

# SOFiA

## Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

### On Conference

This year's Conference has as its theme "Spirituality for a Sustainable Future." What follows is your editor's reflections on that theme. They are only his personal opinions and are not authorised by the Committee or any SoFiA group. However, the editor hopes that they may stimulate discussion and perhaps encourage more interest in that Conference.

At first sight it is hard to imagine a less inspiring topic. Spirituality is such a vague and woolly concept that it can mean virtually anything. I subscribe to an email service called BookBub, which sells selected ebooks at greatly reduced prices. This week, it offers *Angel Chatter* for \$1.99, positing that angels are always nearby, ready to guide us through life's journey. It also has *The Test*, in which a journalist interviews mediums about the possibility of communication between this world and the next. If that's what we mean by spirituality, it will provide little hope for a sustainable future.

Indeed, spirituality is probably the last thing most people look to for a sustainable future. The first thing is likely to be a technological fix. If we could make nuclear fusion work in a sustained way, humanity would have more than enough energy for all its needs. If we could find a way to stop cows belching methane, we would greatly reduce the effect of greenhouse gases on the climate. We could develop machines to suck carbon dioxide out of the air and store it underground. We could inject sulphur dioxide into the stratosphere to encourage more rainfall. Trouble is, such "geo-

engineering" is unlikely to be viable (see Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything* for details).

The media frequently tell us about the changes we must implement. A temperature increase of less than 2 degrees, a dramatic reduction in the use of fossil fuels, a limit to population increase, a reduction in urban sprawl and in the consumption of animal protein and so on. It's easy to lock on to such external changes and to ignore the need for a change in our approach to life.

Another popular idea is that the politicians could lead the changes needed for a sustainable future. But politicians generally only advocate for a policy when this might make them more electable. So we can only expect politicians to deliver if a sizeable proportion of the population wants that outcome and makes its voice heard.

Then there are the appeals for action, to stop the bad stuff, bring on the good and pressure government to take the necessary actions. (See for example [ourclimatedeclaration.org.nz](http://ourclimatedeclaration.org.nz).) But calls for action can come as alien demands from an external authority, rather than convictions ripening from within. In the former case, they may give us a bad conscience but don't motivate for action or change. If we focus on a person's inwardness, the perspective changes from morality to spirituality, from rules for action to what it means to be human.

I have three thoughts on a spirituality for a sustainable future: 1. We need to examine our heritage. 2. The power of money to undo our best efforts to work for a sustainable

planet. 3. Humanity has so far failed to make war obsolete.

## Our Heritage

For most of us, this means the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Whether we identify as Christian or not, we are shaped by a dual tradition going back to ancient Israel and to Greek and Roman culture.

Most agricultural societies had a warm feeling towards nature (often conceptualised as the Great Mother). Israel originated as a nomadic culture, eking out a precarious existence in the wilderness. For them, nature was harsh and unforgiving. Consequently, the focus has been on dominating nature rather than working with it. You might argue against this that they believed the world was created by God, giving nature great value. However, the earliest confessions of faith did not include this belief; only later, under the impact of the Canaanite view of creation, did they conclude that their God, superior to the Baals, must have been responsible for the world.

Sadly, there were societies that lived in harmony with nature, but they have mostly been destroyed by European culture, which aimed to dominate nature through war and colonisation.

Christianity was also influenced by Greek ideas. Notice first that Greek gods are always portrayed in human form, whereas many Egyptian gods were in animal or bird form. That also indicates a disconnect between culture and nature. There was also a dualism of body and soul, which reinforced that disconnection.

A spirituality that can help us towards a sustainable future will need to get away from the idea that our role is to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” and connect us much more intimately with nature. It will need to recognise that we have much more in common with other animals than was previously thought and emphasise that we are just a rather unusual variety of animal that has evolved from other animals. There are hopeful signs here: Auckland Council and several voluntary organisations hold planting days that are well supported:

many are willing to spend several hours of hard work to see trees planted that will capture carbon dioxide. There are also those who purchase land for the sole purpose of planting trees to land restore land to native forest.

## Dominance of Money

What makes action against climate change so difficult is the way that money dominates our society. Business interests want government to act in ways that increase their profits. Retailers are in a desperate Darwinian struggle for our dollar, so we are bombarded with demands to buy this and that. Advertisers cleverly awaken desires that we didn't even know we had. Companies are in debt and are compelled to sell just in order to repay the loan and stay afloat. The mere existence of interest locks us all into growth, because borrowers need to pay back not just what was lent but the interest on top of this. A spirituality for today needs to counter such forces and encourage us to live a simpler lifestyle. The worth of anything is increasingly equated with its dollar value. We are under the spell of a neoliberal ideology that tells us everything that can be turned into a free market should be. Commentators often complain about greed and it definitely exists, but many are simply trying to survive under the constraints that money imposes.

## War

World War I was supposed to be the war to end all wars but there have been countless wars since, with the Ukraine war only the latest war in a long succession of wars. War not only causes countless suffering; it also is very destructive of the environment and consumes extra fossil fuels. It is an indictment of the human species that, for all our cleverness, we have made little progress in preventing war.

To have a sustainable future requires rethinking what it is to be a human being. Life is more than consumption and entertainment.

*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 (deceased): Fred Marshall, Noel Cheer and Norm Ely

**Publication deadline** for the next Newsletter is 20 October 2022.

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# SOFiA News

## Conference 2022

We are back on track to have an annual conference. You can attend in person or by Zoom.

### ***Spirituality for a Sustainable Future***

7-8 October 2022. St Andrews on the Terrace, Wellington.

A flyer and a registration form were sent out together with a previous newsletter. Those who register can attend either by travelling to Wellington or from home using Zoom. There was discussion in the Auckland committee and at the monthly group meeting about having a group Zoom, but the numbers in favour were not great enough for a decision to hold a group Zoom.

## Rethinking Religion

The recently established Christchurch Rethinking Religion group, which is led by Doug Sellman and aligned with the national SoFiA organisation, has recently been debating its role. Your editor found this conversation interesting and summarises some of the ideas expressed below.

The group began with a focus on sharing personal spiritual journeys, but then tended to become more like a "spiritual book club" as people turned to reviewing interesting and thought-provoking books. Throughout this development there was appreciation of the group as a safe space to explore controversial ideas but criticism of a tendency to turn into adversarial intellectual arguments.

The group recently made discussion on its role the subject of a meeting.

This included a round in which people expressed what they found good or not so good, before talking about where to go from here. The group has been beginning with a

Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen.... By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.

Lynn White *Machina ex Deo* p 86, quoted in Theodore Roszak *The Voice of the Earth*.

group meditation and this was appreciated. There was discussion of the Quaker "we space" and whether this could be achieved and a helpful suggestion that "spiritual friendship" (something that well describes the Buddhist Sangha) could provide the focus in future. *The Editor*

## Zooming in on the Auckland Group

You are now able to attend meetings of the Auckland group virtually, using Zoom. This will be of particular value to those whose local group is no longer meeting.

Sunday 21 August 4 pm. Dr Kat Eghdamian, who is a Lead Advisor at the

New Zealand Human Rights Commission, will give us an **Introduction to the Bahai Faith**. The talk begins at 4.30.

Sunday 18 September at 4pm. Anna Bradbury will speak on

**A Course in Miracles** - a psychological/spiritual pathway for the attainment of inner peace through the

practice of forgiveness." The talk begins at 4.30.

Sunday 16 October at 7 pm. Speaker tbd.

You are able to attend by Zoom, either from home or from your local group. To join a SOFiA Zoom meeting:

Meeting ID: 827 2650 6291

Passcode: 003765

[https://bit.ly/sofia\\_zoom](https://bit.ly/sofia_zoom)

Man has always been prepared not only to kill, but also to die for good, bad, or completely hair-brained causes. What can be a more valid proof for the reality of the urge for self-transcendence?

Arthur Koestler *The Lotus and the Robot* p 499.



## Book Reviews

### A New Republic of the Heart. An Ethos for Revolutionaries

Author: Terry Patten. New York 2018

The author is concerned about climate change and all the issues around it, as well as the need for a contemporary spirituality. This requires the 'outer work' of activism as well as the 'inner work' of personal transformation. The aim of the book is to reflect on both and to integrate them into an overarching whole. In this he has been deeply influenced by the integral philosopher Ken Wilber and as a result the book has a rather ethereal feel.

Patten is knowledgeable about contemporary movements responding to our ecological predicament, but his interest is at a high, overarching level, so he rather tends to float above the concrete issues that engage us right now. The following gives an example of his approach:

"Our inner work is the healthy foundation for more effective outward action. Powered by our broken hearts and guided by our particular genius, our stubborn affirmation—combined with receptivity—will make us effective beyond anything we can now imagine. Our unique evolutionary circumstance will have opened us beyond our habitual comfort zone, into a profound willingness to learn, to change, to work, to cooperate, and to practice."

This book is closer to the theme of this year's Conference (Spirituality for a Sustainable Future) than any other I can think of, which surely will make it of interest to SOFiAns. At 402 pages, it is not short and I do not claim to have mastered his argument. As usual, my first reaction is to raise critical questions. He is aware of the issue of growth being compulsory because of the nature of interest-bearing capital, but I don't think he really addresses it. Similarly, those who want strong action to combat climate change are faced with very powerful and influential institutions that are committed to muddying the waters and frustrating meaningful action. As Naomi

Klein says, "The battle is already under way, but right now capitalism is winning hands down." (This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate, page 22.) In other words, his book is trying hard to sell us the value of personal transformation for the issues we face, but it does not address the problem of power held by commercial interests and the power that money itself exerts on us.

*The Editor*

### Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times

Author: Jonathan Sacks

Publisher: Hodder & Stoughton 2021

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks passed away in November 2020. He served as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation 1991 to 2013 and was a member in the House of Lords in the UK Parliament. He led a full life as ecumenical and interfaith religious leader, moral philosopher, public intellectual, global media commentator, and author of 36 books. *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, published in 2020, is the summation of his lifelong search for meaning in life.

The paperback reprint, 2021, included a Preface. This asks how his book responds to the coronavirus pandemic: 'This book was published in Britain just as the coronavirus was reaching these shores. Yet it spoke to the issues that arose then: the isolation many suffered; the selfless behaviour that allowed life to continue; the self-restraints we had to practise for the safety of others; the realisation that many of the heroes were amongst the lowest-paid; the challenge of political leadership in time of crisis and the importance of truth-telling as a condition of public trust. These are all moral issues and I explain in the newly written Epilogue how their significance suddenly became vivid.'

In the concluding Epilogue, Sacks highlights moral issues related to the economy. 'The economic challenge of the years ahead may be even greater than the

health challenge of the pandemic itself, and this will be a time to examine the morals of the market. Writing in *The Economist* (10 April 2020), 'The World After Covid 19', former Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, wrote that "we have been moving from a market economy to a market society". That must change. He continues: 'In this crisis we know we need to act as an interdependent community not independent individuals, so the values of economic dynamism and efficiency have been joined by those of solidarity, fairness, responsibility and compassion'.

## Section One: Summary of Book Contents

The sources for his writing are found at the end of the book, in the Notes to the 23 chapters, followed by Further Reading, a list of books relevant to each chapter. I would have appreciated an Index, but this is not given. A great deal of the ideas come from colleagues participating in seminars and workshops on national and international platforms. Often he contributed papers to such meetings. His genius lies in clearly setting out the key issues and ideas, summed up in the concluding lines of each chapter. The book's five Parts and their Chapters convey the breadth of material it covers:

One – The Solitary Self: Loneliness, Limits of Self-Help, Unsocial Media, Fragile Family.

Two – Consequences/The Market and the State: From 'We' to 'I', Markets without Morals, Consuming Happiness, Democracy in Danger, Identity Politics, Time and Consequence.

Three – Can We Still Remain Together? Post-Truth, Safe Space, Ways of Arguing, Victimhood, Return of Public Sharing, Death of Civility.

Four – Being Human: Human Dignity, Meaning, Why Morality? Which Morality? Religion.

Five – The Way Forward: Morality Matters, From 'I' to 'We'.

Notes, Further Reading, Epilogue.

## Section Two: A Book for Group Learning

This is a book for those looking for starter resources for discussion on contemporary challenges. Individual readers can appreciate it also, and pass it on to friends or other members of the family. It has material both for the mind and heart, for academic and experiential learning. Those with a more academic bent can help others through difficult passages. Those more attune to the lessons of daily life will bring the discussion back to earth. The book draws on the writer's life experience, including personal and the everyday life of families, children and youth.

At the centre of Sacks' life was his own family. In the Preface to this paperback reprint he dedicates the book to his grandchildren, while acknowledging Elaine, his wife, as the most important person in his life. He recalls their first meetings on the university campus: 'I was earning graduate qualifications in self-doubt and existential angst. She was radiating joy. Hence my theory which is a summary of the book, namely "It's the people not like us, who make us grow"'. That's just one gem in storytelling you will find generously illustrated in the book.

The remainder of this review will quote two extended illustrations of the two kinds of learning outlined – the intellectual/academic and the experiential/storytelling. First, for those with intellectual aspirations!

Longtime SOFers will find that the book covers historical theological and philosophical thinking shared by Lloyd Geering over our lifetime, from the ancient Greeks through the Reformation and Enlightenment to the present day.

Chapter 7 is titled Consuming Happiness. Early in the chapter we find traditional understandings on the topic from Aristotle and the Hebrew scriptures. The first two paragraphs:

'When the 'I' predominates over the 'We', the market mindset spreads to other aspects of life where it does not belong. The most striking example is the pursuit of happiness. It begins to lose its connection with morality and starts to be associated with the products, services and experiences that we can buy.

In both the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions, happiness was intrinsically related to virtue. Since the 1960s, however, it has intrinsically reshaped itself to fit the contours of the consumer society driven by self-gratification. The result is that we have become less happy or at least not more so. As Richard Layard argues in *Happiness Lessons from a New Science*, incomes have doubled in the past century in Britain and America, but people are no more happy now than they were then. We are, I suggest, searching for happiness in the wrong places. We may even be searching for the wrong thing entirely.

It was Aristotle who gave the West its most influential analysis of happiness. He believed that its pursuit was at the heart of all human endeavour. We undertake all activities for the sake of some good, but there is only one good that we seek as an end in itself and for no other reason, namely eudaemonia, his term for happiness. This central idea was for him inextricably connected with the moral life. Happiness is, he said, an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. It is a matter of living well and faring well, yet, there are material requisites of a happy life. You cannot achieve it if you are desperately poor or seriously ill. Faring well is therefore not entirely our control. Everyone pursues happiness, but not everyone achieves it. But for the most part eudaemonia is a matter of living nobly, courageously, temperately, and wisely. It is not about having wealth, popularity or power. It is about what kind of human being you become.'

That's the end of an expository treatment on Aristotle's understandings on how we achieve happiness in life. It is followed by understandings on happiness drawn from Hebrew scriptures.

Here is an example of his second approach, storytelling, this time not based on the writer's personal life but on an article from the *Jerusalem Post* 12 July 2019. It features in Chapter 22 'Morality Matters':

'In July 2019 a video surfaced on Twitter. A Muslim-Israeli paramedic, Muawiya Kabha, a member of a responsive unit for an emergency medical service, was making a speech at a Jewish wedding in Israel at that time, telling the groom and guests a story about the bride, Shachar Kugelmas. He told them that he had first met her ten years earlier. He had arrived at the scene of a car crash and found her apparently dead. His was the second ambulance to arrive.

The *Jerusalem Post* tells the story:

'The first ambulance arrived with a doctor. When I arrived there after those initial two minutes, the doctor informed me.'This injured girl, don't touch her. I have already declared her dead. Let's treat the

driver.' I told him, 'Okey, you treat the driver.' I started treating Shachar. From above, something told me that I needed to stay treating Shachar.

When I got to Shachar, she was in cardiac arrest. In terms of strict protocol, the doctor was right. We needed to declare her dead. But what I felt from above was that I still needed to try to save her. I did CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) on Shachar for forty minutes, when she was still stuck in the car. The police had already announced on the radio that there was one person dead in the car accident. Shakur's parents heard the bad news on their way from the North. We continued CPR on the way to the hospital and at the entrance to the hospital, she had a heartbeat. Her heart started to beat.

That night when I returned home, I didn't have hope. I put my head on the pillow and thought the Angel of Death might have beaten me. But I knew that I done everything I could to try to save her. In the end, I must have done what I needed to do, because look, Shachar is with us.

So I am here to tell Shachar, 'Thank you.' Usually the people we save tell us 'Thank you.' I want to tell you 'Thank you.' "

And I'll explain why.

People ask me all the time, 'How do you keep going after all the death you see in your work?' The answer is here. Shachar, I am able to continue my work because of you. Because I saved your body. But you saved my soul. Every time that I remember emergency calls that I have been to, I remember you and your smile. Thank you. Thank you. Mazal tov ('Congratulations', 'Good luck') Congratulations, I love you both.'

Changing the world for others, changes us. To put it in Muawiya's terms, sometimes saving someone else's body is saving our own soul.

John Thornley

## The Lotus and the Robot

By Arthur Koestler London 1960

Eastern religions (mainly Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism) have had an enduring fascination for us in the West. This fascination reached a high point during the 1960s. Groups of Hare Krishna devotees would walk along the main street, chanting and singing. The Beatles were captivated by sitar music, the transcendental meditation of the Maharishi and Hare Krishna. Thinkers

such as Alan Watts and D T Suzuki wrote books that attempted to explain the Eastern way of thinking to us Westerners. Therapeutic approaches such as mindfulness and even Gestalt owe much to Eastern tradition.

Arthur Koestler, a Hungarian-born journalist, was also intrigued by Eastern religions and set out to investigate them by spending 1958 and 1959 in India and Japan. It probably helped that he had recently ceased being a member of the Communist Party, after hearing of the atrocities being committed in Stalin's Russia. Disillusioned by European thought, he looked to the East for insight. What makes his writing of interest, in spite of probably being dated, is that his conclusions were largely negative, a contrast to the uncritical adulation shown by many others. He concludes, "I started my journey in sackcloth and ashes, and came back rather proud of being a European. (p285)" It's not that I want to debunk Eastern religions or that I completely agree with him, but I do find Koestler's willingness to call what sounds like nonsense nonsense, rather refreshing.

The title (The Lotus and the Robot) reflects an unintegrated divide in the Eastern consciousness. As one guru said, "Science derives from the outer light, it must be complemented by the inner light." The lotus is a beautiful pure white flower that emerges pristine, even from the dirtiest of polluted lakes. It represents a pure tradition untroubled by worldly concerns and uninterested in the challenge of modernity. The robot on the other hand indicates a pattern of activity copied from the West with no understanding of its meaning. As a journalist Koestler was refreshingly free of the tendency to concentrate exclusively on religious ideas and philosophical concepts and had many interesting observations about each country's broader culture.

After a brief introduction to India (there were 700,000 people living on the streets in Bombay (now Mumbai), we are treated to an examination of four contemporary saints.

**Vinoba Bhave** became Ghandi's spiritual heir and crisscrossed India on foot to

convince wealthy landowners to donate land to the landless poor. He obtained 8 million acres. He said, "If I do not put my faith in the power of love and God, then I must abandon my belief in non-violence and follow the violent way of the communists." Koestler concluded that his followers were interested in his presence, but not his teaching.

Visiting **Krishna Menon** was a strange experience, as it meant going back to a Communist land (the province of Kerala was Communist in 1959). He was asked to give an anti-communist speech but declined, saying that he really had come to see Krishna Menon. Accordingly, he read the two slim books Krishna Menon had produced, but was unable to establish any personal rapport with him. He analysed the thinking in these books and concluded "when it comes to words, doctrines, philosophical systems, the East has no cure to offer for our perplexities (p51)."

If you want the official Roman Catholic view on anything, you only need to ask the Pope, but Hinduism has almost no hierarchy and is split into countless sects. But Koestler did find the **Sankaracharya of Kanchi**, one of five leaders of an important traditionalist sect. This authority insisted that the traditional rites must be carried out in full and not shortened, no matter how busy someone in employment might be. He also was emphatic that Hindu doctrines are to be understood literally and not symbolically.

The fourth saint was a woman, **Anandamayee Ma**, called Mother or Ma by her devotees, who regarded her as of divine origin, though Ma herself declined to express an opinion either way. She has ashrams in eighteen different places in India, and Bhaiji, a devoted disciple has written her biography. Koestler visited Ma in two ashrams in Benares and in Calcutta, seeing a series of devotees present their offerings to Ma, but he was unable to enter into serious dialogue with her, instead receiving two sticky and dirty tangerines as a parting gift.

Koestler also investigated **yoga** by reading primary sources and visiting numerous Indian yoga institutes and yoga practitioners. The word "yoga" means union.



The aim is for the subject to become pure consciousness without object. His conclusion: the West has received a bowdlerised version in which Hatha Yoga is merely a superior system of gymnastic exercises designed to relax body and mind. But for Indians, every posture has a symbolic meaning and a physiological purpose. He vividly illustrates this difference by describing methods for cleansing the alimentary canal and countering the loss of life force caused by the ejaculation of semen, all practices still occurring in India.

Koestler's account of Japan begins with an analysis of Japanese culture, looking for example at Japanese wrestling, Bonsai, Ikebana (flower arranging) and Japanese gardens, which may consist only of rocks and stones. Then he moved on to look at **Zen**. His conclusion, "Zen's archenemy is rational thinking. "Let your mind go and become like a ball in a mountain stream." "The whole teaching of Zen seems to be directed against the inhibitions and restraints imposed by the Japanese code of behaviour." p 240.

Koestler summarises his view of India and Japan in an epilogue: "Both India and Japan seem to be spiritually sicker, more estranged from a living faith than the West. ...even less resistant against the impact of a materialistic ideology. "To look to Asia for mystic enlightenment and spiritual guidance has become as much of an anachronism as to think of America as the Wild West." p276.

*The Editor*

## A Parable for Today's Church

It was time for the travellers to move out from the safety of the hut. The hut they were in was familiar and well-lit, but they knew that it could no longer serve them. It was time to venture out into dark and unfamiliar terrain, to seek out a new place of life. As they moved away from the hut, the light its windows cast on the world outside grew dim, until there was very little to guide them. They had to move along tentatively. The directions they decided on were often

mistaken and they had to rely on each other for any progress they made.

Not all shared the same feelings about what they were undertaking. Where one grew frustrated, another continued to trust. Where one took heart from the adventure, another started to turn back to the light of the hut. It was a strange and unprecedented situation for them all. The only ones who knew where they were going were the ones who turned back, for they were turning to light and familiarity. But anyone embracing the future was at a loss. The only knowledge they possessed was the wisdom that accumulated as they explored their way forward.

This parable speaks to today's church. A time of safety and certainty has come to an end. A routine and predictable way of doing things has ceased to be serviceable. We are in a new situation and do not know what to do, because we have not had such an experience before. We are all at a loss. The only ones who know where they are going are the ones reaching back into the past. Those who look to the future, who wish to explore, must trust instead that moving on out in the power of the Spirit will yield its own wisdom. At first the wisdom will be very little and a bit all over the place, but slowly it will form sure patterns. But there is no way to prove this to those standing hesitating in the doorway of the hut.

FROM: Prayer for Parish Groups:  
*preparing & leading prayer for group meetings, Donal Harrington & Julie Kavannagh Saint Mary's Press, Winonana, Minnesota 1998. With thanks to John Thornley.*



# Shirley Dixon's dilemmas

Margaret Gwynn responds to Shirley Dixon.

1. *Were human beings the intended outcome of evolution or not planned at all, simply the result of random chance?* I can only answer this dilemma for myself by saying, as neither can be proved, I must simply choose one or the other position.
2. *How to explain the problem of evil which causes pain in sentient beings?* For me pain is primarily not evil. It is a learning tool to warn any sentient being to avoid situations which cause pain. Gradually over time the species builds up knowledge of what plants to eat, how to find water, etc.
3. Irenaeus argues that evil is necessary for humans to develop into moral agents. In ancient and medieval thought many events were seen as divinely caused, but we now know that extreme weather is caused by humanly induced climate change and many diseases are caused by poor hygiene. For me, evil is caused by human greed and a willingness to ignore other peoples' suffering. The war in Ukraine is a case in point. Many of us are recoiling in horror, but surely that is from an already-established moral sense. I see a moral sense as being taught, not arising from an experience of evil.

Most faiths, including Christianity have drawn on The Golden Rule – treat others as you wish to be treated yourself. When children are taught this from a young age, they hopefully develop into moral agents.

I look forward to reading how others answer Shirley's dilemmas.

*Margaret Gwynn*

## On the New Atheists

What I find most mystifying in the arguments of the authors I have mentioned [Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris], and of others like them, is the strange presupposition that a truly secular society

would of its nature be more tolerant and less prone to violence than any society shaped by any form of faith. Given that the modern age of secular governance has been the most savagely and sublimely violent period in human history, by a factor (or body count) of incalculable magnitude, it is hard to identify the grounds for their confidence. (Certainly, the ridiculous claim that these forms of secular government were often little more than “political religions,” and so only provide further proof of the evil of religion, should simply be laughed off as a shabby evasion.)

It is not even especially clear why these authors imagine that a world entirely purged of faith would choose to be guided by moral prejudices remotely similar to their own; and the obscurity becomes especially impenetrable to me in the case of those who seem to believe that a thoroughgoing materialism informed by Darwinian biology might actually aid us in forsaking our “tribalism” and “irrationality” and in choosing instead to live in tolerant concord with one another. After all, the only ideological or political factions that have made any attempt at an ethics consistent with Darwinian science, to this point at least, have been the socialist eugenics movement of the early twentieth century and the Nazi movement that sprang from it. Obviously, stupid or evil social and political movements should not dictate our opinions of scientific discoveries. But it scarcely impugns the epochal genius of Charles Darwin or Alfred Russel Wallace to note that -understood purely as a bare, brute, material event-nature admits of no moral principles at all, and so can provide none; all it can provide is its own “moral” example, which is anything but gentle.

Dennett, who often shows a propensity for moral pronouncements of almost pontifical peremptoriness, and for social prescriptions of the most authoritarian variety, does not delude himself that evolutionary theory is a source of positive moral prescriptions. But there is something delusional nonetheless in his optimistic certainty that human beings will wish to choose altruistic values without invoking transcendent principles.

*Atheist Delusions by David Bentley Hart. p 14*

# Poet's Corner

## Omaui

In memory of Daniel Phillips  
(3 June 1940 – 20 April 2022)

*Pea-stick gaunt Manuka*

*Bald against the West*

*Fence lined gravel leads some miles*

*to this ageless place of rest*

*So near to where the city squats*

*and yet in time quite far*

*Where waters meet and fight their cause*

*across a wreckless bar*

*of shifting sands and changing tides*

*on wave worn weed wet rocks*

*Where water runs*

*fresh to salt*

*and salt to fresh*

*as regular as clocks*

*What is Time?*

*We do not know*

*We speak of it*

*as sands that flow*

*in one direction*

*sometimes slow*

*Yet always running out.*

*Of man's invented minutes*

*Nature has no need*

*What use this measured restlessness*

*Of haste*

*and waste*

*and greed*

*That all seems so remote now*

*as I stand here on the shore.*

*Remote at last*

*from love*

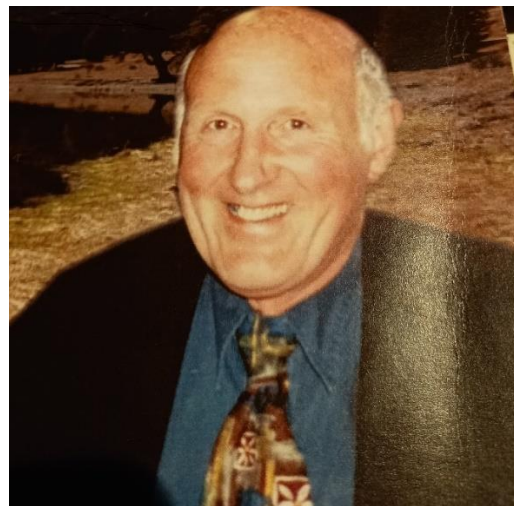
*and hate*

*and war*

*At peace once more*

*Omaui*

*Poem by Daniel Phillips*



Daniel Phillips

## 'Ok Mata'

( at Matariki)

For Ian Crumpton

*Tiny eyes*

*I'm looking at you*

*Work your magic on me*

*What music will you play*

*The music of the spheres ..?*

*Silly me*

*to forget*

*But aah . .*

*Tis' the time of stars*

*We're here again*

*You always were*

*Still*

*Looking . . .*

*An email arrived today*

*A friend is terminal*

*I think of your sparkle . .*

*Philip Grimmett*



Philip invites you to submit your poetry for 'So Creative Now' [grimmetchphil@gmail.com](mailto:grimmetchphil@gmail.com)  
Cell: 021977834



## On Money

“There is in fact no ‘invention’ of human history, which has had such grave consequences over the last 5000 years as the emergence of money. ...Humans appear to be inescapably bound up with the cycle of money, which they keep going by sacrificing themselves to it - a system that is as powerful as the law of eat or be eaten in the food cycle of nature, yes, even more powerful, in that there is naturally no species among animals that could expand without limits at the expense of all other species. Money appears to carry within itself a law that makes it expand beyond all boundaries, a substitute reality that swallows everything, a Moloch, a Vampire - and that's exactly how Jesus saw it!

In contrast to some cynics before him, and some early socialist and Marxist social theorists after him, Jesus did not want to do away with money (or the Roman state, or the Caesar's denarius) but if you listen to his

words, they deprive the money-cult of its basis, they permit freedom where it never was, they stimulate considerations of an enormous explosive power.” P444-5.

“Wars, civil wars, revolts, revolutions, plundering, the exploitation of humans and animals - all that doesn't happen because certain people can't get enough, but because, quite the opposite, they are up to their necks in water (the flood of debt) and the water is up to their necks, not because they have been negligent, or only thought of themselves, but because they could only become entrepreneurs, manufacturers, producers, etc, by taking on debt, to produce the values or the services, with which to cover the debt.” P480/1

Eugen Drewermann *Jesus of Nazareth*

## On Reducing Religion to Morality

I have the suspicion that the Church is hard at work doing what was proclaimed two hundred years ago as a program for doing away with religion: the reduction of the whole of religious teaching to morality. If you look around, you see that in official declarations, the question “What must we do?” is always linked to particular values and is expressed in a way that is interwoven with particular impulses and prescriptions for action.

And I believe, that is very bad, because religion ought to be the place....in which, within society, people can live again, without pressure and compulsion, from the powers that lie in them, and in which they are able to dig out what has been buried. To put it in a picture: we live as in the Sahara. We know that 200 meters under the sand there are water-containing layers, but we have to bore down again and again, in order to bring the water to the surface. That is what religion should do. The Church would have a whole lot of images that reach into the depths. But the organ that people use for apprehending religion or theology is essentially the understanding, very focussed, very rational, very categorical.

Eugen Drewermann