I had been in danger of losing my mind, my mind was impelled to find some kind of solution. Life will out, so to speak. For her, it was not 'God' who 'saved' me but Life's own demand to preserve itself.

But does it really matter which way I describe my experience. I can say, "God intervened" or I can say "My mind needed to preserve itself". It doesn't change the actual experience. From my perspective, what had happened, overnight really, seemed totally miraculous and I really don't think it matters what words I use to express the 'miracle'? Some people would understand God-words, while others would prefer the language of psychology.

All I know for sure is that one day I woke up in a mood of...I was going to say resignation and acceptance, but it was more than that. It was an exhilarating mood of faith and hope and love. Yep, the big three, straight from the Bible. I suddenly and 'miraculously' knew that, come what may, I would be able to cope with any decision I finally had to make.

While there would be no perfect answers, I suddenly had utter faith that whatever eventuated, whatever decision was made, I would manage. I had faith, hope and love. Faith in my own capacity to survive; Hope that the cup would be taken away (or at least ameliorated); and Love, which was the greatest of the three and in my power to provide, no matter what.

I felt as though "the peace of God that passeth all understanding" had come out of my childhood and descended on me, as if God was showing me the way, holding my hand through the "Shadow of the Valley of Death" and all that.

I also began to realise that humans had been here before, facing a dilemma similar to mine. They probably had a similar epiphany to me too, realising what was needed to survive in such a situation.

Had these earlier humans also come up with Faith, Hope and Love? Had they then put these insights into the safe-keeping of their God, writing their insights into their scriptures so they might be passed on to other, future, humans, for use when *they* needed them? Yes, I thought — and how neat is that?

I had not prayed to any god for decades but I certainly felt the *need* to pray while this dilemma was overwhelming me. I felt a desperate emotional need for the arms of a loving God to surround me.

The other thing I felt later, post-deliverance, was gratitude. Richard Dawkins claims it is our 'gratitude gene' that helps make us religious. I can see this too now. I can appreciate how a surge of gratitude can send us to our knees, thanking God for his intervention. I was so grateful for the feeling of the peace beyond understanding that descended on me; the acceptance of 'what is'.

Yes, I am talking in terms of personal experience here and I know that carries little validity with many thinking types, Christian or not. But I am more interested in clarifying my own subjective view of religion than in propounding some kind of objective truth. I have never felt the urge to argue for the existence, or non-existence, of God on objective grounds.

It is a simply a matter of language for me. I was raised in a bilingual household (one parent religious, the other a scientist) and later I studied Arts and Social Sciences, so I have several languages with which to express my experiences: theological, psycho-biological, poetic. Whichever I use, my subjective experience remains the same, but my choice of language to explain it varies to suit my audience, and or my mood and or my ability. I usually choose psycho-biological because the language of poetry is too hard to use and Godtalk is often misheard as literalism.

My hope is that people become more adept at translation, more prepared to use it, and less prone to condemn others for being 'wrong' should they happen to use a language other than the one they themselves prefer. In that scenario, there would be more room for dialogue and learning: less room for hostility and ridicule.

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**Point of view**

## **On Using the Right Tool for the Job**

*Leighton Brough*

Many of us care about outcomes in the world around us — social, environmental etc — which raises the concern, in one way or another, of how positive outcomes we desire are to be achieved: what is the right tool for the job in these various cases? The scientific method is one very powerful tool at our disposal that is clearly very capable and relevant in many situations. We might, for example, conclude we should take an 'evidence-based' approach to a problem of concern in the education system. I would like to make a case for when the scientific method is, and is not, the right tool for the job.

By the terms 'science' and the 'scientific method' (which I'll use interchangeably) I mean the activity whereby, to use an analogy, a map is being made of a territory, ie, ideas are tested for their fit and utility against an external reality. A good, correct map helps you get things done, in that it accurately describes the pertinent features of interest in the landscape. It is for the most part assumed that the map is separate from the territory, as is the scientist doing the mapping — we assume that, for example, drawing on the map doesn't create the landscape. When the scientist, map, or territory do affect each other, care is usually taken to minimise the effect. Science (the activity of mapping) generally can't be done when any of these are hopelessly entangled, by creating or altering each other via the process. The analogy of scientist, map and territory only really holds if these three things are pretty much independent of and external to each other so it's a helpful metaphor for the purposes of this discussion, because this limitation captures some essential assumptions implicit in the use of the scientific method. Finally, science is not an individual activity only, it assumes that more than one scientist can look at both map and territory, and agree (or not) on whether it's a good (i.e., accurate and useful) map.

I'm deliberately leaving the definition of science very broad, because I want to discuss the maximal bounds of where the tool of science can usefully be deployed, that is, the full range of problems it can potentially be applied to. I wish to capture everything that we might agree is, approximately 'scientific': validation of ideas against reality, evidence-based, accepting only sound rational arguments etc. I believe this 'scientific' position, is pretty much the ideal for how intelligent, educated people are supposed to think, given our present social values. 'Unscientific' is a pejorative term (and so is 'irrational').

It's a not uncommon position today to suggest that science is best tool for the job in *every* situation. I will refer to this position as Scientism, and make the case that this is incorrect. But first I cannot resist pointing out that the failure to allow for falsifiability (due to the word '*every*' above) is by definition unscientific, leaving Scientism itself, as a belief about reality, without scientific justification, ie, with the same ontological status as a religion. Nevertheless, Scientism is the dominant and largely unquestioned religion of our culture, as evidenced by our elevation of scientific thought and methods to the status of an ideal for the individual. But as Scientism is the water in which we swim, it can be hard to see.

Science originated with the study of physical, material reality, and its most impressive catalogue of results is found in this domain. These are sometimes called the 'hard' sciences. Continuing with the metaphor above, It has done an impressive job of mapping the territory in this domain, and the maps produced have enabled us as a species to achieve some non-trivial dominance over the territory (largely through the application of science we call 'technology'). We've mapped out physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, materials science... the list goes on and on...and we've been able to achieve impressive outcomes in all these domains. For the most part, the scientist has been able to remain detached from the map and the territory in these cases. An exception is physics where it gets a bit messy when you zoom in to the territory as far as you can at the finest level possible, at which point spookiness starts happening between the territory, the

scientist and the map. But this edge case aside, 'science works' here very well indeed.

Humans, however, are concerned with matters much broader than just physical, material reality. Being a species with complex language and culture, for us there is not just the objective world, but also the subjective (the interior experience of being a human) and the inter-subjective (the part of that inner experience shared collectively). The world of ideas that we create and share via words is quite different from physical material reality. Here we find the 'soft' sciences such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, as well as the humanities, the arts, politics, education, ethics etc.

In the domains of the subjective and inter-subjective, the metaphor of the scientist, map and territory starts to be a poorer fit. If the territory is that of the subjective, then we have the problem that this particular territory can be directly apprehended by only one scientist: the human whose experience it is. For example, we might have two monks who have climbed a mountain, each to their own cave, to meditate and reflect (map) their own experience of reality. However neither monk has access to the experience of the other, merely her map. This is precisely why we don't think of monks as 'doing science' when they meditate and describe the experience. The basic, collective function of the validation of a map by another scientist is impossible here. They might, however, agree that their maps have similar features, or that similar types of map are useful to both. But this is not 'doing science' since it lacks collective access to a shared reality.

There is another reason we don't think of monks as practising science. In the domain of subjective reality, the map is part of the territory — their reflection on their own experience adds to their experience — and the metaphor breaks down here too. And finally, the metaphor fails yet further because the territory is in no way external to the scientist — it is not 'out there', instead it is inside themselves, and (presumably) entirely created by themselves. So the subjective domain of reality is for the large part incompatible with the basic premises and method of science. It is the wrong tool for the job in this case.

Because Scientism is the dominant religion of our culture, sadly there are those who would entirely dismiss the purely subjective as irrelevant, unreal, unimportant, or of less interest. This defies the experience of most of humanity; they care a very great deal about their own personal experience and it makes up an enormous part of their reality. But it is important to be clear that the purely subjective is simply a domain where the toolset of science can't work according to its own premises. To dismiss the purely subjective on that basis, or for that matter to make those value judgements, is entirely unjustified except by the religion of Scientism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To muddy the waters, there is a relationship between subjective and objective reality. We can, for example, using fMRI study the biology of brain function while accessing different subjective states. In this sense, the objective and subjective are two sides of one coin. One defence of Scientism is to focus only on the objective side, and deny significance to the subjective side, but this fails the basic tests of pragmatism and Occam's Razor. Recognising, for example, that a couple are 'in love', is simple (and useful), as against knowing a particular network of neurons is activating in a particular way — for this

So taking stock of the broad domains of reality experienced by humans considered so far, we find one in which science is a superb fit — namely physical, material reality (apart from some corner cases), and one in which it pretty much is entirely irrelevant namely the purely subjective, inner, personal experience. There's not much debate about these two. Even for the acolyte of Scientism it is clear; science applies beautifully to the objective; the subjective should be ignored or dismissed as unreal or unimportant.

It is when we come to inter-subjective social reality that there is some dispute, and it is here where science is frequently applied without due care as to whether it is the correct tool. The position of Scientism in this case is a belief in the universal applicability of science to the inter-subjective; it therefore unquestioningly assumes, in effect, that the metaphor of scientist, map and territory holds. However, it is important to bear in mind that the simplified case of separation between scientist, map and territory is the minority situation, because all inter-subjective reality is ultimately co-created, through language, negotiation and, in general, many complex social processes. Here both territory and map are created collectively by the scientists, and the map is part of the territory.

When a map is developed for objective reality, eg, 'tree', there is no sense in which trees are created through this process. But when we create a map with respect to the territory of the inter-subjective, eg, 'racist', we do in some very real sense *create* racists (the cultural artefacts, not the physical persons), because the inter-subjective is at the same time created through this act, because the map is part of the territory. The culture (territory) has been changed, so that it now includes an artefact that was not there before (the territory contains a new map). But as stated above, what we're really seeing here is a failure of fit regarding the metaphor. A basic premise of science fails here: the scientist is both observing *and creating* the reality. In fact, unlike 'tree' versus material reality, we are operating in a space where everything has been created through the process of focussing on it, naming it, etc (collectively and over time). In general, it's not possible to alter the focus of what is being considered in the inter-subjective sphere without altering the territory itself as well.

So, by default, science doesn't fit or work in the inter-subjective, except in those cases where its assumption that the map and territory are distinct is an adequate simplification. In general, having created a cultural artefact, eg 'racist' it is then a meaningless activity, and a circular argument, to seek empirical validation of its cultural existence, as per the scientific method. The problem is not one of empirical validation of a map with respect to physical material reality, or even inter-subjective/cultural reality, but rather one of whether the cultural artefact of 'racist' should or should not be created, or how it should be constituted, etc — problems best tackled with an entirely different toolkit. This situation is at least as much about creation as it is about observation or validation.

Thus the inter-subjective is a domain in which by default science should be assumed to be the wrong tool for the job. There are exceptions, but these are where it has been established clearly that the case is an approximation of the

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latter description to be remotely useful one needs to know a lot about neuroanatomy and neurochemistry and even then it fails to speak to the experience.

objective domain of physical, material reality, and the scientist-map-territory metaphor holds. But sadly — perhaps just due to envy of the impressive results science has achieved in the domain of physical, material reality — there is a tendency to apply science to the inter-subjective, without due consideration of whether the fit is correct, ie, by first asking whether the scientist-map-territory metaphor is even an adequate approximation.

Where does all this leave us? Bereft, perhaps if ones religion is Scientism. It raises the question of what do we do instead of science in those domains where it doesn't fit; perhaps we fear that there is no credible alternative. But of course there is; we use the tools that do fit there, from the humanities, arts etc, even if some have become a bit rusty through neglect. For example the field of phenomenology exists precisely to wrestle with the subjective and inter-subjective effectively. It does so especially in the place where science is the wrong tool for the job, and the metaphor breaks down; specifically in the case where the scientist can't effectively remain adequately independent of map and territory. There are plenty of other tools that are well considered and long tested; we will need to avoid any temptation to write them off as 'unscientific' (which they are, but it's no bad thing). And there is nothing stopping us developing new tools. It behoves us to take a careful look at the toolkit we have to work with, without being distracted by the very shiny tool of science, as if it is somehow better, best, special, universal (or any other inappropriate value judgement) rather than simply asking: does it fit here and does it work?

In the end this is really an argument against Scientism — the belief that science is a tool that is universally applicable to the human condition, and the notion that it is somehow our 'best' tool. Although it works very well in the limited domain of human experience in which it is capable of operating, it fits really well in only one of three aspects of our experience — the objective, physical, material bit. It has little utility or fit with the subjective, and should only be applied to the inter-subjective in those cases where it can be confirmed that it fits. The inter-subjective is the one in which most care should be exercised, because it's the most ambiguous. We must also not be seduced by any notion that science is somehow privileged over other tools, despite our current cultural values elevating this perspective to the status of an ideal, notwithstanding the impressive range of outcomes it has been able to achieve within the domain where it works best.

The problem here is more serious than simply the risk of getting poor results in some domain of concern in which we wish to see a positive result. Limiting our toolkit to the single tool of the scientific method limits what we are able to perceive in a very dangerous fashion. In particular, it ignores all the important relationships that may be operating between scientist, map and territory, wherever this analogy with science breaks down. It blinds us to the social co-creation of inter-subjective reality. And it hides from us the fact that science is a social activity itself — situated in the inter-subjective social sphere — where it also constitutes a means of creating social reality (most obviously within the scientific community, but also for society at large). Being blind to what is going on regarding the social construction of reality means we lack any means to direct, discuss or adjust this consciously.

Likewise, Scientism's dismissal of the importance or reality of the domain of study we call ethics, is a reason we instead leave ourselves in the control of more random (or even insidious) factors such as market forces. Instead, a more accurate perspective is to see science as just one tool within the broader frame of human experience, including objective, subjective and inter-subjective reality, ie, an over-arching framework of experience that science is simply unable to speak to in its entirety, or even partly. The rightful place of science is therefore subordinate to this larger reality in which there are other tools of importance, in particular the neglected field of study of ethics.

If we fail to position the scientific method correctly within the overall scheme of things, and instead make the mistake of expecting it to be the one tool to rule them all, we will inevitably be faced with a juggernaut of technological 'progress' that seems hopelessly outside our social control. And we will be blind as to what we choose to create as our social, inter-subjective reality, and how or why this happens. It is the responsibility of a species in command of such a powerful tool for analysis and manipulation of the physical, material world, to subordinate its use to well considered ends, consciously and deliberately within the broader framework of human experience and culture. I believe we are doing a pretty bad job of that, right now.

The problems I describe above are playing out all around us. They relate to the unconscious creation of the inter-subjective that is our broader social sphere, as well as the application of science and technology in an ethical vacuum. Climate change appears to be just one such example; another is reaching our planet's environmental limits. And we have allowed neoliberal capitalism to fill the void that results because we have been blind to more useful means of constructing social relations. The blindness that results from Scientism is easily exploited by those with a desire to use others without compassion, motivated primarily by greed.

Many of our major concerns as a species can be explained by us having unconsciously adopted Scientism as the unofficial religion of our culture. It is held dear by many intelligent and educated people. Ironically, Scientism is the very perspective most likely to be pejorative towards religion, especially that of a fundamentalist nature (ie, scientism is a religion that is closed to matters it refuses to see), yet it is possibly the most insidious, least noticed and most dangerous fundamentalist religion of all.

However the situation is far from hopeless. In the end, it is simply a matter of applying the right tool for the job.

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Review

**The Sea Of Faith — The Quest Goes On  
(a Video by Empathy Media)  
and  
Is the Sea of Faith Rising?  
(ABC Radio National The Spirit of Things Sunday 26  
November 2017)**

*For the video, follow the link on the SoFiA Facebook page, or search the web (try the search string 'Vimeo Sea Of Faith'). For the radio program, visit the ABC website or search the web (try the search string 'ABC Sea of Faith Rising').*

*The Sea Of Faith — The Quest Goes On* combines footage from the original 1984 *Sea of Faith* TV series with recent interviews. Over this time-span we see Don Cuppitt develop from young unorthodox TV presenter to measured iconoclastic oracle. And we see the UK Sea of Faith develop into a mature organisation.

In *Is the Sea of Faith Rising?* ABC Radio National presenter Rachael Kohn attends the New Zealand Sea of Faith Conference where she interviews 99 year-old 'heretic' Lloyd Geering, and SoF members Margaret Rushbrook and Patricia Crompton. Rachael Kohn also interviews Hal Taussig, another presenter at the conference.

Between them, these two programs provide a useful introduction to The Sea of Faith movement and its objective of providing a safe place for exploring meaning and faith.

There's a question mark at the end of *Is the Sea of Faith Rising?* Perhaps there is also an implied question mark at the end of *The Quest Goes On*. Asked "Will The Sea of Faith continue?" Margaret Rushbrook replies "Different groups have a life and they serve a need, then as long as it serves a need it will last."

I wonder, will these programs bring The Sea of Faith to the attention of people who are looking for a space in which to explore meaning and faith? I hope so.

I'd welcome longer reviews and a range of responses. Please send your thoughts to Robin Ford, Editor *SoFiA Bulletin* at [robinford@a1.com.au](mailto:robinford@a1.com.au).

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Notices

**Membership Application/Renewal**

If you would like to join (or renew), subscriptions are \$20.00 for ten years' membership. See page 16 for forms (if you need them - many renewals won't) and what to do.

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**Regular Items**

***Digitalia***

*The Editor's review of activity on the SoFiA website, the SoFiAblog, Facebook and sofiatalk. See the SoFiA website [www.sof-in-australia.org](http://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](http://www.sof-in-australia.org) : I've chosen this item from *The Guardian*, Australia, 30 November 2017 firstly because I wanted something to represent the progress of the same-sex marriage bill, and secondly because the title includes 'backflip', a term I have been intrigued by. After a backflip you face the same way that you were facing when you started (unless you add a half twist). So where's the problem? Is 'U-turn' the metaphor they are seeking?

**Malcolm Turnbull backflips on religious protections in same-sex marriage bill** Malcolm Turnbull has revealed he will support at least two amendments to the Senate's same-sex marriage bill to guarantee that charities will not be affected and to allow civil celebrants to refuse to solemnise weddings.

SoFiA blog at [www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php](http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php) (also accessible from the website): Webmaster Greg Spearritt encourages readers to view *The Sea of Faith — The Quest Goes On*. He writes: What is the Sea of Faith? Where is the movement going? For a UK perspective with extensive reference to the original Sea of Faith BBC series, check out **The Sea of Faith – The Quest Goes On**.

Facebook Sea of Faith in Australia: As well as comments on *The Sea Of Faith — The Quest Goes On* and *Is The Sea Of Faith Rising?* there are postings on the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill in the Victorian parliament, and many other topics — a busy period for the SoFiA Facebook page.

Sofiatalk No new postings.

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**Announcement**

**Contributing to the SoFiA Facebook Page**

Jim Norman

My role as the administrator of this group is mainly to manage membership issues. It is not really my role to provide you with a stream of news items; that is for you as members.

It all depends on your level of experience with Facebook, but most of you should know that you can be reading an interesting article on a website and you may see the Facebook symbol. Sometimes this can be a 'Like' symbol but mostly it is an invitation to 'Share' the article.

If you click on the 'F' symbol you will usually open a small web page (dialogue box) or a new tab on your web browser. At this point Facebook anticipates that users will be posting the link to their personal 'Timeline', but if you click on the arrow at the edge of the 'Share on Your Timeline' box you will be presented with another menu where you can choose other options: Share on a Friend's Timeline; Share in a Group; Share in an Event; Share on a Page You Manage; and Share in a Private Message.

In order to post to the Sea of Faith in Australia Group, intuitively, you would select the third option. You then type the name of the Group. For me it is only necessary to type 'S' for 'Sea of Faith in Australia' to appear at the top of the list of options. I select the Group name and then type a brief message to introduce the item I am sharing.

As members of the Group you are free to post items that you feel are appropriate to share. (I guess if I were a real interventionist I could set things up so that I had to pre-approve posts but that's not really my style.)

I don't tend to indulge in online debates — just not that interested (having been burnt a few times in the past) — but feel free to engage with one another respectfully as you wish.

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## Regular Items

# Science & Religion

*The intersect between religion and science seems to be one of perpetual interest. In this column, Greg Spearritt draws attention to recent scientific research that may have implications for our understanding of religion, or for religious belief and practice.*

## Spare the rod

Scientists have found that physical abuse was associated with decreases in children's cognitive performance, while non-abusive forms of physical punishment were independently associated with reduced school engagement and increased peer isolation.

Web reference:

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/09/170929152212.htm>

## More than just clean living?

The first genetic mutation that appears to protect against multiple aspects of biological aging in humans has been discovered in an extended family of Old Order Amish living in the vicinity of Berne, Indiana, report scientists.

Web reference:

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/11/171115152727.htm>

## Were the cathedral builders onto something?

Studies have shown that long-term episodic memories are processed in the same part of the brain that is used for spatial navigation and place recognition. Thus "the environments we inhabit shape who we are".

Web reference: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-07/how-architecture-shapes-your-identity-and-your-brain/9107586> Head or heart?

Are you a head person or a heart person? Research on where people think their 'self' is located shows up interesting results.

Web reference:

<http://www.sbs.com.au/topics/science/humans/article/2016/11/16/are-you-head-person-or-heart-person>

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### In the Gaps

I recently encountered a new word on ABC Radio National.

*Petrichor* describes the smell of parched land just after rain has fallen. Two CSIRO researchers constructed it from Greek roots.

We definitely need a word to describe this glorious fragrance, but might Aboriginal Australians already have had one?

Robin Ford

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

21 December 2017

John Power ([Archetypal Spirituality](#))

*Beyond Liberalism: The Return of Archetypal Spirituality.*

15 February 2018

Nicholas Coleman ([The Interfaith Centre](#))

*Oneness as a Spiritual Alternative to Supernaturalism.*

15 March 2018

John Noack ([Carl Jung Society](#))

*What sort of Messiah was Jesus Christ?*

Postlude

## **Christmas Days 12 Stories and 12 Feasts for 12 Days by Jeanette Winterson**

*Reviewed by Lyndell Ford through comments to a book club and reflections over breakfast*

### **From an email to a book club:**

A seasonal book to dip into. I really enjoyed her reflections and have read them several times. The stories vary but did not hold my attention as much as her reflections; the recipes are fun to read with the many asides.

### **From a breakfast conversation**

Jeanette Winterson was born in England and married an American (of Jewish heritage), so this is a Northern Hemisphere setting.

The first chapter reviews the previous festivals that Christmas is based upon. Then there is the first story. The stories are sometimes ghost stories, sometimes whimsical stories. For me, some work and some don't. After each story comes a recipe. There's always a story with the recipe, and often more reflection.

I found the book worked. Although the stories didn't always make it, I found the reflections very thought-provoking, particularly the idea that Christmas was a time for deep reflection.

In one of her reflections she wants to acknowledge problems with her adoptive mother. This means more to me because I have read her book *Oranges are not the only fruit*, in which she describes her difficult up-bringing.

You can start anywhere in the book. I haven't finished it yet, perhaps because, although I wouldn't read the stories again, I have re-read many of the reflections. With the right company it might open up some good conversation.

In one reflection she speaks of reconciliation of our past among family and friends. She doesn't expect reconciliation to be perfect; she doesn't expect restored bonds. She expects a compromise that might mean acceptance — and even forgiveness. Although you can't rewrite the past, you can rewrite the ending.

She says the things she regrets in her life are not errors of judgement but failures of feeling. The holiday period often has stories about failures of feeling; I hope to avoid them.

Merry Christmas.

Epilogue

## Elegy For Coal Power

### (Ready For When Coal Power Finally Retires)

*"Over the breakfast table, Lyndell said 'We need an elegy for coal.'"  
so Robin Ford wrote one.*

Back then we had two sections in our shed.  
One was for coke, the other was for coal.  
I'd watch the coal-man fill them from the sacks  
He tipped from over his shoulder, one by one.  
In winter, home from school through pea-soup fog  
I'd warm myself, and if the fire was coal  
I'd watch the hissing flames that danced and spluttered  
As gas escaped from fissures in the rock.  
These flames, though full of life, brought early death  
To Londoners who struggled to draw breath.

To visit my dad's parents took a day —  
A bus to London's Underground and then  
A red electric train to King's Cross Station,  
Where hissing express locos brought their trains  
From distant towns, and willing shunters bustled.  
All these were pow'ered by coal; so too the plain  
Tank locomotive that would haul our carriages.  
No wonder sunlight struggled to get through  
The glass roof panels — dust accreted there  
A witness to what hovered all around us.  
Our visit over, making our return  
And standing on the dim-lit station platform,  
I'd watch our train appearing through the night,  
Its driver's cab aglow with furnace light.

Is coal a demon? It has served us well,  
Though what it served came always at a cost  
In lives of miners, cruelly cut short  
By accident, or else by chronic illness.  
One high school break I visited a mine.  
We put on overalls, and belt, and hat,  
And miner's lamp, and heavy battery.  
And from a numbered hook each took a tag  
In case we might encounter misadventure.  
By miner's cage, we dropped, and reached a place  
Where men hewed coal with well-struck pick-axe blows.  
I can't recall, was this how coal was won?  
Or were they making space for a machine?  
In either case a high risk occupation.  
They stayed below and worked, but as for me —  
Back on the surface, I had morning tea.

While reading once, a captioned photo told  
How 'coaling ship' required all hands to carry  
Numerous bags of coal to fill the bunkers,  
Where later, men with shovels fed the fires  
That made the steam to drive a battleship.  
I marvelled at this feat of human toil:  
The old book said, "The modern way is oil."

We knew that on these tracks once hurried North  
The proud *Elizabethan*, A4-hauled  
Non-stop, 400 miles, from tired Kings Cross  
To Edinburgh's far sophistication.  
We'd cycle home from school and reach the bridge  
And wait there for the diesel prototype,  
Whose lairy blue-gold paint bespoke a challenge.  
In time, its offspring hauled the top expresses  
While clanking, worn A4 steam locos passed,  
Unkempt, in charge of lowly un-braked wagons.  
Yes, this was change with two sides to the coin —  
Effective and efficient: the obverse,  
While strangely melancholic: the reverse.

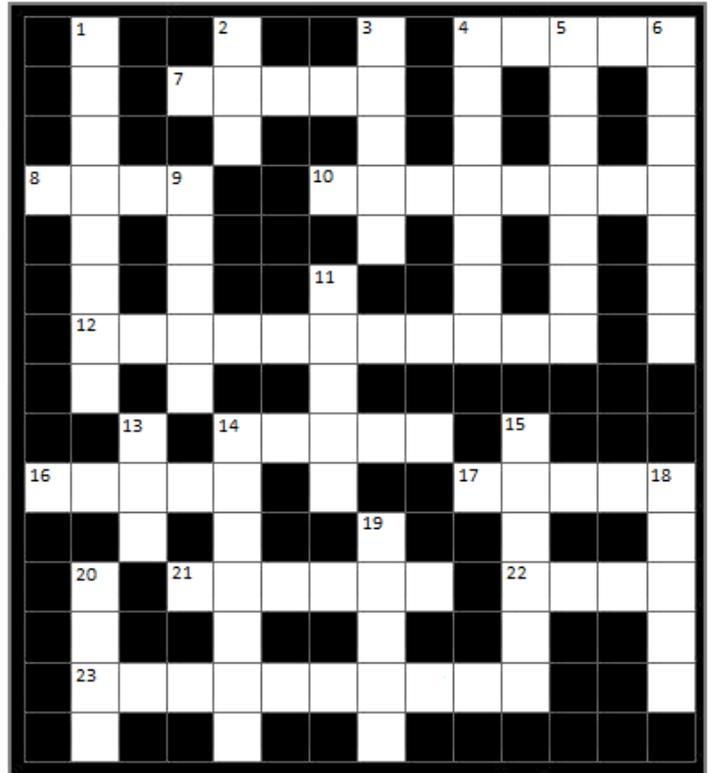
Beside a road, when young, I wondered, "Where  
Do cars' exhausts, and smoke from bonfires go?"  
Now science clearly shows, or so it's said,  
That humankind has found a limit which,  
For us to prosper, we must keep within.  
"Not so" say the opponents (they mistrust  
The work of experts). "Coal must hold this fort",  
They fear, "or electricity become  
Another battle won by new inventions."  
Tilting at windmills; blinded by the sun:  
The final fight for coal pow'r has begun.

Throughout the ages coal pow'r underpinned  
Our ways of life, some formed by coal's disruptions.  
But now coal has itself become disrupted  
By new ideas whose time has just begun.  
An elegy? Before coal pow'r has ended?  
Yes. Surely, it will soon be pensioned off  
To show, in cool museums, what was learnt  
Through sev'ral hundred years of faithful service.  
When that day comes, this is the tale I'll tell:  
"Though at a cost, coal power served us well."

**SoFiA Crossword #31**



**SoFiA Crossword #32** Prepared by Greg Spearritt



Religions: Miscellaneous facts

**Across**

- 4. Wife from well-known and spectacularly unfortunate Seventh Day Adventist couple
- 7. Teacher
- 8. Major deity of the Olympian pantheon
- 10. Priest-in-training
- 12. Wonder-worker
- 14. Song of praise
- 16. Love
- 17. Symbol of purity (Buddhism)
- 21. Sacred sound
- 22. Defer this at the risk of a sick heart (Prov. 13:12)
- 23. Prophecy at your door

**Down**

- 1. Revere
- 2. Son of Noah
- 3. Liturgical headdress
- 4. Son of the morning
- 5. Customary greeting accompanied by a slight bow and hands pressed together (Hinduism)
- 6. Language of East European Jews
- 9. Hebrew patriarch's wife
- 11. Sitting meditation (Buddhism)
- 13. Pilgrimage to Mecca
- 14. Sacrament of confession and absolution
- 15. Fit for ritual use
- 18. World of the dead
- 19. The cosmic hunter who pursued Pleiades and was slain by Artmeis
- 20. The Tetragrammaton

**Editor's crib sheet**  
 When I check the crossword (a task I enjoy) I see how much I can do unaided, then I hit the web.  
 This *Bulletin's* puzzle was particular fun. I learnt some surprising new words but even using the web, I had to free up my mind to discover some of them. *If you want to do it all by yourself, then read no further, but if you'd like some oblique angles on Greg Spearritt's clues, try these.*  
 12A A fantastic word if you want to flummox someone. It's from the Latin (my search methods took a while to find it, but got there in the end).  
 14A Not the first word that seemed to fit (Latin/Greek). I got it while finding 11D.

23A This took forever. I got the word once I found 14D, 19D and 20D. In retrospect it was obvious! (my web searching was no help)  
 4D A lovely surprise (from Greek)  
 11D The web found this word, but because I got 14A wrong at first, I couldn't pick it.  
 18D The second word I thought of.  
 20D A fabulous new concept, and another word to drop into a conversation (the web got it ok).

## 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** 3rd 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 (donations towards printing costs are welcome).

*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.....