

# SOFiA

## Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

### Thinking about Ideas

In the newsletter before last, Margaret Gwynn questioned my claim that SOFiAns had stopped thinking about ideas (I think my claim was based more on the number of book reviews than the amount of thinking about ideas.) Anyway, I issued a challenge, asking for volunteers to review Ian Harris's most recent book.

As a result, this issue has a very good review of the book, by John Meredith. However, it is a reprint from the Methodist magazine *Touchstone*, so no outright win for Margaret. Effectively, there were no real review offers, but not an outright win for me, because John Thornley did offer some practical tips for using the book in groups, intended to complement the *Touchstone* review. I conclude that it was a draw and neither of us won. However, let me widen the original request and ask for any reviews of interesting, SOFiA-related books that you read recently. I would be glad to be proven wrong.

As for myself, I increasingly find that books are too long and complicated. Maybe it's just because I'm getting older, but life is too short and there are too many books. I want to get the essence of a book's message, without having to carefully read every page. Admittedly, some books are easy to read, but others are definitely hard work. In fact, I find that YouTube is often the best introduction to a thinker. Watch a few of their YouTube videos and you can judge whether it will be worthwhile reading a whole book from them. Through YouTube, I've become aware of the following thinkers:

**Jordan Peterson** is a high-profile Canadian psychologist with wide-ranging

interests. He is opposed to ideology of any sort and came to prominence through his rejection of Canadian laws that require people to use others' preferred pronoun (which might be ze or hir or a singular they).

**Yeonmi Park** is a North Korean who escaped, first to China, then South Korea, and finally to the USA. She is now a human rights activist with interesting insights into North Korean society and a passion for freedom. I've read her amazing story, told in *In Order to Live*.

**Camille Paglia** is a feminist cultural critic who got into trouble with other feminists because of her forthright views.

**Jonathan Haidt** is a more recent discovery, and I still don't know much about him. His field is moral psychology, which tends to undermine a philosophical approach to morality by looking at the psychological factors that influence the moral positions people take.

The School of Life, founded by **Alain de Botton** provides helpful thumbnail sketches of important thinkers like Dostoyevsky, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Goethe. It aims to provide practical wisdom and is a welcome contrast to the specialist esotericism of academic philosophy.

**Chris Hedges** sounds like an Old Testament prophet of doom, telling us that the U.S. empire is coming to an end in 10 or 20 years at most. In his recent book *America, the Farewell Tour*, he points to many signs of decline, painting an alarming picture of the American empire's decay.

*The Editor*

# A New Perspective

The walls of Western Christianity are collapsing. It is a seismic collapse! One only has to look around at mainline churches in NZ and recognise that in another 25 years, Christianity as we have known it simply will not be.

There are three reactions to this collapse:

- Denial
- What we need is more of the same but to do it more efficiently
- Ask what is trying to be born (adapted from J Philip Newell)

Paul Tillich said, "Be open to a birthing of what we have not yet known". But also "As long as we think that the new thing can only come through the old thing then we are in danger of missing the new thing. If we think we have superiority, we will miss the new possibility."

## Questions to consider:

- How important is it to talk in language so that other people understand what we are saying?
- Do we have to **undo** the things we have done before in order to move forward?
- We need to challenge ourselves to talk our own talk. Change the language or be silent. (Butler Bass)

## The language of COVID-19 directed our actions

General Messages:

Stay Safe	Stay Home	Save Lives
Be Kind	Stay Calm	We're All in this Together

Messages to those in vehicles:

Expect Delays	Plan Ahead	Stay Calm
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Where did that language come from? Was it worldwide? Who adopted that language-those phrases? Was the language transferred from another earlier situation or was it totally "new" for the present situation?

What realm is it in? Is it in a different, more "soul-ful" realm? Where did we see these phrase? Hear them? Did we use them ourselves?

Was there an expected result?

What was the result?

We were asked to "show compassion" "be compassionate". How can we do that? Is it different from being "kind"?

For some there is no going back. They have lost jobs or the work they did doesn't exist any longer. The career they trained for has gone.

In some parts of the world, significant family members have gone. Life will never be the same for those people. How can we respond to those who have suffered loss? The Canadian prime minister said recently "Offering thoughts and prayers just doesn't cut it." Many have lost their faith.

So, what is the way forward? For ourselves? For the church? For our own congregation? Our community?

Professor Richard Poulton, author of a paper on mental well-being in NZ, says "communities need to be part of the re-design. Each community has different needs and the members will know what those needs are."

During the lockdown I watched a movie I had missed earlier but heard a lot about. *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. A London writer bonds with the residents of Guernsey after their experiences during World War 2 and Nazi occupation. When she returns to her former life, the people left behind reflect on their time with her. "She helped us forget everything we had lost and remember our humanity" one said.

*Jocelyn Kirkwood*

If we were to translate the word "God" into "the background to an affirmation of all life, in a way that nature does not provide, society does not provide, but which is absolutely necessary to be and remain human" then we would have understood everything.

*Eugen Drewermann*

# 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 (deceased). Fred Marshall, Noel Cheer and Norm Ely

**Publication deadline** for the next Newsletter is 1 December 2021.

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# SOFiA News

## Conference 21 and COVID-19

On **Monday October the 4th**, the Prime Minister will inform us all whether Auckland will drop to COVID Level 2 and the rest of the country to COVID Level 1 on Wednesday 6th October - that is the hope. However, if this does **NOT EVENTUATE** then the plan is **to defer the Conference until Feb/Mar 2022** and **hold the AGM by Zoom meeting on 6 November at 10:30am** with the usual business and reports and election of new committee members.

This is to give **some degree of certainty** so you can register and book travel and accommodation if you wish to attend.

## Faith & Reason Group Hawkes Bay

*Your Editor was delighted to receive this article from Jocelyn Kirkwood about a group that doesn't have the SOFiA name but shares a lot of its approach. It was heartening to hear about a previously unknown group. That makes him wonder what else might be there, in particular, whether there is a group of previously evangelical or charismatic Christians who now take a more questioning and critical approach to things. Please, if you know of such a group, drop the Editor a line.*

*The Editor*

. The Faith & Reason Group, based in Havelock North, began some years ago when one of our number was studying a paper at Otago University, through the Theology Faculty.

Being a liberal thinker, she found it difficult to get appropriate support from fellow students, so put a call out for some "Study Buddies". We used her assignments as a basis for our discussions and when her results came through, we claimed them as our own!! There were only 7 or 8 of us at the time and we had a lot of fun.

When the year of study was over, we agreed to carry the group on. We started using the Ian Harris articles being published in the Otago Daily Times once a month under the heading "Faith & Reason". The Faith & Reason group met in the same house for around four years, until the owners moved to a retirement village and the house was sold. We took a recess for a couple of years after which a move was made to start a group up and open it to anyone interested. Some of the present group have no idea that there was ever a group before them who explored along much the same lines!



One of our number was in contact with Ian Harris and suggested we start using that material again. We all received our own copy of the monthly article and studied it before coming to the group for discussion. During last year Ian decided to retire from submitting to the Otago Daily Times and we had to look to other sources for discussion material. The pandemic presented some interesting topics of its own and one or two papers were written by group members themselves. We studied the writing of Rev Dr Peter Matheson, Centre for Theology and Public Issues, Otago University. Topics included, "Culture after Covid 19", "The Future of Religion in New Zealand" and topics such as "Religious education in schools" and "Is Rugby a Religion in New Zealand?" both of which we created for ourselves.

There are regularly 10-13 in our group which meets 9 times a year, taking a break



over December – February. We meet in each other's homes from 3pm -4.30pm approx. on the last Sunday of the month. There is no liturgy of any kind or formal beginning or end to the afternoon meeting, apart from afternoon tea!

Recently Ian Harris notified us of his latest book "Hand in Hand", a series of articles written over the years but not repeats of the newspaper articles. Several of us bought a copy of Ian's book and we now use that alongside other material that presents itself through the year, as a focus for our discussion. Recently, Ian wrote another article, in two parts, for newspaper publication which we will likely use when we are able to meet again.

*Jocelyn Kirkwood*

## More from Don Cupitt

May I report some bits of news about my doings?

On Friday 22 July, a family member will drive me across so that I can join the Conference between about 1.30 and 4.30pm and at least greet some old friends.

Peter Armstrong, who was the producer of the 1984 TV series, has begun filming with me again. He has in mind a slightly refurbished and extended 'second edition' of the old series, a project in which the BBC has expressed interest. But if that doesn't happen, Peter's new film will in any case be put up on the internet, and made available to the SOF websites.

Members may not know about a two hour interview with me on my life and thought, which can be found by Googling 'Alan Macfarlane Interviews', or [sms.cam.ac.uk](http://sms.cam.ac.uk). It's part of a Cambridge project to create a record of the University's intellectual life, and is the best thing of its kind that I have done. It prompted Peter Armstrong to work on a new Episode 7 to add to his earlier work.

*Don Cupitt*

## Bishop John Shelby Spong

June 16 1931 – September 12 2021

*I didn't find out about the death of John (Jack) Spong through the media. Instead,*

*numerous SOFiAns emailed the message to me. This is perhaps a good sign that our network is functioning well.*

*The following tribute from the Westar Institute, which the Jesus Seminar is part of, sums up the significance of this important church leader.*

*The Editor*

Jack Spong was a great friend of Westar who took Westar seriously. He understood the challenge the Jesus Seminar posed to contemporary Christianity. He knew the challenge was international in scope. He upheld that a traditional theistic worldview was untenable in our time and that this plain but shocking truth called for a rethinking and revitalizing of religion as a human value.

"The church is like a swimming pool. Most of the noise comes from the shallow end."

His gaze was set on a new Christianity that could speak and live a new spirituality. He was firmly committed to respect, inclusion, and understanding which he founded on a critical regard of scripture and a realistic understanding of nature.

His voice was that of a prophet centered not on some distant future but on the reality that we need to face now.

He will be greatly missed but will remain inspiring for so many people who found in him a light along the pathways of our time.

*David Galston  
Executive Director,  
Westar Institute*

God is not a Christian, God is not a Jew or a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Buddhist. All of those are human systems which human beings have created to try to help us walk into the mystery of God. I honour my tradition, I walk through my tradition, but I don't think my tradition defines God. I think it only points me to God.

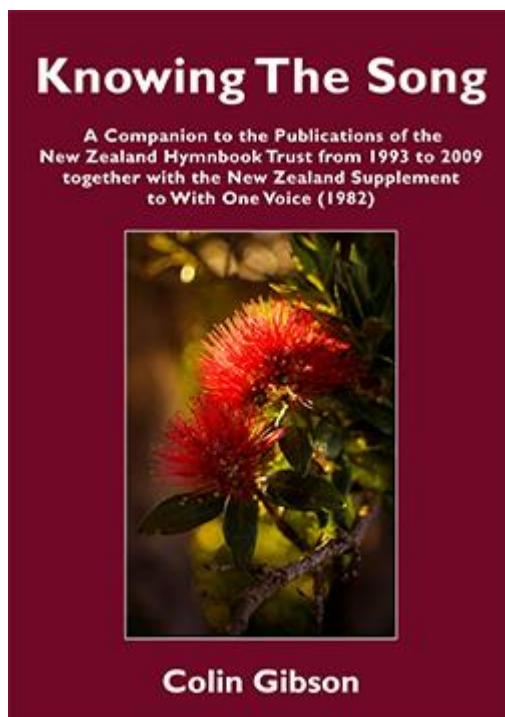
*John Shelby Spong*

# Book Reviews

## Knowing the Song

A Companion to the Publications of the New Zealand Hymnbook Trust from 1993 to 2009. Colin Gibson.

Published by the New Zealand Hymnbook Trust and Philip Garside Publishing Ltd 2021.



My dictionary has two meanings for 'know' or 'knowing'. Both describe aspects of this book.

First, 'know' means 'to be aware through observation, inquiry or information'. The 'information' on the hymns comes in two parts. Colin Gibson first tells the stories of how 506 hymns came to be written. The four books of New Zealand hymns: *Alleluia Aotearoa* (1993), *Carol our Christmas* (1996), *Faith Forever Singing* (2000), *Hope is our Song* (2009) and a further 54 hymns in *The New Zealand Supplement to With One Voice* (1982). The 'information' includes biographies of hymnwriters, the contexts (time, place, and culture), and the meanings/theologies. The second part describes the tune, how melody and rhythm convey the heart or feelings of the texts. The hymns are set out in alphabetical order, two columns per page. While the texts are not given, Colin's story of each hymn, written as

if in conversation with the reader, fully engages us with both subject matter and spirit. In the final pages there are 3 Appendices and 3 Indices, including the history of the NZ Hymnbook Trust, hymn titles and tunes, Scripture sources, information on writings about the hymns and international publication of NZ hymns.

Second, 'know' means 'to develop a relationship through meeting and spending time with someone or something' leading to a deeper friendship. Knowing Colin, I believe he chose 'knowing' rather than 'learning' for the connotations of humanness, humanity, even humour, in the imagery of 'knowing'. What lucky people they are who discover treasures/taonga of a kiwi theology in word and music in the hymnody of Aotearoa New Zealand. As the cover blurb writes: 'Ministers, preachers, worship leaders, church musicians and choir members will find a wealth of material in the *Companion* to entertain and inform them, and to share with their congregations'. I like the word 'entertain' (my italics). Let's show from our church singing that we enjoy our worship!

New Zealanders can be proud of gifts Colin Gibson has given this land and our people. A former Professor of English at the University of Otago, his skills combine literary research and teaching and music composition in hymn, choral and symphonic forms. Colin has led workshops and lecture series on hymns throughout New Zealand and in Australia, America, England, Japan and the Philippines. He was a founding member of the New Zealand Hymnbook Trust and member of its Editorial Group. In 1981 he established in the Dunedin Public Library a national research collection of hymn books and study material. In 2002 he was awarded the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to literature and music.

A special thank you to Philip Garside, who has produced an attractive publication with easily readable text size and layout. At \$50.00 retail, this is a bargain. Every church, school and city library should have a copy!

John Thornley

## God of the Galaxies

The new book that I am reading “The Human Cosmos – a Secret History of the Stars” reminds us ‘that the life we have led is not just an earthly existence but a cosmic one. Our innate relationship with the stars shaped who we are – our religious beliefs, power structures, scientific advances and even our biology’. So goes the blurb of Jo Marchant’s revelatory treatise.

Long before the birth of Christ, humans understood that the cosmos that created us, as we created it, in which internal experience and external reality were inextricably entwined.

After Northern Hemisphere discoveries of Neolithic sites, explorers established that people looked to the spirit world. And found a connection to the moon, sun and stars.

February, 1954 American biologist Frank Brown, discovered something so remarkable, so inexplicable, that his peers essentially wrote it out of history. He discovered that oysters removed from the ocean, kept in brine inside a dark room continued their feeding activity in time with the tides from their home beach.

The oysters gradually shifted their feeding times later and later. Brown realized the oysters had corrected their activity according to the local stage of the moon; instead of matching the East Coast swell. He had isolated these organisms from every environmental cue. And yet, somehow, they were following the moon.

Closer to Aotearoa’s history is how Englishman James Cook learned from Polynesian navigator Tupaia who retraced the voyages of his ancestors. They followed the stars.

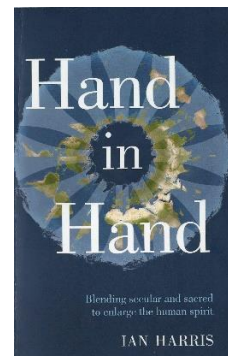
The Writers of the New Testament story of the birth of Jesus focused on heavenly bodies; the star, leading shepherds to where the new born Jesus lay – immortalizing an event that brought forth one of the most momentous changes in Christian history.

The hymn ‘God of the galaxies spinning in space’ sets the scene for us.

*Beverley M. Smith  
Reprinted with permission*

## Hand in Hand

Blending secular and sacred to enlarge the human spirit, by Ian Harris. Wellington: Cuba Press, 2021. 230 pages.



After the earthquake of 2011, the spire on the Anglican cathedral in Christchurch tumbled and lay sideways on the ground. Someone remarked that the spire was no longer pointing to God in some sacred realm above but to God in the world of every day.

“Secular” refers to the world of every day, of the here and now. The underlying premise of Hand in Hand is that the secular world is where religion must be practised, and faith lived out. This is a profoundly biblical concept: life cannot be divided into holy or sacred and ordinary or secular spheres.

The world we live in is, however, vastly different from the world of the Bible. We live in a world of rapidly expanding knowledge that raises many challenges to the veracity of what was once widely accepted. Quite frankly, the world has moved on. In this new world Harris recognises that for many people the existence of God as an independent being who maintains life on earth (a concept known as theism) no longer seems tenable. This does not mean a necessary rejection of religion but people are seeking ways of thinking about God that are consistent with their experience of life and that do not require a sacrifice of their intellectual integrity.

If we can set aside the idea of God as a being with independent existence, Harris states it may be possible to give the word God new meaning as a symbol that expresses the core of religious understanding. He suggests that “in this symbolic view God is a word summing up what is central to a person’s understanding



of life and its purposes and what they sense as ultimate in the values they choose to live by. It points to what is best, highest and deepest in human experience.”

Harris emphasises the partnership between religion and science in seeking to understand life. He quotes Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks who said, “Science is about explanation. Religion is about meaning.” Understood thus, there is no conflict provided religious and scientific views are not held and promoted dogmatically. Mutual listening aids understanding. It may even open up a new appreciation of the sacred as we revere the wonder revealed by scientific discovery.

Content is grouped under helpful headings relating to what is secular: spirituality, theism, science and the environment. The last section is a challenge to the churches: adapt or die. Harris states: “It will be a grand day for Christianity when it ditches its obsession with belief and rediscovers the centrality of faith.”

There is a need to move from ancient creeds and to find that when lived with reverence, respect and responsibility, life yields the fulfilment of faith, hope and love.

The author dedicates *Hand in Hand* “to all who embark on an exploratory journey of faith that continually changes shape and never quite ends.” Written in an incisive and highly readable style, this book should be essential reading for anyone who is willing to think seriously about faith today and realistic possibilities for the future.

John Meredith

## John Thornley's Comments

I first read John Meredith's review in the July issue of *Touchstone*, published monthly by the Methodist Church of New Zealand. It's a very positive review. I expand some information, and then discuss how this book can be a useful learning tool in churches today.

As with Ian Harris's earlier book *New World New God: Rethinking Christianity for a secular age*, Makaro Press, 2018, the format consists of edited reprints of articles that have appeared in secular and religious

newspapers, including *The Dominion*, *The Otago Daily Times*, and now continuing in *Touchstone*. Each article occupies 3 to 4 pages, brief enough to provide ideal discussion group starters.

The headings in *Hand in Hand*:

‘Like it or not, we’re secular’ – seven articles.  
‘Spirituality? In our secular world’ – thirteen articles

‘No.no.no God!’ – three articles

‘And then there’s science’ – eleven articles

‘Don’t forget the planet!’ – six articles

‘In the churches: Adapt or die’ – nineteen articles

## Seven suggestions

1. Buy a copy for your church

Tell folk to read it, buy their copy, and buy a copy as a present – for your grandson, granddaughter, niece or nephew, whoever.

2. Use an article as basis for a service of worship

Three illustrations: ‘Religion in Schools’, ‘The Great Partnership’ (Religion and Science), ‘Abandoning Religion’ (Are teens abandoning churches, or Are adults failing teens?)

3. Take a pick of three articles for a home-based discussion group – three sessions.

Illustrations: Three topics arise out of the six themes: What is Spirituality? Or Spirituality/Religion; Climate Change; Future Church.

4. Organise a panel leadership of the service, with panel members chosen representing their profession or trade or beneficiary

Illustrations: A GP and Neurotheology ‘It’s in the brain’. Nurses/hospital chaplains – there are several Article options under ‘And then there’s science’. New forms of church life – there are several Article options under ‘To the churches: adapt or die’ (for some topics, you might welcome an outsider with the necessary knowledge/experience to join the panel).

5. Use questions to open up discussion

Questions give both focus and direction to highlighting key ideas. One illustration for the article ‘From cosmic gas and debris’,



opening article under Climate Change': Discuss these words: 'new story', 'salvation/destruction questions' and 'noosphere'.

6. Hand the Reflection over to a lay person outside your church membership

The planning of the remainder of the service will be done by church members, who might like to share their input with the invited speaker.

7. Promote, promote, promote
  - Share words from the book, acknowledge it as the source for reflection/prayers,
  - Show it to others, loan it to others, photocopy one article to pass around, and so on.

## Can articles be photocopied?

Ian Harris and his publisher, The Cuba Press, are happy with limited photocopying of individual articles to share. But if more is required, books are available for sale at all good bookshops and The Cuba Press website [thecubapress.nz](http://thecubapress.nz). Libraries are also happy to order books that are recommended.

Email Ian Harris, so that he knows the photocopying of one article is taking place. He will also be interested in the chosen article for discussion. Email:

[ianharris@xtra.co.nz](mailto:ianharris@xtra.co.nz)

Finally: The earlier book by Ian, *New World New God*, can be warmly recommended. It can be ordered by bookshops from Makaro Press: website: [makaropress.co.nz](http://makaropress.co.nz)

John Thornley

The Auckland group had a Zoom meeting on 19 September, at which John Trainor presented ideas from this book, gave us his own view about them, so stimulating a most interesting and lively discussion.

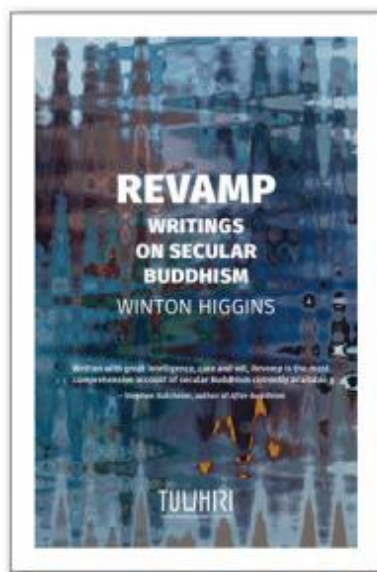
The Editor

## Revamp: Writings on Secular Buddhism

*Some of us will remember Winton Higgins as a keynote speaker at the 2013 National Conference. Here is a review of his latest book, reprinted with permission from the Secular Buddhist Network*

(<https://secularbuddhistnetwork.org/>).

With the growing popularity of a secular approach to the dharma over the last 10 years, it is important for us to take a step back and see the big picture to understand the current state of secular Buddhism. Winton Higgins's latest book, *Revamp: writings on secular Buddhism*, successfully charts the history of this relatively new trend within Buddhism and identifies some of its core characteristics. In doing so, Higgins has created the best account of the history of secular Buddhism available today, while also reflecting on its key perspectives and practices, as well as its upcoming challenges.



The book could be roughly divided into two parts. The first part is focused on the rise of secular Buddhism, locating it within wider historical and cultural influences. The second is composed of a more free-flowing series of essays on key topics connected to secular Buddhism, including a secular approach to meditation, the role of democratic sanghas, and the need for secular Buddhists to engage with the challenges of climate change and social inequality.

Reading Higgins's analysis of the history of secular Buddhism (and Buddhism more generally) I started to see the Dharma like it was a wagon, where every component of a wagon was an idea. Perhaps each wheel was one of the four tasks, the eight-fold path part of the carriage. The wagon's value, its ability to transport people from one place to another, depended not on each of the individual component ideas (you can't get far with just one wheel!) but rather on how those components worked together. *Revamp* is a book that tells the story of the wagon – the bundle of ideas, concepts and philosophies that are Buddhism, and traces its journey through human minds over 2,500 years. We see that almost from the moment the Buddha died, people started to change the size, appearance and purpose of the wagon of Buddhism. People heaped on top shrines and statutes, metaphysical concepts, breath-taking temples and sterile monasticism.

Higgins contextualises the journey of the wagon of Buddhism as it went across Asia, but one of the most fascinating parts of *Revamp* is where he analyses what happened when the wagon stopped in the west. What were secular westerners, with thousands of years of their own political, cultural and social outlooks, to make of the wagon of Buddhism? Many of the components that had been added on to the Dharma in the years since the Buddha's death made no sense to westerners; and the cultural embellishments and decorations that had been shoe-horned on were making the wagon unstable and unroadworthy. Most westerners wouldn't be seen dead riding in something that looked so strange and alien, though some bravely contorted their bodies and tried to clamber onto the wagon of Buddhism – I think of middle-aged white men with shaved heads and saffron robes who have the unenviable task of convincing themselves that rebirth is true.

Higgins traces the first tentative attempts to restore and renovate that wagon of Buddhism for the secular western mind, that gradual revamp of the Dharma. The slow cautious checking of each component to see if it was needed or if it was an ornamental embellishment. The evaluation

of the wheels and body to see if it could be made to carry western minds to their destinations. Reading *Revamp*, a picture emerges of an effort by thinkers such as Stephen Batchelor to pare Buddhism back to its core and a careful process of restoration and renovation in the minds of practitioners to authentically reconnect with the Dharma.

One area where Higgins' analysis illuminates is its evaluation of why westerners wanted to practice Buddhism. Why did we engage in this task of revamping the bundle of ideas of Buddhism in an effort to make them work for us? What appeal did we collectively see? Drawing on western political and social philosophy, Higgins undertakes a thorough exploration of aspects of western philosophy and culture that resonate with Buddhism to help us to understand, in effect, why we are secular Buddhists. He connects secular Buddhism with ideas of the protestant reformation and secular Christianity, as well as the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Martin Hägglund, Sigmund Freud and Peter Watson.

In this exploration of western philosophy Higgins' background as an academic is a blessing, adding depth supported by impeccable research and references, though at the expense of quick readability. Those wishing to explore *Revamp* will need time and patience, but it's an immensely rewarding journey.

*Revamp* is especially valuable to those already familiar with secular Buddhism. There were several points where Higgins' analysis helps slide different pieces of the puzzle together sometimes in quite entertaining ways. For example, he humorously sheds light on the mystery of why secular Buddhists from the United States sometimes get caught up in debates on whether God exists and on whether the benefits of Dharma practice align with our present understanding of science (especially neuroscience), whereas secular Buddhists from other Western countries generally manage to stay clear of those swamps.

While the first part of the book outlines what is essentially secular Buddhism's past

and present, the second half of *Revamp* gives us a picture of its possible future. Higgins begins to explore themes that I think connect with an emerging theme or direction in secular Buddhism: what I like to think of as Secular Buddhism version 2.0. Secular Buddhism 1.0 was a movement inevitably defined by what it wasn't – a movement breaking free of religious, metaphysical Buddhism, but weighed down with the concern with whether their interpretation of the Dharma is 'correct' and often getting drawn into mostly pointless arguments with religious Buddhists. In *Revamp* we start to see the outline of Secular Buddhism 2.0, a liberated, mature and confident practice of the Dharma that draws strength from its secularity – it's deep concern for this world, and this life, for the communities that Dharma practitioners live in and for all people regardless of gender or race or economic status. A practice that draws strength from its agility and openness to ideas and philosophies that are sympathetic to the Dharma while ignoring the cries of religious Buddhists wanting to get into arguments about 'truth'.

*Revamp's* second half demonstrates the potential strength of this Secular Buddhism 2.0, highlighting the benefits of more flexible, self-chosen ways to meditate, as well as more democratic and egalitarian sanghas. On a broader theme, Higgins enthusiastically analyses and highlights inequality, racism and the destruction of our climate as key concerns for secular Buddhists. and as a responsibility of those who choose what he calls 'Dharmic citizenship'. Secular Buddhism's confidence and appreciation for useful wisdom (regardless of its source) is illustrated in Higgins's analyses of Pope Francis's *Laudato Si': on care for our common home* to decry the destruction of our environment as the greatest ethical issue of our time, and Albert Camus's *The Plague* to highlight social issues around COVID-19.

*Revamp* is a brave, insightful book that breaks new ground for secular Buddhists and may prove to be a building block in a new direction for secular Buddhism.

Alex Carr

## Interesting Texts

### Kitty O'Meara Poem

*The following prose poem by Kitty O'Meara, a retired teacher from the city of Madison in Wisconsin, encapsulates what spiritual significance can be found in our experience of COVID-19 lockdowns.*

And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.

And the people healed. And in the absence of people living in ignorance, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.

Kitty O'Meara

### A Prophet's Complaint: Ezekiel 33

Studying theology in Dunedin, we learnt to treat the bible according to what was called "the historical-critical method." Far from having fallen from heaven, the books of the bible were to be investigated using ordinary methods, asking who the author was and when they wrote. One of the first conclusions was that Moses did not write the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). One of the reasons for this was that the books described the death of Moses.

This method was called literary criticism and it concluded that the Pentateuch was a compilation of four different sources: J E D and P. Later, literary criticism was eclipsed by form criticism, which worked on the



assumption that traditions had a history of oral transmission and tried to look at the way these traditions might have evolved before being formalised in writing.

When I went to Germany, I learnt that form criticism is a not very good translation of *Formgeschichte*, which means literally the history of forms. This is particularly clear in the case of Old Testament prophets. The earliest prophets issued brief messages of judgement against the current rulers (for example “In the place where dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will also lick up your blood.” 1 Kings 21.19. Later, messages were addressed to the people as a whole, and still later were messages of hope rather than of judgement. Messages also became longer and more discursive.

The passage from Ezekiel is an example of the later development of prophetic messages. It is in the form of a message from God addressed unusually to the prophet. Those atheistically inclined can interpret this as a message from Ezekiel’s unconscious, or as an internal dialogue reflecting an inner conflict as he finds that people are not really taking notice of the message he proclaims. It is in the nature of a reassurance that the prophet’s message is correct.

The passage is interesting in that it gives insights into the reaction of his contemporaries to the prophet’s activity; normally we only have the bare message and nothing about the reaction to it or about the prophet’s feelings.

The first thing we find out is that the prophet is the subject of idle conversation in the village. When people meet each other at the doors of houses or at the walls surrounding the village, they say, “let’s go and hear the latest word from the Lord” meaning, let’s hear what the prophet has to say. It’s as if they are rather bored, and the prophet provides some interesting entertainment. It is striking that the people don’t say, “let’s go and hear the prophet.” Instead, they want to know what message is coming from the Lord; they tacitly agree with the prophet’s self-understanding as a messenger of divine truth.

The prophet is like a singer of love songs. (We have a whole collection of love songs in

The Song of Songs, but apart from them, this is the only reference to love songs in the bible – such a contrast to our current reality!) In other words, it is an enjoyable and entertaining experience to listen to the prophet, rather like listening to the Wizard of New Zealand give a talk in the Christchurch square.

As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls, and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to a neighbour, “Come and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord.”

They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people and they hear your words, but they will not obey them. For flattery is on their lips, but their heart is set on their gain.

To them you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; they hear what you say, but they will not do it. When this comes – and come it will – then they shall know that a prophet has been among them. Ezekiel 33.30-33.

We can infer that the message has an ethical or moral focus; the prophet’s complaint is that the people like to be entertained, but don’t let the prophet question their actions. Their heart is set on their gain; in other words, they are like contemporary society in that it is obsessively focussed on obtaining a good return on the invested capital.

The divine message reassures the prophet. The reality that is announced will come to pass and then the people will realise that the prophet was speaking the truth. Here the assumption is that the divine Word has an intrinsic power to turn into reality, much like the creation story, in which God speaks and it happens.

*The Editor*