

SOFiA

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

Slow but Profound Changes

Some changes are rapid. Just think how quickly the world changed when COVID 19 spread around the world. Other changes are slow, so slow that people might not even notice that they are happening. I've been going to Purakaunui, an inlet north of Dunedin, since childhood. There I see slow changes. A gradual build-up of sand covers many rocks I used to clamber over. The gradual washing of clay into the inlet has degraded much of the sand and allowed mud snails to inhabit a far greater area of the inlet.

It's hard for us to get a clear picture of how our country's environment has gradually degraded, with the conversion of forest into farmland and the introduction of many foreign species of animal and plant, because it has been so gradual and taken place over many years.

An increasing influence of entertainment is another, particularly important slow change. This change has been carefully analysed by Neal Gabler in his book *Life: The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*.

His main point is that entertainment (newspapers, movies, television and celebrity culture) has been gradually increasing in importance over the years, so that today it is dominant. Because the change has been slow, we might not even be aware of it and how wide its ramifications are. Life itself is becoming a movie. We are becoming performance artists in a show rather than simply living our lives. A few examples may help to make this clear.

In the past, people like Leonardo da Vinci and Isaac Newton became famous because of extraordinary achievements. Today, it's more a matter of celebrity rather than fame, and celebrities are well-known for, well, being well-known. No achievement necessary. An example would be Zsa Zsa Gabor, who became well-known because of her glamour and her often intentionally hilarious off-the-cuff comments in interviews.

Celebrity was initially conferred on film stars because of their acting, but soon, the star as performer was eclipsed by the star as personality. Later, celebrity expanded to a whole range of people: evangelists, world leaders, criminals, self-help gurus, great thinkers.

Along with this change, the ethos of entertainment increasingly came to affect or infect all areas of life. Entertainment is fun, it is superficial, it engages feeling rather than thinking, it provides models for us to identify with or emulate.

In politics, it was all about the media presence of the leader. Scenes were not spontaneous, but carefully scripted together with the media. Policy detail was boring; much better to have a short scene that showed the leader in a positive light. Party conferences degraded into media events, with the delegates reduced to the role of extras.

In religion, televangelists aimed to fill huge cavernous churches in the same way that rock stars filled concert halls, and increasingly used the techniques of entertainment to achieve their aims.

Entertainment spilled out from movies and TV to affect life. People were divided into the plain people, the audience, and the celebrities. People were in competition with each other, striving to attract the publicity that would turn them into celebrities, on the other side of the divide.

Entertainment affected news and current affairs. The O J Simpson trial became an entertaining spectacle. TV in general turned news into entertainment, creating pseudo-events like award ceremonies. TV debates were not about the substance of policy but about the superficial effect that the candidates had on the audience, something that would be endlessly debated afterwards by journalists. Conspicuous consumption arose not because we need more goods, but because we need to demonstrate our superior sense of fashion.

And the relevance of all this to religion? Today, we may spend an hour or two at church on a Sunday, but many more hours being entertained by TV and social media. In response, religion has tended to become entertainment, which we see in the big evangelical churches. Now, entertainment is becoming religion, as shown for example in pilgrimages to Elvis Presley's grave in Graceland. Celebrities may come to have a quasi-religious significance.

The Editor

Personal Profile

Camille Paglia



Camille Paglia is an American feminist and social critic. She has been a professor at the University of the arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, since 1984. A provocative, but

also very learned thinker, she can be relied on to have a definite view about almost anything. As her students are majoring in the arts such as theatre or sculpture, she is dealing with people who are less abstract and intellectual than other students.

She has been troubled by their ignorance of basic information about our religion and culture. For example, many did not know the story of Adam and Eve or who Moses was. This meant that many cultural references were opaque to them. For example, the negro spiritual "Go down Moses" was sung in church but had a revolutionary meaning in a society that tolerated slavery. As a result, she argues for teaching students the basics of all world religions, though she is an atheist herself.

She is also very critical of the new atheists, whom she describes as cynical, supercilious, and snide. They dismiss religion without an awareness of its important role in our long history.

The French postmodernists do little better. She is very critical of the fawning adoption of their thinking by American academics. Useful if you would like a little critical distance from Don Cupitt's widespread adoption of this philosophy.

A feminist from even before second wave feminism began, she is in favour of pornography and even prostitution, stances that resulted in other feminists trying to remove her from her post. These stances are because she is an ardent defender of free speech.

Paglia has wide-ranging learning and has written many articles for magazines such as Salon. She has learnt the art of providing entertaining, provocative and stimulating articles. I find her always interesting and enjoyable, if sometimes unnecessarily negative in her criticisms of others.

You could do worse than begin with her book *Glittering Images*, a series of essays about notable works of art, aimed at a broad audience. Alternatively, try one of her volumes of essays on current themes.

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

1 October 2021.

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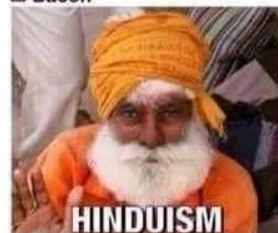
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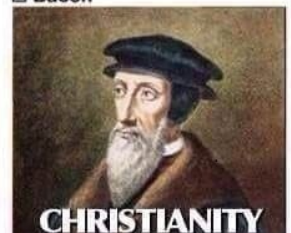
Funny Hat
 Bacon



Funny Hat
 Bacon



Funny Hat
 Bacon



Funny Hat
 Bacon

Christianity: We Have Bacon.

ifunny.co

SOFiA News

What will we in SOFiA make of our future?

Our committee chair of the last two years, Ian Crumpton, has had to withdraw from further committee and conference involvement because of seriously deteriorating health.

This brings into focus the whole membership's responsibility to take on the needs for the future of our organisation. Our funds have been, and still are adequate. Numbers are slowly declining. Although Covid has scotched plans to set up an international link with Progressive Christians, we have managed to put together an annual conference both last year and this year. Our Newsletter continues in lively good health, and Pete Cowley has charge of our library resources.

Last year at the AGM no new members were voted on to the committee. Pete Cowley volunteered to move from an ex officio and co-opted role to an elected position, and later John Thornley volunteered to be co-opted. Roger Wiig volunteered also, but later had to withdraw because of the pressure of other work. We have had no women committee members elected in the last three years.

Volunteers wanted

Half of your Committee stands down at the AGM, leaving only three members. Please consider volunteering to go on the committee, which meets monthly using Zoom (no travel required). Email anyone listed on p3 (except Ian Crumpton) to let them know of your interest.

At this AGM, Ian Crumpton, Brian Ellis, and Steve Collard are due to leave at the end of their four-year terms, leaving Philip Grimmett, and Pete Cowley as elected members with time still to run, and John Thornley, currently co-opted.

The regional spread of committee members has not been bad, with Ian Crumpton from Christchurch, Pete Cowley (now) from Gisborne, John Thornley from Manawatu, Philip Grimmett from Wellington and Brian Ellis and Steve Collard from Auckland. But without any women representatives. Ideally, we should have at least six elected members, with at least three women, widely spread from regions around the country. As with all our AGMs, whom and how many we elect will play a major role in the shape of SOFiA in the coming year(s).

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, Wgtn

Remembering Cornelia Leenman

Cornelia Leenman passed away on 11 July.

Cornelia's association with SOF, and particularly Lloyd Geering, gave direction and meaning to her life since the beginning of SOF. I believe she was a member of both local and national groups from the founding year. She rejoiced in the variety of views, both those that she agreed with and those that she didn't, that she could interact with, through the personalities, talks and discussions that she could be party to in SOF meetings, both local and national.

In recent times, she was, in my experience, nearly always able to be courteous and willing to receive visitors, at least for an hour or so. And she remained eager to engage in both the life of the St Andrew's village around her, and the world of history and ideas. She took particular joy in the aspects of Nature, the flow of seasons, of plants, of the birds and dogs that she could interact with on her verandah, and the tides and the comings and goings on the Tamaki Inlet which she had in quite close

view from her verandah. I know that the pastor at St Luke's visited her in her last weeks.

Over the last four months scans showed that chemotherapy had failed to halt a thorax cancer, so it had metastasised throughout her body. She was irked by pain in her last six weeks, trying with difficulty to manage two different medications for pain relief.

With thanks to Steve Collard

Letter to the Editor

I read with interest your articles 'Is Science the End of Religion?' and 'Subverting Tradition: God the Creator' in the latest Newsletter (Issue 54 June 2021). Two years ago I wrote a book titled 'In Search of An Elusive God', examining the God question. Unlike the late Stephen Jay Gould, the Harvard University paleontologist (whom you quote), who saw science and religion as Non-Overlapping Magisteria (NOMA), I see science and religion as being like two railway tracks heading in the same direction in trying to understand what is truth. Einstein's famous quip 'Science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind' I think is applicable in this quest, and as science proceeds through verification and falsification, so too should religious concepts and ideas be equally critiqued, along with atheism. It is a hugely important and vital discussion. See below for an excerpt from my book out of the chapter "

There are many rabbit-holes one can go down and I venture down a number of these in my book, but the idea that the modern scientific understanding of cosmology and biological evolution has somehow buried God is a monumental fallacy.

Robin Broom

Theology: The Science of God

Although Einstein had dismissed the God of his Jewish heritage as depicted in the Old

Testament scriptures, he made many references to God and respect for the unknown spiritual realm. In the book *The Quotable Einstein* edited by Alice Calaprice, Einstein noted that the religious feeling of the scientist 'takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection' (p. 151). He further stated, 'Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe – a spirit vastly superior to that of a man' (p. 152). And later he stated: 'My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable, superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God' (p. 161).

When we consider the sheer immenseness of the universe and the complexity of matter that life is composed of, we realise how utterly insignificant we are and also how little we really do know. Many of Einstein's comments reflect this notion and there is an obvious humility in accepting a reality well beyond human comprehension. He once remarked: 'All our knowledge is but the knowledge of school children....we shall know a little more than we do now. But the real nature of things; that we shall never know, never'.

Since science itself is based on hypothesising and proving or disproving the merits of a particular hypothesis, there is a

place for hypothesising in our quest to try and understand God and the spiritual realm should they exist. Such hypotheses about God can be put through the exercises of verification and falsification to see whether they make sense or not. Thus we may go through paradigm shifts as old beliefs about God and the spiritual realm are falsified or proven wrong and new paradigms and beliefs become forged. And this should be the quest of the genuine seeker of Truth: being prepared to take on new beliefs as the evidence leans heavily one way or the other. There are spiritual principles which we can explore and experience for ourselves in this dimension beyond the physical universe. True religious experience and spirituality are found by venturing into the realms of God, a quest we humans appear to be hard-wired for, yet which our materialistic society distracts us from pursuing. In an essay called, *The World as I See It*, Einstein wrote:

The most beautiful and deepest experience a man can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed. It was the experience of mystery – even if mixed with fear – that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds: it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute true religiosity. (Originally published in 1931 in *'Forum and Century'* Vol 84 p. 193-194)

Robin Boom

Rethinking the Garden of Eden Story

I have been reading *The rise and fall of Adam and Eve: The story that created us* by Stephen Greenblatt, and how St. Augustine regarded the Garden of Eden story as a literal account of the first humans.

I acknowledge that St. Augustine (C4-C5) was an intelligent and learned man but, not only was he a man of his time, I believe that he had several major character flaws that

he, inevitably, brought to his Biblical interpretations. Augustine was a misogynist, he had an ambivalent attitude to his own sexuality, and he was preoccupied with sin.

Augustine formulated the doctrine of Original, or Ancestral, Sin, which became the Christian belief that humanity has existed in a state of sin since Adam and Eve's disobedience in Eden.

Even before Augustine, and following on from St. Paul's contention in Romans 5 that: "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me", the theologian Tertullian (C2-C3) regarded Eve, and all subsequent women, as 'the devil's gateway' and told them that 'your sin meant that even the Son of God had to die'. But Augustine was the first to add the concept whereby an infant was damned at birth.

I believe that the doctrine of Original Sin was one of the worst things that could have happened to Christianity, and that it was hugely detrimental to the lives of millions of people over the following sixteen hundred years.

So, I decided, perhaps somewhat perversely, to also take the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis at face value; that is, to read it as literally as possible, while acknowledging that I, too, would bring my own opinions, experiences, attitudes, prejudices and ignorances to the task.

My literal reading of the Garden of Eden story is based on the RSV translation - but with significant adaptations.

There was once a god who created for himself a beautiful garden, with a river flowing through it, in which he could relax after his day's work was done. The god called his garden Eden and he made to grow in it every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food; as well, in the midst of the garden, there were two special trees: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Every evening, the god enjoyed the peace and quiet of this garden, but then he found himself longing for company during his time of relaxation. He didn't want the company of any of his staff - his angels - that he worked with during the day as that would just be like an extension of the working environment. Nor did he

find the company of any of the animals that he had created and which lived in the garden fulfilling.

So, the god made man out of the earth and breathed life into him, so that he could be his companion-pet. Then, realising that the man would be better with a companion, the god paraded all the animals before him and, while the man named them all, a suitable helper and companion was not found among them.

Even though the man had the ability to speak, by expecting him to find a companion among the animals – especially after his own failure to do so - implies that the god regarded the man as little more than just another animal. But the connotations of this statement are problematic. Perhaps the god expected the man to select, may be, a dog - 'man's best friend'. However, if the god intended the companion to be a mate for the man, then the mind boggles at the connotations.

So, not having found a companion for the man, the god then made a female version of the man to fulfil this role.

In a second version of the story in Genesis, the god created two beings, together: a male, whom he called man, and a female, whom he called woman.

These companion-pets were neither gods nor angels and although they were male and female and naked, they were not ashamed. By telling us only after Adam and Eve had been expelled from Eden that Adam 'knew his wife and she conceived', the story implies that, while they were in the garden, they had no understanding of sexuality and lived together chastely. Although they could speak, they had no ethical understanding of such things as good and evil. Perhaps they could be characterised as physically mature but, intellectually and ethically, like young children. Thus, they could not be considered to be fully developed humans.

The god found the company of these companion-pets congenial as he walked in the garden in the evening and, as a bonus, during the day when he was working, they were kept busy tilling and keeping the garden. The god commanded them saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the

knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die".

The meaning of "You will die" is ambiguous. Does it mean you will drop down dead immediately, or that you will not be immortal but die at the end of your life? The Biblical story never said that Adam & Eve were immortal, which implies, that they were mortal. Certainly, they had not eaten of the Tree of Life in the Garden - which appears to have been able to bestow immortality. Therefore, as mortal creatures, being told "You will die", implies that you will drop dead immediately.

Now, one of the creatures that lived in the garden was the serpent, which was more subtle than any other wild creature that the god had made. The serpent said to the woman, "Did the god say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?"

To have a serpent capable of speech would suggest that this was not an ordinary snake, but rather, a literary device - which is another factor that makes it difficult to read the Genesis story literally. Although not mentioned in Genesis, the serpent has traditionally been interpreted as the devil. And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but the god said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

The serpent replied to the woman, "You will not die. For the god knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like the god, knowing good and evil."

As what the serpent said to Eve was true – even though the devil is not renowned for truthfulness - I see the snake in the role of a mentor who gave Adam and Eve the information they needed to grow up, to develop beyond their pet-companion status. So, when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she gave some to her husband, and he ate.

The Genesis story relates that Eve was beguiled by the serpent, but he must have done this without deception as everything the serpent told her was the truth. Also, the Biblical story fails to acknowledge the gods' culpability in what happened after he had deceived them about dying if they ate the fruit.

Traditionally, the Eden story has been regarded as the origin of human sinfulness and - worse - as the origin of Original Sin. I do not think this is valid as, until Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they had no awareness of sin - so the actual act of eating was done in a state of naïve innocence with no understanding that disobedience contravened the will of the god.

After they had eaten the fruit, the eyes of the man and the woman were opened.

An obviously metaphorical rather than literal statement!

The man and woman realised that they were naked, so they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons to cover their genitals.

Rather than seeing the making of aprons as an awareness of sexual shame, I suggest that they could now recognise their nakedness because it was in contrast to the (presumably) clothed god - otherwise, how would they know about clothes? This episode is a significant marker in Adam and Eve's transition from companion-pets to human beings.

That evening, when they heard the sound of the god walking in the garden the man and the woman hid themselves from the presence of the god. But the god called to the man, saying, "Where are you?" The man replied saying, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." The god then said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man replied (honestly) "The woman gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate". Then the god said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman replied (honestly), "The serpent told me about the fruit of the tree, and I ate."

The god then had a major fit of temper.

Firstly, the god vented his anger and frustration on the serpent. He cursed the serpent saying that because of what it had done it was cursed above all other animals and that it would live its life on its belly and eat dust all the days of its life. And that he would put enmity between it and the man and the woman and their descendants.

However, all the serpent had done was to tell the truth – and for this, the god cursed it.

The god then turned on the woman saying that because of what she had done he would make her sexually desirous of her husband, and cause childbearing to be painful, and that the man would rule over her.

To the man the god said that because he had listened to the [truthful] voice of the woman, and had eaten of the tree, that the very ground would be cursed, and that it would bring forth thorns and thistles, and that, in toil and sweat, the man would eat of the plants of the ground all the days of his life, until he died and was, himself, returned to the ground.

The god's punishment of Adam and Eve reads very much like a just-so story – as a post-event explanation of the realities of human life.

The man adopted the name Adam, which means 'man', and he named the woman Eve because she was the mother of all living. As Adam and Eve's fig-leaf aprons were rather flimsy, the god made them garments of skins.

However, the god said that as they had now become god-like in knowing good and evil, in case they also ate from the second forbidden tree, which would mean that they would live forever, and become "like one of us (gods)" they would be banished from the garden of Eden and sent into the wilderness.

The god 'condemned' the man and woman to mortality. However, as they never were immortal, as the god never wanted them to eat of the Tree of Life, the belief that humans are mortal because of the sin of Adam and Eve has no validation in the story.

The god drove the man and woman out of Eden and, at the entrance, he placed one of his angels, with a

flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the Tree of Life and ensure that no human being could enter the garden and eat its fruit, and thus acquire the attributes of gods.

 While I am sure that the interpretation developed by anyone who attempts a literal reading of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden would differ considerably from both mine and St. Augustine's, it would nevertheless require them to tie themselves in intellectual knots.

It is, and was, a serious error to misunderstand the Genesis story as historical fact. As Karen Armstrong reminds us, a creative story - a myth - must be approached in an appropriate mode of consciousness and read and understood according to the rules of its genre. And reading and analysing a myth as if it was a literal account is *not* an appropriate methodology.

So how would I now read the story of Adam and Eve?

I would follow Karen Armstrong's advice and acknowledge that a myth didn't just happen in the past, but is continuously recurring, so we should not be satisfied with a superficial reading of scripture, but should continually elicit new meanings from the text. I would thus take themes from the story and use them as points for exploration and discussion in my own life and in contemporary society. For example:

- can the most unlikely sources sometimes convey the truth?
- how do we cope when someone who we trust deceives us?
- what can be the consequences of reinforcing a rule with a lie?
- is something a sin if it was done in ignorance or by accident?
- if an understanding of ethics is essential for maturity, then how should this be conveyed and taught?
- how do we cope with living in the big, wide, harsh world?

Shirley Dixon

Book Review

A New Republic of the Heart: An Ethos For Revolutionaries

By Terry Patten

It's always helpful and interesting to know a little bit about authors, particularly authors of major works such as this one, A New Republic of the Heart (NRH). Terry Patten was born in 1951 in Chicago, was brought up in the Brethren church, but became a follower of the Western guru Franklin Jones (aka Adi Da) at age 22. At age 53 he joined Ken Wilber's Integral Institute. Integral theory is Ken Wilber's attempt to amalgamate the range of theories and thinkers into one single framework, and has been referred to as a "theory of everything", including matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit. This is probably the fundamental underpinnings of NRH, Patten's quest to have an all-encompassing theory that unifies the globe and saves us from our self-destructive ways as a species.

Patten exhorts us to live with apparent paradoxes and seeming inconsistencies in these conflicts and in so doing develop higher levels of awareness and wisdom as we face what he considers to be potentially apocalyptic conditions on Earth that have been of our own doing. He doesn't shy away from the real potential for catastrophic climate change and ecological collapse. But he also sees a silver lining; the potential for a major shift in our collective awareness about our relationship with each other and the Earth.

He addresses the old debate about whether human technology will save the day or not and refers to the two sides of this debate as Cornucopian (optimistic) and Malthusian (pessimistic) perspectives. I guess we all have both in some measure; we yearn that things will work out and we strive to be hopeful and optimistic, while we also hold a lot of fear inside that our number is coming up – that we are facing a major comeuppance for our collective addiction to growth.

He likens the critical state of the world to a family sitting down with an addicted family

member for an abstinence intervention, and suggests the scientific evidence for the planet's ecological crisis is commanding our whole species to put a halt to our destructive addiction that is our collective lifestyles. Rehab is required to restore wholeness.

We have sinned; in the sense of the ancient meaning of the word "to miss the mark" by losing touch with wholeness and even denying it, especially in terms of our western growth-orientated lifestyles, ie our continuing insistence, as demonstrated by our profligate lifestyles, that we are separate rather than dependent and part of the Earth's ecosystems.

Part of Patten's hope for a major shift in human consciousness and awakening lies in the way that humans have previously made enormous shifts in awareness. He gives as an example the fact that Isaac Newton, who was considered one of the greatest scientists of his time in the early eighteenth century, publicly supported the religious calculation that God created the world on Sunday, October 23, 4004 BCE. And in less than 150 additional years of scientific observation, an enormous shift of awareness and understanding has occurred so that we know the planet has been here for many more thousands of years than thought just 150 years ago, but for many, many millions of years. And the orderly nature of the Universe according to Newtonian physics has been replaced by a deeply mysterious Universe based on Einsteinian physics.

One of the most important learnings for me in the book was around worldviews. He describes three main contemporary worldviews as premodern, modern and postmodern and describes them as follows:

"The premodern worldview is authoritarian, religious, and traditional. The modern is achievement-oriented, egalitarian, and rational. Postmodern worldviews emphasize compassionate sensitivity to self and others, challenging objectivity and expressing liberal, pluralistic ideals. These worldviews exist in a historical relationship: premodern, traditionalist cultures began about five thousand years ago, modern about five hundred years ago, and the postmodern only 150 years ago—emerging

more fully in the liberation movements of the 1960s. The tensions between these worldviews are the all-too-familiar stuff of our current 'culture wars.'"

The book has helped me appreciate more clearly how when I jumped off from a premodern fundamentalist Christian worldview in my youth I jumped to one that was a loose and at times confusing combination of both modern and post-modern ideas and practices. I see better now how the tension between the two domains has been a feature of my thinking struggles for the past 40 years. With the stimulus of this book, I feel motivated to attempt to better integrate these two ways of seeing the world and determining truth; but also, to regather some of the treasure of my formative traditionalist worldview – its values and guidance on the best way to live.

The book probably needed a good edit. However, I enjoyed the repetition, and the immense breadth of content that Patten brings to bear on understanding our current human predicament; but even more importantly, how to use the planetary crisis we're in to lift ourselves to a new plane of sister- and brother-hood and reconnection with the Earth and all other living things. Now that would be a revolution!

Doug Sellman

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July 2021

The Functions Served by Religion

As far as we know, religion has existed in every culture and society for thousands of years. Scholars from different disciplines have proposed that this is so because religion has served deeply felt human needs at both the individual and societal levels. I'd like now to briefly outline four of these proposals – and ask if it might be possible to re-think religion in a way that might address these same needs in today's secular society.

The first of these is *Terror Management Theory*, which notes that every religious tradition holds some sort of belief about what happens when we die. Millions of people over thousands of years have faced recurring famine, plague, and warfare. Life in this world has been terrifying. And knowing this – knowing that our death is ever-lurking produces a kind of corrosive anxiety, if not an incapacitating fear.

Building on anthropologist Ernst Becker's book, *The Denial of Death*, social psychologists Sheldon Solomon and Jeff Greenberg became the principal architects of TMT. In Solomon's words, every human being is just a "breathing defecating piece of meat." Unable to face this reality, we have invented religious fictions to distract and comfort ourselves. Those who weren't paralyzed by the constant fear of death had an evolutionary advantage. Our self-deception became functional. Religion, in short, has provided us with a bulwark against the fear of death.

Philosopher Stephen Cave has elaborated on this by identifying four such self-deceptions that he calls "immortality narratives." The first is the longevity story. Adam, according to the book of Genesis, lived to be 930. Some schools of Daoism teach that longevity can be extended to the point of achieving immortality in this life. And there are some today who believe that modern medicine may yet be able to deliver exactly that.

A second narrative is the one emphasized by the Abrahamic religions. After death, your body can be revived and you will live again. So Jesus is said to have been raised from the dead – "the first fruits of them that sleep." That is, we may rest in peace until some future day when our body will be resurrected in a heavenly afterlife.

A third immortality narrative says that, even though the body may be mortal, we nonetheless have an essence – a soul – that lives forever. Hindu and Buddhist traditions take this a step further and suggest that we are and will be reincarnated.

The fourth narrative, currently popular among many today, says we will live on in the hearts and minds of others. It's about leaving a legacy – our children and

grandchildren, or some good we may have done, or whatever estate we may be leaving for others to enjoy.

Another theory says that religion has been invented to serve social cohesion needs. For a long period in our early history, groups were extraordinarily egalitarian – not because we were socialists, but because there were few ways to accumulate wealth. If you killed a bison which you couldn't keep as food for yourself, it made more sense to share the meat with others and, in doing so, buy yourself some goodwill that may come in handy further on down the road. As hunter-gatherer villages grew into city-states, however, and the rise of agriculture made it possible to hoard wealth, it became easier for people to act in antisocial ways. Those who are strangers to you can more easily cheat and be cheated. And when individuals care only about their own well-being, things can quickly go downhill, leading to a potentially disastrous collapse of group cohesions and solidarity.

According to psychologist Adam Shariff and other colleagues, these challenges set the stage for a new social innovation – a religion that told people that, if they didn't play nice, there would be terrible consequences, if not in this life, then in the next, at the hands of a punitive deity. And the Abrahamic God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is about as punitive as you can get. What Shariff calls this "big, omniscient, punitive God" helped enforce civic virtue and provided a unified set of rules – a shared moral code that, in turn, allowed for vast trade networks based on trust.

Still another theory adds to this – proposing that religion contributes further to our social cohesion, while at the same time meeting a deeply felt psychological need, by providing members of any society with its own shared meaning system. We humans, it is said, are essentially meaning-making creatures. That is, we need to see how this little life of ours fits into a larger cosmic narrative or worldview. So every society, by providing its members with precisely this, strengthens its cohesion while at the same time meeting our need for meaning. Which is what every religion delivers – a cosmic

narrative and conceptual map that we know is true because it has been revealed to us by an all-knowing deity or other supernatural beings .

It's not enough, however, just to say that such gods or supernatural agents were invented to produce these functional benefits. How did they come about in the first place? It wasn't like early humans held a big meeting and decided they should start believing in gods. On the contrary, it seems that we began to actually *experience* what we think of as a spirit world at a very early stage of our development.

Some 50,000 years ago, changes in the brain of *Homo sapiens* gave birth to symbolic consciousness – the capacity to create an inner world of symbols to represent the outer world of objects and events in which we live. And we have lived ever since in these two worlds – an outer world delivered to us by our senses, and an inner world constructed by our mind. This extraordinary shift in consciousness enabled us to expand out of Africa, occupy almost every ecological niche, engage in an outpouring of creative activities, and give birth to the very earliest expressions of what we think of today as religion.

Pre-dating all organised religion was the emergence, at least 35,000 years ago in hunter-gatherer societies, of shamanism – a practice by which those identified as shamans entered a 'spirit world' to obtain information to help and to heal members of their social group.

Shamans were humanity's first physicians – spiritual specialists able to enter an altered state of consciousness that yielded experiences easily thought to be connecting them with other-worldly spirit beings – the same experiences that, over the millennia since, have been described as mystical in all our religious traditions – at the core of which is the apprehension of the ultimate unity of all things.

A number of studies have shown that such experiences are shared by 20 - 40% of the population in all cultures and in all historical eras. The phenomenon seems to be a human constant – a universal tendency of humans to extend the boundary of the self

while in an altered (some might say "enhanced") state of consciousness.

So what are we to make of this today, in our modern, Western, secular society? For most of us, life no longer holds the terror that it once did. At the end of a long and relatively peaceful life, can we not now face our death with equanimity? And with democratically enacted laws maintained by a trusted police force and judiciary, do we any longer need a punitive deity to deal with the cheats and free-loaders. For those who still choose to believe, that deity has already morphed into one that is no longer punitive but downright loving and benign. And what of our shared worldview or meaning-system? Does it need to be religious? Science provides us with a cosmic narrative that I am told is evidence-based, and its technology delivers us a cornucopia of goodies. Is that not enough? When the All-Blacks bring home the World Cup or we win the Americas Cup, that surely is all the social cohesion that we need. Which leaves us to deal only with those mystical or self-transcendent experiences that seem to underlie religion and still sometimes surface in a few of us. But they surely are pathological (or so we are told) – strange, drug- or meditation-induced aberrations of consciousness that have nothing whatsoever to do with reality.

Wow! Could it be that, after all these millennia, there is no longer any need for religion? Free at last! Free of any vestiges of magical thinking. Free to finally let go all those mediaeval myths and embrace a purely scientific account of what we know now to be reality. Free at last to live out our life, unencumbered by religion, in this little secular utopia of Aotearoa – the envy of the rest of the world as together we face the prospect of global civilisational collapse.

What think you? As for me – (call me old-fashioned if you must) – I'm still inclined to practice a little magic, am heartened by accounts of near-death experiences, fashion meaning-making narratives that should never be exposed to peer review, and treasure every glimpse of self-transcendence that may be given me. *Merv Dickinson*