

SOFiA

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

Christmas Milestones

As I head rapidly into old age, I can look back at a rich variety of Christmas celebrations. The only trouble is, I now find it difficult to work up much enthusiasm for them. I wonder why this is. Certainly, my children are now all grown up, so the magic of opening presents on Christmas day has largely evaporated. I also no longer lead the worship of a congregation, so do not carry responsibility for the continuing vitality of the Christian tradition. And then there is secularisation as another possible factor. Religious rituals are perhaps becoming less important, less real to the general population. Perhaps I'm rather like the Jewish rabbis who have lost contact with the details and can only tell the story, but even just the story is enough (see Meditative Moments on page 11). But the fate of Christmas could have more to do with the triumph of our consumer society, which floods the world with advertisements selling us ever more goods for at least a month before Christmas. Lloyd Geering is undoubtedly right in saying that Christmas has become a celebration of family togetherness, but this is probably being overridden by the overwhelming dominance of big business and its commercial imperatives.

So here are a number of milestones on my journey of celebrating Christmas.

1. My first Christmas memory is of Christmas puddings at my grandparents' place. They had a number of coins (thrippences or sixpences) each carefully wrapped in greaseproof paper. It was a matter of luck how much pocket money we each ended up with.
2. I have little memory of Christmas services growing up, but then the Church Year was not very significant for Baptists. But I do remember my father taking his Hi Fi amplifier and playing tape-recorded Christmas carols out the back window of the church. They were audible many hundreds of meters away on the opposite hill.
3. I remember seeing my aunt acting as Santa Claus distributing presents and must have already lost any literal belief in Santa Claus, as this caused me no disillusionment.
4. As a newly ordained minister, I experimented with a multi-media presentation at an ecumenical Christmas service. A highlight was playing Simon and Garfunkel's 7 O'clock News/Silent Night, which contrasted the world's violence and war with the saccharine calmness of the traditional carol. (Only later did I learn about the origin of that carol and the fact that it had many more verses than are commonly sung.)
5. My attitude to Christmas was very rational, so we carefully refrained from mentioning Santa Claus to our children. Given his frequent presence in shop windows, this proved unsustainable. (Later, I learned that Santa Claus goes back to the 4th Century Saint Nicholas, probably bishop of Myra (in present-day Turkey), and that the custom of giving gifts possibly goes back to

- him providing dowries to girls who would otherwise have been too poor to marry and would probably have been forced into prostitution.
6. In Timaru, I strung transparent fishing line in the church and had pictures of Joseph and Mary, of the wise men and of the shepherds moving along these almost invisible lines week by week closer to Bethlehem.
 7. My first Christmas in Germany blew away my rationalistic approach. Snow fell for the first time that winter on Christmas Eve. We trudged in the dark through new snow to the midnight service, seeing the warm, welcoming lights of the church in the distance. A classic Christmas-card scene!
 8. Christmas for a parish minister in Germany was intimidating. Every parish group expected a Christmas reflection and I wondered how I would cope with this.
 9. Christmas eve family services were greatly helped by the idea of having children act out the story. As the biblical passages were read, children who had been assigned the various roles (Joseph and Mary, wise men, etc) would informally act the story.
 10. Christmas Eve back in New Zealand was a disaster. We each were given candles to light at the beginning of the service. At midnight, all the neon lights were turned on, unpleasantly blinding our dark-adapted eyes. (This was traumatic enough to cause my then wife to abandon the Presbyterian Church and become Anglican! By contrast, in Germany, the service began in virtual darkness, with perhaps only one candle so that readers could see the text. When midnight arrived, candles were lit from the one candle, resulting in the gradual spread of a wonderfully warm light and giving vivid expression to John 1:4-5 "In him was life and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.")
 11. Christmas had always been rather problematic to me, in particular because

almost all the details of the familiar stories are of doubtful historicity. Eugen Drewermann's book reflecting on the Lucan birth stories has helped me greatly in this. He sets the scene by telling stories of encounters, first, with a Muslim taxi driver, who rejects the idea that God could have a biological child. As Allah is utterly transcendent, a good Muslim has no need of such mythological ideas. By contrast, a museum worker thought that the Christmas stories have a history that goes back way earlier than Jesus. There have been many heroes of divine origin. For the ancient mind, birth stories were not factual history. Rather, they were mythological or symbolic stories that encapsulated the essence of the person and their significance.

Rather than indulging in theological speculations about the probable consequences of a belief in incarnation, Drewermann wants to go back to the source texts from which the concept of incarnation was derived and to help us continue dreaming the images of these stories.

Modern literalism over the virgin birth motif is out of place. It has an Egyptian precedent; when a young man became Pharaoh, his divine nature required that he was declared to be born of a virgin, even if he had brothers and sisters running around at the time.

12. As if there were not problems enough in these various milestones, we in the southern hemisphere celebrate Christmas on the same date as the northern hemisphere. This decision destroys its embedding in a particular season and incidentally is contrary to the original decision to celebrate Jesus' birth at the time of the pagan Saturnalia celebration. Juliet Batten has written eloquently about this in her book *Celebrating the Southern Seasons*. The result is that I'm indecisive; wondering whether it's best to celebrate Christmas with the great majority on 25 December, or to opt for a mid-winter Christmas.

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.

Chairperson: Ian Crumpton

email ian.crumpton@gmail.com

Secretary: Steve Collard

email rosteve@xtra.co.nz

Treasurer: Philip Grimmett

email grimmettphil@gmail.com

Membership Secretary and Webmaster: Peter Cowley email prcowley@gmail.com

P O Box 321 Gisborne 4040

Other members: Brian Ellis, John Thornley.

Newsletter Team

Editor: Laurie Chisholm

email laurie.chisholm1@gmail.com

mobile 0212010302

Copy Editors: Shirley Dixon, Maria Cash, Yvonne Curtis and Jocelyn Kirkwood.

Distribution is by Peter Cowley.

Assistance is also provided by John Thornley (john.gill@inspire.net.nz) and Maria Cash.

Address: 62/68 Mountain Road
Mount Wellington
Auckland 1072

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 February 2021.

Contents

Christmas Milestones	1
About SOFiA	3
SOFiA News	4
2020 AGM	4
Auckland Group AGM.....	4
Conference 2021	4
Unpopular Thoughts	4
Personal Profile	5
Stephen Warnes	5
Book Review	6
The Uninhabitable Earth	6
Interesting Texts	7
No obvious angels	7
Beginning to appreciate maybe	7
Joseph.....	7
Internet Corner	8
Interesting Websites	9
From the Archives.....	10
Sea of Faith and Humanism	10
From the Resource Centre.....	11
Meditative Moments	12



SOFiA News

2020 AGM

The SOFiA AGM was held as a Zoom meeting on Saturday 30 November 2020. 27 members participated, much smaller than past years, when the AGM was part of the annual Conference.

Our finances are healthy. 70 copies of the newsletter are printed and 163 are emailed. SOFiA has a total membership of 223.

2020 is the last year that Canterbury University will accept archival material from us.

Resource Centre use is down and postage is expensive. There are plans to migrate some material to our website (sofia.org.nz).

The existing Committee was all re-elected. In addition, Pete Cowley (previously ex officio) was made an elected member. John Thornley continues as a co-opted member.

Auckland Group AGM

The Auckland group held its AGM on 22 November. It re-elected the committee unchanged and agreed to change its name to SOFiA, to fit in with the national organisation. Though your editor has an aversion to AGMs, he is glad to see that at least one SOFiA group has enough structure to support an AGM.

Conference 2021

'Spirituality for a Sustainable Future'

- Sir Lloyd Geering Lecture: **Ian Harris**
- **John Thornley** on Black Theology in African-American Music – illustrated by blues, gospel, soul, reggae and soul tracks
- Youth panel and speakers, core group discussions, refreshment times and socialising

Fri 5 Nov 12.30 pm to Sat 6 Nov 4.30 pm

Venue: St Andrews on the Terrace, Wgton

More details to come in 2021 Newsletters

Unpopular Thoughts

A few years ago we spent time cycling round "rural" Netherlands, mostly on well-manicured cycle paths. Now and again we would spot a congested motorway nearby, or come to a busy roundabout, where, much to our astonishment, the cars all gave way to us! But for the main part, it was quiet and rural. Except when you looked up. The sky was grey, criss-crossed by hundreds of contrails. I began to realise that there were thousands upon thousands of people sitting up there; thousands upon thousands of tons of greenhouse gasses turning the sky a sinister grey. The website <https://www.flightradar24.com/> tracks aircraft across the planet. Then there are the motor vehicles, ships, trains, farms, coal fired power stations and industry – all adding their percentage.

About thirty years ago we moved from Dunedin to our current rural block, not far from Christchurch. The road was gravel, and if we were near our gate, the rare passing motorist might give us a wave! There were almost no trucks. Since then, traffic has increased at a faster and faster rate. Arthur's Pass is no longer a nail-biting crawl. No longer do many motorists put their cars on railway flat-cars at Springfield, and recover them at Otira! Today, the dull roar of commuter traffic and heavy trucks is becoming more and more relentless.

Then came Covid-19 and lockdown. It felt like 1990 again. Very few cars, almost no trucks, and the airport, 10 km away, became silent. No noisy planes, large or small. The community's response ranged from anger to acceptance. From eagerness to return to previous ways, to the realisation that that can never happen, if we want to leave a liveable planet for our grandchildren.

I couldn't help feeling that the whole Covid-19 debacle also had a good side. Greenhouse gasses plummeted right across

the world (for a short time). Consumption dropped sharply. The environment benefitted as tourism fell away. Education benefits, as the immoral overseas cash cow is shut out. Schools can no longer use overseas students to generate income, widening the gap between rich schools, which made a big thing of this, and all the rest. These are just a few of the benefits – sadly, mostly short term.

But the biggest benefit is that it has made us stop and think. (some of us, anyway) and assess our values and priorities. Is the material world of consumption all that there is? The economy, which has been the sole focus of previous governments, is nested within the culture – and that in turn is nested in the environment. According to the journalist Rod Oram writing in “Newsroom”, it is the Greens who have forced the environment onto the political agenda, offering long term and science-based policies.

Finally, we note that there have always been plagues and epidemics: the Black Death, Typhus, Cholera, Spanish Flu, to name just a few. Covid-19 is not the first, nor will be the last affliction humanity will suffer. Its positive effect: it gives us a chance to awaken to our need to work together as a species to deal with it – then with the much larger threat of human induced global warming, species loss, and habitat destruction. That in turn needs an awakening of our innate spiritual dimension. So may it be! – Ian Crumpton

Personal Profile

Stephen Warnes

Stephen Warnes (1940 -) is a long-standing member of the Sea of Faith, with experience of the organisation in New Zealand as well as in the UK, from its very early days.

Like Richard Holloway before him, Stephen joined the Society of the Sacred Mission, an Anglican religious community, studying theology there with a view to being ordained as a priest. The Society sent him to

Africa, where he spent three years learning the Sesotho language. Then he returned to England where he worked in a parish for three years before returning to Africa as a University chaplain, at the end of which the Anglicans asked him to be Director of Training for Ministry.



Stephen Warnes

His time in England coincided with the release of Don Cupitt's BBC TV series *Sea of Faith*. The organisation Sea of Faith was formed as a follow-up to the TV series and Stephen attended its second Conference, ending up as its chairman for a year. This makes him one of the privileged few to have been in the Sea of Faith from the beginning and to have met Don Cupitt as well as other controversial figures of the time, such as Anthony Freeman and Hugh Dawes.

In 1994 he moved to New Zealand to become the vicar at Te Awamutu, then the chaplain to the Bishop of Christchurch, and subsequently Associate Dean in Hamilton. He enjoyed an active and stimulating Sea of Faith group in Hamilton at the time.

On retirement, he moved to the North Shore. He continues to attend the SOFiA group in Auckland and Derek Pringle's group on the North Shore.

While Stephen's roots are in the High Church (Anglo-Catholic) wing of the Anglican Church, over time he has become

increasingly radical in his theology and politics. He still enjoys good liturgy that is well done, but generally finds himself unable to believe the sentiments expressed in it.

In spite of this, he views Sea of Faith's recent turn to issues of environment and climate change with concern. Sea of Faith's founding vision was related to wrestling with faith issues, with rethinking theology and even with wondering how the church could be renewed. It seems to him that that original vision has not evolved into something new for the 21st Century. Instead, Sea of Faith has lost focus. The recent name change, with which he disagrees, he considers to be indicative of this. Climate change is an important and urgent concern and there's nothing wrong with SOFiA or any other organisation discussing it, but this does not exhaust the purpose of the organisation.

The Editor

Book Review

The Uninhabitable Earth

The uninhabitable Earth: a story of the future, by David Wallace-Wells. Penguin, 2019.

This is a terrifying book, taking as its topic what warming means to the way we live on this planet.

I thought I was reasonably well-informed about the damage being wreaked upon our planet by climate change. But the scale of destruction detailed in this book- fires, heat waves, floods, sea level rise, hurricanes, food shortages, ocean acidification, air pollution, much of it **already happening** - is deeply shocking.

After twelve chapters devoted to the current and extremely probable effects of climate change, the author turns to the stories we tell ourselves – negative emissions, carbon capture, technological solutions like artificial intelligence, escape to Mars. He says “imagination is not the hard part. We have imagined and even developed some solutions. We just haven't discovered the political will, economic might and

cultural flexibility to install and activate them, because doing so requires ... a complete overhaul of the world's energy systems, transportation, infrastructure and industry and agriculture” p. 178-9. Instead, he says, “the church of technology has instructed us to regard the world beyond our phones as less real, less urgent and less meaningful than the worlds made available to us through our screens” p.184.

The author concludes that we have thirty years to completely de-carbonise the world before truly devastating climate horrors begin. Environmental panic and despair are already growing, and he lists books advocating withdrawal and detachment.

David Wallace-Wells is not one of those authors, though he leaves it to a footnote to declare his position. We need to become one global people, we need a community of political resistance and a renewed egalitarian energy. “Meaningful, even dramatic change, can be achieved through the familiar paths of voting, organizing and political activity deployed at every level. In other words, I believe in **engagement** above all, engagement wherever it may help. In fact, I find any other response to the climate crisis morally incomprehensible” p.295.

A hard book to read, but impossible to ignore. Will any other Sea of Faithers be brave enough to tackle it and find ways to act?

Margaret Gwynn

Interesting Texts

No obvious angels

No obvious angels sing through the night skies,
no thunderstruck shepherds tell out their surprise,
But Christmas comes into the here and the now
through star-sighted people,
the watchful and hopeful,
who wake to see a new world.

Our angel potential is waiting to start!
The Spirit will teach us the song of the heart,
for Christmas comes into the here and the now
through peace-maker people,
the just and the gentle,
the stars who will light the new world.

Whoever will take it is given the role:
the fruitful, the faithful, the joyous of soul;
for Christmas comes into the here and the new
when we are the angels
who dream and deliver,
who rise and create this new world!

Life into Life: New and Collected Hymns, Shirley Erena Murray, Hope Publishes US, 2019.

Beginning to appreciate maybe

You I Trust to guide
Free of doubt or judgement
We create
Once upon a time
A giving giving
Deeper, much deeper than beauty
Before and beyond the word
Receiving and giving are one
Involving you and me
So Happy to find
It will still be
It can not be
Thank you
No matter what
I
Rejoice in you

Philip Grimmert

Joseph

We both knew that the time was pretty tight
We hoped it wouldn't happen just tonight.
The hotel didn't have an empty bed
Instead we found ourselves a cattle shed.

I felt so helpless being Mary's mate
A man in such a fix could never rate.
I hardly dared to touch the baby's toe
As he was placed upon the manger straw.

A welcome beam of stars came sifting in
Lest he would suffer scars upon his skin
Excited shepherds ran through the morning haze
And in their rapture sang a hymn of praise.

Though it humbles me and makes me groan
Yet the child she bore I call our own
My name is Jo and I'm from Galilee
But the boy she gave me, who is he?

John Ylvisaker



Internet Corner

The Internet is truly marvellous and amazing. Almost every day I use it to view the weather forecast, navigate across Auckland, listen to music, watch TV or movies, read a book, look at the news, pay bills, send and receive emails and consult my calendar.

Of course, the Internet doesn't compare with the recently discovered vastness of the universe or the weirdness of black holes, but it is still worthy of awe and respect, despite being humanly created. (Neoliberals should note that both the Internet and GPS were created as Government-funded projects, not inventions of big business, even though Amazon, Facebook, and others are profiting insanely from it.)

The Internet began as a project to enable universities that had been funded to conduct military research to communicate with one another.

It has taken clever engineering and universally agreed conventions to make the Internet possible. Computers really only understand the difference between 0 and 1 (or on and off, or Yes and No, or True and False, depending on which you prefer). It takes cleverness to build everything from email, graphics and movies on top of that simple distinction.

One convention gets us from binary (0s and 1s) to the letters of the alphabet. This agreed convention is called ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange). Lower-case a, for example, is 01100001. In the early days of computing, there were other conventions, and a computer using one convention would be unable to talk to one using another convention.

One of the really big conventions is layered protocols, which aren't very easy to explain. Has it ever puzzled you that your cellphone and your laptop can both access the Internet? That some cellphones are Android while others are Apple, and yet they manage to talk to each other even though their computer code is fundamentally different. That you can send a photo from your cellphone to your laptop and it fills

both screens, even though one is small and the other large?

Another complication: sometimes I listen to music on Spotify or the radio from the Internet. I'm connected to it via wifi. Then I leave the house and go outside of wifi coverage, but my cellphone soon picks things up again, using mobile data. How does it do that? To explain that, you need to understand layered protocols and the way you can change the medium of a lower-level protocol without affecting the higher-level protocols.

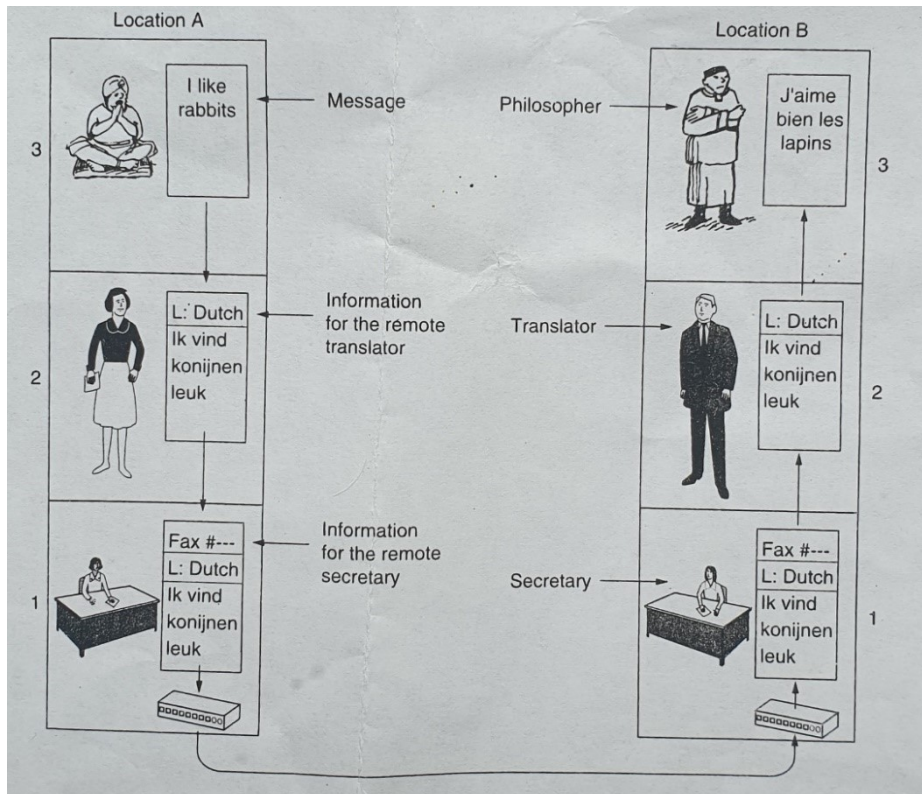
The subject of layered protocols is best approached by means of an analogy. Imagine two philosophers who have no common language but want to communicate with each other. You could think of their communications as layer 3 (the top layer). To help, they each engage a translator (layer 2). The translators each engage a secretary (layer 1). The translators convert the message ("I like rabbits") into Dutch, a convenient common language. The first secretary takes the message and sends it by fax (the layer 1 protocol). When the message arrives, it is translated into French and passed to the second philosopher.

Note that each protocol is completely independent of the other ones. The translators could change from Dutch to say Finnish. The secretaries could switch from fax to email or telephone without the philosophers even knowing. That's why, when I head out to the gym, the low-level protocol changes from wifi to mobile data and the application (Spotify or digital radio) doesn't even know.

The Internet absolutely depends on the TCP/IP layered protocols. The lowest layer (wire, radio signals or fibre optical cable) defines the characteristics of the signal and determines what counts as a 0 or a 1. The next layer (the IP layer) defines the addresses of the sender and the receiver, just like a letter sent by post. The layer above that (the Transport layer) defines such things as whether each packet (bundle of 0s and 1s) needs to be acknowledged to make

sure it got there, and how to route the packets over different paths to get to their destination. Finally, the top layer (the Application layer) sends and receives the

messages ("I like rabbits" in the case of the philosophers, or "get the home page of my favourite website" in the case of HTTP).



With thanks to Andrew Tanenbaum for the above illustration and to numerous patient software engineers at Tait Limited.

The Editor

Interesting Websites

Here are some websites that can provide interesting reading.

bbc.com/culture/tags/religion

You can find a range of articles on religion here and elsewhere on the BBC website.

stmatthews.org.nz

Website of one of the premier liberal congregations in New Zealand. Some good articles on Anglican affairs.

<https://www.religion-online.org/book/god-in-the-new-world/>

Here you can view the full text of this book by Lloyd Geering. If you have an author you are interested in, check to see if they are represented here.

religioustolerance.com

Slow and riddled with advertisements. You might find "*The long, slow death of religion, as the Secular Age is snowballing.*" by James Haught interesting.

ProgressiveChristianity.org

Good stuff. "We are a 501c3 non-profit organization that offers thoughtful and practical resources for individuals, families, and communities to explore and affect progressive Christianity, spirituality, community life, social and environmental justice."

theo.kuleuven.be/en/education/links

A Belgian gateway to a large number of religious sites around the Web

From the Archives

The following comes from Issue 7 of the Newsletter. with the demise of supernatural religion, the question of how Christianity or religion was related to humanism had become important. The author was probably Lloyd Geering.

Sea of Faith and Humanism

Many ask the question of where the dividing line is, if any, between the religious stance of the Sea of Faith Network and that of humanism, particularly as Anthony Freeman sub-titled his book "A Case for Christian Humanism."

The short answer is that, if there is a line, it is a very fine one. A longer and more adequate one can be given by looking at the origin and changing nature of the term "humanism." "Humanist" first came into use at the Renaissance when the revival of interest in the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome began to turn people's interest away from heavenly matters to earthly matters. It's the reason why classical studies became known as the "humanities", a term now more widely used of all the humanly-based Arts subjects. Petrarch, Nicholas of Cusa, Pico della Mirandola (author of *On the Dignity of Man*), Erasmus, Catholic Thomas More and Protestant Philip Melanchthon, were all humanists. They did not deny the reality of God but they adopted a much more positive attitude to the human condition than had prevailed previously.

The advance of this humanist emphasis in Christian thought was halted by the bitter struggle between Catholic and Protestant, following the Reformation, but it survived in literature and drama. Humanism continued to spread through the essays of Montaigne, the plays of Shakespeare ("What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!...in action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god!"), and in the poems of Alexander Pope (in his *Essay on Man* we read "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan: the proper study of mankind is man."

It was not until the Enlightenment that humanism surfaced again in philosophy and religious thought, particularly in John

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and Reasonableness of Christianity, and in Tindal's *Christianity as Old as Creation*. The humanist base from which these Enlightenment thinkers were now starting enabled them to become critical of the traditional ideas about God. They abandoned the concept of divine revelation and acknowledged the human origin of all our knowledge. Only very few became atheists, but theism (belief in a personal God) was replaced by deism (belief in God as the First Cause or Creator).

The freedom to think for oneself and to be critical of past tradition, which thus first surfaced at the Enlightenment, gathered considerable momentum in the 19th century; many aspects of life became emancipated from ecclesiastical control. Because of this power struggle between the new and the old it was not the term "humanist" which was chiefly used, but such terms as "secularist" and "rationalist."

The Unitarians, who became a very significant force in the 19th century, can be described as religious humanists. They were largely responsible for the revival of the term "humanist" and the promulgation of the Humanist Manifesto I in 1933. This defines religion as consisting "of those actions, purposes and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious". It consistently speaks of "religious humanism" interpreting it to mean that "Man is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realisation of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement."

It is useful to draw a distinction between humanism (as a general cultural trend) and Humanism (as an ideological label). The former is increasingly influencing the world today; it is a mark of the emerging world culture. Many people are humanist without knowing it. But Humanism, as an ideology and a self-chosen label, is more specific, even though it covers a wide spectrum from Unitarians and religious Humanists, at one end, to militantly secular Humanists at the other. It is at the former end of this spectrum that the Sea of Faith most comfortably sits.

From the Resource Centre

Pete Cowley has selected the following items from the resource centre that you might like:

Cost to borrow is just the return postage (or if you are technically savvy he can email the files to play directly on a computer).

These items may be useful as a presentation for discussion in a local group.

DVDs

DVD19 - Jung, The Unconscious and Us Lloyd Geering 2011
(request D19A: parts 1 and 2 or D19B: parts 3 and 4)

DVD02 - Living The Questions Liberal Christianity 13-part series

DVD23 - Nature of Human Beings & the Question of Their Ultimate Origin. Rowan Williams, Richard Dawkins 2012

Audio CDs

CD16 – C16 Vosper, Gretta: With or Without God Why the way we live is more important than what we believe. SATRS 2010

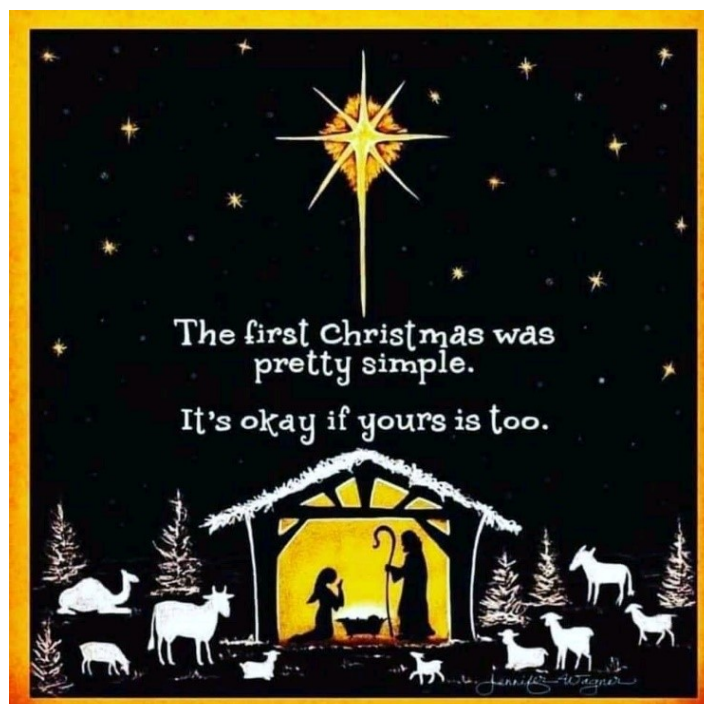
CD07 - Geering, Lloyd: speeches at the 1967 “heresy” trial

CD09 - Geering, Lloyd: Myths as the truths we live by 2007

Nearly all of the SOFiA conference keynotes are on the website either as PDF documents and where possible as sound files you play directly.

If you wish to borrow anything (or have it sent electronically) please contact Pete Cowley on prcowley@gmail.com or 022 6102 910

See sofia.org.nz/files/documents/resource.pdf for the full list of resources.



Meditative Moments

The theme of secularisation keeps engaging me. Here is a Hasidic Jewish story that also touches on this theme. It ended up as the preface in The Gates of the Forest by Elie Wiesel. He was a Holocaust survivor who lost his father, mother and sister in Nazi concentration camps.

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov
Saw misfortune threatening the Jews
It was his custom
To go into a certain part of the forest to meditate.
There he would light a fire,
Say a special prayer,
And the miracle would be accomplished
And the misfortune averted.

Later when his disciple,
The celebrated Magid of Mezritch,
Has occasion, for the same reason,
To intercede with heaven,
He would go to the same place in the forest
And say: "Master of the Universe, listen!
I do not know how to light the fire,
But I am still able to say the prayer."
And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later,
Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov,
In order to save his people once more,
Would go into the forest and say:
"I do not know how to light the fire,
I do not know the prayer,
But I know the place
And this must be sufficient."
It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn
To overcome misfortune.
Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands,
He spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire
And I do not know the prayer;
I cannot even find the place in the forest.
All I can do is to tell the story,
And this must be sufficient."
And it was sufficient.

God made man because he loves stories.

Elie Wiesel

Wiesel also wrote the following:

My father, an enlightened spirit, believed in man.
My grandfather, a fervent Hasid, believed in God.
The one taught me to speak, the other to sing.

Both loved stories.

And when I tell mine, I hear their voices.

Whispering from beyond the silenced storm, they are
what links the survivor to their memory.

Elie Wiesel

R. D. Laing was an unconventional psychiatrist, even an anti-psychiatrist. The following is my favourite quote from him: It eloquently captures the importance of a meditative experience:

Words in a poem

Sounds in movement

Rhythm in space

Attempt to recapture personal meaning in personal
time and space from out of the sights and sounds of a
depersonalised, dehumanised world.

They are bridgeheads into alien territory

They are acts of insurrection

Their source is from the silence at the centre of each
of us.

R D Laing The Politics of Experience p 24

John Gray is no theist, but he has no
sympathy with the new atheists, as the
following quotation indicates:

Zealous atheism renews some of the worst
features of Christianity and Islam. Just as
much as these religions, it is a project of
universal conversion. Evangelical atheists
never doubt that human life can be
transformed if everyone accepts their view of
things, and they are certain that one way of
living - their own, suitably embellished - is
right for everybody. To be sure, atheism
need not be a missionary creed of this kind.
It is entirely reasonable to have no religious
beliefs, and yet be friendly to religion. It is a
funny sort of humanism that condemns an
impulse that is peculiarly human. Yet that is
what evangelical atheists do when they
demonise religion.

John Gray, The Guardian 2008

Postscript

Apologies to anyone who submitted a
manuscript that has not been published,
now or in the future. Feel free to remind me
of my failure... I need to develop a proper
system to keep track of any submissions.
The Editor