

SOFiA

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

Is Science the End of Religion?

Science today has enormous prestige and there are good reasons for this. It has brought about fundamental revolutions in the way we see the world.

- **The Size of the Cosmos.** While it is natural to regard earth as the centre of everything, we now know that Earth revolves around the sun and that our sun is just one of millions of suns in our galaxy and that there are millions of galaxies.
- **The Age of the Cosmos.** This is estimated to be almost 14 billion years. Scholars who took the Bible literally, estimated that the universe began in 4004 BC, based on the genealogies in Genesis.
- **Evolution.** Humans are just another animal. We have tended to regard ourselves as special and unique (made in the image of God) but the theory of evolution makes unmistakably clear the many features that we share with other animals.

Even the most scientifically illiterate among us are confronted daily with technological innovations that owe their origin to science: computers, cellphones, GPS, electricity, airplanes and television, to name a few.

The result is that many see a 'religious' significance in a new Big Story. Lloyd Geering's book *From the Big Bang to God* is an example. Brian Swimme's book *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*. Humanity and the New Story is another. There is something awe inspiring about contemplating the

vastness of the cosmos and the inconceivably long length of time that has elapsed since the big bang. There is also the complex diversity of life and of human biology. This all makes us humans seem pitifully insignificant. Albert Einstein thought of scientists as truly religious people, in the sense that they dedicated their lives to often tedious and exhausting data collection, not for financial gain, but to gain at least a little insight into the rationality that operates in the universe.

But is science all that there is? Is there no truth other than that revealed by science? Stephen Jay Gould said no, arguing that science and religion are non-overlapping magisteria. That is, each has its domain where it has authority. Science should not interfere in religion, which is concerned with the realm of human purposes, meaning and values. Conversely, religion should not interfere in science, for example by arguing that the existence of the universe requires a creator that originated it.

Philosophers have made a clear distinction between facts and values, between 'is' and 'ought' and claimed that there is no pathway from is to ought, from the way the world is to what humans ought to be doing.

Others argue that this is/ought distinction is about to be overturned. For example, Sam Harris says in *The Moral Landscape* that, generally speaking, science can determine human values. Given that human flourishing is the goal, ethical questions can boil down to empirical questions about which alternative provides

the greatest well-being for the greatest number. Science, in other words, can objectively decide what is right. Ought statements can be translated into is statements about the likely effects of a moral stance on the world and on states of the brain. Philosophers call this utilitarianism and debate its pros and cons.

For me, the gulf between is and ought stands; science can't provide answers to everything. I see at least two problems with utilitarianism. First, that the goal is the greatest well-being for the greatest number is a prior axiomatic assumption that can't be proven empirically. Second, you can't quantify different sorts of well-being, in order to compare them with each other. How would you compare the well-being that comes from mastering a skill in sports with that which comes from having enough food to eat, from having a relatively equal society, or from having democratic freedoms? Ethics is a different domain from science. No matter how much it advances, scientific inquiry cannot tell you which goals to pursue or how to resolve conflicts between them.

Of course, ethics is not the same as religion, even if Judaism is to a large extent a matter of rules for conduct. Jordan Peterson says that you cannot act without having a set of values. Your decision to do this rather than that reflects an underlying set of values, even if these are not consciously articulated.

The more we are able to explain the reality of the universe, the more meaningless it reveals itself to be. The old thinking that it was created to give humans a pre-eminent place is being replaced by a universe that only led to the emergence of humans through a cascade of arbitrary and improbable chances, such as a meteorite collision with earth that led to the extinction of the dinosaurs and a new niche habitat for mammals to move into.

Humans are a tiny phenomenon in an insignificant corner of an incomprehensibly vast cosmos. That gives 'religion' plenty to work on, updating its rich traditions to give a response to the question of life's meaning.

The Editor



Whatever we in our lives understand of God, we will understand most intensively in the language of our deepest longings and deepest feelings. But there is no feeling that teaches us to comprehend God more deeply than the perception of a love that takes hold of our whole existence, for God himself is Love – its origin, its goal, its hope.

When we address a person so that we touch the depths of his being, when we express his Thou so that it characterises his name as completely as possible, then his person opens up and becomes a pathway that leads us into the infinite. Behind the form of every human person, every human Thou, emerges invisibly the person and the eternal Thou of God, who is also addressed and present. Whenever we feel ourselves to be addressed so that our own ego is surrounded, intended, and supported, then we feel ourselves to be connected with the origin of our existence, that we call God.

Eugen Drewermann *The Gospel of Mark Part 2, page 476. Translated by 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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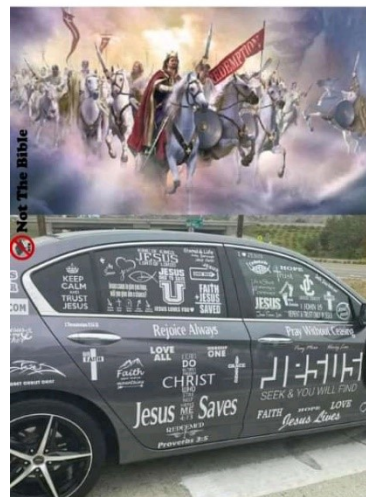
Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Ian Harris, Suzi Thirwell, Yvonne Curtis and Peter Cowley. Also Fred Marshall, Noel Cheer and Norm Ely (deceased).

Publication deadline for the next Newsletter is 7 August 2021.

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Jesus has stopped my car from being stolen



What people think I mean

What I actually mean

SOFiA News

Committee

Your committee continues to work on the planning for our national Conference. We will provide more details as 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

For details see the accompanying flyer.

Widening the Ministry of Ethnic Communities

Arising out of the Government response to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on the Christchurch Mosques, the Buddhist Council proposes setting up a new Ministry of Ethnic Communities, to avoid another 15 March. This would start operating on 1 July 2021.

Robert Hunt, from the Auckland office of the Buddhist Council, proposes that the work of this ministry is widened to cover the diversity of faiths in Aotearoa. The new Ministry should be titled 'Ministry for Faith and Ethnic Communities'.

To quote from the Buddhist Council letter to Government early in May: 'By repeatedly focusing on ethnic communities, Government is failing to recognise and acknowledge the distinct role of faith communities, and still failing to skilfully engage with them after more than two years.

We want to urge on you the importance of Government engagement with faith communities, not just if they happen to be minority ethnic communities as well. As the Royal Commission say, to rebuild social cohesion requires engagement with faith communities as well as ethnic communities.'

The Buddhist Council is sending an Open Letter to the Prime Minister and key Ministers, inviting them to widen the scope of the work to be undertaken by the new Ministry, as signified in the new title: Ministry for Faith and Ethnic Communities.

The Open Letter names three key issues relating to a better understanding of the diversity of faiths in Aotearoa New Zealand:

- How those practising those faiths are delivering outcomes of benefit to society
- What challenges to inclusion there are for faith communities
- How to co-design information-sharing practices with faith communities

There will be keynote youth speakers from representatives of diverse faiths at the 2021 SOFiA annual conference in Wellington, November 5/6. The writer of this note sent an individual submission to the Royal Commission, focused on the need for more discussion/exploration of the diversity of faiths in Aotearoa, including Humanist and non-religious expressions, in the learning curricula from pre-school to adult. He is happy to send anyone interested a copy of this submission.

John Thornley (johngill@inspire.net.nz), SOFiA Committee, and the Palmerston North Interfaith Group

Reminder

Subscriptions are due on 1 July for the 2021-2022 financial year. \$20 for email newsletter \$50 for printed newsletter (in NZ). You can pay into our account at Kiwibank 38 9000 0807809 00. Please include your Initial & Name and sub22 in the reference fields.

Letter to the Editor

I question your statement that members have stopped exploring ideas. In my case, I seem to have moved from investigating pure theology to reading in the area of quantum physics and chaos theory and their implications for how I see the universe and “God”.

For example, Barbara Brown Taylor’s book “*The Luminous Web*” scans the development of science from the Newtonian world view to that of quantum physicists. Her interest is in the questions science and religion raise for one another and the eroding boundary between the two.

Some sample statements : “The Bible is one long story about how God demolishes human beliefs in order to clear space for faith (p.63)” “While science disputes religion’s certainty that purpose is built into creation, religion challenges science’s certainty that such purpose is impossible (p.74)” “If nothing else, reading a little cosmology now and then is a good corrective for those of us who speak too easily of God. If we really believe the one whom we worship is the creator of heaven and earth, then where do we get the nerve to offer tidy explanations about exactly who that one is and exactly how that one acts? (p.66)”

I find it refreshing to meet an ordained minister who says she hasn’t the foggiest idea who God really is and is glad of this, because knowing would certainly blow all her circuits (p.34). A short and very readable book. *Margaret Gwynn*

The Editor responds:

Thanks, Margaret, it’s great to see a letter to the editor, and a disagreement over something in the newsletter. My main point was an impression that older newsletters had reviews of books such as those by Don Cupitt. I note that the March 1996 issue of the newsletter had reviews of five books.

So, let’s put it to the test. Ian Harris has published a new book, *Hand in Hand*. Is someone willing to read it and write a review for the newsletter? If this is you, please drop me a line at laurie.chisholm1@gmail.com to let me know that a review is coming.

Auckland Group Hears From Quakers

On 20 June, Heather Denny gave us an overview of the Quakers, perhaps better called The Society of Friends. Linley Gregory and Lesley Young supplemented the talk and were available to answer the audience’s many questions. Also discussed was the recently published pamphlet “A Call For Action After COVID19.”

A Call For Action

Quakers call on every person in Aotearoa New Zealand to bring about whatever changes they can to enable us to live in harmony with one another and with the planet. www.quakers.nz

Meditative Moments

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.
No time to turn at Beauty’s glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance.
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began.
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

W H Davies 1871-1940

Marriage of Monk and Nun

– a radio playreading

An intriguing picture of the domestic life of Martin Luther and Katharina Von Bora was given in a recent mini-drama recorded as part of the weekly access radio programme of Palmerston North's Wesley Broadway Church.

Here are two illustrations:

'God is Dead' (Roll over, Nietzsche)

Katharina had to be nursemaid to Martin, who suffered numerous physical and mental illnesses. When he fell into frequent bouts of depression, she would hold him, pray for him, comfort him and read Scripture to him. But sometimes it was to no avail. So she tried another tactic, one time coming out dressed all in black. Martin asks, 'Are you going to a funeral?' Kate replied, 'No, but since you act as if God is dead, I wanted to join you in your mourning.' Luther got the message and quickly recovered.

Partnership in Marriage After Luther and others rescued 12 sisters from a Cistercian nunnery, Martin and friends arranged marriages as surety for protection. Though a great defender of marriage, Luther did not seek it for himself. His view was firmly expressed: 'Good God, they will never thrust a wife on me?' When no place was found for Katharina, they were secretly married. At this stage they were not romantically in love, and Martin confessed to friends he did not find Katherina at all attractive. But after 20 years of marriage, when Katharina had proved a highly efficient manager of the domestic chores (in a three-storey house with forty rooms), and an equal in the famous 'table talks' of theological and political issues presided over by Martin after the evening meals, a deeper relationship of equals developed. Kathie was more than able to hold her own in teasing exchanges! This recorded exchange is found in the archives. Martin: 'One of these days a man will have more than one wife.' Kate: 'Only the devil would accept that as true. St Paul said, 'Each man should have his own wife. See Corinthians 1.' Martin: 'True, but not just one.' Kate: 'If that happens, I will leave you

with all the children and return to the nunnery.'

The full drama, 20 minutes in length, can be downloaded via the Manawatu People's Radio (MPR): www.mpr.nz/show/wesley. It will remain accessible up to the end of August.

Source: Rob Yule's 2017 book *A Terrifying Grace: Sexuality, Romance, and Marriage in Christian History* (12 names including Karl Barth, John Wesley, C S Lewis and Saint John Paul II) This can be purchased from the author: robertmyule@gmail.com. Paperback \$35.00 NZS Post \$5.90. Hardcover \$55.00. Post \$7.00.

For an online copy of the play script, email johngill@inspire.net.nz.

Subverting Tradition: God the Creator

Conventionally, people think that the fundamentals of religion are to believe that there is a God and that this God created the universe. (By 'religion' they mean in practice Judeo-Christian and Muslim religion.) Of course, the picture in Genesis does not fit with the picture held by modern science: earth is not the centre of the universe, which is also way older than Genesis assumes, humans evolved rather than being created, and it makes no sense for example to say that light was created before the sun. So modern cosmology subverts this traditional doctrine.

But has the Bible been correctly interpreted? What if modern thinking has distorted and misunderstood talk of God as creator? Looking more closely at the book of Genesis and other biblical passages, with the help of modern biblical scholarship and, in particular, the book *Creation* by Claus Westermann, we can subvert this doctrine not just from the side of cosmology, but also, and perhaps more importantly, from the side of the biblical tradition itself. Then we are left with the task of really understanding what modern cosmology has to say about

our universe and its origins and exploring what ongoing meaning the biblical tradition might have. The following points can help us on this journey:

1. The Bible never speaks of **believing** in God the creator. While the Apostles' Creed says, "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth," the Bible never brings together "believe" and "create" or "creator." That God created the world was not a belief but rather an underlying assumption, an unquestioned axiom, or a presupposition of thinking. Moreover, it was one that was shared by the cultures surrounding ancient Israel. No-one at that time was able to conceive of a cosmos not created by the divine. The biblical creation stories aren't trying to create something uniquely Jewish; rather, they are taking up a widespread tradition and reworking it for their communities. It is odd that something common to Israel and its neighbours is today regarded as the mark, distinguishing believers and 'non-believers.'
2. The story of God creating the world is widely regarded as primitive science. Creationism is a futile attempt to defend this approach against the conclusions of science. It would be more appropriate to regard the creation story as an undifferentiated whole that combines religion and science, cosmos, society and individual. For those who think of it just as obsolete science, let me point out that it does much more than answer scientific questions. It provides an origin story not just for the world but also for the institution of the sabbath. It accounts for culture (something that humans create) as well as nature. This is even clearer in *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation story in which Marduk, the supreme God, commanded the construction of the city of Babylon after creating the world.
3. As each new year began, the creation story was recited. It served the function of reassuring everybody that the world was not going to continue becoming colder and colder and that spring would come and vegetation grow again.
4. The Bible speaks differently about creation at different times. That subverts the assumption that creation stories are an attempt to provide a scientific explanation for the existence of the world. Scholars are pretty sure that Genesis merges two creation stories, one from the Yahwist and the other from the Priestly tradition. The former has humans created by forming out of earth, the latter simply by divine command. The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah and some Psalms speak differently of creation: "You are wrapped in light like a garment, stretching out the sky like a curtain (Psalm 104.2). And then there is the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word." This rather suggests that interpersonal communication or the rational structure of things is a fundamental reality.
5. It is unclear whether "in the beginning" means a temporal beginning or a fundamental/ underlying reality. When the Wisdom literature says "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom" it doesn't mean that a more advanced wisdom might leave the fear of God behind. It means that the fear of God is the foundation on which all wisdom is built. Scholars such as Thorleif Boman and James Barr have made much of the idea that the Hebrew way of thinking is different from the Greek and from ours today. It could well be that ancient Hebrews were not very good at conceiving a temporal beginning and so for them "in the beginning" had a mixed meaning of foundational as well as initial.
6. Initially, the people of Israel appear to have thought of God giving them the land, but not of being responsible for the creation of the world. In the earliest confession (Deuteronomy 26),

the Israelites praised God for bringing them out of Egypt and for giving them the land of Canaan. Only later, in response to the agriculture-based Canaanite religion, did they develop the idea that Yahweh created the world as a whole.

7. It's hard for us to unthink the concept of God we have grown up with and to appreciate the way Israel and Jesus thought of God. Thinking of God has a long history. The early Christians adopted much of the way the Greeks thought of God. Hence the idea of the unmoved mover, the first cause that began everything. Everything in the world is moved by something else, but God is different. God moves without himself being moved. This is a philosophical concept that is trying to give an account of why there is a world, something alien to ancient Israel but familiar to the proto-scientific thinking of Greeks. Understanding talk of God as creator requires that we unbundle this merging of Greek and Hebrew ideas.

Well, then, what if anything is left of this idea of God as creator? We need to begin with the experience of absolute human insignificance in the face of a vast cosmos.

We may be able to feel awe and wonder at its vastness, but in the realm of biology, we exist only as momentary structures that defy the second law of thermodynamics by maintaining an ordered structure for a time. We are predators on other creatures and in turn prey, even if today we have little to fear. Small wonder that we can feel alienated from the world and no longer at home. This is something that found expression in the gnostic movement in the early centuries of Christianity, as well as in Existentialism between the world wars. The world doesn't care about us, and is completely indifferent to our suffering.

It is the care and concern of others, mediated through language, that can counter such feelings and enable us once more to feel at home in the universe. As Martin Buber says, God is the eternal Thou at work in all our I-Thou relationships. (See the quote from Drewermann on page 2 for a restatement of this thinking.)

Today, we have no need of a God to explain the existence of the world and God has no need of a religion. It's only we humans who need a religious relationship to God to help us live in a world that exhibits no care for us and is indifferent to our suffering.

The Editor

Reductionist Science

But I believe science has more to do than live down its reductionist and mechanist vices; it must also purge itself of the idolatrous sensibility it inherits from its Judeo-Christian background. No change of scientific mind will go far enough that does not return us to the sacramental vision of nature. Theodor Roszak *Where the Wasteland Ends*. 1972. Page 405

Deism

True, Deism has never been a robust faith....It survives today as an easy and shapeless orthodoxy among routine churchgoers. They may never have heard the word "Deism" but they continue to pay respects to that aloof "Somebody (or is it Something?) Up There," the managerial deity who stands well off behind the scientist's universe, careful never to intrude....If God has at last died in our culture, he has not been buried. For the casually religious, he lingers on like a fond old relative who has been so expertly embalmed that we may prop him up in the far corner of the living room and pretend the old fellow is still with us. *ibid p 186*.