

SOFiA

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

SOFiA's Mission?

What does SOFiA exist for? What is its purpose, its mission? It seems to me that its mission was reasonably clear in the first years after its formation, but I have my doubts about its current mission.

Sea of Faith began when the mainline Protestant churches were strong and most of us grew up in contact with church culture. Each denomination had its own teachings and there was a fairly strong hierarchical authority to accept those teachings.

Publicity around the ideas of Lloyd Geering and Don Cupitt in particular caused a ferment. The above thinkers questioned such teachings and many people were motivated to explore that questioning further and to follow their individual path rather than simply belonging to the collective. Sea of Faith was a neutral forum where radical ideas could be explored without the risk of offending more conservative members of your church.

But the spirit of the age is always moving and today we have a very different situation. We have seen the rise of evangelical and charismatic churches and a general decline in religious literacy. In addition, people's understanding of Christianity is much more derived from an American-style fundamentalism and traditional liberal Christianity is almost invisible.

Lloyd's declarations that "man has no immortal soul" and "the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine," together

with his critical thoughts about God serve to undermine the twin foundations of traditional Christianity: the immortality of the soul and the existence of God (conceived primarily as Creator).

If this is our situation, what is our mission? SOFiAns have often emphasised what they don't believe and taken an aggressively critical stance in relation to any religious ideas. Arthur Wells, in the article below, spends some time describing how belief in gods and in life after death might have originated, before making his own declaration that what he believes in is the overwhelming experience of love that mystics describe.

That is a good example of what we need. I think our mission needs to focus more on what we can believe in this modern, secular, pluralistic world. Having a foundation of basic knowledge about the various religions is a necessary precondition for this task. We must also recognise that diversity has increased, also within SOFiA. Looking at old newsletters, I get a strong impression that members were much more involved in reading books such as those by Don Cupitt. Our energy for exploring ideas has declined, perhaps because we don't see their relevance any more.

We need to explore and articulate a variety of building blocks that can be put into service as we continue on our human journey. Martin Buber's attempt to construct a concept of God from the bottom up might be another suitable building block.

The Editor

God: the Eternal Thou

Martin Buber was a liberal Jewish thinker best known for his distinction between I-It and I-Thou. Underlying this is a particular philosophical focus. Some think primarily about the objective world out there, others about the world within, our internal psychology. Buber had a mystical phase, in which he focussed on the world within, but abandoned or transcended this to focus on “the between.” In other words, he is more interested in what goes on between me and the world or other humans. This is rather similar to the psychological approach of transactional analysis.

Buber’s important point is that there are two fundamental ways of relating to things and people. There is a neutral, objective, dispassionate approach and there is the approach of encounter, a two-way approach in which two humans interact with each other as independent individuals. Buber describes these two ways with the two “fundamental words” I-Thou and I-It.

I can relate to another human in either an I-Thou or an I-It mode. For example, at the checkout counter, I might engage in a purely functional conversation with the employee. There’s nothing personal, no exploration of who we are in ourselves, just the task of presenting our shopping and paying for it. Similarly, we can encounter an inanimate object such as a tree in either mode.

The book *I and Thou* is not easy reading. Most people don’t realise that the third and final part of the book is a profound attempt to explain what God-talk is about. In a draft it had the title “The Eternal Thou” but titles were removed from the published version.

We experience I-Thou probably only in brief moments, but in each moment we are addressed. You could regard what addresses us as a moment-God, a divinity that flashes into awareness only briefly. But a whole range of such moments can come together as the eternal Thou. So Buber says that the extended lines of the I-Thou relationships intersect in the Eternal Thou. He also says that each relationship to another human

being is a parable of the relationship to God. Buber uses the analogy of a poet. We learn almost nothing about the poet from a single poem, but as we read more and more from the poet, our impressions combine into a polyphonic symphony that provides deeper and deeper insights into the poet.

Buber emphasises that the eternal Thou cannot become an It. There is no objective knowledge you can derive from an I-Thou encounter. This is something that European theologians have emphasised. It’s also rather like Don Cupitt’s idea of non-realism.

There is an important qualification. Humans keep making the eternal Thou into an It. They need some sort of continuity between the moments of I-Thou. They need something ‘objective’ to hold onto. And so the religions have a doctrine of God. What begins as an aid to assist in the I-Thou encounter ends up replacing it.

Buber later complained in relation to many of his critics “that my most essential concern, the close connection of the relationship to God with the relationship to one’s fellow human being, has not dawned on them in its central significance.”

The Editor

The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead. A snuffed-out candle. It was the experience of mystery, even if mixed with fear, that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty. It is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude. In this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man. I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures or has a will of the type of which we are conscious in ourselves. Enough for me, the mystery of the eternity of life and the inkling of the marvellous structure of reality, together with the single-hearted endeavour to comprehend a portion, be it ever so tiny, of the reason that manifests itself in nature.

Albert Einstein

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 June 2021.

Contents

SOFiA's Mission?	1
God: the Eternal Thou.....	2
About SOFiA	3
SOFiA News	4
Committee.....	4
Conference 2021	4
From Don Cupitt.....	4
From the Archives	4
Rethinking Religion	5
Neoliberal Takeover of Council	8
Why God Never Received Tenure at Any University.8	

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

Committee

Your committee continues to work on the planning for our national Conference. More details will appear in this newsletter once they are finalised.

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

From Don Cupitt

It's a long time since I last reported on my condition. May I do so, briefly? I'm frailer. My sight is weaker and more blurred, and my mobility less good. I live in quite deep isolation now, but my head is tolerably clear, and I still enjoy thinking.

The plight of the churches, worsened by the Covid pandemic, and by very serious moral scandals, is wretched. What of the Christian tradition. Can hope survive?

I still stick to the position I reached when I stopped writing in 2015, but there's also plenty to think about.

From the Archives

I found the following poem in the November 1994 issue of this newsletter. Noel Cheer provided it.

A fire-mist and a planet,
A crystal and a cell,
A jelly-fish and a saurian,
And caves where the cave-men dwell;
Then a sense of law and beauty
And a face turned from the clod —
Some call it Evolution,
And others call it God.

A haze on the far horizon,
The infinite, tender sky,
The ripe rich tint of the cornfields,
And the wild geese sailing high —
And all over upland and lowland
The charm of the golden-rod —
Some of us call it Autumn
And others call it God.

Like tides on a crescent sea-beach,
When the moon is new and thin,
Into our hearts high yearnings
Come welling and surging in —
Come from the mystic ocean,
Whose rim no foot has trod —
Some of us call it Longing,
And others call it God.

A picket frozen on duty,
A mother starved for her brood,
Socrates drinking the hemlock,
And Jesus on the rood;
And millions who, humble and nameless,
The straight, hard pathway plod —
Some call it Consecration,
And others call it God.

William Herbert Carruth

Rethinking Religion

Talk from Arthur Wells given to the Christchurch "Rethinking Religion" group on 28 March 2021.

As I approach 76 years old, I am increasingly doubtful about all religious beliefs, yet I can't leave religion alone. I look at human evolution and history through a naturalistic lens, yet the puzzle of why we exist remains a bottomless mystery to me. This sense of mystery is enough to make me still think of myself as a religious person.

At times I tell myself I should have committed more firmly to the sceptical, secular humanism that I discovered as a teenager from Bertrand Russell and Julian Huxley. At the time it felt revelatory and liberating. But I'm glad I've had a lifelong obsession with religion, because the history of religion is also the story of humanity -- a story full of great sadness and beauty, and also full of ghastly conflicts and shocking brutalities.

On one hand, religion has been a poignant expression of the deepest human needs, giving rise to great art, architecture, poetry and music, and much profound philosophical thinking. Religion has motivated people to amazing acts of selflessness and love. It has strengthened community and challenged the rule of the wealthy and powerful. But on the other hand, religion has motivated terrible cruelty and violence -- there have been Crusades, Jihads and Inquisitions, burnings of heretics at the stake, witch-trials and prejudice.

In other words, religion is the human story itself, writ large. We can't be unmoved by it, or untouched by it. I want to home in today on the question "What is religion and is there anything still credible and valuable about it?" First let's ask, where did religion begin? Then let's discuss the belief in an afterlife as a fundamental feature of all religion.

Anthropologists think religion began when humans developed a "theory of mind," or the ability to imagine what goes on in *other* minds. When we experience floods, plagues, droughts, earthquakes, crop-failure,

accidents, infertility, or lose in battle, our natural tendency is to think these things must be the work of invisible beings who are angry.

Early humans understandably inferred that something they did, or failed to do, made the powerful, invisible beings angry. So they pleaded with them, flattered them and made tasty offerings (even human sacrifices) to appease them. In other words, Anthropologists think religion arose from our brilliant new powers of inference, combined with the wariness and suspicion that we needed when big cats, for example, wanted to make a meal of us. Philosophers call this "*the over-attribution of intentionality.*"

It is an important feature of religion that these malevolent beings lurking behind the scenes are hidden from view to normal people and only able to be seen by shamans and visionaries. The brilliant ethologist Robert Sapolsky suggests that religion originated in the imaginative gifts of the roughly 10 percent of humans on the "schizotypal spectrum" who can hallucinate at the drop of a hat. Hence the power of priesthoods who gain so much respect and prestige through being able to bridge the visible and invisible worlds.

Of course this is only part of what gave rise to religion. Another enormous contributing element has been *our ability to imagine that death might not be the end.* The belief that there is an afterlife is amongst the earliest features of human religion. We see this in ancient burial sites where the corpses are surrounded by food and weapons. Even the Neanderthals seem to have believed in an afterlife.

It's possible that the belief in life after death arose from the way people who have died reappear in our dreams. This happens to me a lot. Although my Dad died 30 years ago, I dream of him often and wake feeling warm and grateful that I've been close to him, no matter how weird the dream.

As humans we prefer our dreams and imaginings to what the evidence tells us. I've come to the conclusion there is no good evidence that we survive death. Near Death Experiences (NDE's) and Out of the Body Experiences (OBE's) don't persuade me.

Evan Thompson, Oliver Sacks and others have looked hard at this question and remain sceptical. Thompson, a philosopher trained in neuroscience, has written a careful study of what happens at death and examined many accounts of NDE's and OBE's, in *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation and Philosophy* (2015). He concludes that, as with stories of remembering previous lives, none of this anecdotal material reaches the standard of persuasive scientific evidence.

Oliver Sacks, the great neurologist, is similarly dismissive. He looks at one of the most widely publicised recent accounts of a Near Death Experience, by Eben Alexander, whose story of his seven days in a coma after a severe attack of cerebral meningitis is recorded in his book *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* (2012). Alexander describes how, during his coma, he passed through a dark tunnel into a bright light that he understood was the boundary between life and death, on the other side of which he found himself in an idyllic and beautiful meadow which he took to be heaven. There he met a beautiful unknown woman who conveyed to him telepathically various wonderful messages about the universe (which he doesn't pass on to us, worse luck). Advancing further into heaven Alexander says he felt the "evermore embracing presence of God."

Sacks is deeply sceptical about all this, saying "Dr Alexander insists his cerebral cortex was completely shut down during the coma, yet his NDE was rich in visual and auditory detail, as many such hallucinations are.... The most plausible hypothesis is that his NDE occurred not during his coma but as he was surfacing and his cortex was returning to full function. It is curious that he does not allow this obvious and natural explanation, but instead insists on a supernatural one...."

The 'dark tunnel' described in most NDEs, says Sacks, is explained by the neurologist Kevin Nelson in his book *The Spiritual Doorway in the Brain: A Neurologist's Search for the God-Experience* (2011) as "due to compromised blood pressure in the eyes." Nelson believes that the frequently reported

'bright light at the end of the tunnel' arises from a flow of visual excitation from the brainstem to the visual cortex, via the pons-geniculate-occipital pathway.

Sacks writes, "Our yearned-for voices and visions have the reality of perception because they activate the perceptual systems in the brain, as all hallucinations do. These visions, voices, and feelings of 'presence' are accompanied by intense emotions of joy, peace, awe, revelation. Some evangelicals may have many such experiences, others only a single one – but even a single experience of God, imbued with the overwhelming force of actual perception, can be enough to sustain a lifetime of faith.... But hallucinations, whether revelatory or banal, are not of supernatural origin; they are part of the normal range of human consciousness and experience. This is not to say they cannot play a part in the spiritual life or have great meaning for an individual. Yet while it is understandable that one might attribute value, ground beliefs, or construct narratives from them, hallucinations cannot provide evidence for the existence of any metaphysical beings or places. They provide only evidence of the brain's power to create them." (*Everything in Its Place*, 2019, pp. 79-83).

Where does all this leave us? Illness, accident or some kind of violence ends all sentient life. That much is obvious. Contemporary neuroscience offers us no reason to believe that death is other than what it looks like, that is to say, the end of a conscious being, whether fish, bird or mammal.

Nevertheless, some of my experiences have shaken my scepticism. When my Dad died, I sat up with him for most of the night. In the early morning, as he breathed his last few breaths, it seemed to me that his consciousness dissolved into a vast mind beyond anything I knew or could imagine. This might very well have been a delusion, very like Eben Alexander's belief he'd gone to heaven. I was in an overwrought state of grief that may have made me unusually suggestible. However, I find it hard to discount the experience, even though I think my Dad no longer exists as a person. I don't

expect to meet him again, other than in my dreams. I think our individual life ends with death.

And yet, and yet! I have a sense that our consciousness is not altogether different in kind from the mind that gives rise to the universe in each moment. Einstein has said that he thought he was encountering an intelligence vastly greater than his own, as he contemplated the equations that his unusual brain was generating. $E=MC^2$ squared feels mystical to me. But then, what would I know!

Some kind of Pantheism, I think, remains possible for the scientific mind. Einstein said he couldn't conceive of God as a personal being who intervenes in the natural world, to whom we can pray to for help. Neither can I. Rather, I think of God as *the coherence of all that exists*.

Sometimes when I'm euphoric I do feel I am encountering God as a mysterious presence within everything. In the pantheism of Spinoza, or William Wordsworth, God and Nature are indistinguishable. This feels right to me. The origin of the universe remains unexplained by science. Studying the natural world doesn't inevitably result in a shallow and reductionist materialism. "Religious Naturalism" could become the name for a religious attitude that is deeply contemplative and experiential.

Finally, I want to say something about self-transcendence. This doesn't seem to me to require assent to any metaphysical belief. Our capacity for stepping outside our innate egocentricity doesn't prove there is a God, but it helps us with the pain and sadness of being intelligent and sensitive animals with a need to deal with being an intelligent animal with a limited lifespan, living on a planet.

I see self-transcendence as an emergent property of our evolution as conscious selves. It allows us to turn upon our own axis and see beyond our self-concern. This is the radiant heart of the teachings of the Buddha, the Sufis, Hindu saints and Christian mystics. It's not so much about *believing* something as *doing* something. It is altering our angle of vision, or changing our viewpoint.

In Zen we say "Your true body is the world in the ten directions." The answer that Zen offers is to practice various mental disciplines that encourage us to feel that we have *become* the earth. In a very real sense we *are* the earth, the trees and animals, mountains, rivers and oceans, and also be the sun and moon, the stars and the endless galaxies. In the mystical state the separateness of the self disappears and there is no "inside" and no "outside" to our identity. Dare I say it, we can even become one another, in a way that is much deeper than ordinary empathy or imaginative identification.

This can be experienced through the practice of meditation, and also much more rapidly with the help of psychedelics. Either way, the ecstatic experience needs to be integrated into our normal conscious awareness or it doesn't much change our behaviour. I don't think there are any shortcuts to this integration, which is arduous, demanding and takes a lifetime. Yet I'm satisfied that millions of men and women have proved it possible.

The one conclusion I've come to with confidence, amidst so many doubts, is that the best answer to death is the great overflow of love that mystics experience -- to love so much what exists beyond our personal life that we stop feeling small and trivial. We can become large, by identifying with our society, history, culture, values, friendships, loved ones and the natural world itself. That's good enough for me. It gives me peace and gladness to have been part of this world.

Now I'm going to be really provocative. For exactly this reason, that the whole value of our life is right here, now, I think *we should not bother too much about God*. Instead, we should commit fully to this finite, human life. We should live in heartfelt solidarity with one another because we cannot escape our mortality and our biology. Nor can we escape the terrible truth that we are damaging our vulnerable planet and the other beings on it.

As Spinoza said, looking to our own lives and the well-being of all life is the most meaningful way to worship and commune

with “God.” Praise to the ordinary, because it’s not ordinary. We ourselves are not ordinary. This world is not ordinary.

Arthur Wells

Neoliberal Takeover of Council

People may wonder what has gone wrong with Auckland Council and why it doesn’t deliver what the old TLAs did (though they weren’t perfect either). The answer is: it’s still in the grip of neoliberalism and the major role of the Council is to transfer its wealth (ratepayer’s money) into the private sector through outsourcing, contracting out and essentially privatising the public’s assets.

In days gone by you had Council staff - parks superintendents, caretakers, workers, transport staff etc. who worked directly under the oversight of public sector officials. There were direct lines of accountability. The rot probably started when Govt said ARC could no longer have the (publicly owned) Yellow Bus Company and had to contract in services. That happened in the 1990s.

But a succession of neoliberal ex-private sector CEOs and managers has cemented in this way of doing things. As a result firms like Fulton Hogan have prospered while the public bemoans the loss of service. Once upon a time you could rock up to your local park and talk to a guy mowing and find he could answer your questions, tell you what was planned and knew his park really well. Now the guy mowing

the lawns probably trucked in in his company emblazoned van, will drive out to some remote headquarters and next week be at Maraetai. So as well as enriching the private sector, neoliberalism has disenfranchised the public who pay for them.

Then you have to try and find out who you can talk to, and even Council staff can’t tell me - an elected official. I’ve just found out biosecurity has been restructured and instead we have sections with names like Natural Environment Delivery and Natural Environment Design and Community Facilities. Where is biosecurity? Where is Parks? No such thing anymore. All this is by way of making the whole edifice impenetrable even to someone like me who’s been around for nearly 20 years.

I’m also astounded how neoliberalism - which was adopted in NZ in the mid-1980s - remember the corporatising of government depts and the Gibbs Report - and has been shown repeatedly to have failed - hangs on. Nothing changes. It still has a grip on local govt despite the lack of delivery. The aim of neoliberalism was to install private sector managers in the public sector and transfer business to the private sector. While I was a councillor, Auckland Council sucked up to the Property Council and other private sector entities, and this still goes on. It still is entirely successful.

Sandra Coney on Facebook Jan 15.

Why God Never Received Tenure at Any University

1. He had only one major publication. ¶
2. It was in Hebrew. ¶
3. It had no references. ¶
4. It wasn't published in a refereed journal. ¶
5. Some even doubt he wrote it himself. ¶
6. It may be true that he created the world, but what has he done since then? ¶
7. His cooperative efforts have been quite limited. ¶
8. The scientific community has had a hard time replicating his results. ¶
9. He never applied to the Ethics Board for permission to use human subjects. ¶
10. When one experiment went awry he tried to cover it up by drowning the subjects. ¶
11. When subjects didn't behave as predicted, he deleted them from the sample. ¶
12. He rarely came to class, just told students to read the Book. ¶
13. Some say he had his son teach the class. ¶
14. He expelled his first two students for learning the wrong subject. ¶
15. Although there were only ten requirements, most students failed his tests. ¶
16. His office hours were infrequent and usually held on a mountain top. ¶