



Sea of Faith

Sea of Faith Network in Australia

BULLETIN

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2017



photo Robin Ford

Thredbo Trail at Christmas Tide
Snowy Mountains, NSW

The SOFIA website and archive of articles: www.sof-in-australia.org
The SoFiA blog at: www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php

E X P L O R E
religion faith meaning

EDITORIAL

This *Bulletin* is 24 pages! An abundance of riches. Maybe I should have considered the lilies of the field earlier — they don't worry about the future, yet still end up looking good.

On the next page I've written an addendum to *Paper Bulletins And The New Fee Structure* (*Bulletin* November/December 2016). I've had a few comments along the lines of "Because of the cost of the paper *Bulletin*, I'll take the email version, but that probably means I'm less likely to read it." To your editor, that's an problematic unintended consequence of the new fee structure. On the next page I have a proposition to fix this.

What's this edition like? There's a feature on charitable giving, several items on how SoFiA might develop (including a letter from Don Cupitt who rather poignantly would like more young people to follow up his ideas),

a book review, and other assorted items, including some that round off the Christmas season. There is a preliminary announcement for the Mini-Conference in June 2017 (the SoFiA AGM will be held on the same day), and details of the ever-popular *Between the writer and the Reader* (returning for, yes, it's 5th manifestation)

This *Bulletin* looks like a good read to me; I hope you'll enjoy it.

I started this Editorial with the thought that I should consider the lilies of the field and just wait for new articles to come flooding in. Others might say "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition", so as usual I'll encourage you to write about whatever is on your mind and send it to me at the email address below.

Robin Ford

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SoFiA *Bulletin* is produced every two months
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Views expressed are those of each author and not necessarily those of the Editor or SoFiA.
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Management

Membership Application/Renewal

January 2017 has come and it's time to renew your membership. Thank you to all those who have already paid.

The new fee structure is a fantastic deal — \$20.00 will give you membership for ten years.

Details are on the back page. That announcement is reproduced below; but go to the back page for forms and payment options.

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

From January 2017 SoFiA will have a single membership category.

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

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

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

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

Management

Paper Bulletins And The New Fee Structure — Addendum

As the Bulletin Editor I want to encourage readership. So don't be reticent about asking for the paper version of the Bulletin if that means you are more likely to read it.

The standard method for delivering the *Bulletin* is by email attachment. 57% of members receive it this way. You might like to consider changing to this method — it gives you colour! But please consider whether this change would make you less likely to read the *Bulletin*.

As described in the November/December 2017 *Bulletin*, paper *Bulletins* are available on request, and if you currently receive paper *Bulletins* this will continue. To minimise administrative effort there is no charge for this service, however, SoFiA does incur expenses in the process. You might like to make a donation towards these expenses; if so, you might like to know that typical costs are:

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

A 16 page issue is approximately 30 cents a page, delivered to your mailbox. It's a good deal.

1. If you are going to read most of the *Bulletin* and prefer to do so in hard copy, then why not let us print it for you?
Each year I will put out a reminder notice asking for donations to offset the cost of paper copies, but your paper copy will arrive whether or not you donate.
2. If you might read just part of the *Bulletin* and you have a printer, then you could get the email version and print off those articles that appeal to you.
3. If you are happy to read The *Bulletin* off the screen, then of course you'll be fine with the email version.

So, choose the option that will help you get the most from the wide ranging articles and news items that the *Bulletin* supplies.

Announcements

Preliminary Information

2017 AGM and Mini-Conference

Saturday 10 June 2017

South Bank, Brisbane

Following last year's successful pattern, the 2017 AGM will be held in conjunction with a one day Mini-Conference. Date, time and venue as above. The topic for the Mini-Conference will be:

Ecology In The City: A Case Study

Major development projects, whether City or Country, usually raise issues – political, economic, social and ethical – that can lead to major conflicts amongst stake-holders. These conflicts affect the whole nation.

The massive Queens Wharf Development Project in Brisbane's CBD is a case in point. The battle-lines are drawn.

On the positive side, it promises jobs, profits and valuable community facilities – in this case, a huge new casino, luxury hotels and dramatic public spaces.

On the negative side are fears of wasted resources, pollution, destroyed heritage, disruption of traffic and increased crime; there does not seem to be much in it for ordinary Australians except low-level service jobs.

Mini-Conference participants will observe the site, then participate in two sessions of short presentations and discussion.

The March/April *SoFiA Bulletin* will provide further details. In the meantime, mark the date in your diary. And why not check out some of the hundreds of web-sites devoted to the project. You will find contributions from the three main categories of interested parties: the consortium undertaking the project; the Queensland Government; and various community organisations.

Announcements

Between the Writer & the Reader 5

With Maurice Whelan

Saturday 4th March 2017

8:30am to 4:00pm

In times of uncertainty it is good to return to Shakespeare. Fear dulls the mind and anxiety dulls the imagination. Shakespeare was a great playwright and an even greater poet. We need to observe his capacity to dramatise the human condition. We need his poetic voice to articulate our fear, our anxiety and our hope.

Following a viewing of *Richard II* Maurice Whelan will present his paper

Seeing Things

Which will explore some psychological aspects of globalisation post 2016:— what gets in the way; how, when obstacles present themselves in the external world, our first port of call is located in the inner world; the need to think big and think small; to find our voice; to regain and enrich our imagination, and to recover our capacity to think. He will underline how, as in *Richard II*, wisdom and understanding can be found in the most unlikely of places.

'If we understand our own minds, and things that are striving to utter themselves through our minds, we move others, not because we have thought about those others, but because all life has the same root.'

W.B. Yeats

Venue: The IndigiScapes Centre, 17 Runnymede Rd, Capalaba, Brisbane QLD

Cost: \$120 (\$55 concession); a few tickets are available for a small donation.

More information: piahirsch@icloud.com

judibore@bigpond.net.au

This event is sponsored by
the Australian Association of Group Psychotherapists

Point Of View

Charitable Giving

Being a tourist led Phil Roberts to question his approach to charitable giving. How should he respond? He needed a structure to base his decisions on. Here's what he came up with

Last year as a tourist I visited three countries, all with very different experiences of poverty and its alleviation. The countries concerned were Sri Lanka, France, and United Arab Emirates. My time in each was limited and my experiences were correspondingly superficial, but in each case I felt not only saddened by what

I saw but helpless and frustrated. I came away with a burning need to review my own thoughts and practice on charitable giving, realising that though I've been "doing it" for a long time, my approach has been pretty haphazard.

Sri Lanka is self-evidently a country with a poverty problem: for example, it's not long

before one becomes aware of Colombo's slums. Somewhat surprisingly, however, I did not feel overwhelmed by begging. More chastening was the experience of entering the dwelling of a friend, a young man who shares a room with another – a room with just the two beds, a small table and (the big luxury) a fan. France was different altogether, for beggars on the footpaths of Paris were a depressingly frequent occurrence, and these beggars were routinely ignored by their compatriots. In a bizarre twist, I found a row of dossers' tents all along one side of the Montparnasse cemetery. With winter approaching it was heart-wrenching to see small families living outdoors on the street or in parks. Dubai in contrast seemed to have its poverty well hidden – poverty in that country is kept well under wraps – but there was a small group of park dwellers that I spotted in one of the wealthiest residential areas, undercutting the official image of that super-rich society. As always, expectations are a big factor in poverty. Just as we distinguish between absolute poverty and relative poverty and differing percentages below the poverty line, so we are most struck by the presence of stark poverty in countries which are the richest and supposedly the best developed in terms of social security and welfare.

That's the background to this article, where my purpose is to explore the options for individual giving in modern times. There have been various standards before, such as the rule of the Good Samaritan and the rule of tithing, but what can and should each of us do now? My discussion does not include personal giving – giving to family or friends – even when these people may be charity basket cases in themselves. Nor does it include other types of giving, like support for buskers.

Why give at all?

We give in order to make the world a better place. This is the one fundamental principle of giving. A related principle is that of equality, out of which comes fairness. A Christian view of this is explored in a 2011 article by Marg Mowczko entitled *Equality' in Paul's Letters*

(<http://newlife.id.au/christian-living/equality-in-pauls-letters/>). In summary, her position is that Christians in advantageous situations and influential positions today have an obligation to help those who are disadvantaged so that we can progress towards the Kingdom ideal of equality for all people.

Giving can also arise out of negative emotions like guilt and fear. However, we should not give because we would feel guilty if we did not. Likewise we should not give (or refuse to give) because we are afraid – afraid, for example, of social pressure to conform with what other people are doing.

Giving should be planned

Giving is like any other worthwhile human activity; admirable when spontaneous but better when planned. The field is wide and there are many factors to take into account. Indeed it is probably for this reason that many of us proceed in a largely ad hoc manner.

In each situation we should ask ourselves:

- how great is the need?
- what is our capacity and willingness to give?
- what are the available alternatives?
- what weight if any should be given to circumstances? This includes how our aid is sought, when and where does the need present itself, and so on.

Need requires us to make essentially two assessments: 1. which types of need we are prepared to meet, and then 2. in each instance how great is the need. These are macro and micro judgements.

Capacity and willingness to give likewise involves macro and micro judgements. Firstly there is the overall quantum of our giving, then the quantum we can afford in each instance.

The *available alternatives* relate firstly to our own giving: major giving, minor giving and decisions not to give at all. Secondly there are non-monetary forms of charity which we might be able to give. Thirdly, there are alternative sources of relief from other people and issues of what is most appropriate in each situation.

Circumstances are many and varied and begin with the way a need presents itself – whether there is a specific request and how that request is framed, and so on. Requests out of the blue, outside the scope of our normal planned giving, fit under this heading. Part and parcel of the circumstances are also the emotions we feel when we give or are asked to give.

John Spong has the memorable and wonderfully challenging phrase “to love wastefully”, and notionally this can be extended to giving with extreme, almost unbounded generosity. However, in a world where we have to deal with the finite, beginning with our own perceptions of need and our own capacities to help, this ideal has to be anchored by a lot of practical considerations. One of these considerations is the necessity to plan not only for the immediate and the obvious but also for the unexpected, such as disasters or encounters with needy people in places away from home, including other developed countries.

Identifying and assessing need

A good foundation principle is that giving should be in response to need and proportionate to that need. An individual donor may have reason to favour one need over another, but collectively the greatest amounts should go to those who have least – least food, shelter, security, sanitation, means of self-care and so on. If a donor has no greater priority, the default should be in this direction, giving first to the poorest of the poor.

When assessing need we should distinguish between the absolute and relative. Absolute poverty is more dire than relative poverty, though relative poverty is no less real and may be just as painful. People in absolute poverty deserve our support first, but where do we set our benchmark, and how do we locate individual cases in relation to this benchmark? Those of us who live simply, maybe without a computer or car or TV, may say that these are non-essentials, but in the modern world that is arguably no longer the case. So, we have to be constantly aware of shifting standards and

possible personal bias in relation to these standards.

Assessing need is always difficult, simply because we don't have all the facts. Appearances alone are not enough. Some people may look clean and well-dressed but be dirt poor; others may be overweight but also poor. Unless we have deep personal knowledge of a case, we cannot know the full truth about the many factors at work – the causal factors, the effects of one factor on another, the many possible remedies, and so on. In line with the principle of loving wastefully, or simple generosity of spirit, in cases of doubt we should err on the side of generosity, assuming that people who claim to be in need are doing so truthfully, with full knowledge of what is required to lift them out of this need.

To take this idea a step further, we may find in some instances there are fairly clear indications that the need is less than claimed or there are mitigating circumstances which make it not absolutely necessary for us to give. Each of us has the gift of reason and we should not be afraid to use it. We may be making a mistake when we make this sort of assessment, but if we do so in good faith with whatever information is available to us at the time, ethically we remain on firm ground. If we are wrong, this is regrettable but part of the imperfection of being human.

Another question that inevitably arises when we are assessing need is whether the people concerned are able and willing to do better by themselves without our help. Again we cannot know and it can be unwise and unfair to rush into judgements based on our own prejudices and our own necessarily limited personal experience. Our giving should recognise but not be confined to the principle of helping people to help themselves. We should of course expect people to do precisely that, but there are others who are incapable of self-help, and they should not be neglected simply because they can't make a return on what we might call our giving 'investment'. For people who are able to help themselves, we should give up to the point where that can occur.

Capacity and willingness to give

The quantum that we give overall is a matter of personal choice, guided by our values, means and circumstances. There is no perfect rule. Tithing was once seen as such, but we might just well say we should give half our fortune and leave only half for ourselves. We each have to decide:

- how much we need to maintain ourselves at optimum level, now and in the future, and therefore how much discretionary money we have
- how much the act of giving is an essential part of our make-up
- what other forms of giving are available to us.

Once we have decided how much overall we can afford to give, we have to go through certain routines to decide who gets what. This depends first on our assessment of need (discussed above), our personal priorities as to which kind of person we should favour most, the most suitable type of gift we can give, and the method of making this gift.

Available alternatives I: Deciding to give, and how much

How do we decide the right amount to give and the method and frequency of giving?

Quantum of gift We can distinguish between major giving, minor giving, and non-giving. Major giving means large amounts, either one-off or once in a while or spread over a period to ensure some continuity of sustenance. Minor giving means small amounts, generally occurring only once. Non-giving means a conscious decision not to give.

Most suitable type of gift As stated earlier, giving can take different forms, typically money or labour (which also means time). Labour can be at different levels: advocacy, skills development (teaching or tutoring), correspondence (writing letters or filling out forms), companionship (shopping or in hospital or at Centrelink or at home), home help, driving, and so on. Sometimes we may choose just to give information or a kind word or a smile. Probably

the most personally satisfying approach is to employ a mix of these methods, however as always this is entirely a personal choice.

Advocacy is an especially powerful form of giving, for here we are encouraging other people to give, and there is thus a multiplier effect. This is enhanced when we are able to cite personal experience, such as the transformation of individual lives as a result of giving, especially when we ourselves have been a donor.

Method and timing of giving In cases where we choose to help a whole class of people or a large social group, it makes sense to give through charitable organisations. This can be contaminated by market factors, for the brutal truth is that there are charities in competition with each other, and we as outsiders have trouble knowing which are the most efficient and effective. The sensible and indeed moral thing to do in such cases is to carry out some basic research and see which organisations have the best reputation.

Linked with institutional giving is repeat giving, or giving regularly to a particular cause so as to help ensure a regular income. This recognises that need is continuous and that, while we might want to spread our giving widely in order to benefit more, effectiveness is maximised when we pick a worthy target and give in a sustained way.

An alternative possibility is delayed giving, where the delay enables the giver to give more but at a time that better suits him or her. The reverse is an immediate and substantial but one-off gift, which in a sense gets the recipient off the donor's 'list' and frees that donor up to attend to other worthy causes.

Available alternatives II: Deciding not to give

An ethical and sensitive person is bound to feel pain or at least disquiet when turning down a request for aid. At such times we need to review our decision and deal with our state of mind. In summary the decision not to give will be based on perceived need and practicality of some kind. The practicality will most likely have to do with things such as our own self-imposed limits on

giving, efficacy, and the existence of better alternatives.

There are situations where clearly it would be wrong or foolish for us to give. Most obviously these are:

- the need is small, or small in comparison with the needs of others
- there is untruthfulness in the request, either in the way the need is represented or the way in which money received is used (nothing kills charity so fast as falsehood)
- someone else is better placed to give.

Nothing further needs to be said on relative need, for this has been addressed above. However, the other disincentives to giving need further amplification.

Giving would be wasted In a world where there is so much need, it makes no sense to be giving merely to have the gift wasted or be ineffective. Past errors by a potential recipient are not necessarily a reason not to give – we all have a past we regret – but a fear that this would happen, *if well founded*, is indeed a legitimate reason to say "no".

It is not uncommon experience to make a gift then discover afterwards that we have been wrong – that people have wasted the money, or they are stuck in a pattern of behaviour that is only exacerbated by having more money. In these cases we can try to alter the nature of our giving, for example we might suggest counselling, or we can simply call a halt saying that there are many people in need and we now have to move on and help some of those others.

A variation on this theme is the reasonable suspicion that giving would breed an unhealthy dependency on charity. This is a difficult call to make because we can never be certain what might happen in the future, however patterns of past behaviour – if we know these patterns – are a reasonable guide. Governments routinely make this sort of judgement in their administration of social welfare programmes and, as we all know, often make mistakes and are unduly harsh. Charities are then put into the role of compensating for the failings of the state. We as

individuals may or may not draw the same conclusions.

Another aspect of waste is the failure of organisations, including charities, to administer their affairs properly. This may be inefficiency leading to ineffectiveness, or it may be corruption – either way, the result is the same. Continual propping up of such organisations not only achieves nothing, but it also does actual harm and should be stopped.

Someone else is better placed to give "Not my responsibility" is increasingly, in this ever more complex world, a line that is used to justify refusal to give, and this is possibly the argument that is most contentious. In any situation on this Earth, who *is* responsible? States have been created, with governments which supposedly take the lead in these matters, and within states there is devolution of responsibility to non-government organisations, but we cannot pretend that these arrangements are always effective. Sometimes they are ineffective because there is clear dereliction of duty, as in the case of repressive governments or corrupt organisations; sometimes there are simply not the resources. Turning our back on these situations and walking away from the needy people affected achieves nothing. Not only this, but it is false to say that need occurring in another place is not our business, for the world is one, and the human race is one, whatever the ways in which we might be divided politically and culturally. At the same time, we may reasonably choose to direct the bulk of our giving close to home, perhaps on the grounds that we are the best placed to do so and that there are other people better placed to look after the needy who are far away.

Review and communication of the refusal If we decide not to give, we should consider the consequences of that decision. Will the person we refuse necessarily be condemned to death or intolerable or unreasonable suffering or deprivation as a result? If so, we should ask ourselves whether alternative beneficiaries of our charity really are the best choice. A related question is: if we leave to others the responsibility of providing for that person, will

those others step up to the mark? Again, our answer might lead us to change our mind.

Once we have considered the matter thoroughly, weighing up the options, we should have the courage of our convictions. Guilt should never enter the picture. We should clearly and calmly tell ourselves that:

- it is possible, with good reason, to say no
- there are ways of doing so, politely and with a smile, that will blunt the pain of refusal.

If an explanation is necessary, it can be “I’m helping in other ways” or “I have other priorities” or “I have considered the full spectrum of need and have other directions in which I prefer to direct my money.”

Circumstances and the emotions of giving

Each decision to give or not give is wrapped up in circumstances which may make the choice easier or harder. For example:

- the request may come directly from the person in need or through an agent or intermediary
- the request may be oral or written, addressed personally or to a wider audience
- there may be just one person asking for help, or many
- the request may relate to one’s own community or society or one somewhere else where there is perhaps less sense of personal responsibility;
- there may be other people better placed to give

- there may be no one better placed to give
- there may be only the one opportunity to give – that time and that place
- the request may come from someone who expects a lot and is vociferous and repeated in the asking
- there may be an “extra tug at the heartstrings” factor, such as a baby or a pet who constitutes an extra – and innocent – mouth to be fed
- the person asking may also be providing a service, e.g. selling *The Big Issue*.

At this point it is necessary to reiterate the principle that giving is all about making the world a better place. We should not give because we would feel guilty if we did not. Likewise we should not give (or refuse to give) out of fear, for example fear of social pressure to conform with what other people are doing.

Inevitably, giving or not giving carries some change in our emotional state, and the circumstances surrounding our decision can intensify this change. We need to recognise that this is so and to try to see the decision in its essence. The gift or non-gift is not *about* our feelings, and in a way it is not about the feelings of others either, though in each case the feelings are important. Rather, it is about the removal of need and associated suffering. If our decision can be said to take a step in that direction, then we have done some good.

Some rule-of-thumb responses might be:

The request comes directly from the person in need, not just an agent or intermediary.	Make your decision whether to give based on need, your capacity to pay, and the available alternatives. How you receive the request for help is irrelevant.
The request is oral and addressed personally, so that refusal is a little harder.	Make your decision whether to give based on need, your capacity to pay, and the available alternatives. How you receive the request for help is irrelevant.
There is not just one person asking for help but many.	If you give you will do so through an organisation because this should benefit more people.
The request is for someone somewhere else, in another community or state or country.	All people are equal and therefore deserve equal consideration. Some from elsewhere may have alternative providers upon whom you can rely.
There are likely to be other people better placed to give.	Make your decision whether to give based on need, your capacity to pay, and the available alternatives. In this situation you are likely to leave the giving to others.

There is no one better placed to give.	In this unlikely eventuality, make your decision, as always, based on need and capacity to pay, but with the probability that you will give to at least some degree.
There is only the one opportunity to give – here and now.	Make your decision whether to give based on need, your capacity to pay, and the available alternatives. The “here and now” factor is irrelevant.
The request is from someone who expects a lot and is vociferous and repeated in the asking.	Make your decision whether to give based on need, your capacity to pay, and the available alternatives. The 'noise' factor is irrelevant.
There is an “extra tug at the heartstrings” factor, like a baby or a pet who constitutes an extra – and innocent – mouth to be fed.	Make your decision whether to give based on need, your capacity to pay, and the available alternatives. The “extra tug at the heartstrings” factor is irrelevant.
The person asking is also providing a service, e.g. selling <i>The Big Issue</i> .	As always, make your decision whether to give based on need, your capacity to pay, and the available alternatives. However, this person is prepared to work for money and deserves credit for that. Giving may be for the service, if not for the charity.

Conclusion

Charitable giving is ethically and emotionally a minefield. It requires a person to have self-knowledge, to actively become aware of the many issues and alternatives involved, and then to be resolute, confident that when a decision has been made it can stand up to questioning,

including questioning from within – from one’s own “softer” self. Charity is not just a matter of warm and fuzzy kindness, for it is a conscious act of truth as well as love, a key element in the ongoing creativity of the world, making the life of this world gentler. Whether or not we are people of religious faith, this is an imperative for us all.

Point of view

Surfing The Sea Of Faith*

Robert (Stewart) Culbard describes how he found space for thought in the UK Sea of Faith

A couple of years ago I completed an online survey on the provision and presentation of the BBC. The survey had around eight sections exploring various aspects of the BBC's radio and television programming. The final section had to do with the personal details of those completing the survey and asked about the respondent's "Religion/belief". It listed an extensive range of religions with which to identify. I put myself into the "Other" category and wrote "Secular Humanist" in the appropriate box.

I avoided the "No Religion" category in the belief that, as with several categories, for example Buddhism, there was no requirement to suppose that religious/spiritual belief involved the acceptance of God or gods. Therefore, to

state that one is a "Secular Humanist" is to recognise belief in and acceptance of a philosophical and ethical position that could be termed "religious". The focus of belief and acceptance for a secular humanist is the human being — to touch the human is to touch the divine. This belief has profound implications and is a reflection on what Shakespeare said in Hamlet:

What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason; how infinite in faculty, the paragon of animals.

It is not, however, the purpose of this article to write a philosophical and ethical treatise on what it means to be a secular humanist. Rather, I want to overview one of the

several foci of my post-retirement being. Therefore, this article will explore some of the background to my becoming a secular humanist.

In 1991, following two years of working as the Manager for Domestic Programmes with World Vision UK, I was made redundant from this post. There followed several years of part-time youth ministry and general pastoral work in several Northampton schools and churches. In 1996 I completed post-graduate studies in education and became a teacher of the Humanities (specializing in Religious Studies and History) at Campion School, a Northamptonshire rural secondary school. At the same time, and at my request, I was removed (defrocked) from the Accredited List of Ministers with the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

My physical separation from the specialized urban ministry of the Christian Church and its charitable institutions was a quite sudden and unexpected phenomenon. The intellectual divorce was more of a gradual process. There is no doubt that my changed professional roles and responsibilities assisted this. So too was my link with a network known as the *Sea of Faith*.

I first became aware of this network in 1985, when a BBC television programme called the *Sea of Faith* was shown on Australian television. At around this time a book of the same name was published. I watched the television programme and bought the book. I have read this book more times than I have gone through the entire New Testament, it is the most read book on my bookshelf — secular or religious. Let part of an article in a recent edition of *Portholes*, the magazine of the British *Sea of Faith* network, describe its beginning:

Our organisation takes its name from the lines in the poem *Dover Beach* by Thomas Arnold in the nineteenth century in which he describes the slow decline of traditional religion as being like the ebbing tide. The movement started shortly after Don Cupitt's† 1984 ground-breaking TV series *The Sea of Faith* and his accompanying book, something of an intellectual tour de force with which he explains the historical development of Christianity that has led us to the present

situation, and the concept of 'religious non-realism'. Cupitt claimed that even after we have given up the idea that Christian beliefs can be grounded in anything beyond the human realm, Christianity can still be believed and practised in new ways.

†Dr Don Cupitt was a teacher of the philosophy of religion at the University of Cambridge and an ordained Anglican clergyman. He remains a Fellow of Emmanuel College Cambridge and the author of over fifty books

It is worthwhile pointing out that the term 'religious non-realism' essentially refers to the belief that there is no God as believed in by traditional monotheistic religion. God is not real; God is a construct of the human imagination — perhaps the greatest construct, but a construct nevertheless. The *Sea of Faith Network* [in the UK, Ed] believes that no human being can legitimately speak with absolute certainty on the matter of religion; if they could there would be no need for faith. The important thing is to approach the matter with an open and questing mind and to join the conversation. That seems to be the reason for being of the *Sea of Faith* movement.

When I arrived in the UK in 1991, I made contact with the UK *Sea of Faith* network, but did not pursue any deep involvement in it. I was still an ordained Baptist minister with a future, as I thought at the time, in the church's work in urban areas. I duly completed a doctoral thesis in this area of study.

However, as briefly outlined above, since the mid 1990's I have withdrawn both professionally and personally from my association with the Christian Church, as well as institutionalized religion of any kind. Prior to my retirement from secondary school teaching in 2012, I formally joined the *Sea of Faith* network in the UK. This movement now forms the intellectual focus of my spiritual and social being.

* I acknowledge the title as being that of a book of the same name by the late Australian writer, academic and prominent *Sea of Faith* activist, Dr Nigel Leaves.

Short biography of Robert (Stewart) Culbard:

Robert (Stewart) Culbard is a retired secondary school teacher of Humanities, majoring in Religious Studies and History. He is a graduate of Whitley College, Melbourne University (the Baptist College of Victoria) and formerly an ordained Baptist minister working in the inner cities of Australia. He went to the UK in 1991 to be the Manager for Domestic Programmes with

World Vision UK. His doctoral dissertation, Towards a Contextual Theology of Urban Mission; the Development of Urban Mission in Melbourne from 1980 to 1990, reflected his primary interest and focus as an ordained minister. Robert's association with the Sea of Faith predates his arrival in the UK, and he has been a member of the network for several years. He lives with his wife, Vicky, in Northampton, England. Each of their three children lives in England.

Response

In Praise Of Talk Fests

from Judith Lewis

I would like to endorse David Miller's comments about what SoFiA is for (*Bulletin* November/December 2016). I found Nigel Leaves quite depressing when he spoke in Melbourne some time ago. As we know (from the SoFiA bus trip to Carnarvon Gorge at least) talking is very rewarding. In fact, SoFiA and other 'talk-fest' type meetings I attend add to my enjoyment of life, give perspective and new directions to explore, and also inform my actions at work and in other areas of life.

I rather like the impractical nature of SoFiA.

Point Of View

News From Don Cupitt

Don Cupitt wrote this letter to the UK Sea of Faith magazine Sofia. It was first published in Sofia 122, Christmas 2016.

May I again use Sofia's columns in order to let SoF know what I am up to?

I was keen on Peter Armstrong's idea of a second edition of our old BBC TV series, with one or two programme added, because I hoped it might bring an influx of new, younger people into our membership. Unfortunately the whole idea proved a bit too novel for the BBC; but Peter is nevertheless pressing ahead in the hope of releasing at least one new film on the internet.

That has prompted me to work on communicating my own ideas better through the internet.

Clem has created a new page listing a dozen or so items by or about me for the SoF

website, and my own webmaster has been busy enlarging and revising my own website.

There will be more to come: the British Library recently grilled me for nine hours on my life and thought!

I hope all this will catch on with at least a few people in the younger generation.

Meanwhile, I am immobilised by arthritis, and have wet-form macular degeneration (AMD) in both eyes. I still get around a bit on an electric scooter and hope to be present for more — perhaps most — of next year's [UK] Conference.

Yours ever

Don

Don Cupitt, Cambridge

Response

Reply to David Miller's reply to *What is the Church?*

John Gunson

I was delighted to read David Miller's response in the last issue to my article *What is the Church*. It is always good to know that someone has read what one has written, even if in disagreement. Of articles I have written over the years to the *Bulletin*, most have passed without comment!

As a fellow member of the Melbourne SoFiA group I almost always find myself in agreement with the views that David expresses. So, I was surprised when I read his response to mine. In summary, David asserted that SoFiA, through free discussion of religion, faith and life, is there to help those who have left the churches to sort themselves out, after which they can "take action" through one of the numerous social or environmental action groups present in our society (which he says are the "ethical communities" I talk about.)

This response only serves to confirm for me the immense difficulty people have in understanding what 'church' is really about, perhaps because the church they have experienced has moved so far from its original form and purpose.

I am also happy to acknowledge that my attempt to elucidate the question may well have lacked the clarity I sought.

I suspect that part of the problem is revealed by the heading to David's response, which reads; "What is SoFiA for?" This, in fact, is the secondary sub-title to my article, and not its main purpose (though one which I had written about in previous *Bulletins*). Had I just written an article on "What is the Church?", and made no comment about SoFiA, the confusion may not have arisen.

So, let me try to unravel the confusion.

There are two issues: The first is how do people come to live the ethical life in every

aspect of their lives, personal, relational, social, career, political, etc?

The second is David's assertion that there are numerous "ethical" groups or "communities" out there in society through which we can express the "ethical life".

Let's take the second issue first.

The many groups in our society working for social or environmental justice are almost all single issue groups. They exist to bring about change in one specific "ethical" area; they do not claim to be ethical groups. In fact, while the behaviour of such groups and their members is mostly ethical (perhaps because they only have to agree about a single issue), when they do disagree, internal strife and broken relationships occur, showing that the ethical life is not central to their concerns or relationships. They make no demands upon their members to live ethically, but simply encourage them to pursue their single just cause. In short, they are not ethical communities, but exist to pursue a single ethical agenda. For example, the Labor Party exists for noble ethical ends. It seeks a fairer, more just and more equal society. However, it can be shown to be characterized by internal factional strife, cut-throat personal ambition, and other unethical behaviour. The Wilderness Society recently nearly destroyed itself with internal factional fighting over the best way to be a wilderness society.

The other, and more important, issue is how people come to live the ethical life, and be sustained in living it, in all aspects of their life and behaviour.

Hearing lectures about it — or being taught it — (e.g. at school or university) is not normally the way to ethical living.

SoFiA attracts people who in the main have learnt the ethical life already somewhere else. In fact, many will have learnt it in the churches they

have perhaps now rejected and left. SoFiA operates primarily at an intellectual level, not a life-commitment level.

The ethical life is a “chosen” way of life that normally has to be nurtured by living in a family where that life-style is consciously practised and reinforced. It is at its best where that family belongs to a community of people which exists primarily to nurture the ethical life in its members. This is done through a conscious program of teaching and living, nurturing and supporting, the ethical life in its members’ relationships; and beyond that in their social/political action in the society in which they live. What is equally important is that such a community can also embrace people who have not had an ethical formation in their family life, but who through the support and acceptance of a loving “ethical” community can find a new direction for their lives.

This ethical community is exactly what the Christian church has always been at its best. In its formative years 2000 years ago the most characteristic thing said about it by those who observed this strange community was “How these Christians love one another!”, and how they take in and care for the lost and rejected members of society.

Even where the church has lost its original form and become a “worshipping of God on Sundays” institution, its primary message has still been that of its founding hero, Jesus of Nazareth.

His teaching and practice was to gather people into small ethical communities which existed to change the world by love; to love one’s neighbour as oneself, to overcome evil with good, to oppose evil and the unjust structures of society, and to support the poor and suffering members of society.

To my knowledge, the Christian church has been the principal, if not the only, institution or community which has existed in Western society, (and many other societies), for the deliberate purpose of teaching and nurturing people in the ethical life.

At its best, and especially in its original form, that is exactly what it has done. It came into existence precisely to be the “ethical community”, not to worship God in cathedrals and church buildings.

If today it could leave behind its God worship and outdated dogma, it could have a future, and we would have within our society a network of ethical communities in which the ethical life was nurtured for the health and healing of society.

Point of View

The Trouble With Christmas. Part Two

by Andrew D'A E Bush

In Part one of this article I looked at Paul and his statement of belief in Romans chapter one that Jesus was the son of God, that he became the son of God by adoption, and that the adoption occurred at Jesus' resurrection. Next I noted Mark's variation on this theme, with Mark accepting that Jesus was the son of God, that he became the son of God by adoption, but stating that the adoption occurred at Jesus' baptism, (not his resurrection). This has a certain logic to it, as it would have given Jesus the ability and strength to heal, to create miracles, to minister, etc. Thirdly, I examined Matthew's two

contradictory stories. The first was the genealogy of Jesus, (Matthew chapter one, verses one to seventeen), and I showed how this required that Mary's husband, whom we call Joseph (not God the Holy Spirit) was the biological father of Jesus. The second followed immediately, (Matthew chapter one, verses eighteen to the end of chapter one), and supplies the very first virgin birth story, about eighty-five years after Jesus' death. I questioned why it was that the prior writers in the New Testament, namely Paul and Mark, knew nothing, or mentioned nothing, of the virgin birth.

Luke is the fourth New Testament writer (in chronological order) to visit the question of who Jesus was, and he was the writer of the second version of the virgin birth story, and the genealogy of Jesus, (Luke chapters one to three inclusive). Luke gives us many more details than any other author; and most of these details are unique to Luke. It is through Luke's telling of the stories of the birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus of Nazareth that we learn that John the Baptist is the son of a temple priest named Zacharias, and his wife Elizabeth. We also learn that Elizabeth and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were cousins; and therefore John and Jesus are second cousins. Was none of this known to the earliest writers? Or, are these factors about John the Baptist, and Jesus of Nazareth, both inventions of Luke's creative mind? Is it likely that none of these details was known to any prior writer, or anyone in the Jesus movement, until Luke unearthed this information, some fifty-five or more years after Jesus' crucifixion?

In Luke's account, Mary and Joseph are "espoused", whilst in Matthew Joseph is Mary's husband, though in another verse they are "espoused". Another term that is used in some translations states that Mary and Joseph were "betrothed". In these contexts "betrothal" and "espousal" are inter-changeable, and are said to apply to two people who have recently been married. We need to note here also that there were certain traditions that surrounded the process of two people being married, or, more accurately, being "betrothed" or "espoused". First, betrothal was a contract, (as was espousal), between the father of the bride (in this case, the father of Mary, about whom we know nothing) and the husband of the bride (in this case Joseph, about whom we know all too little; very little, indeed). The Joseph present in the New Testament is more of an archetype person than a real person, though obviously this archetypical person is based on a real person. One tradition related to being betrothed or espoused is that, for the first three months of the betrothal or espousal, the bride continued to live with her father, and only at the end of this three month

period did the bride move in with her husband. This could raise the serious question, when did Mary become pregnant. Did she become pregnant before she moved in with Joseph, and if so, to whom; or did she become pregnant only after she lived with Joseph? If it was before she moved in with Joseph, this would explain why he wished to "put Mary away", as we might say "discretely", or privately, as Matthew indicates.

The birth of Jesus, according to Luke, occurred in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary went there to satisfy the requirement of a census for tax purposes. This creates historic difficulties in that the only census in this area of the Roman empire is said to have occurred in the year 6CE (6 AD), and this would be at least ten years after Jesus birth. Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great and Herod died in 4BCE (4BC). The supposed historic features in the telling of Jesus birth do not stack up. This raises very serious questions. The very major question is, did the early Jesus movement try to write Jesus' birth back into history, and if so, why? Many questions follow from this, in particular, was Jesus really born in Bethlehem, or was he actually born in Nazareth and he is given a Bethlehem birth as a metaphor, or myth, made to strengthen the claims that he is the son of God?

Here, we need to acknowledge and understand that the Jewish people wrote in myths, particularly in a religious context. In "religious studies terms", a myth is a story where the literal truth is not important; what is important is the truth (or truths) that the story-teller is seeking to convey. The Jesus movement was initially entirely a Jewish movement, but it increasingly became a gentile movement, especially after Paul became the apostle to the gentiles. On his missionary journeys he successfully created believing communities amongst non Jewish people as well as Jewish people, initially in Asia Minor, and later in Greece. The Jewish members of the early Jesus movement would have clearly understood the meaning of the myths. However, it is doubtful that the gentiles would have either understood, or known about, the propensity of Jewish people

to write in myths, and therefore would have taken the writings within the early Jesus movement literally. This, of itself, raises a whole host of questions, which are further complicated by the small size and the isolation of these believing communities.

These small communities (often no more than about one hundred people, with even the largest being possibly no more than a thousand) were independent of each other, and probably had few, if any, communications or contact with each other. With this isolation they would almost certainly have developed their own separate beliefs and understandings. To put this another way, the early Jesus movement was a bubbling cauldron of sometimes compatible, sometimes contradictory beliefs, ideas, and developing theologies, and the New Testament reflects this. We have no record of the extent to which the early writings were changed, so we cannot know how much of what we have today in the New Testament is original, and how much was subject to these modifications.

Here is a current example. Over the last thirty or so years, the Anglican Church has begun ordaining women as priests, and then consecrating women as Bishops. Many of the opponents to this say there were no women apostles, and thus there should be no women priests or bishops. This is untrue. If one goes back to the all too few copies of the earliest texts that we have (some in the Vatican libraries, some in libraries at Oxford or Cambridge, and elsewhere) we find a number of women who were described with the Koine Greek word "apostolos" (from which we get the word apostle). Later, this was changed in some texts to the Koine Greek word "presbuteros" (from which we get the two different words "priest", and "elder"). This is but one example of the many changes, or "redactions" that were applied to the early texts from which our current New Testament has been created.

The last writer to deal with the question of who Jesus was is known as John, from the name associated with the fourth Gospel (though we don't know who the author was). John's essential

argument was that Jesus was the son of God because he pre-existed all of creation. This belief is reflected in the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, eternally begotten of the father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, before all worlds were made, of one being with the father, through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the holy spirit he became incarnate of the virgin Mary, and was made man.

This creed is, of itself, a modified document with a modified meaning. In an earlier version it stated "For us **men**, and for our salvation...". When the creed was written and adopted at the Council of Nicaea, the participants of the Council did not believe that women could receive salvation; only the men could. We now understand "for us men..." to mean "for us human beings...", but initially it excluded women. This is an example of the adaptability of the early church that probably ensured its survival, but through this adaptability the early church lost much of its early beliefs and theology.

John's Gospel is quite different from the other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three Gospels are known as "the synoptic Gospels", with Mark being chronologically the first of these three, followed by Matthew, and then followed by Luke. Some scholars would say the four synoptic Gospels, and would include the Gospel of Q, (meaning Quelle), which is a re-created Gospel of Jesus's sayings used extensively and chronologically by Mark, then Matthew, and finally Luke.

John's Gospel, opens with "the prologue", which begins, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God". The first fourteen verses form the main Gospel reading for Christmas day. Their essential message is that the word, Jesus, is God, and was God the son, because he was a part of God from before the creation. Just as the creation story was a myth with a message, so this passage is a myth with a message. It can be seen as a bridge between the man Jesus, and the Christ, (to use the Koine Greek word for Messiah). Of significant

interest here is that, even though John's Gospel is almost certainly the last to be written it includes no Christmas story; there is no virgin birth story. After the prologue, John goes straight to the message of John the Baptist. John talks about one greater than himself who is coming (appearing) some time later. The Gospel moves straight to the transferring of two of John the Baptist's disciples to Jesus and the calling by Jesus of his disciples.

What does all this mean? We have essentially at least seven stories as to how Jesus of Nazareth became the son of God, and only two of these stories are virgin birth stories. Paul, the earliest writer, states that Jesus was the son of God by adoption, and the adoption occurred at Jesus', resurrection. Mark agreed with Paul that Jesus was the son of God and became the son of God by adoption, but believes it happened at Jesus' baptism. Matthew has two stories about how Jesus became the son of God. Firstly there is the genealogy of Jesus which makes Joseph Jesus' "biological" father, thereby making Jesus Jewish. Secondly there is the first appearance of a virgin birth story, when God the holy spirit is meant to have made Mary pregnant. Luke tends to follow Matthew's pattern but has a great deal more detail about this conception of Jesus, but is it for real, or is it Luke's imagination trying to fill out the story of Jesus' birth to give it credibility and integrity? Finally, we have John with his clear underlying theme that Jesus is the son of God simply because he pre-existed all creation.

Regretfully, one seldom hears from the Christian church, or from clergy more generally, reference to any information about how Jesus became the son of God, apart from the virgin birth stories. There is seldom any discussion about the other five stories explained above, the associated passages and their meanings. This may have been fine in the past when people were not educated, and a high percentage of people were illiterate. Today, people are taught to think for themselves, yet the church still expects people to accept, believe, have faith, not to think for themselves, question, read or research. I think the church is the poorer for this disrespectful

stance, and is seriously losing members because of it.

In the 1950s about forty-seven to forty-eight percent of Australians attended their churches. Then the Billy Graham crusades were held, firstly in 1958 followed by 1968 and the late 1970's, and the percentage of people who went to church rose to over fifty percent. Today, if we define as going to church regularly as attending at least once per month (this is fair when one considers that many small country towns may only have a service once or twice a month), only eight point two per cent of people in Australia go to church on a regular basis. Many people can no longer accept, let alone believe and have faith in, a simplistic faith, a naive faith. They will not necessarily believe what they are told, be it from the pulpit, in bible studies, or wherever. Perhaps it is time to bring our faith, and our knowledge into the twenty-first century, and deal with doubts, and rejections in an honest, open and transparent manner and with integrity (if not absolute integrity). Perhaps it is past time that we recognised that people can and do think for themselves, do yearn to ask questions and have honest, open, and transparent answers to them. In every other field of study, and especially in academic institutions such as Universities, people are encouraged to critically analyse what they are taught, are given different opinions and thoughts, are encouraged to know about and understand the debated different opinions and thoughts of the experts. All too often this is not the case within the Christian church and when religion and theology are taught.

My question is, "why is this not the case?" Wouldn't people learn a great deal more, and understand a great deal more if it was otherwise? Then, churches might actually grow, and be able to extend their learning to the many areas of activities, knowledge, and life, where there is a desperate need for a considered, mature, open, transparent, and deeply thoughtful and insightful contribution. Here, I am thinking of the increasing abuse of Human Rights in many parts of the world, including Australia, and the desperately urgent need for disciplined and focused

leadership on this issue. If the Christian church was to do this it might no longer be seen as "middle class mediocrity, at its worst".

About two thousand years ago, one man, supported by his chosen followers, changed the

world. Nowadays, two and a quarter billion Christians in this world keep it unchanged, when change and improvement is so desperately needed and yearned for. The question for all of us is *why!*

Review

Digitalia

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

SoFiA website www.sof-in-australia.org : I came across this brief note in *Religion News*:

King's College removes photo of ex-archbishop opposed to gay marriage (The Guardian, Australia) Dec 22 — *An image of George Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, has been removed from a London university amid student concerns about his views on gay marriage.*

SoFiA blog at www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php (also accessible from the website): No new postings

Facebook Sea of Faith in Australia: The Facebook page is continuing its steady progress with a slowly increasing handful of contributors and associated postings. A recent topic that looks interesting is [why is psychology silent on atheism](#). This link takes you to a youtube video. For discussion of the topic, go to the SoFiA facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/groups/sofiatalk/?ref=bookmarks>

sofiatalk I found two brief notes on the letter from Don Cupitt that is reprinted in this *Bulletin*.

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 - sof-melb@yahoo.com.au

16 February 2017

Carl Turney ([Sunday Assembly](#))
Love: Saint Valentine and his Day.

16 March 2017

Tim Harding ([Australian Skeptics](#))
"Europe's Dark Ages."

20 April 2017

Neil Blood (UCA)

"Exploring Don Cupitt's suggestion:

To give ethics priority in defining and shaping religious life."

***Not In God's Name* by Jonathan Sacks (Winner of the 2016 Templeton Prize)**

Reviewed by Judith Lewis

Lord Sacks was for 22 years the British Chief Rabbi who has written a number of books broadly concerning faith and society. I chanced upon this rare inclusion in a secular bookshop in Brisbane after the wonderful trip with SOFIA adherents to Carnarvon Gorge. On the trip there was little time for reading, such was the quality of the company and the visual and cerebral stimulation, as outlined in the October *Bulletin*.

While my religious background bequeathed me a grounding in 'Old Testament' stories, Jonathan Sacks brought out many different ways to interpret the familiar myths, for example, by examining the context of overlooked verses, using more accurate translations, and using the intensive scrutiny of textual material that is characteristic of Jewish scholarship and midrash. He uses the term 'myth' in reference to the writings of the Torah in the sense that these stories are true even if they may not have actually happened as described. As Hannah Kent (*Burial Rites*) said recently "an emotional truth if not a factual one". Sacks posits that "the narratives of Genesis are deliberately constructed to seem to mean one thing on the surface, but then, in the light of cues or clues within the text, reveal a second level of meaning beneath".

He begins by discussing 'Altruistic Evil' defining it as "evil committed in a sacred cause". He quotes Blaise Pascal "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction". However, Sacks points out that although many well known atheists might suggest that religion is the only motivator for altruistic evil, many regimes have committed acts of altruistic evil — the greatest ones being perpetrated by secular regimes (religion is a feature of only 10% of 1800 known conflicts). He says that the re-emergence of politicised religious extremism in the 21st century caught the West unprepared, as their narrative— that liberal democracy now predominated — lacked a

serious regard for the human need for meaning and identity.

Sacks argues that humans are potentially violent as there is competition for resources, and yet unselfishness in the kinship group plays a key role in survival. Trust of strangers is another matter (ironically it is often mistrust of those holding somewhat similar views) and early religions created fraternities with watchful gods to enable trade and marketing to take place — with ethical living the ideal. He posits that by the time of early civilisations, polytheistic religion became "the robe of sanctity worn to mask the naked pursuit of power". Abraham, an early monotheist, sought to be a blessing to others regardless of their faith. It took millennia before the later prophets of Abrahamic monotheism rejected imperialism, despite its brief glory in the Davidic kingdom. After the final crushing defeat of the Jews by Rome there was a change from outer practices to inner faith, although disagreements were always common. He does not say so explicitly but I would presume that Sacks, along with the majority of Jews would not support militant Zionism.

In the section entitled 'Siblings' Sacks analyses a number of narratives. On a superficial reading of the Isaac and Ishmael passages, it appears that one is chosen, the other rejected. Sacks' analysis finds that the promises to Hagar were similar to those God gave to Abraham, including 12 rulers. The text reads "Ishmael is your offspring, Isaac will be called your offspring". God does not reject Ishmael but his inheritance is of a different nature. There are parallels between the binding of Isaac for sacrifice and the sending away of Ishmael and Hagar. He notes that Ishmael and Isaac together buried Abraham. Some rabbis have considered that Abraham's 'new' wife after the death of Sarah was Hagar renamed.

Sacks refutes the Islamic interpretation that as the firstborn, Ishmael was the true heir. He points out that Paul (as recorded in *Romans*) fell into the same erroneous 'displacement narrative' that there could only be one heir; one way — the error of dualism. He provides other examples (in detail) of the 'subversion of myth' where the tragic heroes such as Cain, Ishmael, Esau and Leah are not rejected by God: the counter narrative being that our common humanity precedes our differences. Peace, reconciliation and welcoming of the 'Other' are contained in the stories of the Torah as a guide to be reinterpreted in later ages.

As a Jew, he has numerous illustrations from Jewish history to support his argument. He posits that the factionalism of the late Second Temple period during the Roman siege of Jerusalem was the "first appearance in history of religiously motivated terrorism" the aim being to

generate fear, and inflame relations with the occupying power; it resulted in complete disaster. The Jewish identity survived, not by the exercise of outward power but by the bond of mutual responsibility through their religion.

Luther and, later, the Reformation movement similarly rejected the pre-eminence of power and institutional structures in defining faith and practice. He sees separation of Church and State as essential. 'Secular religions' such as Communism and Fascism result in the same tragic outcomes when fervent ideology and political power are combined. Let us hope that deeper truths of Islam are represented by groups such as 'Muslims for Progressive Values' rather than the much publicised beliefs of a dangerous few.

NOTE See also the 2009 SOFIA blog 'Religion and Violence' by Greg Spearritt.

Postlude

Female Modesty

by John Carr

I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

One of the most heated issues in current discussions on religion and ethics is the wearing of hijabs, niqabs and burkas by Muslim women. This is anathema to many conservative Westerners, whether religious or not. The motivation in this sector of society is, at least in part, gut feelings of fear of 'the other'. For many liberal and progressive Westerners, it is a conflicted issue. On the one hand, there is disgust at what is seen as the oppression of women, a disgust that may be reinforced by knowledge of the continuation of ancient practices of polygamy, arranged marriage of very young girls and genital mutilation. On the other hand, there is evidence that, in some ethnic groups, the practice of 'veiling' is a choice, freely taken by the women. Some veiled Muslim women state

adamantly that this is the case for them and, furthermore, that it is a symbol of freedom. Some particularly resent the focus that self-appointed moralisers, especially non-Muslim men, place on women's bodies and dress.

A common game-changer in this debate is the fact that customs like veiling are 'cultural' rather than religious. Many such gender-related customs predate the advent of Islam. The 'Arabic' culture, or Middle-Eastern cultures in general, often get the blame. All three 'religions of the Book' had their origins in the Middle East and have, for much of their history, promoted a double standard of morality. Christian women have often been set much higher standards of modesty than men: Christian nuns have usually been veiled until the last 50 years; women

church-goers in Mediterranean countries still must cover hair, shoulders and thighs at least; and British women had to cover their heads in Church until very recently. Are these religious or cultural requirements? Or is this a false distinction, religion being just one component of culture?

The rules set down in the scriptures for male and female behaviour are often radically asymmetrical, as the (in)famous quotation above demonstrates. Which Holy Scripture does it come from? It's from 1 Timothy 2, beginning at Verse 8 (KJV) and was the epistle for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost. This was written more than six centuries before the Qu'ran.

Man enjoys the great advantage of having a god endorse the code he writes; and since man exercises a sovereign authority over women it is especially fortunate that this authority has been vested in him by the Supreme Being. For the Jews, Mohammedans and Christians among others, man is master by divine right; the fear of God will therefore repress any impulse towards revolt in the downtrodden female.

Simone de Beauvoir – The Second Sex, 1949

Epilogue

Christmas Train

by Robin Ford

John and Ella Luxton supplied a link to an article in **DAWN**, which according to Wikipedia, is Pakistan's oldest and most widely read English-language newspaper. **The link:** [In pictures: All aboard the Christmas train!](#) leads to an article that begins:

Minister for Railways Khuwaja Saad Rafique on Thursday inaugurated a special purpose 'Xmas Peace Train' ahead of Christmas festivities in the country.

Nine captioned photos show models of Santa, sleighs, reindeer, snowman and a lot of tinsel.

Behind the Minister for Railways and the Minister for Human Rights at the ribbon-cutting ceremony are about thirty men. Most are bare-headed, but I counted five regulation baseball caps, one Muslim skull-cap (kufiq), one hat that,

For modern readers, the emphasis on the requirement that women be modest in dress is probably not the most offensive issue. What is more concerning is that women are to learn in silence and subjection. The subjection of women is a feature of most of the religions of the world, but it almost certainly predates organised religion and has deep roots in the biology and psychology of our species. The greater physical strength of men leads to our lust for power and domination, not only of women but also of other men. In historic time, asymmetric gender relations and male control of women's sexuality have been normalised by religion.

from Wikipedia, I take to be a Pakol (Afghan cap or Pashtun cap), and, right at the back and only just in the shot, a youth with a baseball cap worn sideways.

A photo of carriage painted with conventional images of Christmas is captioned:

Policeman standing alert to avert any untoward incident during inauguration of Christmas train at Islamabad Railway Station ahead of Xmas.

Another photo shows Santa, wearing thick black-rimmed spectacles, waving from a carriage entrance with a policeman beside him, his rifle pointed demurely at the ground.

The Minister for Railways hoped that:
...this train would serve as a symbol of unity, tranquility and harmony wherever it would go.

I hope so too.

SoFiA Crossword #26

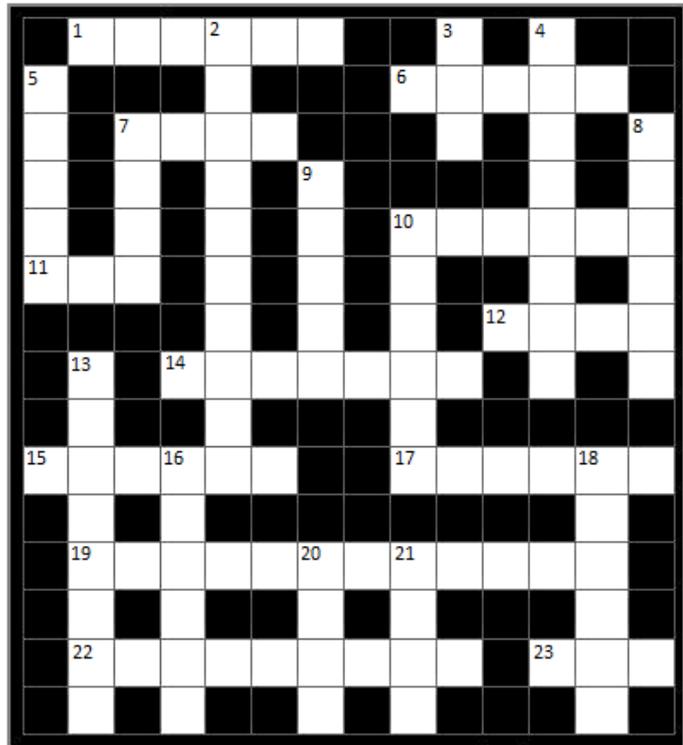


Theme: spiritual practices

Across

- 1. Mechanism of concentration; spiritual conduit
- 6. Sitting meditation (Zen Buddhism)
- 7. Cult image
- 10. Breath
- 11. Darker element in Chinese philosophy, usually viewed as feminine
- 12. Magi's guidance system
- 14. Sojourner
- 15. Eclectic, individualistic approach to spiritual exploration (3, 3)
- 17. Liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth (Hinduism)
- 19. Distinctive historical period in which the Christian God is believed to have related in a certain way to humankind
- 22. Creation myth / origin theory for the universe
- 23. Non-clergy

SoFiA Crossword #27 Prepared by Greg Spearritt



Down

- 2. Ancient Chinese scripture, often translated as *The Book of the Way and its Virtue* (3, 2, 5)
- 3. Food traditionally avoided by Jews and Muslims
- 4. Honour
- 5. Monastery
- 7. Religious image, most commonly a painting
- 8. That which Catholic clergy are expected to do once they reach 75 years of age
- 9. Episcopalian Bishop of Newark from 1979 to 2000
- 10. Mystical Islamic tradition
- 13. Theological attempt to reconcile a loving God with the existence of evil
- 16. The Curate's role
- 18. Mother of Samuel (1 Samuel)
- 20. That which, according to the erstwhile Harold Camping, the return of Christ was in the lead-up to May 21, 2011
- 21. Hindu god of fire; one of the 3 chief deities of the Vedas

Sea of Faith in Australia

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

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

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

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

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

Brisbane CBD 2nd Sunday, 1pm to 2.30pm. Contact:
 Rachel Matthews 0408 193 872)

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

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

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

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

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

From January 2017 SoFiA will have a single membership category.

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

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

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

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

Name(s).....

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	<i>Bulletin</i> delivery	number	each	amount
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Total paid on line, (BSB 032 085 A/c 446904 ref your name) or by cheque (payable to SoFiA).				

Signature.....