

# SOFiA

## Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

### Second Thoughts on Secularisation

With the publication of the very popular book *The Secular City* by Harvey Cox, secularisation became more visible to a wider population. Secularisation is the idea that the world is inevitably becoming less and less religious. If traditional societies divided reality up into religious and secular, then the domain of the secular is increasing and that of the religious is decreasing.

There is no doubt that religious observance, as measured by such things as church attendance, has been decreasing for some time. It could be that attending an hour service on Sunday mornings at a mainline Protestant or Catholic church is an old-style form of religion and that new forms are emerging. Is religion inevitably disappearing, or just changing its form over time? In other words, is secularisation an ideology or an empirical description of historical change?

In exploring the issue of secularisation, it is helpful to distinguish between three levels: society as a whole, religious organisations within a society, such as churches, and individuals.

Secularisation is essentially a sociological theory and Peter Berger was one of its most important advocates, until he completely changed his mind. Here is how he describes his current thinking:

“My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false. The world today, with some exceptions, is as furiously religious as ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists, loosely labelled secularisation theory, is essentially mistaken. In my early work, I

contributed to this literature. I was in good company. Most sociologists of religion had similar views and we had good reasons for upholding them. Some of the writing we produced still stands up. Although the term ‘secularisation theory’ refers to works from the 50’s and 60’s, the key idea can be traced right back to the Enlightenment. The idea is simple. Modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals. And it’s precisely this key idea that turned out to be wrong.”

Peter Berger thinks that religion is alive and well in most of the world; it’s just that Western intellectual elites and Western Europe remain secular exceptions.

Linda Woodhead is a younger sociologist who explains secularisation very well (see the link below).

The book *God is Back. How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge provides concrete details to challenge the secularisation thesis. Religion has flourished in the US because it ceased to be “established” (allied to the throne). In China, Christianity is popular as it is seen to be allied with business success on the American model, which Chinese aim to emulate.

<https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/podcast-linda-woodhead-on-the-secularisation-thesis/>

*The Editor*

# About SOFiA

SOFiA (The Sea of Faith in Aotearoa) is a network of people interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of values, meaning and spirituality. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives.

SOFiA is not a church: it is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and perspectives. SOFiA itself has no creed; its members come from many faiths and from those with no attachment to any religious institution.

If you are in sympathy with our aims, you are most welcome to join us; receive our Newsletter, attend a local group and/or come to our Conferences.

We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from "Sea of Faith", the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

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Our national Committee oversees the work of SOFiA.

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Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Ian Harris, Suzi Thirwell, Yvonne Curtis and Peter Cowley. Also Fred Marshall and Noel Cheer (both deceased).

**Publication deadline** for the next Newsletter is 7 August 2020.

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Mrs. Jones got a little too used to watching online worship from home.

# SOFiA News

## From the Committee

Two new members have been co-opted onto the national SOFiA committee: Roger Wiig and John Thornley.

### Roger Wiig



Retired Presbyterian minister Roger Wiig has served the Church in Aotearoa, Australia and the U.K., as a Christian educator, curriculum writer, parish minister and newspaper editor. In Melbourne he taught post-graduate courses in Educational Administration. He was parish minister in St Andrew's, Palmerston North, St Andrew's Uniting Church in Brisbane, and West Wickham Methodist Church in London. In London he served on the Advisory Board of the Three Faith's Forum bringing together Jews, Christians, and Muslims to deepen their understanding of each other and develop ways of cooperating. He has always been interested in connecting modern biblical and theological scholarship with the worship life of congregations and the realities of daily living.

### John Thornley



Why did I join the committee? It is because I owe much to a lifelong association with the SOFiA movement.

As Gillian and I live in a provincial centre, Palmerston North, we miss the mental stimulus usually found in larger urban centres. Regular contact with a progressive Christian community keeps our faith alive.

We enter our 80<sup>th</sup> year this year, and tramping is one factor in keeping us physically fit. SOFiA and other progressive events look after our spirit.

Gillian and I come from strong Methodist families. Both of us were active in the Student Christian Movement, meeting up first at their annual conference. I was President of the Wellington SCM, while Gillian was Secretary to the Canterbury SCM when Don Brash was President.

In the late 60s, Gillian joined me in Trinidad where we married, and enjoyed a honeymoon on the island of Tobago. I worked for 3 years with the SCM, and Gillian was lecturer in Maths at the local campus of the University of the West Indies. It was 6 years after both Jamaica and Trinidad became independent, and Bob Marley began his calling as singing prophet and poet for Third World peoples. It was a heady time to be living overseas.

For the next decade we lived in Nelson, then Wellington, with two children, in editing (for John), and then teaching in Correspondence School and Polytechnic classes.

After Gillian and I moved to Palmerston North in 1980 for Gillian to start her 20 year lectureship in Mathematics at Massey University, I was free to do what I wanted, so I followed my bliss: part time teaching, including 4 years at Hato Paora College – a lucky immersion in Maori life – 8 years with the Workers Education Association in Palmerston North, and 6 years Executive Officer with the Community Services Council. All were part time positions – I never wanted to be full time in paid work.

Other involvements included adult education tutoring, Vice-President in the NZ Methodist Church in 2000, Lay Preaching for over 50 years, management of the NZ Hymnbook Trust from 2002 to 2015, editor/publisher of *Music in the Air* – forty issues exploring spirituality in the arts, mainly music.

For over 20 years I have hosted our church's access radio programme on Manawatu People's People. This has been a very enjoyable calling, with opportunity to share talks, local church news, but mainly, music of a wide variety including NZ hymns, and popular music drawn from an extensive collection of vinyl and CD recordings. It is this that has led to the publication of articles in the SOF Newsletters this year, under the title of Theopoetics.

I'm the oldest of five children from the late Robert and Dorothy Thornley. As ageing quickens its pace, family links are vital to our years of hope-full living in whatever years are given to us!

## 2020 Annual Conference

The June meeting discussed the nature and format of Conference. It currently plans to hold a one-day Conference in or near Wellington on 7 November. There are to be two keynote speakers and the Annual General Meeting. More details in future newsletters.

# Reinventing the Sacred

*Summary of a talk by Leo Hobbs given to the Auckland Sea of Faith group 21 February 2010*

## Spirituality

Sacredness is part of human spirituality which I take to mean sensitivity to certain non-material aspects of human experience. It can range from the simplest understanding that “we do not live by bread alone”, through the occurrence of spontaneous transcendent or peak experiences, prompted, for example, by a piece of music, to profound mysticism. Spirituality is an innate quality quite distinct from religion. Like all subjective experiences it is a quality which lies in a non-material domain. If we want to have a coherent world view, we have somehow to reconcile this awareness of the non-material with our understanding of the universe, of the nature of reality.

## Reality and science

Some take the view that reality consists only of the objects which can be studied by science. This has led to the view that everything from societies down through people, our organs, cells, and the molecules of chemistry, is ultimately to be explained in terms of the movement of atoms. This is “Reductionism” and leads to nihilistic statements such as that from Steven Weinberg, “The more we understand the universe, the more pointless it all seems”, a view of reality which offers nothing constructive for our living. But the “laws” of science are not immutable and science can claim no monopoly of the language we may choose to describe the universe. However, whatever language we choose, our descriptions must withstand being tested against our experience.

## Cosmic evolution as a progression in relationship

We can choose to view cosmic evolution as a succession of creative processes. Starting from the big bang, we see the formation of primordial hydrogen, the evolution of stars and galaxies, and the synthesis of the heavier chemical elements by stars, the appearance of planets and complex molecules, and on to the emergence of life. On this view, each one of us embodies the



whole history of the cosmos, an awe-inspiring thought!

I like to describe this as a progression in *transcendent relationship* in which things at one level of complexity have combined to form new things whose properties may be quite different from those of the constituent parts. Each new entity carries the potential for further complexity and diversity by changing the environment for everything else. There is ceaseless and endless creativity which derives from the nature of all the inter-relationships present.

This story of the evolution of the universe and planetary life in terms of transcendent relationship, in contrast to the nihilistic view, helps us to relate to the whole of creation in a world in which everything is connected. It is told in a different language from that of reductionist science but such a language is necessary for the story to make sense in terms which are relevant to our living.

## The role of love in human evolution

At the human level our relationships are a major factor in our wellbeing, at its best when love, compassion and justice are present. Darwin recognised the role of love in human evolution. In his second book, *The Descent of Man*, he referred frequently to love, moral sensitivity, and cooperation, and hardly at all to “survival of the fittest”.

The same point is developed strongly by H Maturana and F Varela in *The Tree of Knowledge*. They describe love as the biological foundation of human living. Without love, without acceptance of others living beside us, there is no social process and, therefore, no humanness.

## Complexity and the emergence of life

Stuart Kauffman has written extensively about the behaviour of highly complex systems of molecules, cells, and organisms, and their role in the evolution of life and the biosphere. Increasingly, scientists are accepting that physics can't explain all the properties of such complex systems which may exhibit self-organised order with the appearance of new and sometimes unpredictable properties. Such properties are said to be *emergent*. (Life itself is perhaps the most obvious emergent property.) They don't

break any laws of physics but can't be deduced from the properties of the components. There seem to be laws of organisation which apply to complex systems, in particular to the evolution of the biosphere. Self-organised structures can evolve without evolution in the Darwinian sense having always to feature.

Paul Davies is another who emphasises the significance of life, consciousness, and mind, as fundamental emergent features of the universe. He favours the view that the universe is somehow destined to bring forth conscious life, that it must be such as to give rise to observers who then become participators. The universe may even have engineered its own self-awareness.

## Mind and consciousness

The pinnacle of the evolutionary process so far is the emergence of conscious minds in the higher animals. Consciousness is a major unsolved mystery. In spite of the progress in neuroscience nobody can say how brain states can give rise to the sensations of our mental experience. (Brain is not identical to Mind.) Some philosophers of mind attempt to escape the problem by saying we only think we are conscious! It would seem more reasonable to take consciousness as a given because no human experience can happen outside it. Perhaps Descartes should have said, “I experience, therefore I am”.

Our thoughts and attitudes can lead to change in ourselves and in the external world. We are agents of change. Kauffman writes, “While life, agency, value, and doing, presumably have physical explanations in any specific organism, *the evolutionary emergence of these cannot be derived from or reduced to physics alone*. Thus life, agency, value, and doing are real in the universe”. It follows that our reality contains material and non-material elements, the physical things we infer as existing outside us and the non-physical qualities of our mental experience, including our spirituality.

## Reinventing the sacred

Kauffman has written extensively about the need to move away from reductionist science. In his recent book, *Reinventing the*

*Sacred*, he writes that part of this will be "...to heal the wound derived from the false reductionist belief that we live in a world of fact without values, and help us jointly build a global ethic". Kauffman finds reverence in the ceaseless and unpredictable creativity in the unfolding of nature, a creativity which he says is "God enough for me". He also writes:

"I also feel parts of the religious person's sense of awe. I sense the solace that prayer to a transcendent God brings. But I don't believe in a transcendent God. I do believe in this new scientific worldview .....even without talking about God, this new scientific worldview brings with it a sense of membership with all of life and a responsibility for the planet that's largely missing in our secular world."

This new understanding of science leads naturally to the recognition of spirituality as a feature of reality which we don't have to consign to some other-worldly realm. Spirituality belongs naturally within a holistic world view. Our sense of the sacred may be an expression of a deep inter-connectedness with all that is. It is hardly surprising that people, when contemplating the wonder of creation, have felt the need for gods to explain it. *Leo Hobbis*

## Call of Life

*Abbreviated from a reflection by Brian Ellis at the Takapuna Methodist Church on 8 March 2020.*

### Abram's Faith

You have to admire Abram. He was the first migrant mentioned in the bible. He left the city he would have known all his life for somewhere unknown. He was not a young man either. Neither was he alone, taking his family with him. That would have taken great courage and faith.

Beginning a journey is often referred to in the Bible. We can think of the disciples as they first followed Jesus and then travelled to other lands, to the area we know as Turkey, and then Paul to Rome.

But what was that faith of Abram? Faith that he would live, that he would prosper, even in the desert and in a strange land!

Paul says that Abram received the promise that he would be heir of the world, not through the law but through the righteousness that comes by faith. He had Faith in Life itself.

### What is Life?

Perhaps many of you have heard or asked the question "What is Life", "What is the meaning of Life?" Does Life have a meaning? What do you think?

Leo Tolstoy wrote in *War & Peace*: "Life is everything, Life is God." William Golding a British novelist and poet, in *Free Fall* in 1959, wrote: "Life is nothing, because it is everything."

Don Cupitt (a fellow and former Dean of Emmanuel College Cambridge, who I met in 2016), puts it this way:

"The word Life comprehensively reminds us of what we are and from what angle we see everything. We invoke everything about the human condition, human experience and knowledge, and a point of view about all living things with an intense interest in life.

In the past we constructed a God-centered, Being-centered and knowledge-centered vision of everything.

But today it seems that the Life-Centered point of view serves us best."

### Different World Views

What had changed and Why. Why did this view change?

After the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and development of modern philosophy came the realization that history involves real and deep change. By 1870 life had emerged as a new religious object.

Two centuries ago, Hegel described a process whereby the entire supernatural order entered into this world, coming down to earth and being diffused through the life of ordinary people. We refer to this as the Incarnation of Christ.

Don Cupitt says we should not regret this process as it is part of the working-out of Christianity's own logic. After Protestantism, the next step is the religion of ordinary life. The "traditional" church sort of Christianity should rejoice, not complain, to see it at last

being elbowed aside by its own fulfilment. Just recall the saying of Jesus in Matt 6: 26 about “the birds who do not sow and do not reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much better than they?”

Some, perhaps most modern people, would say our Life is what we make of it. This is a non-realist view of life. I hope that what is meant by that term will become clearer shortly.

From about 1960 the new religion of life - of ordinary life - has become the effective religion of ordinary people. Such phrases as ‘All life is sacred’, and ‘We must have faith in life’, and ‘Make the most of it while it lasts’ have become common.

For the Danish Philosopher, Kierkegaard in the 1850’s, Christianity wasn’t a set of doctrines, but a communication concerning a way of existing.

He also said: “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” “The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.” and “People demand freedom of speech as a compensation for the freedom of thought which they seldom use.”

Another example of how we take a life-centred view is of death itself. So the funeral service has become ‘A Thanksgiving for the life of a person’, or a ‘Celebration of their life.’ Burial grounds are no longer the resting place of those “asleep” waiting for the Day of General Resurrection, but a place where they are restored into the biological life of this world.

Ludwig Wittgenstein said:

“The spirit behind the Sabbath – ‘The Day of Rest’, is to take time out for reflection and re-creation, to nurture and be nurtured by family, to savour our existence and Godness inherent in being alive.”

This is surely central to a rounded life, whatever day we choose for that. Faith comes first and belief is something that is derived from faith.

For Paul Tillich, Faith is “ultimate concern” in contrast to matters of no great importance. This is what all religions are about. How is that expressed? It is in and about Life and a way of living.

Ian Harris points out that Jesus put the shortcomings of consumerism in an economics-obsessed society this way: “What will it profit you to gain the whole world and lose your own soul”. In other words, life is not just about having more: it is about being more.

## The Sacredness of Life

So now we see all life is sacred, and we must have faith in life, to live a full life, to make the most of it while it lasts.

There are two ways in which life differs markedly from God. They arise from the fact that the “omni” attributes of God are quite different from those of Life. God was transcendent, simple, holiness, perfect and sovereign over all things. Whereas Life is finite, temporal, immanent and all inclusive, baggy and includes all the opposites – bliss and wretchedness, comedy and tragedy, good and evil, holiness and profanity, all bundled together. The result is that saying ‘Yes’ to life is different to saying ‘Yes’ to God. When we say ‘Yes’ to life we say Amen to a package deal, and here is the point: the so-called Problem of Evil does not arise. We are required to renounce the victim psychology and the old impulse to complain about being treated unfairly.

On the other hand, those who say ‘Yes’ to God take sides. They commit to a dualistic view of life, at every point choosing this or rejecting that. Inevitably there is great difficulty with suffering and evil; it becomes difficult to maintain that violence and death are no more than intruders into a life world that was originally intended to work best without them. That view effectively is a choice of hope that one day they will be spectacularly vindicated. This is a view of the Realist.

The second way Life differs from God is that - unless we believe in a ‘Life Force’ – those who love life are Non-realists. Life is not a great Being that exists utterly distinct from us. Life is just what happens in our human world, business, pleasure, conversation. Life is communication; it is what we make of it. A religion of commitment to life is therefore the only fully immediate and non-dualistic religion. It

makes no distinction between our outer life and our inner life, be it secular or sacred, or between loving God and loving it all, or loving one's neighbour. Neither does it distinguish between temporal and eternal concerns, it simply calls for an unreserved ethical response to the Call of Life, here and now.

This surely is the response Jesus demanded in Luke 9: 57-62. One said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Life is chaotic: we can't constrain or limit it. But in the way we commit ourselves ethically to life and to our neighbour we can make sense of it.

## The Religion of Life

So it should be very clear to us that this Religion of Life is very different from traditional Theism, different to the religious outlook most of us were brought up with and still persist today.

This replaces two great all encompassing ideas: 1) God, and 2) the finite or 'created' order we usually called the World.

These are replaced with a single idea: "Life". It is a single continuous whole of which we are seamlessly part. It has no outside, nothing is excluded. Life is simply everything.

So if we have faith in God we are really saying we have faith in Life. "Life is everything, Life is God".

*Brian Ellis*

## Meditative Moments

What follows is a summary of *Breathing Through the Whole Body: The Buddha's Instructions on Integrating Mind, Body and Breath* by Will Johnson (2012). It was provided for us by Arthur Wells of the Christchurch "Rethinking Religion" group. It might help us reflect more deeply on the practice of meditation and also increase our

awareness that 'religion' is much broader than Christianity.

## Meditating the Breath

Three Pali Suttas attributed to the Buddha himself are about meditating on the breath, the Satipatthana Sutta, the Anupanasati Sutta, and the Kayagatasati Sutta. The meditator is instructed in all three Suttas to first to "go to a quiet place" where he or she will not be disturbed or distracted, to sit in a way that the "spine remains upright," and begin to "observe the passage of the breath" at two very specific spots, the area of the nostrils (where the breath enters and leaves the body) or the abdomen (where one can attend to the rise and fall of the belly). These instructions are said to calm the tendency of the mind to jump from thought to thought, enabling us to remain more present and aware.

## Whole Body Awareness

However another statement about the breath in all three Suttas is overlooked in contemporary Buddhist practice, says Johnson. The Buddha also encouraged people as follows: As you breathe in, breathe in through the whole body, and as you breathe out, breathe out through the whole body. This passage has been the subject of debate among scholars and teachers, some insisting that it refers to the whole body of the breath, meaning the whole sequence of filling the lungs and expelling air from the lungs. Others think the Buddha was referring to the physical body itself. This is Johnson's view, supported by the contemporary Buddhist scholar and translator Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who says "the step of breathing in and out sensitive to the entire body relates to the many similes in the suttas depicting jhana as a state of whole-body awareness." Johnson goes on to say:

"Keeping our entire attention focussed on one small part of the body can significantly help develop our powers of concentration (samadhi)... Concentration alone, however, has never been presented as the final goal of Buddhist practice. It is a very important stepping stone on the path, a necessary skill that allows the practitioner to move easily and gracefully into the unusual terrain of panna (or wisdom) where



the mind doesn't just remain concentrated but is actually able to confront its essence nakedly, directly and boldly. To enter the world of panna the practitioner will want to open himself or herself to everything that can be experienced, not just to one isolated aspect of it: the whole of the visual field that appears before the eyes (not just an isolated object in it), the whole field of sounds (not just a single sound in the overall symphony), the whole of the mind (not just the most superficial dimension that is expressed through thought), and the whole of the body (not just one small part of it). And this is the terrain that we are ushered into by the practice of breathing through the whole body" (pp.5-6).

Johnson says this is a universe in which everything is moving. Electrons spin around their nuclei of atoms, unable to stop. The universe itself is expanding. Our bodies are full of tiny rivers of blood and lymph as well as digestive juices. Stillness in real life doesn't exist – it is at best a relative term. The upright spine is actually not still, it moves with the breath. Subtle movements occur at each joint in the vertebral column as we breathe. In fact the entire body, as we breathe, is in a state of subtle, constant motion.

## Stillness?

In meditating people often try to sit completely still, as if imitating a stone statue, but this is a mistake. They force themselves to become overly still and rigidly frozen, at great cost to their ability to come alive in their practice. Stillness should refer to a quality of mind, not to the way we hold our body. While sitting we should feel subtle movements throughout the body. As we notice these gentle movements the mind actually quietens more, whereas if we brace ourselves against them the mind becomes more stirred up and the body loses touch with itself. Any areas of frozen tension in our bodies resist the force of the breath that wants to move that part of the body. Tensing the body makes it become still, whereas in relaxing the body everything starts to move again. "Surrendering to the inherent motion in all things, we allow resilient motion throughout the body."

The stillness in stillness is not the real stillness. Only when there is stillness in movement can the spiritual rhythm appear which pervades heaven and earth. *Taoist text*

All deeply relaxed breathing is initiated by the diaphragm, which is as big as a dinner-plate, below the lungs and above the viscera. After the heart, this is the most important muscle that is keeping us alive, as it flattens downwards with the inbreath and domes upwards with the outbreath. As the diaphragm flattens, drawing fresh air into the lungs, it also pushes down on the viscera, making the lower belly bulge outwards. People who hate looking tubby may resist this movement, but the swelling of the lower belly is a helpful sensation in meditation. [There's no place for vanity in meditation. Let the belly 'hang loose'!-- AW].

Because of blocking tensions in the body, it takes many people a long time to become aware of the movements in the whole body caused by the forceful action of the diaphragm. It's like the ripples from dropping a stone into water, or the wind making waves in the ocean. Our "watery" bodies are similar, able to experience this ripple and flow. Allow all of the movements that naturally want to occur. Surrender to those movements.

In meditation every part of the body should be in motion, says Johnson. The body is entirely composed of living tissue, so it needs to move resiliently with the force of the breath. Resistance to the force of the breath can exist anywhere in the body, but the head and the neck are particularly prone to this stubborn, blocking of movement. Involuntary thoughts and rambling monologues lead to a stiffening of the neck muscles in order to hold the head still. Our neck and head should be allowed to move with each breath. When the body moves naturally like this the mind begins slowing down. Exposed to the constant, gentle motions of the body, the inner monologue lacks a stable stage for its activity.

## Letting Go

Johnson says that the primary action of meditation is a letting go, a yielding of patterns of tension that cry out for release. This letting go, he says, "may feel like a kind of free-fall through space. The more the

whole body participates in the motions of the breath, the quicker tension is released.... A hundred times during an hour's sitting the mind sneaks in like a cat burglar, steals your awareness away without you even knowing, takes you off on a thought journey during which you forget all about breath, about body, even about vision and sound. During these journeys, breath gets more tied up and body more frozen. And then a hundred times an hour, you wake up to this intrusion and bring your awareness back to the possibilities of letting go again.... What could be more simple? What could be more challenging? Every breath you take offers you a clear choice: either you let go, surrender to, and cooperate with the force of the breath, or you brace yourself to resist it" (pp.34-35).

Each breath is unique. No two breaths, like no two snowflakes, are ever exactly alike. They may be laboured or free, long or short, large or small, smooth or rough. Each breath is accompanied by a wave of sensations passing deep into the body, none of which are identical each time we breathe. Every breath is accompanied also by subtle changes in our emotional state, also usually unnoticed. You can feel each breath in your head and neck, shoulders, back, arms, hips, thighs and feet, throughout every joint, throughout every muscle, and throughout the skin especially, as it tingles and thrills to the flow of the breath. No part of the body need be left out. We can only work with this body, our own unique body that we bring to the cushion. No-one had a body that is perfect, but all bodies are able to balance and settle and enjoy their own unique energy and felt life. More and more pin-points of sensation in the body appear, like stars appearing at night to fill the whole sky with brightness.

Upright balance is never a static state. It can only be entered into as a play of movement that never stops. The spine is not like a Greek column but is flexible, with 24 joints that exist solely for the purpose of movement, designed to move in an undulating way as we breathe. This should be experienced as full of fine and delicate sensations. If there are things we'd rather

not feel (our sadness, fear, even hope) we may dissociate ourselves from them by locking them away into areas of stillness in the head and neck, arms, hands, lower back or belly. Even our diaphragm can be locked up by fear. This is a kind of self-imposed paralysis. Only by bringing awareness to these locked up areas can we bring back movement and ease.

As you explore the possibilities of breathing through the whole body, you may alternate between periods in which you feel the entire body all at once, as a unified presence, and times when you move your awareness slowly through every part of the body. If the body feels too diffuse, return to moving your awareness through part by part again, resurrecting the body once again, sensation by sensation.

*Arthur Wells*

## Book Review

### The Universal Christ

By Richard Rohr Convergent Books, 2019

A good part of this book is concerned with the failure of churches to teach true Christianity. Rohr instances the creeds which sandwich Jesus' whole life and teaching into a comma between birth and death. Not surprisingly, Christianity has often failed to imitate Jesus' life and teachings. There are other omissions in the creeds – no mention of love, forgiveness, hope or service. The emphasis is all on theology, not praxis, no hint of a simple lifestyle, no indication of a Jesus who shows us how to be fully human. "In Jesus, God became part of our small, homely world and entered into human limits and ordinary-nesses" p.110. Jesus is the guarantee that divinity can reside within humanity.

But worse than omissions in the creeds, says Rohr, was the limitation of Christ to one man, and the remainder of his book sets out to show an alternative interpretation. For Rohr, Jesus is the map for the time-bound and personal level of life. But Christ is the blueprint for all time, space and life

itself. The unique insight of Christianity, he says, is Incarnation, God's loving union with all of creation from the beginning. For Rohr there have been three "comings" – the act of creating the universe, Jesus, and the beloved community (the whole of creation). Matter and spirit have never been separate. They reveal and manifest each other. You could call this an incarnational world view. Rohr's code word for that is Christ. Resurrection then becomes, not a one-time

miracle in Jesus' life, but a pattern of creation a universal principle, incarnation taken to its logical conclusion.

Rohr offers some suggestions for meditative practices to ground our lives in the incarnation world view. His style is very readable, and I found the book a worthwhile read.

*Margaret Gwynn*

## A Bad Boy in Perspective

With the exception of Jesus, possibly the most misunderstood of all Biblical identities is that villain of the Nativity, Herod the Great.

Despite the fact that Herod's life is better documented than any other figure from classical antiquity apart from Alexander of Macedon, he is continually misrepresented as a sinister figure of great evil, synonymous with the powers of darkness that supposedly opposed all that the Incarnation symbolized. From traditional images in children's Bible stories to the absurdities of cinematic portrayals, Herod, the most outstanding of all Judaea's many kings, is seen as a crazed baby killer.

We have only Matthew's Gospel to account for this although the detailed history of the Herodian dynasty as given by the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, makes it clear that in the latter stages of his life, appalling diseases affected that aging king's reason and stained the record of his reign with a catalogue of atrocities. But by the standards of his day he was no worse than many another. His close friend in the west, Augustus Caesar, had a worse record in terms of judicial slaughterings and could not blame his ill health for deranged decision making.

Historians have long recognised that Matthew depicts Herod as a counterpart to the Egyptian pharaoh in Exodus decreeing the death of all Hebrew male babies. This was part of the Evangelist's attempt to draw parallels between Moses and Jesus in order to persuade early Christians that the old

order had been superseded by the coming of the Lord; his life had mirrored that of the Law-giver himself. Matthew has the parents of Jesus flee with him into Egypt to escape the tyrannical king's decree. Subsequently, like Moses, Jesus comes out of Egypt to enter the Promised Land and throughout his career, a variety of events have resonances of the Exodus, from miraculous feeding of a multitude in the wilderness to instructions on how to live a good life, given from a mountain top.

A life-long fascination with the Herods meant that when called upon recently to address a U3A history group, I willingly did so with the first of that line as my subject. I ventured to suggest then that there may well have been an authentic element to the boy-killing tradition that has nothing to do with Matthew's tale.

According to Josephus, Herod ordered the execution of at least three of his several sons. The strangling of two young men, his much-loved twin heirs, Aristobulus and Alexander, supposedly for treason, shook Judaea and regions beyond when the news spread. When his first-born, Antipater, was also condemned, shortly before the old king died in agony at Jericho, the shock waves of this may well have meant that Herod was being muttered of as, "boy killer." His notoriety was enhanced by a final crazed order that he gave when he realised that his own demise was imminent.

Josephus describes how one son of each of Judaea's most prominent families was to be imprisoned in the amphitheatre at

Jericho and the whole lot to be butchered when the king's death was announced. This would ensure that when Augustus learned that his chief ally in the east had died, it would be truthfully reported that there had been great lamentation throughout the land. Fortunately for the young men awaiting their fate in a state of dire apprehension, the king's sister, Salome (not the one who danced for John the Baptist's head) had them all released. A manipulative and calculating individual, she was also thoroughly practical and knew that her dearest friend, the emperor's wife, Livia, would not have viewed such a massacre with any favour. Neither would Augustus who had put great emphasis on the maintenance of the Pax Romana throughout his empire.

By the time Herod's corpse was being borne in procession to burial at his fortress of Herodium very near Bethlehem, he was in all probability being recalled as the killer of sons. Matthew, writing some eighty years later, found this a convenient element to weave into his riveting account of Jesus' early life and a most convenient way of linking the Messiah with the Law-Giver.

Do such acts of violence make Herod a monster? He was indisputably cruel and violent in an age that is indelibly stamped with such but he was also losing all reason according to Josephus. Furthermore, he was paranoid and convinced by his appalling sister, Salome, that he was being plotted against by other members of his family. When compared with the illustrious Julius Caesar - great uncle of Augustus - Herod was comparatively mild. Caesar managed to win fame for his conquest of Gaul with the slaughter of at least one million. Unknown thousands of Gallic prisoners of war flooded the Roman slave markets thereafter.

Herod's legacy was a series of architectural marvels throughout his dominions, chief among them being the temple at Jerusalem, the largest and most spectacular place of worship in the entire empire with its thirty-five acres of glittering courtyards, porticos and the colossal sanctuary that supposedly housed the Holy One of Israel behind its elaborate tapestry.

It is likely that Herod was already being admirably spoken of as Great by the time he had been appointed *agonothete* - president of the Olympic Games - a role he held for twenty-four years. An ardent philhellene, he adorned his cities with the finest of Greek architectural forms and décor, dressed like any aristocratic Athenian or member of the Roman nobility, went clean-shaven except when the growing of a token beard was expected for major Jewish festivals and hob-nobbed with everyone from Cleopatra and Mark Antony to client kings of the near-East. A far cry from the hideous and scowling caricature, black-bearded and dripping with gold medallions as portrayed in every Hollywood movie.

But the killing of sons, of other family members? Again, we should see such acts in the context of antiquity. The Macedonian family of Alexander - a greater Great than Herod - is littered with incidents of sudden death that scarcely suggest anything resembling what we casually accept as family love. Josephus who makes plain his contempt for much that occurred under Herod, nevertheless permits a degree of sympathy to permeate his writing when he describes the dying king racked by agonies that were beyond all treatment and so fouled by disease that the stench of his breath meant his servants had to be put on an hourly rota to cope with its effects.

We may well assume that the Galilean healer, Jesus, would have looked on him with both pity and compassion had the opportunity of visiting him ever occurred.

*From a talk to a USA group by Norman Maclean*

Secularization simply bypasses and undercuts religion and goes on to other things. It has relativized religious world-views and rendered them innocuous. Religion has been privatized...The gods of traditional religions live on as the private fetishes or the patrons of congenial groups, but they play no role whatever in the public life of the secular metropolis.

Harvey Cox *The Secular City* p2