

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



Annual General Meeting

This Zoom meeting will be held on Sunday 2 September at 2 pm.

- John Thornley will give a talk “Redemption Song” about Bob Marley, poet and prophet (see the words of his song below).
- Margaret Gwynn will have a Q and A session on “Challenging the Myth of Economic Growth” (see her April Newsletter article on de-growth). Please submit your questions at least one week beforehand to Mary Ellen (mewarren1@gmail.com).

To join the Zoom meeting:

<https://tinyurl.com/sofia-agm>

Meeting ID: 823 6796 6223

Passcode: SOFiA-AGM (note the lower case "i" in the passcode)

Bob Marley’s Redemption Song

Old pirates, yes they rob I
sold I to the merchant ships
minutes after they put I
from the bottomless pit
But my hand was made strong
by the hand of the Almighty
we forward in this generation
triumphantly
All I ever had is songs of freedom

Won’t you help to sing
these songs of freedom
Cause all I ever had
redemption song
redemption songs

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery
None but ourselves can free our mind
Have no fear for atomic energy
Cause none of them can stop the time
How long shall they kill our prophets
While we stand aside and look
Some say it's just of it
We've got to fulfil the book

O won't you help me sing, etc.

Remembering Jock Crawford

Jock Crawford (1935-2023) was a stalwart Sofian. He wrote an account of his spiritual journey, intended for his wider family. Part of this, we print below. It's a down-to-earth story no doubt repeated with minor variations by many of us.

I was born in 1935 and raised in a New Zealand then still recognised as a Christian Dominion of Great Britain. During my first year as a boarder at Southwell School, World War II ended in August 1945 with the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan, announced to the assembled school prior to daily morning chapel service by the headmaster, the subsequently greatly revered Paul Sergel, then a recently returned Army padre from the hell of Monte Cassino.

A period of national relief and optimism tempered with the need for rationing staple foodstuffs and other exigencies followed six years of warfare which had engulfed most of the world in one way or another. The birth of the United Nations organisation in October 1945 was the most visible sign that the international community was done with aggression, slaughter and torture and lasting Peace was the common goal.

It is little wonder that there was a quickening of religious interest in the West: there was a lot of church building and congregations grew significantly. God was back in Heaven instead of fighting alongside every soldier whether Friend or Enemy – both Allies and Axis combatants and their relatives had surely claimed His help. In New Zealand the traditional Christian denominations were well supported with the Anglicans claiming the greatest number of adherents, of which I was one.¹



I was in my early forties when my hitherto conventional understanding of who Jesus of Nazareth was and what he accomplished started to undergo some real scrutiny. Up until that time he had been, for me, a shadowy figure typically depicted in Sunday School posters, perhaps sporting freshly shampooed long hair and wearing a white robe *à la* the ubiquitous Persil soap advertising of those days, with a young lamb draped around his shoulders. He was understood as having been a great miracle worker and healer before being agonisingly crucified “for us men and for our salvation” and miraculously rising from his tomb before ascending – apparently bodily – up to Heaven to sit beside God, his father, to ultimately judge us all. One

had to have the utmost respect for such a figure but to have any doubt about standard church doctrine, let alone express such, *was simply not done*.

At that time (1976) I became a participant in a local religiously oriented programme of *Life in the Spirit* seminars. The weekly classes were very ecumenical in nature – some 50 or so people from all the local churches had their religious interest greatly enhanced as a result. Many had strong emotional responses to the material studied and all became much more familiar with the gospel accounts of Jesus' life and teaching and the recorded circumstances surrounding his death and resurrection.

I think the town gained considerable benefit from those seminars which was apparent, particularly within the church-going community, for some years afterward. I myself became interested in and committed to church cooperation having been exposed to some different emphases and understandings for the first time in my life. I had also been forcefully struck by the sheer brilliance of Jesus' teaching and his courageous example. Who was he really? How did he come to display such wisdom? From whence did it come? If he was a fully human being how could he have been "born of a virgin"?

During the intervening years since those *Life in the Spirit* seminars were held, I have become familiar with the thinking and writings of quite a few well-recognised, thoughtful and widely published theologians. Of particular interest have been books by John Spong, a former bishop of the Episcopalian (Anglican) Church in Newark, New Jersey, whose many titles have been read by hundreds of thousands; Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, a Unitarian minister and Catholic priest respectively and close friends; Karen Armstrong, a former nun; and, most significantly, Lloyd Geering, tried for heresy here in New Zealand in 1966 but acquitted by the Presbyterian Church -- to name only five. Much of what they have written I have found very helpful to my understanding and which has allowed me to remain in the more liberal part of the Church with a degree of intellectual honesty.

The first real challenge to the rather weakly practised belief system I grew up with was the "virgin birth".² As a 20th century Kiwi farmer and father of my own two children, the expression of this piece of doctrine which ran contrary to everything I knew of mammalian reproduction had to be examined and discarded. This was especially so when it came to light that *almah*, the Hebrew word for young woman, had been mistranslated – either accidentally or purposefully – to "virgin" with the consequent officially implied view that human sexual reproduction contained much sinfulness which Jesus' mother was believed to be incapable of: hence the requirement of his divinity and mysterious and essential fatherhood "by God".

It was, of course, the Nicene Creed, which gave much impetus to the development of Church doctrine and orthodoxy. Hammered out under the stern auspices of the Emperor Constantine at Nicea in 325 CE, it was the final flourish which put the finishing touch to the transformation of Jesus' teaching which had been all about life and love, how to treat friend and enemy, **how to act** with generosity and compassion; nearly three hundred years later this had been transformed into **what to believe**.

How this came about surely must be due to many factors, among them the wrestling with Jesus' political execution and the need to distil meaning from his significant life and death for his followers; the incorporation of the thinking and missionary travels of S(P)aul of Tarsus which have had such an influence on non-Jewish beliefs; the Roman occupation of Judea since before the birth of Jesus and the razing of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E.; the sidelining of the parts played by the women among the early followers of The Way, particularly, perhaps, that of Mary Magdalene, recognised as being one of Jesus' closest confidantes and given the respect and status of a widow at the time of his death and burial according to gospel accounts. (One coherent theory is that she could have been a prime source for the writer of the gospel of John.³)

It was pointed out to me recently that in the words of the Nicene Creed, Jesus' ministry and adult life was reduced to just a punctuation mark e.g.

“...incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man.” ✓

*For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;...*⁴

However, this is not the place for a deep discussion of the creed and I am certainly not equipped to do so. My limited understanding, though, is that, apart from the theological questions wrestled with at the time and which have been debated in certain academic and theological quarters ever since, Constantine succeeded in the initial joining of Church and State into the most powerful amalgam of power the world knew for the next 1300 years or so. Christendom came to loom very large indeed for individuals, societies and nations. If you offended against the State you ran the risk of execution by hanging or far more ghastly methods like being hung, drawn and quartered; question the orthodoxy of the Church and you might be stretched on the rack, burned at the stake or drowned. The Crusades and the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions were the most blatant distortions and travesties of what Jesus' message became during the Middle Ages.⁵

Temporal power was exercised by the State and spiritual power by the Church. That was more or less the status quo until 1510 when Galileo and his telescope proved that Nikolaus Copernicus's mathematical calculations were indeed correct and so Earth was *not the centre of the universe*. It was this development which ushered in the Age of Enlightenment although the Catholic Church was affronted at the time and Galileo was lucky not to lose his life as a result. Indeed the Vatican did not officially recognise that he had indeed been correct until 1992!⁶

I have shunned reciting the Nicene Creed now for nearly 20 years, ever since a much loved minister, the late Alan Leadley, told me in private conversation that he would no longer expect his congregation to have to stand and recite words, many/most of which some people could no longer believe with integrity and thus had to do so with their fingers metaphorically crossed behind their backs. What a relief that conversation was to me at the time, I who could not have remained in the pews much longer otherwise!

It was a lightbulb moment when I started to realise that no, I was definitely not from a Jewish background and living in a harsh Palestinian environment occupied by a Roman garrison at a time when few people could read and write and Earth was understood to be flat. That was then and this was now, thousands of miles away in a most beautiful island country and nearly two millennia in time. Coming to some understanding of the difference between the Jesus of history who became the Christ of faith has become central to my perception of reality.

Who or what is meant by reference to G O D ?

I approach this question with some trepidation. Over the last five hundred years or so many of the practices of Christian belief have had to undergo some serious revision, starting with Galileo's discovery referred to earlier. The ongoing revelations of scientific and academic research have brought about massive changes in our understanding of not only the position and age of our planet in relation to the solar system, the galaxy and even the cosmos itself but also of humankind's growth and development. Our culture has been undergoing increasingly rapid change, particularly over recent decades even. Because of this much of the language of religion has lost a lot of its power and meaning through overuse and familiarity or has become too archaic or opaque to be useful for many.

I also am only too aware that any attempt to find contemporary meaning in this context has the possibility of seeming arrogant and dismissive of much of great value that has long been believed and sincerely acted upon. I intend no disrespect – only a search for some philosophical integrity for myself in the time and place in which I live and will soon die.

1. GOD...

How do I understand the meaning of those three letters: G O D? Well, no longer the way I did in my youth when the accepted version of the Deity was as an omnipotent celestial being who had literally created the perceived universe along the lines described in Genesis but on a greatly distorted timescale, e.g. "A thousand ages in Thy sight are but an evening gone" (*Hymns A&M*). Due respect should be and was due to such a One who on occasion could be implored to intervene in puny human affairs on behalf of and support those in dire straits. After all "every hair of your head is numbered" but as the years have passed by my understanding has had to undergo significant revision. Jesus himself, the originator of the phrase above, called that terrible cry from his cross as he was dying: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? which has echoed down the centuries.

The IDEA of gods endowed with supernatural power first took root a very long time ago and is common to all major civilisations of the past. From a modern perspective it seems understandable that in antiquity fire, thunder and lightning, flood and drought, and other inexplicable phenomena were attributed to powers thought to be super human in form and ability.

Also from a modern perspective is the revelation that the world we inhabit is an infinitesimally small part of the Milky Way galaxy calculated to have formed some 13.2 billion years ago in the aftermath of an initial Big Bang which gave birth to our universe. Even more mind blowing is the recent scientific hypothesis that there may be an infinite number of galaxies which form parts of multiple universes – Why? Who/What is responsible? Or should we not question but just accept that it is so and be very grateful for Life itself and live accordingly?

The Hebrews were the first to scrap a pantheon of deities in favour of their One God who inspired awe and fear and whose name was not to be spoken aloud. The God of the Hebrews was variously understood to be bloodthirsty, demanding, just, jealous, merciful, omnipotent, vengeful and other contradictory all-too-human attributes writ large. In a patriarchal society this god was involved in not only the creation of the world and mankind but with various mega events – some apocalyptic or historical, some surely allegorical or mythical – set out in the Torah of the Bible. Major ones included the story of Noah and the Flood, the Exile in Egypt and subsequent Exodus from there led by the charismatic but by-then-octogenarian Moses; the colonisation of the Promised Land and displacement or slaughter of the Canaanites, Hittites and others who inhabited it, the aftermath of which is still being played out some three thousand years later in today's Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

The replacement of the understanding of a somewhat bloodthirsty, capricious and demanding God of the Hebrews/Old Testament by the loving Father figure Jesus related to was a watershed development. It also seems reasonable to suggest that the special relationship Jesus had with whom he called his heavenly father was because he did not know who his earthly biological father was. [An idea I am indebted to the late Fred Marshall for in one of his essays.] Be that as it may, whatever doctrinal adornments and accoutrements have been added to early Christian beliefs and practices over two millennia, one thing stands out above all others: Jesus' adult life, example and teaching to the point of being executed for his vision of a "Kingdom of God" to which all people of goodwill are called to recognise and serve in the here and now can be for us "the way we need to follow and the truth we need to know" (*NZPB page 486*).

It is at this point the question arises for me: If the IDEA of God is to have any real traction in 21st century secular New Zealand (and indeed elsewhere) then it has to undergo some fresh thinking.

I must be one of an increasing number of people brought up with traditional orthodox religious beliefs who have cast off a lot of what we learned as children, much of which was taught us in doctrinal terms without much thought being given. I am fully aware that much of their spiritual life is an emotional response for many, reflected in the wording of certain prayers, well known pious hymns and Bible readings. The

tendency for many people nowadays seems to be either to ridicule and dismiss most of such matter, or to invest in it literalness never originally intended. I am wary of both approaches.

One thought that does resonate with me is “God has no hands but ours”. In his elegant book *God is the good we do* Michael Benedikt examines *theopraxy* – godly action versus *theology* - godly words. A practising Jew, he argues most persuasively that God can be understood as being present in simple acts of compassion, decency and kindness and absent from acts of aggression, coercion, violence, war and the like. It is in subscribing to the values of the former that will see most of us die in a clean hospital bed rather than in a gutter at the end of an AK47, for instance.

My father’s last words uttered to me as he was in fact dying in just such a hospital bed were: “I am in God’s hands now.” Religion was not a subject we had ever really discussed, which seems strange in the light of the relationship we had, but I firmly believe that from that moment the words he had uttered were true in the way that his passing was attended to by everyone involved.

Our perception of reality itself needs revision and with it also some aspects of contemporary religion as practised. For instance, climate change deniers need to discard the biblical stance that Earth is to be exploited for humankind’s benefit (*Genesis Ch1 v28*) and become serious stewards instead: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that therein is” (*Psalms 24*). Lloyd Geering has addressed the question persuasively in his monograph *The Greening of Christianity*.

Perhaps some radical new thinking resulting in beneficial action may receive some real impetus in reaction to the aftermath of recent increasingly catastrophic weather events. Issues of climate change and political actions resulting in mass population movements and growth/restrictions demand concerted, worldwide action; also urgently needing to be addressed are much wider questions of human sustenance and viability, relationships both international and individual, the overcoming of unbridled greed and the need to treat neighbour and “stranger within the gate” as well as we wish to be treated ourselves.

Jock Crawford
17/2/2022

NOTES

1. The 1945 NZ Census figures were (A)32,578; (RC)15,190, (M)7,535 and (P)1,646; for Anglicans, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterians respectively. Six years later in the 1951 Census the comparative figures in the same order had grown to (A) 37,311; (RC)16,958; (M)8,529 and (P)2,357. The overall gain for these four denominations was more than 14%.
2. In the Ancient World Zoroastrianism was a primitive religion dependent on a virgin birth. The birth story of Muhammed is another which shares this belief. Other religions more distant from Palestine also feature such.
3. [Ramon Jusino’s essay, Mary Magdalene: Author of the Fourth Gospel?](#)
4. *Spiritual Defiance* by Robin Meyers. Yale University Press 2015.
5. Most contemporary experts would place the total number of official executions during the Spanish Inquisition alone at between 3,000 and 10,000, with perhaps an additional 100,000 to 125,000 dying in prison as a result of torture and maltreatment.
6. *New York Times* October 30, 1992.
7. The hypothesis that Mark was written first continues to be held by the majority of scholars today, and there is a new recognition of the author as an artist and theologian using a range of literary devices to convey his conception of Jesus as the authoritative yet suffering [Son of God](#).
8. Luke, Ch4 v17
9. Mark, Ch6 v3

10. The list includes Caesar Augustus and Alexander of Macedonia. "Son of God" - This should not be confused with "God the Son" of later doctrinal importance.

The Editor

Co-governance by 2040? Part 1

(This is the first of a two part series by John Bluck, author of *Becoming Pakeha: a journey between two cultures*, published by Harpercollins and available in bookstores now.)

Predator free by 2040? OK. Carbon emissions zero? Yeh well. Smoke free? Of course. Child poverty free? A work in progress. But how close are we to making the 200th anniversary of signing Te Tiriti o Waitangi a celebration rather than a commemoration?

He Puapua was the think tank report that tried to set out some goals we need to reach by 2040. And even though it grew out of a response to New Zealand signing up to the UN resolution on the rights of indigenous people under a National Government, then cautiously explored by a Labour government, it's become the whipping boy for anyone anxious about finding a bicultural future for Aotearoa.

The report offered some ideas about co-governance which is a principle that has been around for a long time, it's a Cabinet guideline for policy making, already embedded in the rules of dozens of institutions (including several of our church denominations), schools, universities, museums, national parks, rivers and waterways. It's one principle for sharing power in particular settings and locations, remembering that Maori are not all the same everywhere any more than Pakeha are. Aucklanders where I live think Cantabrians are creatures from another planet.

Co-governance is not the same as co-government as Chris Finlayson reminds us. It doesn't give Maori greater rights, but under the Treaty there are different rights.

And since the Treaty was signed and then dishonoured over and over, there are different ways to set things right in response to different histories. Each region has a different back story. Take the current furore over the Uruwera National Park which has been under a co-governance covenant between DOC and Tuhoe since 2014. Tuhoe inherited a backlog of maintenance and upgrades and said it wouldn't pay for that backlog. Why is Tuhoe anxious about the deal now? Well back in 1896 the Seddon government at the time granted Tuhoe autonomy to prevent mining claims in the Uruwera. That control was repealed in 1923 without any consultation. Wouldn't you be nervous?

Cogovernance is a Treaty principle that will shape our future, but it has to be worked through place by place, issue by issue, by partners talking to each other. When that happens everyone benefits.

The Anglican Church's experience of co-governance at the level of its General Synod is that decisions are made by consensus, negotiation, conversation rather than Westminster style votes and divisions that used to define our life and leave us divided and disgruntled.

So what might a bicultural future for Aotearoa look like by 2040? Along with He Puapua and the slew of government reports and political party manifestos doing all the imagining, wouldn't it be good if the churches joined this conversation. Pointing people toward a future that is hopeful and just is our core business after all. But we've been strangely silent since 1990, preoccupied and distracted by our internal woes.

Whatever we might have to say now would look different from what we said in 1990 at the sesquicentennial. Back then the churches talked about constitutional reform of Parliament which has since become a deeply unpopular topic. Archbishop Sir Paul Reeves convened a national convention on the

subject ten years later and concluded that the best outcome was probably that they managed to offend and upset an equal number of people for and against.

Back then the churches talked about the urgency of environmental stewardship run by Maori and Pakeha principles and understandings of creation working in harmony. That was far sighted at the time.

And the churches praised the work of the Waitangi Tribunal and pledged their support.

In 2023 I think we could do even better and be much more specific about honouring the Treaty, 33 years on and midway on the journey to 2040, we can add a lot more detail to the model of a bicultural future.

Co-governance by 2040? Part 2

(This is the second part of a two part series by John Bluck, author of *Becoming Pakeha: a journey between two cultures*, published by Harpercollins and available in bookstores now.)

What might a bicultural nation worth celebrating look like by 2040, the 200th anniversary of Te Tiriti o Waitangi?

The much feared and demonised issue of co-governance will be front and centre stage by then, no longer a ping pong ball for our political parties to bat around. The churches have a story to tell about that, firstly to each other, for our different denominations have tried some brave models with great success and a few failures. We need some honest talking amongst ourselves before trying to sell anything to the nation, which we tried unsuccessfully to do in the 1990's.

Anglicans for example, wrote Maori back into their constitution (it took us 133 years) but we lost the focus on building a common ground, to be promoted through Common Life Hui.

Because working toward a common ground is the goal that is constantly forgotten in the bicultural planning and dreaming. For all out talk of partnership there are far too few occasions, public celebrations, shared forums where Maori and Pakeha stand alongside each other to talk and sing, speak and listen, to pray together. The sports fields do a better job than our sanctuaries, celebrating a country where both Treaty partners enjoy not only equality but equity, not only proud identity as Maori and Pakeha, but the common humanity we share as children of God.

But to get there by 2040 there is much to be done by both partners, Pakeha especially, and urgently.

Because the opportunity to get it right doesn't last for ever. The promises that we've broken and apologised for and then broken again aren't always elastic. You can stretch them to breaking point. The symbols of justice and reconciliation have a shelf life that depends on how well they've been honoured.

As the debacle in our High Commission in London in front of King Tuheitia reminds us. As the continuing Dawn Raids on Pasifika families reminds us. And the fudging and ducking and diving around co-governance reminds us.

The coronation of King Charles is a case study in the shelf life of symbols. However beautifully they're displayed, people tire of them if they don't stand for what is good and honourable and true.

The work we have to do is transformational work no less. The fashionable word for that is decolonisation, for both Maori and Pakeha have been colonised by this imperial history we share, one rather more harshly than the other.

Maori scholar and lawyer Moana Jackson wasn't too sure about the word. He preferred to talk about an ethic of restoration whereby each partner works at finding the truth about their part of the story.

In the book I quote Supreme Court Justice Joe Williams saying, “Both sides have to decolonise their minds because both sides are colonised, both saying now “ We want to do it a different way”. It’s no longer right to say ‘Evil, nasty Crown, good angel iwi’ ”

We’re not going to get to 2040 by relying on laws and resolutions and more reports. It’s also going to need new songs and movies and art works and poems and yes sports and teams and occasions like the Black Ferns victory and Eden Park going crazy with poi swinging and waiata. We’ll have to learn to sing and dance our way to 2040 with karaoke and kapa haka. Check out the winners at the NZ Music Awards and the Ockham Book Awards, both the adult and the children’s sections.

And to trust the language of symbols and images, melody and shape and form. Symbols especially. When Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana met Prime Minister Peter Fraser in 1935 and reshaped bicultural politics in this country he did it with symbols not words. A broken watch to speak of poverty, a huia feather to speak of dispossession, a pounamu pendant to speak of rangatiratanga.

Evidence abounds that we are finding things that bind us together beyond words and to dream together about the future we share. And to agree on the values that will shape it.

And it’s not rocket science. The values that shape decolonisation or restoration are what we both want. About community, and the importance of place and care of the land and sea. The value of belonging, of balance and dignity and tikanga, the way things ought to be for our culture.

Values that come to us on a wing and a song and a prayer. Values that we find when we reclaim our history for better or worse, repenting of the mistakes we made, and celebrating our successes in establishing partnerships and above all friendships.

John Bluck

Rethought Religion

At the Christchurch Sea of Faith conference in 2019 a potential new name for our organisation, Rethinking Religion, was finally rejected by a majority of attending members at the AGM. However, I continued to think this remained a pretty good name for a religious discussion group, at least a pretty good name for a group I wanted to belong to at the time. So, I revived the Sea of Faith group in Christchurch that had recently folded, with Rethinking Religion as its name, and religious discussion as its purpose.

Rethinking Religion meetings became scheduled for the 4th Monday evening of the month preceded by a pot-luck dinner. The first occurred in January 2020, with me as the presenter. I talked about my own spiritual journey to date – a journey out of fundamentalist, evangelical, Anglican Christianity. I provided Lloyd Geering’s book chapter “Religion in the 21st Century” as accompanying reading for the meeting, which includes Lloyd’s take on the basis of religion, drawing on the Latin word *religio*, to bind together.

What followed that year of 2020 and into 2021, as the Covid epidemic progressed, was a series of really interesting presentations by most of the regular attendees of the group, focussed on each member’s spiritual progression to date. Presentations were each received with respect, and a feeling of togetherness resulted. I realized my journey had not been as unique as I once had thought, and I felt an emerging sense of spiritual comradeship with fellow travellers.

However, as time passed, discussion revealed there were some significant differences in the group in terms of such things as: the nature of spirituality; what is important to live well by and survive future anticipated calamity; philosophical issues such as the nature of consciousness; and socio-political issues such as whether medical authorities can be trusted about the usefulness of the covid vaccination. Discussions

gradually began to feel somewhat tense, and the warmth of “spiritual friends” that had been present for the first 18-months began to wane.

Two books in particular helped me understand what was going on. The first was, “The Righteous Mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion”, by US social psychologist Jonathan Haidt. Righteous Mind helped me see that people holding different values and life insights to my own are not stupid, bad or ignorant. They simply have a different formulation of this immense complexity (“Life, the Universe, and Everything”), the ultimate truth of which eludes us all, and perhaps will always do so. But we have evolved an exquisite self-consciousness with a need to hold on to something that gives us orientation and provides a degree of security in the face of the yawning mystery we find ourselves immersed in. I began to understand better how this need for something to hold on to is deep within each of us and we can all become defensive and irritable if our particular formulation is questioned.

The second book was, “Hold Me Tight: Your guide to the most successful approach to building loving relationships”, by Dr Sue Johnson. In fact, this second book was one of a series of books I’ve been reading over the past three years while undergoing some new psychotherapy training in Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) based in part on the theoretical work of John Bowlby on human attachment. During one of the workshops I participated in, an EFT therapy session videotape was played of a woman in her late-30s I think who was somewhat bitter and demoralized about life and in conflict with her parents. When she casually brought God (her Catholic God) into the discussion I was immediately very eager to see how the therapist was going to deal with it, if at all. I wondered if the therapist might acknowledge her comment and then say something like, “Well that’s the area of your spirituality, now let’s get back to the therapy” or similar. But what he did surprised and excited me. Rather than dismiss or side-line her God, he incorporated Him (as a major attachment figure) into the therapy as a positive resource and set up a therapeutic encounter between the two as part of a strategy of building up her confidence to face her parents.

I saw then more clearly than I’d seen it before, how we all have a deep need for some sort of attachment figure (or idea) in our lives. It was this epiphany that gave me a further shot of empathy for my fellow Rethinking Religion comrades whose life-views I didn’t share. It also, incidentally, helped me subsequently feel sympathetic understanding towards the thousands of grieving people standing in lines for hours to pay respects to the dead Queen Elizabeth II.

In withdrawing from the Rethinking Religion group, and thus bringing it to an end (no one came forward to continue it) I felt grateful to those who had shared and argued, as it was in this context that I’d been able to take another step forward in my spiritual journey, with two particular ideas reinforced: 1. There is a strong nexus between spirituality/religion and psychology; and 2. Spiritual groups need a shared attachment figure (or idea) as orientation; what Lloyd Geering wrote about in reference to something Big that binds a group together.

Doug Sellman
May 2023