

# SOFiA

## Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

### The Joy of Living

There is a traditional wisdom that says “count your blessings.” When life deals you a blow, focus not on the blow but on all the positive things that you have. In that way you avoid descending into depression or despair.

**“Ours are the most fortunate generations that have ever lived. They are also the most fortunate generations that ever will.”** That is a quotation from George Monbiot, a journalist with the Guardian. I reacted with shock and awe when I first read it. Just let it sink in. Through numberless generations, humans have struggled to keep their heads above water and escape war, wild animals, famine, drought and disease. Today, most of us in the developed world have enough money to afford all the food we need. Now our problem is obesity and its health consequences rather than starvation. How amazingly fortunate we are to be living at this time!

From this you would expect that we would be way happier than those who came before us. When I look around me, I don't see this. Sure, there are innumerable popular songs that celebrate the elation that comes with falling in love. But there are very few that celebrate happiness in general. There's “Feelin' Groovy” (The 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge Song) which really does capture the simple joy of living and also Louis Armstrong's “What a Wonderful World.” Beyond that I have no suggestions.

As an Aucklander, I live close to the construction work for the Eastern Busway. The news media are full of complaints by

those who find that their access has changed or been temporarily halted. I think most people have little comprehension of the complexity involved in managing such a project and of how hard people are working to reduce the disruption to the public.

I could go on at length detailing the complaints that people articulate. Hospital Boards are protesting that budget cuts will compromise their ability to optimally care for patients. National are continually looking for flaws in Labour's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The news is full of people campaigning against what they regard as great injustices, but which are often minor in the grand scheme of things.

Let me briefly count a few blessings.

1. Manufactured goods. Complex products at astonishingly low prices. Supermarkets with endless aisles and a huge choice.
2. Songs. In the past people would have known a few folk songs. Today, I have a Spotify playlist with 374 songs, and I can choose from millions at no extra cost.
3. Google searches. No matter what you want to know, Google will find it for you. Previously we laboriously obtained information from Encyclopedia Britannica.
4. Social media. Using Zoom, I can be in touch with friends and relatives no matter where they are. Not long ago, I needed to record a message on tape and post it.
5. ebooks. Using Kindle, I can access and store thousands, often very cheaply.

*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.

## Committee

Our national Committee oversees the work of SOFiA.

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## Life Members

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

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

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Elijah and the widow of Zarephath updated...

**Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid...  
The toilet roll will not be used up and the  
handsoap will not run dry until the day the  
Lord releases you from quarantine."**



# SOFiA News

## 2020 AGM

This year's Annual General Meeting will be held on **Saturday 31st October 2020 at 2:30pm**. It will occur as a Zoom meeting, so you don't need to travel.

We will have a practice session for those new to Zoom on **Saturday 17th at 2:30** to enable as many people to get to grips with Zoom as possible.

Please register your attendance with Ian [ian.crumpton@gmail.com](mailto:ian.crumpton@gmail.com) for the AGM only or for the practice session and the AGM. Closer to the time Ian will email the Zoom access details to you.

## New Group in Christchurch

As most of you will be aware, the SOFiA group in Christchurch has folded. But our former national chairperson, Doug Sellman, has not been idle. A new group, called 'Rethinking Religion,' has been formed, drawing membership partly from the Sunday Gathering group. This is an encouraging development. The group managed to continue to meet during the lockdown by using Zoom. Doug provides minutes of each meeting, which help those who didn't attend to maintain their connection with the group and its thinking.

## Sir Lloyd Geering Scholarship in Religion

Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington marks a half century since its foundation. Since its beginnings, the Programme has trailblazed innovative and provocative research and teaching on religion in Aotearoa New Zealand. We are in the process of firming up this legacy for the next 50 years, and seek your help in making this happen.

You are all aware of our founding Professor of Religious Studies Sir Lloyd Geering. Sir Lloyd quickly established the Programme as a place of critical inquiry,

outstanding teaching, and prolific scholarly output. He has since been widely celebrated as one of New Zealand's foremost progressive thinkers and for his remarkable contributions to the scholarly study of religion.

Religious Studies at Victoria has maintained its reputation as a premier place for the study of religion. Its faculty continue in Sir Lloyd's footsteps, delivering outstanding teaching and cutting-edge research. As New Zealand becomes increasingly diverse, and religion grows in salience globally, we remain committed to investigating contemporary dynamics of religion and spirituality – exploring the big issues of human existence, and the breadth of religions in their interactions with politics and society, morality and ethics, and in the shaping of human imagination and experience.

We recently announced the launch of the Sir Lloyd Geering Scholarship in Religion. This scholarship has been established to honour Sir Lloyd's extraordinary career and legacy. The goal of the scholarship is to allow postgraduate students the opportunity to undertake excellent research on religion.

For many of our students, financial difficulty is a major hurdle to overcome. We know that scholarships can have a huge impact in helping talented students to achieve their academic dreams, allowing them to focus more intently on their studies and produce their very best work. Scholarships can make a transformational difference to students' lives, so they can go on to create great futures for themselves, their community, and the nation.

We are asking you to consider financially supporting the Sir Lloyd Geering Scholarship in Religion. By supporting this scholarship, now or as a gift in your will, you will help give promising students the opportunity of a lifetime to pursue their academic dreams.

We are already over halfway to our goal of raising at least \$200,000. A fund of this amount will enable the provision of a

substantial annual scholarship in perpetuity. We will be tremendously grateful for gifts of any size. Every bit helps, no matter how large or small. We make a commitment to all our donors that 100% of your gift goes directly to supporting scholarships, with no administration fees charged.

We hope you will consider this invitation. If you would like any additional information about the Sir Lloyd Geering Scholarship in Religion, please contact [Geoffrey.troughton@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:Geoffrey.troughton@vuw.ac.nz). If you would like to discuss your donation or leaving a gift in your Will please contact [corinne.barnard@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:corinne.barnard@vuw.ac.nz)

For more information or to make a donation today, go to our website <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/sacs/study/scholarships/religious-studies-scholarship-fund>

## Remembering Norm Ely

Norm joined the Sea of Faith Network as it was then called in 2005. In the 15 years he was with us on our journey together, he contributed in several major ways.

He was Chairperson twice and on the then Steering Committee several other times (I think). Before the last conference he was a member of the Wellington Local Arrangements committee for the previous three years. This triumvirate comprising Norm, the late Noel Cheer, and myself (Pete Cowley) organised the Wellington conference in Silverstream.

This was one of the most enjoyable committees I have ever been a part of – we all were of the view of wanting to get down to business and sort things out without a lot of drama. So our meetings were very focussed and productive and also because we were all friends, they felt really comfortable. We all accepted our ideas could be voted down, and often were, but that was democracy in action.

I don't know a whole lot about Norm's life before I met him at the Sea of Faith Conference, but I do know he was involved in helping out with Riding for the Disabled for a long time right up until he got so sick he could no longer continue.

In his latter years, he was involved in business mediation and problem solving. He had a way of seeing and getting to the heart of matters and dealt with things in a very straightforward way – you were left in no doubt about where he stood on things if you asked.

I think some people found his straight-to-the-point manner a bit challenging, but I for one greatly liked the “calling a spade a spade” approach. I knew exactly what his position was. So refreshing not having to guess as to what people meant rather than what they said.

I for one, will miss his straightforward manner, dry humour and knowledge of many areas of life.

*Pete Cowley*

Norm's brother Trevor wrote the following:

We grew up in South London in Mum and Dad's home. It was a good life. In the early days an outdoor toilet and no bathroom. Come "bath night". Norm and I would carry the tin bath upstairs over our heads, where we would put it on the kitchen floor and Mum would boil the "copper" and hand fill with buckets.

As we become older Norm became a Rocker and I became a Mod, so you can imagine the two of us and the differences, he in leather with greasy combed-back hair and me in paisley bell bottoms with long hair to my shoulders.

Norm and his wife, Jill (now deceased) had a second child, Allison. Their marriage regrettably failed. Norm's son, Richard, died of a serious health issue in his young teens.

Norm remarried to Mary, and they stayed together for a number of years before that marriage also failed.

Norm was a registered nurse, the CEO of a large pharmaceutical company. He ran for parliament as a member for Ohariu, which he nearly won. He had a very varied and successful life in business and was a help to numerous people through his consultancy work.

Norm leaves behind a daughter Allison, grandchildren Stacey, Kyle and Sam and a great grandson Ariki.



## A Thought from Norm

In the July 2008 issue of the Newsletter, Norm provided a meditation on Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*, which inspired the name "Sea of Faith." The meditation included the following:

"It seems to me that as members of the Sea of Faith ... we are certainly in a very similar position to that of the followers and/or believers in Victorian Darwinism. Having left behind our Traditional Faith Group, be it a Christian Church or other group, because we see the contradictions; the cynicism, the dogmatism; the polarisation and persecution of minority groups of the traditional faith groups or for whatever other reason, we are faced with the question of where to go to explore and seek a better way."

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor

Please be aware of my profound disappointment at the rejection of the article on climate change submitted, edit it if you must but rejecting it! that is not the SOF I joined nearly 40yrs ago.

It indicates to me the very real problems surrounding information at this time, with the malignant effect of algorithm processed data pitched at the believer, with an echo chamber effect.

I for one am, after 80yrs on this planet, very sceptical about the arguments made for human induced climate change, that the climate is changing there is no doubt, but in my view why is highly debateable.

We need more debate not more repression of it, we need to make plans that are executable, not pie in the sky propaganda which is almost completely ignored by the World.

On behalf of those who seek enlightenment on all matters, please publish the article.

*Edward Fenn  
Auckland*

While supporting the right of an editor to decide what should be published, I have some reservations about having a policy

which declines the publication of articles against human-induced climate change, rejecting the theory of evolution, arguing for the divine inspiration and infallibility of the bible, or rejecting a heliocentric solar system. SOFiA exists as a forum for the non-dogmatic discussion of religious topics and all of the above areas should qualify as appropriate areas for consideration. Several of our members have come from backgrounds which accepted the divine inspiration and infallibility of the bible and have found it valuable to be able to discuss the issues involved. SOFiA has no creed but by taking a position on these topics it appears to be accepting some beliefs and not others and removing the opportunity for debate. I would have preferred to have read the article arguing against human-induced climate change and do not see how this would give a wrong impression to the SOFiA readers. What might give a wrong impression is saying that some topics are now beyond the stage at which they can be questioned. This is equivalent to suggesting that SOFiA does have a creed, e.g., that human-induced climate change is an important problem. Academics at Australian universities, such as Ian Plimer and the late Robert Carter have held contrary views, and I would like to see SOFiA adhere to its founding principles, including being a place where we can hear a variety of views and explore for ourselves what we can believe.

*Bruce Spittle  
Dunedin*

The Editor responds:

Thank you, Edward and Bruce for your letters. Indeed, there are pros and cons to the decision whether to publish this article. I have now published it in the Sea of Faith Network group on Facebook. Go to Facebook, search for Sea of Faith Network and join the group. Once you are joined, the article will become visible.

I only have space for a couple of points:

1. Can Bruce really mean that I should publish an article arguing for a flat earth? Yes, such people do exist!
2. Hasn't the time come for action rather than discussion? Do we have to wait for the last person to be convinced before doing anything?

# Meditative Moments

Romans 13:8-14

## Can love ever be a risk-free option?

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud was a French poet. He influenced modern literature and artists including Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso. He inspired various musicians, and it was he who paved the way for surrealism. He started writing poems while still in primary school and stopped before he turned 21.

Noticing the plight of the underdogs and outcasts, he made a rather bold claim “Love has to be reinvented.” When Rimbaud looked around France, all he could notice is a presentation of love deprived of any real ethical substance. He noticed that the notion of love is solely reduced to overly meaningless romantic engagement among his contemporaries. As a result, he felt that the concept of love had lost its power, its quest for truth, its search for meaning. Love had become one good idea in the pool of other ideas.

Such an observation led him to claim, “love has to be reinvented.” The claim is unsettling, if not outright scandalous for a religious institution. After all, God is love and to claim that love has to be reinvented is to say God has to be reinvented and therefore implying Christianity has to be reinvented.

But Rimbaud was onto something. His claim on love may still stand true in our ever eclectic society where, on the one hand, we get an over sentimentalized version of love –

one usually presented to us by Hollywood. On the other hand, we have a love that is privatized and sold in the marketplace as a commodity form.

A couple of years ago, I read an academic paper on the sociological analysis of the word “love” in marketing slogans related to couples dating sites. It noted various catchy slogans. One said, “Get love without a chance.” Another says, “Be in love without falling in love.” And yet another one, “Get perfect love without suffering.” And one more “coaching in love.”

What is implied in these slogans is a “safety first” concept of love. This privatized version of love is sold with comprehensive insurance against all risks. The implied message is simply this: you will have love, but you will have assessed the future relationship so thoroughly, you will have selected your partner so carefully by searching online – by obtaining a photo, his or her details, likes and dislikes, date of birth, horoscope sign, fashion tastes and so on. And finally, by putting it all together, you can take a deep breath and say: this is indeed a risk-free option.

But the question is, can love be a gift given or attained on the basis of a complete lack of risk? To put it simply: can love ever be a risk-free option? Can we be in love without the fall? Can we escape the fall? Can we have love without all the risky and dangerous moments?

This sentiment is well captured by Dostoevsky in his monumental novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the fourth chapter, “Rebellion,” Ivan (one of the brothers) is somewhat puzzled with Christ’s demand, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” So, he says, “I could never understand how one can love one's neighbour.”

Ivan cannot get his head around the idea of actively loving one’s neighbour. That is not to say that Ivan is a bad person. By all means, the character of Ivan Karamazov has a loving nature. In fact, Ivan is portrayed as an extremely intelligent, logical human

being. He is full of passionate love, even to the point of excessive sentimentality. He says: "Though I may not believe in the order of the universe, yet I love the sticky little leaves as they open in spring. I love the blue sky. I love some people, whom one loves you know sometimes without knowing why."

Ivan also repeatedly states that he has great love and sympathy for the human race. But when faced with the idea that human salvation requires human suffering (i.e., risk and pain on his part), he finds this exchange unacceptable: "I don't want harmony. From the love of humanity, I don't want it."

Though Ivan feels a general sentiment in an abstract manner for the welfare of humanity, he struggles to focus it concretely. And he recognizes this himself and admits: "I could never understand how one can love one's neighbours. It's just one's neighbours, to my mind, that one can't love, though one might love those at a distance". What Ivan is against is not love but the risk and pain and effort that comes with the neighbourly love.

As absurd as it sounds, there is a moment of truth in what Ivan Karamazov is saying. It is far easier to love humanity in the abstract than a concrete human being. At times, our immediate perceptions and (unconscious) prejudices make any kind of truly 'Christlike' love difficult, if not impossible. This is precisely the point Dostoevsky is trying to make that it is easier to idealize humanity and love them from a distance, in the abstract, because people to people contact can be challenging, it can be a rigorous struggle. But isn't it precisely when the rubber meets the road?

And so, in the same vein, we can say that it is much easier to love God in an abstract sense. For Protestants, salvation is based on faith, not works (Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*). Spirituality is largely a personal issue, without the need for a prescribed ritual. In a way, Protestants mostly do not care how other Christians practice their faith so long as they accept certain central beliefs. Clinging to the right belief and confessing the right creed could be the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. "My faith and my spirituality is

between my God and me", I recently heard from a friend of mine.

But what if the truth lies outside, not in what we believe but in what we do? And maybe that's why Christ never stopped simply with "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." He adds to it with, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." i.e., true devotion and love go beyond me, myself and I. It goes beyond what is familiar, what is preferred, what is known, to experiencing the world from the standpoint of difference.

Love thy neighbour is not the love of the familiar but the love of difference. It is an invitation to experience the world from the point of view that may be different from ours. It is a call not into an inward-looking relationship, rather a construction of a new dimension of life that is being made from the perspective of not one but *two*.

This is the ethical demand of Christianity that one should take the risk and not be afraid of the fall because the risk factor can never be eliminated from the authentic act of love. The same love that inspired Christ to mix and mingle with the outcast, touch the untouchable, and embrace the powerless. It is the same love that drove him to face the demonic forces and outwit the manipulative. We, too, are asked to practice this love by Saint Paul simply because to love God means to love what God loves.

Abhishek Solomon

<https://parallaxisview.com/>

North Shore Methodist Church

## Editor Says Thank You

This issue has more contributed material than any this editor has produced. So a very big thank you to all contributors. Please keep them coming. Letters to the editor are also welcome. We welcome a diversity of opinion. We are all on a journey, exploring the meaning of everything and trying to make sense of life.

## A Curious Faith

Referring to life after Covid-19 let us pose the question “How are we to live, and for what? What makes lives, any lives and all lives go round well? What is good, right and fitting as we emerge into a world that has changed? Will we hear the song of the earth? Am I a child of the earth?”

Voltaire, a philosopher of the French enlightenment, once said, “Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers”. His point was that the quality of any period in human history is defined by the quality of the questions asked. He emphasized that the quality of the question determines the quality of the answer we get. Good answers require good questions.

So to the question: “What is Life, what is the meaning of it all? Does Life have a meaning?” Leo Tolstoy said “Life is everything, Life is God”. But whereas in the past we constructed a God-centered, Being-centered and knowledge centered vision of everything; today it is the Life-Centered point of view that serves us best.” It leaves nothing out.

Life is chaotic: we can't constrain or limit it. But we have innate wisdom and can make choices by the way we commit ourselves ethically to life and to our neighbour. We can make sense of it and find a new meaning. Our attitude on life and how we deal with the now is what matters.

Are we still asking questions?

Logan Wolfram in his book *Curious Faith* says we are born with an innate curiosity to explore, marvel, and believe there is more to life. But, laundry piles up. Bills pile up. Ultimately, life piles up. We can doubt God's goodness and the everyday becomes marked by restraint, limits, and settling for the routine. Unexpected hardship events can extinguish our hope and we exchange curiosity for control.

To quote Michael Foucault, asking questions is one of life's most essential skills. It improves our logic and reasoning, decision-making and problem-solving skills. It teaches us how to separate truth from lies, and fact from fiction. It stops us from being naïve and gullible so we may hopefully see through the fake news and false information. Most importantly, asking questions does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. Instead, it consists of seeing on just what assumptions, familiar notions, or established and unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based. To ask questions is to make harder those acts and assumptions which are now too easy.

Logan Wolfram again says a Curious Faith is about rescuing the now. It's about exploring possibility with a “God” who is unlimited, unpredictable, and ever-loving. In the gospels Jesus simply calls for an unreserved ethical response to the Call of Life, here and now.

We can overcome feelings and outside circumstances that inhibit growth and rob us of hope. Pursue curiosity to enjoy the wonder of an open-handed life.

To quote some good advice from Max Ehrman in 1927:

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars;

you have a right to be here.

And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive God to be,

and whatever your labours and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life,

keep peace with your soul.

With all its shams, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.

Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

*Brian Ellis, with acknowledgements to Bill Peddie and Abhishek Solomon*



## Do I have a Dying Wish?

*A poem for one who has been told they have weeks to live.*

When the writing's on the wall,  
 We know our end is nigh.  
 The plans for days to come  
 No longer mean a thing.  
 But still I'll be myself.  
 The anger, tears, regrets, not mine alone,  
 Will fade.  
 Do I have a dying wish?  
 Only this, for strength to take on board,  
 The love behind the words,  
 About the times of shared fun, excitement,  
 And doing something to better all our lives.  
 This remains when I am gone.  
 Full time declared, the play has ended,  
 The furnace or the grave awaits.  
 What do I care, my cares no more.  
 The self I was becomes a memory,  
 Held dear by you who love and care for me.

*Bob Geddes*

## Seasons in the Sun

[Verse 1]

Goodbye to you, my trusted friend  
 We've known each other since we were nine or ten  
 Together we've climbed hills and trees  
 Learned of love and A-B-Cs  
 Skinned our hearts and skinned our knees

Goodbye my friend, it's hard to die  
 When all the birds are singing in the sky  
 Now that the spring is in the air  
 Pretty girls are everywhere  
 Think of me and I'll be there

[Chorus 1]

We had joy, we had fun  
 We had seasons in the sun  
 But the hills that we climbed  
 Were just seasons out of time

[Verse 2]

Goodbye Papa, please pray for me  
 I was the black sheep of the family  
 You tried to teach me right from wrong  
 Too much wine and too much song  
 Wonder how I got along  
 Goodbye Papa, it's hard to die  
 When all the birds are singing in the sky  
 Now that the spring is in the air

Little children everywhere  
 When you see them, I'll be there

[Chorus 2]

We had joy, we had fun  
 We had seasons in the sun  
 But the wine and the song  
 Like the seasons, have all gone

We had joy, we had fun  
 We had seasons in the sun  
 But the wine and the song  
 Like the seasons, have all gone

[Verse 3]

Goodbye Michelle, my little one  
 You gave me love and helped me find the sun  
 And every time that I was down  
 You would always come around  
 And get my feet back on the ground

Goodbye Michelle, it's hard to die  
 When all the birds are singing in the sky  
 Now that the spring is in the air  
 With the flowers everywhere  
 I wish that we could both be there

[Chorus 3]

We had joy, we had fun  
 We had seasons in the sun  
 But the stars we could reach  
 Were just starfish on the beach

We had joy, we had fun  
 We had seasons in the sun  
 But the stars we could reach  
 Were just starfish on the beach

[Chorus 2]

We had joy, we had fun  
 We had seasons in the sun  
 But the wine and the song  
 Like the seasons, have all gone

[Outro]

All our lives, we had fun  
 We had seasons in the sun  
 But the hills that we climbed  
 Were just seasons out of time  
 We had joy, we had fun  
 We had seasons in the sun...

1974 hit by Terry Jacks, a Canadian singer

# Consciousness is Fundamental

In his Book 'A Brief History of Time' Stephen Hawking states 'Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing.' Also 'Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing.' Now I know that gravity can only be known by its effect but if it is the cause of creation can you really call it 'nothing'?

Gravity is a constant. Definition of constant – Any characteristic of a substance, event, or phenomenon, numerically determined, that remains always the same under specified conditions, as gravitation, the velocity of light etc.

I have been asked why I always refer to the Big Bang as 'material' evolution. It is because consciousness does not play any part in the Big Bang. So the question must be asked 'What came first, the brain or consciousness. Logic would say the brain. But how does something that is totally unconscious, not even aware of itself create a brain when it doesn't even know what a brain is and is totally unaware that it requires one? If gravity is not a random chance happening but is governed by a principle or law then this law did not evolve but was a prior requirement before gravity came into being.

I am following the work of American Physicist Thomas Campbell who proposes that 'consciousness is fundamental'. If anyone has read Tom's book 'My Big Toe' I would really like to discuss his findings with them. My email is [Hvanwyk@extra.co.nz](mailto:Hvanwyk@extra.co.nz).

*Heather van Wyk  
Gisborne group*

## Thoughts on Euthanasia

*The following was written for the Otago Daily Times by Ian Harris, who graciously has given permission for it to be reprinted here.*

The over-riding question raised by the End of Life Choice Act is not for me one of law, nor the sanctity of life, nor the medical options available to prolong a person's life. It goes far deeper, to put compassion front and centre.

If we highlight compassion, the emphasis shifts from how a person might end his or her life, to how they might *live* successfully to the very end – and then, accepting death as a basic condition of life, to die well.

There is more than one way to achieve this. A compassionate response to someone who feels their life is complete and who wishes to round it off gently will range from providing palliative care to enabling them to end it in a controlled and dignified way, and in their own time and space. The central moral question is: What does love require for this person, in his or her specific circumstances, at this time? It's also the central religious question.

That's why I shy away from a moral absolutism that says any move to allow assisted dying must always be ruled out.

Palliative care, when available and effective, should obviously be the first option. But for the terminally ill in pain beyond relief, I cannot believe that love requires them to prolong their misery in order to satisfy someone else's sense of right and wrong. There will be some sufferers – I hope not many – for whom assisting an earlier death will be both a responsible and compassionate choice. The referendum will either leave that option open or ensure it remains closed off.

Some fear that saying yes in October will lead to a steady widening of assisted dying provisions some time in the future. That would trigger a new debate – but it is not what they are being asked to vote on.

This Act is restricted, fair and appropriate. Only the patient can initiate the process, and after an interval must confirm his or her wish. They must have a terminal illness, with death likely within six months. They must be clear about what they are asking for. They must be suffering in a way that cannot be eased.

There is no compulsion. Overseas, only half of those who have been prescribed pills to end their life early use them. The choice is theirs, and it should not be denied them. *Ian Harris*

<https://www.odt.co.nz/news/decision-2020/readers-add-generously-euthanasia-debate>

## On Being Secular

Re-reading Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* has caused me to think further about the modern secular world. I was struck by the tension in the book between Cox's unconditional affirmation of the goodness of secularity and his continuing talk of Gospel and church as if these were unaffected by secularity. Moreover, his description of the secular city is not so much an empirical one, with all the advantages and disadvantages of living in a modern metropolis, as an ideal, imagined future reality.

So I read Lloyd Geering's *In Praise of the Secular*, which, as usual, is a model of clarity. He correctly points to the revolutions that have happened: earth is no longer the centre of the cosmos and humans are just another animal, not the crown of creation. Our religious tradition is interpreted as evolving towards the secular. The myth of creation disenchanting nature and the concept of incarnation meant that the divine was to be found in the physical world rather than beyond it. He argued that modern science has emerged from the biblical doctrine of creation, something that C..F. von Weizsäcker propounded.

But I am not so interested in praising the secular. Rather, I simply accept that I am part of the modern secular world and I want to explore the contemporary meaning and relevance of religion in that world. In other words, my interest runs in a different direction to that of Lloyd Geering. He tends to assume that the world is inevitably globalising and becoming increasingly secular. He regards Buber as secularising God-talk in his book *I and Thou*, which I see as a brilliant work that articulates the meaning of God-talk for a secular world.

So where to look for more insight into the secular world? I have been aware for some time of Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age*, but being by a philosopher and consisting of 874 pages, I was completely daunted. However, I discovered *How (Not) to be Secular*, by James K. A. Smith. This book is an introduction to Taylor's massive tome and emerged out of a seminar in which

students read and discussed the whole work. Taylor uses his own terminology and Smith provides a helpful glossary at the end.

Prepared through Smith's book, I ventured into Taylor's and was pleasantly surprised. To give an adequate account of his argument is beyond my ability and the scope of this newsletter, but I will focus on one aspect: the attitude to 'spirituality' in order to clarify the contrast between Geering's approach and Taylor's.

The word 'spirituality' comes from spirit. For Lloyd this is a remnant of an obsolete world view, in which the realm of spirit is dualistically opposed to that of matter. But spirit (pneuma or ruah) means air or breath, which actually consists of gaseous molecules and so belongs to the realm of matter. It is "a frozen metaphor from a now obsolete world view." Lloyd chooses to use the word spirituality but emphasises that it can only have a symbolic meaning. He maps the territory that 'spirituality' can cover, consisting of awe towards the universe and a secular mysticism towards the earth. God, for the modern secular world, is "the oneness of the universe."

Taylor begins by asking what 'spirit' would mean for creatures without language. We would be aware of wind in a storm and of breath when we exert ourselves. But understanding the word 'spirit' requires an awareness of the whole realm of culture that we have been brought up in. An important linguistic tradition emphasises that language doesn't just describe, it also creates. This is particularly true of poetry. Taylor's discussion of spirit takes place within a discussion of how various modern secular people (Péguy, Dostoyevsky and Gerard Manley Hopkins) have become aware of 'spirit' ('higher, "invisible" things'), effectively being converted. Taylor is at pains to emphasise that we can leave the ontological status of 'spirit' open:

"Through language in its constitutive use ... we open up contact with something higher or deeper (be it God, or the depths of human nature, desire, the Will to Power, or whatever) through language. Poetry can be seen as an event with performative force, words which open up contact, make something manifest for the first time. (p 758)

*The Editor*



# Choosing a Religion

Have you ever felt that you would like to commit to a particular religion, rather than being neutral and rather uninvolved and intellectually detached from them all, as perhaps many SOFiAns are? Well here is a tongue-in-cheek flowchart to help you with the decision.

## A Flowchart to Determine What Religion You Should Follow

