



# Sea of Faith

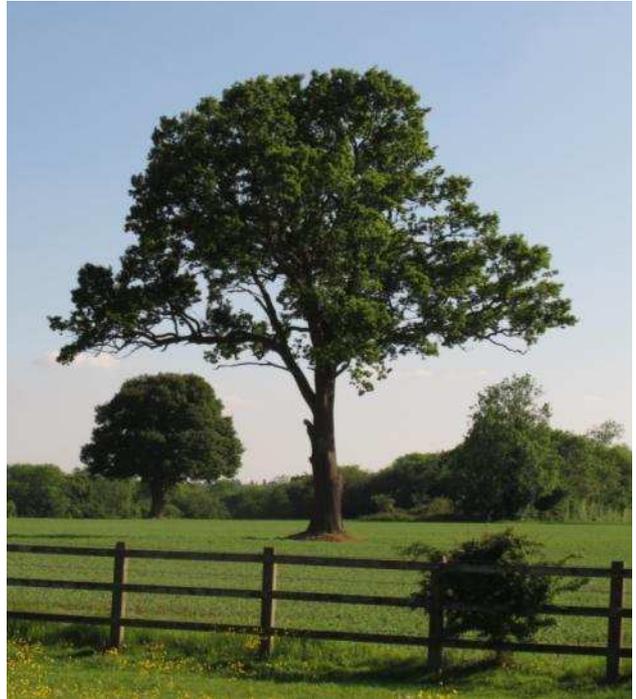
Sea of Faith Network in Australia

## BULLETIN

May/June 2017



country lane, Lincolnshire



country lane, Hertfordshire



beside the Hume Highway, Victoria



country road, Oxfordshire

photos Robin Ford

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

E X P L O R E  
religion faith meaning

## EDITORIAL

This *Bulletin* is late because I have been in England. So much happened there. Brexit still hovered in the air, a bomb exploded in Manchester, the UK election became hard to pick and on the way home we heard about the London Bridge incident.

I remembered previous eventful visits to England. Once, in July, as we over-nighted in Japan, we watched television as it reported on bombings in London. Another time we woke up in bed to sombre music and the announcement that Princess Dianna had died in a car crash.

Is it strange that we were in England for each of these events? Barbara McKenzie explores this in *Synchronicity*. And are these times of sadness, or is it melancholy? This is picked up in Robert Culbards's *A Strange Glimmer of hope*. And if you are asking "Where is God in all of this?" Beryl Meyers has some ideas in *God*.

At the excellent SoFiA Mini-conference, two of the presenters didn't like the way the Queen's Wharf development was going, yet

despite suggestions of a *fait accompli* they retained hope that change might still be possible. There's more on this in this *Bulletin*. You'll also find the President's report to the AGM with its hopes for SoFiA (there is still work to do on this, articles to the *Bulletin* would be welcome).

In a James Carleton's *God Forbid* (Radio National, 11 June 2017), Dr Michael Jenson (Sydney Anglican priest) asserted the supremacy of 'the word' over artistic expressions of meaning (eg Roman Catholic iconography). I wonder. Can literal language on its own provide a full assessment of our present turbulent world? Not for me. I find I need the work of artists — for example poets, playwrights, musicians, sculptors and painters — if I am going to make sense of this soul-ache.

Could this *Bulletin*, mainly prosaic as it is, provide some hope?

Robin Ford

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## Subs

\$20 for 10 years.

Due now.

See p7 and p16 for  
more details

## Mini-Conference 2017

### Some Wider Implications of the Queens Wharf Project

*John Carr, the conference organiser, provides background for this event.*

The 2017 Mini-Conference, an exercise in urban ecology, focussed on Brisbane's Queens Wharf Casino Development Project. However, this project is only one of three multi-billion dollar projects based on casinos, currently underway in Australia, the other two being Sydney's Barangaroo and the Gold Coast's Southport Spit.

The histories of these projects have common stages: (a) massive financial consortia are established; (b) grand proposals are made and publicised; (c) these attract criticism from community groups and opposition parties; (d) time passes; (e) modified proposals are made; (f) these attract more criticism; (g) the government of the day gives in, embracing the project with various degrees of enthusiasm and lays down a number of ecological and economic conditions; (h) the project is carried out. Stages (d) to (f) may be recursive, though the process may be short-circuited by a change of government.

The government's capitulation is usually based on the realisation that the project promises a politically gold-plated outcome – JOBS! The consortium may be focused on profits, but the government wants the potentially large number of new jobs as headline proof of their good government. If we don't elect them again, we shall miss out on jobs, and are headed for the Job Search queue.

Such urban development projects, mostly more modest than these three but contentious nevertheless, are in train in every city and large town in the country. Even more contentious, perhaps, are the large mining projects in rural areas. Since the coal industry has now replaced uranium mining as the most politically sensitive extractive industry, the biggest battles have been over the construction of the Adani coalfield in Central Queensland. We have been through stages (d) to (f) a few times already and we appear to be swirling around in this whirlpool still.

A couple of weeks ago, the resident cartoonist at *The Courier Mail*, Sean Leahy, captured the government dilemma in such controversies. You can see this cartoon on Leahy's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/leahycartoons/> (scroll down to 'QLD Labor Pains', Thursday 25 May). In the cartoon, two stage horses, front halves only and connected at the back of each, are pulling in opposite directions. One is labelled 'The Great Barrier Reef and Tourism Jobs', the other 'The QLD Economy and Coal Mining Jobs'. Hand printed in a separate box is 'QLD Labor pains'. In essence, the conflict is between certain profits and jobs now, and possible profits and jobs sometime in the future. The environmental benefits of the long-term option are even more in the shadowy realm of 'the possible'.

The Atheist's Convention is on again next year: 9 - 11 Feb. Greg Spearritt is intending to go. Details at <http://atheistconvention.org.au/>.

The cost is \$360 pp (\$300 concession), but Greg can get a bit of a discount if anyone is interested. If you are, please let Greg know soon (by the end of June).

Greg Spearritt [sof@a1.com.au](mailto:sof@a1.com.au)

## Mini-Conference 2017

### What Can We Learn About Ecology In Cities From The Queens Wharf Casino Project?

*The 2017 mini conference was held on South Bank, Brisbane on Saturday 10 June 2017 10:30am to 2:30pm (with optional preview from 9:00am). The Editor, Robin Ford, was there. Here are his impressions*

We wanted to be ready for the start of the mini-conference, so Lyndell and I arrived the night before from wet and cold Sydney. We woke up to find Brisbane sunny and warm.

We located the group in Queens Park and together we strolled around the local streets noting the scope of the project and, through John Carr's commentary, learning something of its history. Currently it's in the demolition phase, as we saw for ourselves when the roof-top component of an air-conditioning system toppled before our very eyes.

After the inspection we continued on our way to Southbank, where we got another angle on the development. Soon enough we settled ourselves in a comfortable room in the State Library, ready for our first speaker.

Steve Keating, of the State Development Department, gave us the official line. He emphasised the jobs that it would create, and the income it would generate both in the construction phase and when operating. His slides showed us what it might look like when finished. If you have not seen the images, you can find them on the website.

( <http://www.statedevelopment.qld.gov.au/major-projects/queens-wharf-brisbane.html> )

The project will include a casino, 'five new premium hotel brands' (words from the website), shops and (later) three apartment towers. I won't go into details here, but instead will try to describe my reactions.

The talk was predicated on the dominant ideology of our time. Well, I say dominant, but it is currently being challenged around the globe by people such as Bernie Saunders in the USA, Jeremy Corbin in the UK, and the Brexit plan. The mantra that this ideology has been chanting for years is: "Reduce taxes on industry, incentivate

business leaders, encourage foreign investment, and get on with the job"

I was surprised when Steve Keating praised strong, visionary leaders, with specific mention of Joe Bjelke Peterson. As an example of benefits of persistence and leadership he quoted the creation of the Southbank Cultural Precinct (where we had gathered earlier); it too had, apparently, attracted criticism when it was planned,. "No one would criticise it now" was the punch line. It seemed reasonable.

I was confused over the current status of the project. Was it signed off and ready to go, or were there procedural formalities to be completed? Perhaps it didn't matter much — I couldn't see the plans being significantly changed (let alone the whole project being reconsidered) unless one of the three consortiums (two from China) pulled out.

Perhaps the strangest line was the explicit mention of 'city icons'. Sydney has its bridge and Opera House, Melbourne has Federation Square and its coffee culture in laneways. But Brisbane is bereft — apparently. It needs a city icon, and this project will be it.

The business plan leans heavily on attracting tourists (1.39 million additional tourists per annum according to the website), principally from China where the growing middle classes are looking for places to visit. And who wouldn't want to visit Brisbane on a day like the one we had; sunny and warm and with a gentle breeze. We were told that, even with this enviable weather, visitors stay for only three days or so on average; they plan to encourage them to stay for one more day. Some of us wondered what they would do in that extra time. Steve Keating explained that it was a state-wide vision, so maybe they will explore some of the state.

There were questions along the way. The questioners were polite but often sceptical. Steve Keating answered with aplomb; no doubt he'd been there before. Time for questions was limited at the end, but nevertheless we had been entertained and informed by a skilled practitioner in the art of persuasion.

We broke for lunch, many choosing to eat at the State Library Cafe. When we re-gathered, we were about to hear very different views.

The first speaker after lunch was Irina Anastasiu, an urban planner at QUT. She proposed an alternative process for deciding how to redevelop the site. She saw the existing process as top down and wanted more of a bottom-up approach, where community consultation would be the starting point. In this way she hoped the project would demonstrate the 'Brisbane-ness' of the place. Surely international visitors would like something that was not generic international city? In fact the website has as an objective

...world class sustainable urban design and architecture that establishes a clear identity that is uniquely 'Brisbane' and 'Queensland'

but this is probably not quite what she had in mind. Like the speaker who would follow, she believed that there was still time to change the plan. Their commitment seemed to me admirable, but I can't see it happening. Perhaps the method she preferred might be implemented when the next re-development comes along. Affordable housing was something they both wanted to see included, but this didn't seem likely to happen either.

The second speaker after lunch was Jonathan Sri, a Brisbane City Councillor from the Greens Party. He brought passion to the occasion, starting with an observation that the City had given a large block of public land to developers without a convincing approval process. And he questioned the use to which that land was to be put. "It's not too late to do something about it" he insisted (it seemed cut and dried to me, but then I'm not a campaigner). He started his critique with a promotional video from the developers, to which he had added his

own voice over (I found it on Youtube by searching for "jonathan sri youtube queens"). He's an activist, clearly, and he knows how to have an impact. I was left wondering about public spaces. On the website, I found that the project would deliver "high quality public spaces" totalling "more than 12 football fields of redeveloped and enhanced public realm". 'Public realm'? According to a document from the Local Government Association of South Australia:

Public realm belongs to everyone. It comprises the streets, squares, parks, green spaces and other outdoor places that require no key to access them and are available, without charge for everyone to use.

Will the public realm spaces in the Brisbane development "require no key to access them and [be] available, without charge for everyone to use". I wonder. He ended his presentation with a bang — a slam-poetry rendition of a poem.

What were my takeout messages? The official presentation left me troubled. Was it the way it saw Chinese tourists as a money-making opportunity? Or perhaps it was the casino. Although the casino was said to be just 5 percent of the project, it still had a very prominent position. On the website I found "a guarantee of \$880 million in casino taxes for the first ten years of operations" and "\$272 million payments to the State". Is this \$272 per annum? If so Casino revenue would be 32% of the payments from the project to the State.

The alternative view was energising — even thrilling — but, perhaps because I haven't got the imagination required, I can't see it triumphing over the government-developer complex (Was it the Bjelke Peterson reference that had me thinking "the return of white shoe brigade"?). Nevertheless, I was uplifted by their enthusiasm, vision and commitment. And who knows what the future holds in this period of global instability?

Altogether it was an informative and entertaining mini-conference, as we all agreed when called upon to thank John Carr for all his efforts in organising it.

## President's Report to the Annual General Meeting of SoFiA 10<sup>th</sup> June 2017

by Rodney Eivers

It can't be said that Sea of Faith in Australia Inc. is a raging success these days, either in terms of membership or of activities. The membership report shows a decline to 88 financial members for 2016 —a stark reminder of the loss of commitment compared with earlier years when our membership rose to 300.

Have we outlived our purpose? Or is it perhaps that we are not reaching the people, especially the younger people, who might have reason to join us in our pursuit of the open exploration of religion, faith and meaning?

With the spectacular impact of fundamentalist Islam one could expect a surge of interest in religious enquiry. 'Joiners' of associations like ours, or associations in general, are scarce these days. Even though it is not difficult to locate organisations of any kind in this era of screens, typified by social media and mobile telephones. Most seem to be struggling to retain membership or to find officers to run the show. Despite, or perhaps because of, globalisation through the internet and various electronic facilities, there is hesitation about involvement. This is typified by the dramatic withdrawal from a common universal identity shown at the ballot box with the surprise results of Brexit, and the elections of Trump and Hanson.

In relation to interest in religion though, I was surprised to read a week or so ago of what is happening to secondary school religious studies in Britain. It was reported that against a background of a steady decline in main-line church attendance, religious studies are rapidly growing in England and Wales, and that they are growing in status as a subject for entry to university.

One commentator noted:

No one should be surprised to see how popular Religious Studies A level has become. Pupils want

to study the subject because it allows them to explore crucial questions in relation to beliefs, values and morality, and contributes to their preparation for living in a multi-faith, multi-cultural world. It also provides an excellent foundation for further study in a range of academic subjects, not limited to theology, religious studies and philosophy, and remains a very attractive qualification to universities. Pupils and their teachers deserve congratulations for this impressive set of results.

I don't know if there is a comparable situation in Australia but promotion of such a development would surely come within the charter of Sea of Faith in Australia. The above quote could almost be part of the SoFiA manifesto

It may not be out of place to mention here a current personal project of mine. This is to provide scholarships of up to \$5,000 for aspiring theological students on the condition that they write an essay after a reading a number of appropriate scholarly titles on the subject of, "My response to 'progressive' Christianity". If you know people, especially young people, with that inclination please steer them in my direction so they can go on a list for 'expressions of interest' ([ucbursaries@bigpond.com](mailto:ucbursaries@bigpond.com))

Perhaps this is good reason for SoFiA to retain a presence. Even with our limited membership there are activities which can generate participation from our members. There are several small discussion groups operating, we have had the stimulating experience this year of the bus tour to Carnarvon Gorge (a similar tour is under development for 2018, see page 10), our *Bulletin* under the dedicated editorship of Robin Ford is regularly published and we have public gatherings such as this mini-conference.

SoFiA, traditionally, has provided something of a half-way house for religiously-

mindful people struggling to break away from their inherent theism. The invitation to join us in this process remains, and it must be our role as members to nurture people in that journey.

I thank you for your loyalty and your support. I particularly want to acknowledge the support from members of our Management Committee. Their suggestions for initiatives, their active role in furthering our aims and their firm moral support, all lead me to have no regrets in

filling the role of President. However, it is my hope that my time as president will continue to be seen as an interim period, in which I will keep the role ready for someone younger and with fresher ideas to take on.

I trust that we can look to the future with some confidence. We have a productive part to play in a world continuing to be greatly troubled by differences in religion and ideology.

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**Management**

## Office Holders for 2017/2018

**Position**

**Appointee**

President:

Rodney Eivers

Vice-President:

Glen Beasley

Secretary:

Greg Spearritt

Treasurer & Membership Secretary

Lyndell Ford

Committee Members:

Rachel Matthews

John Carr

### Membership Application/Renewal

Membership subscriptions became due January 2017. Thank you to those who have paid.

If you are not sure of your membership status, send an email to [robinford@a1.com.au](mailto:robinford@a1.com.au) for notification.

The new fee structure is a fantastic deal — \$20.00 for ten years' membership. Why not take a break; do it now?

If you have friends who might be interested in SoFiA, this deal makes it a good time to join.

See page 16 for forms (if you need them - many renewals won't) and what to do.

For cost reasons, if subscriptions with paper copies are not paid by the time the next *Bulletin* is due to be sent (end of July), *Bulletin* delivery will revert to email. Paying the subs will restore the paper copy. Donations towards the cost of paper copies are always welcome.

### Scholarships of up to \$5,000 for aspiring theological students

write an essay after a reading a number of appropriate scholarly titles on the topic "My response to 'progressive' Christianity".

To register an expression of interest send an email to [ucbursaries@bigpond.com](mailto:ucbursaries@bigpond.com)

## Synchronicity

Barbara McKenzie

In May it was my turn to lead the discussion at the Toowoomba group's monthly meeting, and I cast about for suitable subject matter. My mind went back to something that happened to me in January, and at once I had my topic: 'synchronicity'. It provoked an interesting discussion, so I thought I'd share my notes with the readers of the *SoFiA Bulletin*.

First I'll tell you about the event that sparked the idea.

My daughter and I will shortly be heading off overseas for a holiday together, so over the past few months there has been some intensive planning. We decided to spend most of our time in England and Scotland, and to stay for a few days in Edinburgh before travelling further north to meet up with some friends in the western Highlands.

One day in January, before I'd booked our accommodation in Scotland but after I'd started researching it, I was looking at a post on Facebook and my eye was caught by a random name in the "People You May Know" panel: Andrew McRae.<sup>1</sup> Goodness, I thought, I knew an Andrew McRae ages ago — perhaps forty years. Could this be the same one? I looked closely at the picture. The hair was grey and the face bearded, but they belonged unmistakably to the same Andrew. I sent him a message: "Remember me? He was gratifyingly pleased to hear from me, and we started conversing by email.

As you'd guess from the name, Andrew is Scottish. But we got to know each other in Cambridge when he was a PhD student there; and the last time I saw him he was living and working in The Netherlands. So imagine my surprise when he told me he now lives in Scotland; and not just Scotland, but the centre of Edinburgh. In his next message he said, *You must both come and stay*.

What amazing synchronicity, I thought. It seemed like magic, and with perfect timing.

The truth is, however, that all this happened because Facebook snoops on its subscribers. Its digital spying mechanism had taken note of the fact that, some years back, I Googled Andrew McRae. Something had reminded me of him, and I idly wondered what he was up to these days and what, if anything, he had published. So I Googled his name. Just the once. The search yielded nothing, and I thought no more about it. But Facebook remembered. And Facebook detected my online searching in relation to our forthcoming trip to Scotland. It also knew more about Andrew than I did — it knew, for example, that he lived in Edinburgh — so it matched us up and suggested I contact him.

In other words, what happened had a rational explanation. While it was serendipitous (or at least I hope it was — I've yet to discover whether Andrew and I still enjoy each other's company), it wasn't miraculous.

But can synchronicity *always* be explained in a similarly rational way?

First of all, though, what *is* 'synchronicity'? The term has acquired New Age connotations, but its first appearance was in a far more scholarly context. It was coined by Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung in the early twentieth century to describe what he called 'meaningful coincidence' or 'acausal connection' — events that coincide without any evident cause, but seem connected.

As examples, Jung recounted various stories from his own clinical experience. Here's one, originally published in 1952:<sup>2</sup>

A young woman I was treating had ... a dream in which she was given a golden scarab. While she was telling me this dream I sat with my back to the closed window. Suddenly I heard a noise behind

<sup>1</sup> 'Andrew McRae' is a pseudonym (but my old friend's name is equally Scottish!)

<sup>2</sup> Carl Jung (originally published in German, 1952— various subsequent translations) *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*.

me, like a gentle tapping. I turned round and saw a flying insect knocking against the window pane from outside. I opened the window and caught the creature in the air as it flew in. It was the nearest analogy to a golden scarab that one finds in our latitudes, a scarabaeid beetle, the common rose-chaffer (*Cetonia aurata*), which contrary to its usual habits had evidently felt an urge to get into a dark room at this particular moment. I must admit that nothing like it ever happened to me before or since, and ... the dream of the patient has remained unique in my experience.

And here's another, from the same publication:

The wife of one of my patients ... once told me in conversation that, at the deaths of her mother and her grandmother, a number of birds gathered outside the windows of the death-chamber. I had heard similar stories from other people. When her husband's treatment was nearing its end, his neurosis having been removed, he developed some apparently quite innocuous symptoms which seemed to me, however, to be those of heart disease. I sent him along to a specialist, who after examining him told me in writing that he could find no cause for anxiety. On the way back from this consultation (with the medical report in his pocket) my patient collapsed in the street. As he was brought home dying, his wife was already in a great state of anxiety because, soon after her husband had gone to the doctor, a whole flock of birds alighted on their house. She naturally remembered the similar incidents that had happened at the death of her own relatives, and feared the worst.

Although I was personally acquainted with the people concerned and know very well that the facts here reported are true, I do not imagine for a moment that this will induce anybody who is determined to regard such things as pure 'chance' to change his mind. My sole object in relating these two incidents is simply to give some indication of how meaningful coincidences usually present themselves in practical life.

Jung saw what he called 'archetypal symbolism' in the scarab and the birds — the type of symbolism that often occurs in myths and legends. In light of this, he came up with various definitions of synchronicity, such as these:

a psychically conditioned relativity of space and time

a coincidence in time of two or more causally unrelated events which have the same or similar meaning

the simultaneous occurrence of a certain psychic state with one or more external events which appear as meaningful parallels to the momentary subjective state.

Jung had no conclusive explanation of *how* this happened; but he saw parallels between synchronicity and quantum physics. In fact it was as a result of discussions with Albert Einstein, when the great man was developing his theory of special relativity, that Jung set out on the path leading to his theory of synchronicity. He also had extensive discussions with theoretical physicist Wolfgang Pauli, who first came to him as a patient — and a particularly interesting one, because he seemed to experience synchronicity events with unusual frequency. Pauli made valuable contributions to Jung's theory by providing rigorous criticism.

Jung's work was enormously influential, in a wide range of fields. His theory of synchronicity provoked controversy, and continues to have its detractors, but since the 1970s it has been adopted enthusiastically by many in the New Age movement. It was embraced by dream-interpreters, astrologers, past-life regressionists and so on, and used to explain such phenomena as extrasensory perception, omens, *déjà vu* and precognitive dreams. It has spawned a crop of derivative theories, and been incorporated in many publications, both serious and fanciful. (A quick Amazon search on my Kindle using the word 'synchronicity' yielded 416 titles.)

I had synchronicity in mind when I visited the recent Lifeline book sale in Toowoomba, and I picked up a book with the promising title *Past Lives, Future Lives*.<sup>3</sup> Sure enough, synchronicity figured, and the author offered the following 'physiological' explanation:

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Bruce Goldberg (1982), *Past Lives, Future Lives. Accounts of regressions and progressions through hypnosis*, Newcastle Publishing Co. Inc., North Hollywood, California.

There are two hemispheres of the brain, the left and the right. Synchronicity actually entails the communication of the intuitive right brain (the subconscious and superconscious) with the analytical left brain (the conscious mind) through the use of symbolic events. Thus, these so-called coincidences represent the purposive communication of the subconscious and superconscious minds with our conscious minds. Since the right hemisphere of our brain contains all knowledge of past, present and future lives through the Akashic records,<sup>4</sup> and since the left hemisphere of our brain barely keeps up with our present life, it is no wonder that consciously we call these events a 'coincidence' and dismiss them from further thought or consideration.

I personally feel that absolutely nothing happens by mere chance or coincidence. It's open to question how faithfully the various New Age groups and writers have adhered to Jung's

carefully formulated theory of synchronicity, about which he published extensively (and, in my limited experience, somewhat impenetrably). But it's largely thanks to the New Agers that the word itself has become so well-known and commonly used, if loosely applied. Many in the New Age movement would accept Jung's concept of archetypal symbolism as part of the deal, whereas in common parlance the term 'synchronicity' is more often used in the sense of simultaneous occurrence. It's the word that comes to mind when something happens fortuitously, at exactly the right place and time — something that feels as if it's *meant* to happen.

So are such occurrences pure chance, or are they able to be explained rationally — by Facebook's 'Big Brother' reach, for example? Sceptics would say they are. Personally, I'd prefer to keep an open mind.

### **Bus Trip To Explore The Blue Mountains of NSW**

"Who has been on this land and what did they do?"

Monday 9 April to Friday 13 April 2018

#### **Preliminary Scheme and call for expressions of interest**

This trip, in the style of the 2017 bus trip to Carnarvon Gorge, is being planned now.

Here's the present plan. From a base in Leura (120 km West of Sydney) we will take in Aboriginal land, tourist attractions (natural and man-made, past and present), historic sites, majestic views, paths and tracks, art galleries, and gardens. We will hear about austere religions, counter-cultures, and bohemian excess. All this will encourage conversation (if encouragement is ever needed with SoFers).

Walks will be various, with alternative accessible activities for those with restricted mobility.

If you are this interested in this adventure, or you have questions, email Greg Spearritt at the address below (no commitment at this stage).

[sof@a1.com.au](mailto:sof@a1.com.au)

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<sup>4</sup> The Akashic records purport to be 'a compendium of all human events, thoughts, words, emotions and intent ever to have occurred' (Wikipedia)

## 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) :  
**Have a little faith: Melbourne vegetarian spiritualists' religion recognised** (*The Age*, Melbourne) June 11 — Where does a philosophy end and a religion begin? This story intrigued me. It makes a change from child abuse or Islamic extremism.

SoFiA blog at [www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php](http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php) (also accessible from the website): This *Bulletin's* editorial spoke of hope; Greg Spearritt's blog-post [Even in the Churches](#) talks of hope too, in the area of gender identity.

Facebook Sea of Faith in Australia: Rather than pick an entry I'll just say that there are many postings and shared links. Well worth a look.

sofiatalk No new postings.

**Science & Religion**

*Greg Spearritt's selection of recent scientific research that might illuminate your views of religion, belief and practice.*

**The veiled truth**

Contrary to the opinions of courts in the US, UK and Canada, it is easier to determine the truthfulness of a woman wearing a headscarf or even a veil that leaves only her eyes exposed than a woman wearing no head covering at all, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

cont/...

## Science &amp; Religion (continued)

The study is believed to be the first to look into the effects of religious garments on lie detection. [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/06/160628123603.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/06/160628123603.htm)

**Religion and the evolution of chickens**

Chickens were domesticated from Asian jungle fowl around 6,000 years ago. Since domestication they have acquired a number of traits that are valuable to humans, including those concerning appearance, reduced aggression and faster egg-laying. A new study combines DNA from archaeological chicken bones with statistical modelling to suggest that these traits became significantly more common around 1000 CE.

Study author Anders Eriksson explains how religion may have been involved in chicken evolution:

This significant intensification of chicken and egg production has been linked to Christian fasting practices, originating with the Benedictine Monastic Order, which disallowed the consumption of meat from four-legged animals during fasting periods, but the restrictions did not extend to birds or eggs. These dietary rules were adopted across Europe and applied to all segments of society around 1000 AD.

Eriksson notes that other factors are likely to have contributed also, however, such as urbanization, the introduction of the more efficient agricultural practices and a warmer climate.

[www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/05/170502204556.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/05/170502204556.htm)

**Spare the praise, spoil the child**

A four-week study in which parents were instructed to give their child five pieces of praise each day, alongside catching their child's good behaviour, saw an improvement in the child's wellbeing and behaviour when compared to a control group.

[www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/05/170506185832.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/05/170506185832.htm)

Point of view

## A Strange Glimmer Of Hope

*Robert Culbard provides the first in a series of three articles focusing on aspects of contemporary religion.*

Recently I was captivated by reading the comments of someone who had re-read George Eliot's *Middlemarch*:

But in revisiting *Middlemarch* in middle age, the melancholy I experience in reading its final pages is augmented by a strange glimmer of hope, even optimism. I see in it now what I could not see as a young person: that wisdom is always being acquired, and is never fully accomplished.

The above suggested to me that, even as we get older, our own limited lives might perchance contain the possibility of acquiring further wisdom. Retirement — its privileges and opportunities — reiterates that it is only a child who believes that a grown-up has stopped growing.

As a secondary school teacher of philosophy and ethics, I occasionally referred my sixth form students to the work and words of the late American writer Ronald Dworkin. Even though Dworkin's prime focus was on legal philosophy and, therefore, possibly more useful for law studies than religious philosophy and ethics, he obviously has major relevance to the question of human rights and, within that, the matter of values and religious experience.

Ronald Dworkin's focus, of course, is not on traditional or systemic religion, or overt religious experience, but on how he conceives and expresses the "meaning of life" and what has been called "the sublimity of nature", as well as those values which transcend individual religious preferences — what may be termed universal values. These ideas and their practical values go beyond the traditional religious expressions that incorporate belief and obedience to a god or gods.

It seems to me that Ronald Dworkin is saying that we come to an understanding of objective values (those that have meaning and practical value) and then compare our ideas about god(s) with a divine being we then seek to worship as an extension of those ideas. In this, he

would echo philosophers such as Daniel C. Dennett, who consider that religion is part of that branch of learning known as 'Phenomenology'. For Dennett, religion is a human phenomenon, a construct of the human mind that has developed with human social evolution.

One of Dworkin's conclusions is, therefore, that if there is any 'religious' basis at the foundation of ethics (human moral behaviour), then that basis is a "religion without god", a religion without creed, chapels, worship or salvation/redemption.

Ronald Dworkin's personal philosophy seems to suggest that he would be sceptical of a Christianity that simply casts-off the belief in a cosmic or personal god, but continues with the practices and allegiances that derive from such a belief. This is a form of religious faith wherein we discard belief in a 'real' god (the god of the theists, or the 'realists'), but continue to hold an allegiance to the infrastructure and institutions established by that belief and the practices developed by and within it.

By extension, this would mean that a "godless Christianity", or a Christianity that wishes to retain the Christian church without its fundamental and historical belief in a god who is 'real' (and, of course, the ritualistic and ethical practices essentially based on this belief), is a form of "false consciousness".

In the past few years I have been a recipient and reader of *Sofia* and *Portholes*, the magazine and newsletter respectively of the British Sea of Faith movement. I am also conversant with the Australian Sea of Faith *Bulletin* (see my two published articles *Surfing the Sea of Faith*, and *Is God back?*). Through these publications, as well as attendance at regional group meetings and conferences of the British movement, I have become aware that some persons within the movement have expressed their disbelief in a cosmic or personal

god whilst, at the same time, they have retained their office within membership of, or simply regular attendance at, a Christian church.

So too, such persons seem quite comfortable with the language, liturgy, music, worship, architecture and 'religious spaces' of a Christian church. By implication, that would suggest an established church where "keeping the rumour of god alive" is accompanied by a "leap of faith" rather than any specific belief. This further suggests an existential wrestle without the possibility of providing a satisfactory outcome.

Readers of this article will be familiar with the writings of Dr Don Cupitt, the Cambridge philosopher of religion. Don Cupitt would share the same non-realist view of god as Daniel Dennett (see above). This view has led Don Cupitt to search for ways to change the traditional understanding of Christianity — revising, adapting and re-formulating the Christian message in an attempt to retain a contemporary relevance, as well offering a place of being, for those persons who have lived much of their lives

within the bosom of Christianity and the institutional cloisters of its churches.

Therefore, where, if anywhere, can the Sea of Faith movement legitimately go in order to further pursue its more or less original intention — to disentangle god from religion?

Is the Sea of Faith simply a collection of those persons who are content with a gentle meander through the green and pleasant pastures of selective doubt about religion, faith or spirituality, without seriously — even threateningly — questioning this doubt, or seeking to settle and put down deep roots in the brown fields of non-realism.

As with the person who re-read Eliot's *Middlemarch*, those who have the courage and endurance to sail, or surf, on the Sea of Faith might experience a form of melancholia for the things that once seemed the very stuff of life, but a melancholy that is "augmented by a strange glimmer of hope."

"Every limit is a beginning as well as ending." (George Eliot, at the end of *Middlemarch*)

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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 - [sofme1b@yahoo.com.au](mailto:sofme1b@yahoo.com.au)

15 June 2017

Peter Sanders ([Uniting Church in Australia](#))  
"Pondering the Universe."

20 July 2017

Paul Tonson (Progressive Agnostic Christian)  
"The Faith-Freethought Divide is a False Dichotomy."

17 August 2017

Jennifer Jaeger ([Ankh Antiquarian Books](#))  
"Aspects of Kingship in the Old Kingdom of Egypt."

21 September 2017

Reem Sweid ([Muslims for Progressive Values](#))  
"Can Islam be a progressive religion?"

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Postlude

## God

by Beryl Meyers

How would I define God?

I see God as the word we humans use to provide an external reference to our inner experiences.

Not everyone needs such an external reference, but even those of us who don't, will often use that word God as a form of shorthand. For example, when we say, "This is in God's hands now," perhaps what we are really saying is "I can do absolutely nothing about this situation except wait and see." That is a bit too scary to admit to, so we handball the problem into the hands of 'God'.

Or if we say, "God bless you" to someone, we are in fact wishing that person all the best, or perhaps thanking them for something. Again, it is easier for some folk to use the word 'God' than to personally offer our *own* good wishes or thanks.

Those examples are relatively innocuous. But when it comes to such statements as "God wants me to do this" or "I am doing this work for God," things get a bit hairier. Here, the

reluctance to take ownership of our own thoughts and intentions borders into dangerous territory. We begin to (gratuitously) claim extra authority to back up our own inner desires or intentions.

I see this as a cowardly way out. Why not just say you intend to perform this or that action, or this kind of work? Why hide behind the apron of 'God'? Why not take full responsibility for your actions for yourself? That way you get to claim kudos for the results when things turn out right as well.

So, if you ask me how I define God, I would say it is a word in our language rather than a factual, objective, external being. It is a word used by humans when they feel unsure of themselves, or inadequate, or timid — too afraid to claim responsibility or accept defeat.

I'd prefer to see humans hold their heads up high, put some steel into their backbone and re-claim their power, responsibility and intention.

Let's stop hiding behind that word God — it is *just* a word

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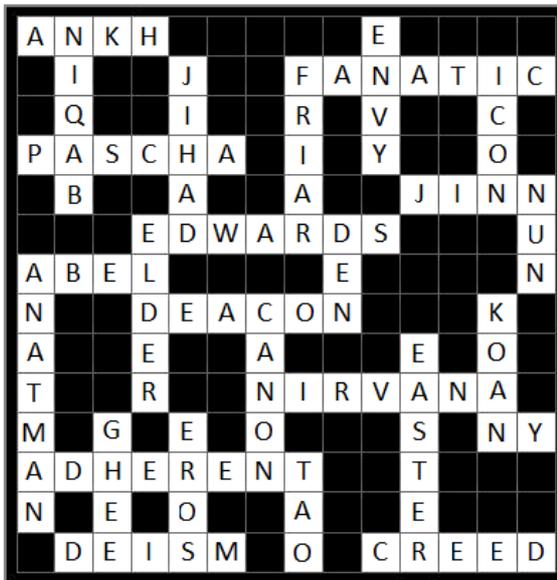
Epilogue



Dusk, Philip Island, Victoria

photo Robin Ford

**SoFiA Crossword #28**

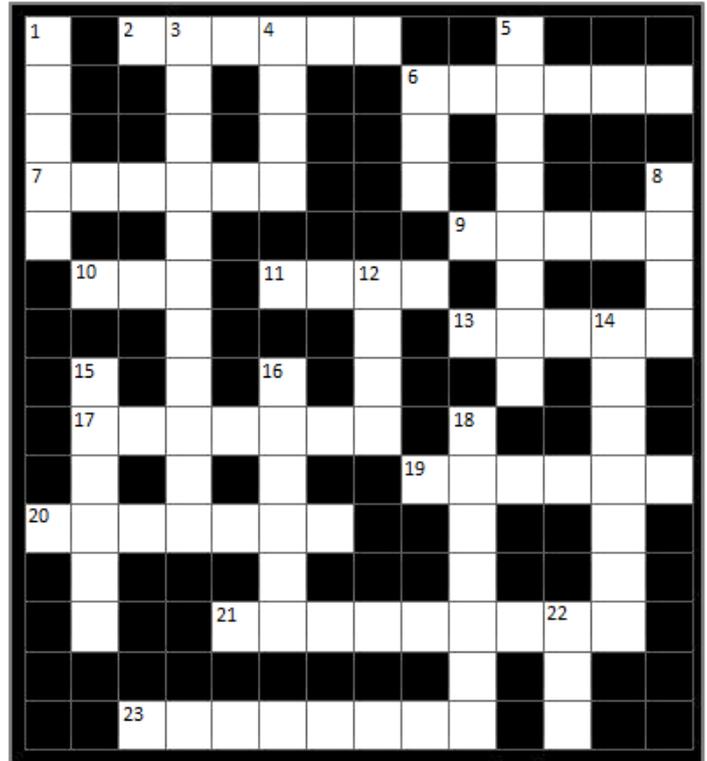


Theme: behaviour

**Across**

- 2. Indifferent to behavioural standards
- 6. Principles governing behaviour
- 7. Principles for righteous action
- 9. Intentional action leading to future consequences (Buddhism)
- 10. Strike out at
- 11. Obligation
- 13. Consciousness of one's own dignity
- 17. One with an overinflated self-assessment
- 19. Feeling or showing great care
- 20. Intentional behaviour causing harm or suffering
- 21. Explanation by reference to some purpose or end
- 23. Restraint from excessive vanity

**SoFiA Crossword #29** Prepared by Greg Spearritt



**Down**

- 1. Humiliation caused by wrong or foolish actions
- 3. One who has a contempt for humanity
- 4. Regrets
- 5. Moral system combining a warrior ethos, knightly piety and courtly manners
- 6. Blunder
- 8. Act with uncontrolled anger
- 12. Skill and sensitivity in dealing with others
- 14. Behaviour showing seriousness and self-control
- 15. Behave treacherously
- 16. Goodness
- 18. Faithfulness
- 22. Prevent another from speaking

## 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.....