

SOFiA Newsletter 167, August 2023

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



Limestone cliffs like those at Dover, scene of the poem “Dover Beach”

Annual General Meeting

A friendly reminder: This Zoom meeting will be held on Saturday 2 September at 2 pm.

- John Thornley will give a talk “Redemption Song” about Bob Marley, poet and prophet.
- 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)

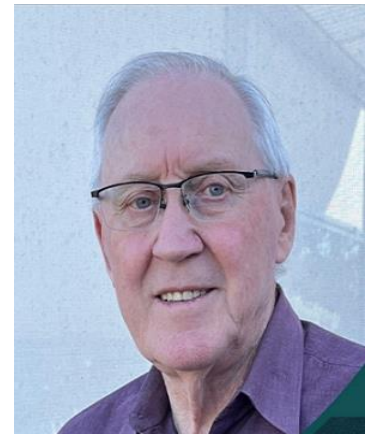
Next Steps in the Interfaith Journey – Ancient Wisdom in a New Context

The following talk was given by Keith Rowe to the Palmerston North Interfaith Group on May 3 2023.

Nudged Beyond Tribalism

Thank you for the invitation to be with you this evening. Your invitation came as a surprise for I am no longer actively involved in an interfaith group though my interest in interfaith friendship and exploration is no less strong than during the decades I was active in interfaith dialogue and action in New Zealand and Australia. I remain grateful for those who over the years nudged me beyond Christian tribalism. I cannot imagine my life as a person of faith being lived within a narrower framework.

When I read the brochure describing the goals and activities of the Palmerston North Interfaith group I was impressed at how you have maintained a programme that holds together the joys and stimulus of friendship in the presence of difference and a shared commitment to a the building of a humane, just and peaceful society here in New Zealand and beyond. The list of participating faith communities that make up the Palmerston North Interfaith Group is itself symbolic of how far we have come and how much New Zealand society has changed over the last 50 years. I recall an event in January 2016. I joined with a group of Christians from many backgrounds, a Jewish Rabbi, the Iranian ambassador to NZ, and a number of Muslim leaders, Sunni and Shia, in welcoming and hearing from two scholars from Iran. At the lunch table we were invited to introduce ourselves and to share a brief reflection. When it came time for me to speak I mentioned that our being together was a sign of something important happening in our divided and often violent world. Our sharing of food and our lively conversation was like an acted prayer for peace in a world shaped by misunderstanding, prejudice and division. We were part, I suggested, of a significant movement of people who refuse to be captured by inherited divisive and destructive attitudes. I recalled how about 50years earlier I first shared in a meeting of Protestant clergy with a Catholic priest. It seemed an unbelievable, even daring thing to be doing! In fact we quickly became friends, colleagues, without needing to deny our differences. We discovered we shared a desire to



contribute to the healing of God's world and we sought pathways of cooperation. There was so much to learn and to unlearn. The group laughed at how the 'unusual' 50 years ago had become 'normal'. The leader of the Iranian delegation, Sheikh Navab, wondered aloud who we might be talking with in another fifty years and what harvests might grow from the seeds we were currently planting.

No Longer the Same

A recent book by a Christian theologian, David Brockman is entitled "No Longer the Same - religious others and the liberation of Christian theology." The title captures a mood that reflects my experience and perhaps, suitably amended, yours too. We, as members of faith communities that could once ignore, caricature or condemn each other are being changed – we are no longer the same. For many of us, in all our difference, the experience of meeting, befriending, exploring together, has been like liberation, the opening of a door into newness and possibility.

Interfaith engagement, learning, struggling and working together is among the hopeful signs in our somewhat broken world. More of the same: inherited antagonisms, misunderstandings and foolish prejudices, along with doctrines devised to exclude those with whom we disagree, will not open the door into a future shaped by the peace, justice and hospitality we have been taught to cherish by our holy books and participation in the life of Temples, Mosques, Gurdwaras, Churches and other meeting places. Quite simply, we need each other. And the world needs our best wisdom as part of its pathway through the challenging decades that lie before us.

Living and Learning in a More Expansive World

We should not underestimate how involvement in interfaith engagement has changed us as people of faith. I can only speak of my experience but it may mirror yours. My life and my work as a Christian theologian and pastor has been enormously enriched by those who first encouraged me to ask the question "what does it mean to be Christian in a world of many faiths?" and to pursue my exploration in conversation with those shaped by other pathways. My growing conviction that deep truth is larger than can be contained within a single religion was given flesh and form through friendship with people shaped by other ways. I soon learned we are held together by similar dreams of a world shaped by life enhancing values and open to an ever-present creative love, named differently in each tradition, that lies at the heart of all life.

We are not the same people we were before we began to explore the meaning of friendship in the presence of difference. Our imaginations have been stretched, our sensitivity to deep meaning has been intensified, our appreciation of difference has been extended. We will have learned that we are stewards of complementary expressions of deep truth, that it's possible to affirm our own life shaping convictions without denigrating those held by others, that there are more ways of putting a spiritually sensitive life together than our way. Perhaps you, like me, have learned that we live on small islands of certainty surrounded by a great ocean of mystery. Through the eyes of faith, of committed and compassionate believing, we learn to see the outlines of greater truth but no one group sees it all or sees it without distortion. We are learning to live with loose ends, unanswered questions. Like me, you will have learned interfaith experience can be painful as we learn to see ourselves through the eyes and experience of others. We will have learned how to face the dark side of our religious stories – the ways in which our truth has been and still may be twisted, misinterpreted, taken over by political, economic and imperialistic agendas. We probably agree that conversation in the presence of difference is a form of prayer, a reaching towards truth beyond what we have yet glimpsed.

[A Form of Living the World Needs](#)

The sort of sensitivity we are learning within interfaith dialogue is the sort of sensitivity to our neighbour and to the larger questions of life and meaning that our world needs if we are to make it through the coming decades. I don't say that lightly or merely to flatter.

Religions, as institutions and as systems of belief, are easily criticised. Our imperfections and blind spots are there for all to see. Many of the criticisms are deserved and needed. In my judgement all the great religions of the world are in need of renewal, of a return to the life giving perspectives that accompanied their beginnings. This is certainly true of the Faith I know best. Each of the great religions began as renewal movements dedicated to the building of good human community and the enhancement of human living. The deep truth at the heart of each of our faiths contains an invitation to peace, justice and hospitality, the gentle yet tough building blocks upon which good human community is built. Sadly, yet it seems inevitably, over the centuries religions and the structures that support them grow tough, judgmental and harsh edges. As long as we relate to each other from these, unwelcoming, doctrinaire and rigid edges religious life, at least in its organised form, will remain as a problem to be solved rather than as a gift pointing us towards our liberation and to the building of a hospitable and

inclusive society. We need to dig beneath the harsh edges of both our neighbour's religion and our own if we are to find the pearl of great price at their heart.

Four Stages of Encounter: From Fear to Work for the Common Good

There seems to be an almost inevitable progression in our encounter with neighbours who are different, whether it be a matter of culture, ethnicity or religion. It is common to begin with fear of the other, even a desire to destroy them or to deny them the right to be different. Beyond this negative starting point is the possibility of tolerance of the other. The other is acknowledged in their difference but we resolve to keep out of each other's way. Beyond tolerance is the possibility of the development of positive appreciation of the other. This is born both of knowledge and of deepening spiritual sensitivity. Knowledge of the other and a shedding of our own need to be right, to be certain, to be in control are among the components of appreciation. The fourth stage must surely be that of working together for the common good, sharing our wisdom as we seek to make sense of the times in which we live and the possibilities that beckon. We seem to be teetering on the edge of this fourth and necessary stage. We have valuable wisdom to offer to a world that is in deep trouble.

Ancient Wisdom in a Troubled World

If our Faiths were simply static collections of long ago stories, rituals and unchanging values we could leave them as mere footnotes in the history books and get on with the tough scientific work that might guide us into whatever the future holds. According to interfaith pioneer Huston Smith that's exactly the problem we face. We have given our souls to scientism, the view that secure scientific knowledge is all we have as we face our troubled world and wonder about the future. So great has been the impact of scientific discovery that the wisdom of religious communities has been increasingly set aside by decision makers. Huston Smith challenges this assumption. Scientific discovery shows a vital half of the world, its physical, calculable, controllable half but ignores those aspects of life that are not amenable to control, measurement and calculation. These aspects of life include such important things as a humane sense of purpose and meaning, deep relationships, imagination, hope, a sense that there is more to life than what can be possessed, traded, manipulated, catalogued and fully understood. Huston Smith, like us I imagine, believed the human family needs the living and transformative wisdom treasured in communities of faith seeking to live within inclusive and generous horizons. Our twenty first century has been too

eager to push religious intuition to the boundaries of living, exiled to the private lives of a diminishing number but irrelevant to the great issues of our day.

The Challenges of Our Day Are Ever-Present

The challenges faced by humanity in our time are ever present: Climate change and environmental degradation; the growing and apparently unbridgeable gap between the rich and the poor; racial, gender and cultural prejudice; the promise and peril of artificial intelligence; international rivalries that threaten to plunge us back into violence we hoped we had outgrown. It is a painful time for those who still dream of a human family held together by peace, justice, hospitality, and generosity. The shambles we are in needs the heart wisdom of the great religions interacting with scientific knowledge not available when the religions were first shaped.

The human family needs all the wisdom it can muster if we are to make it through to the next century as a cohesive, just and life - enhancing civilisation. Of course, ancient wisdom cannot simply be repeated in the language or thought forms of a thousand or more years ago. We live in different times and are shaped by new questions and challenges. The great religions, the sort of communities represented in an interfaith group like ours, need to be digging into the wisdom we have received, discovering afresh deep truth about human relationships, human hope and the sources of human compassion that lies beyond the rough and sometimes deceptive edges of religious structures. The next step in the interfaith journey must surely be a shared naming and disciplined facing of the problems our community and larger world society face in the light of the wisdom bequeathed to us. It is urgent work.

We Have Wisdom to Share About Care of the Natural World

In 2016, following water problems in Havelock North I attended a two-day seminar on water. The first day we were fed a diet of measurable facts and scientifically verifiable descriptions of the problems we faced. The large group floundered without access to ethical or imaginative perspectives that might help us make sense of all these facts. The second day began with a contribution from Tangata Whenua. A Maori perspective on water was presented. It was described as living gift rather than as economic object, shared asset rather than the property of whoever wielded economic or social power. Like a living person, we were told, it needs to be cared for if it is to care for us. Rivers and aquifers need to be respected if they are to share their best gifts with us. We were gifted a language and imaginative, spirit-inclusive concepts, to advance our conversation beyond divisive debate about who deserves or can afford the greatest share of a

valuable resource. Each of the great religious traditions has wisdom to unpack and to share about the human relationship with the natural world. There is cultural and spiritual wisdom that needs to be introduced, as it was in Havelock North, into the conversation - not as a problem solver but as a direction finder and bearer of an ethical perspective. Perhaps it's true as a Yale environmentalist suggested that "our environmental discourse has for too long been dominated by lawyers, scientists and economists, now we need to learn a lot more from poets, preachers, philosophers and psychologists."

We Have Wisdom to Share About the Origins and Control of Human Violence

Each of the great religious traditions grapple at depth with the large question as to how human society can overcome a tendency towards violence in the solving of differences. However, this wisdom is largely ignored through a common perception that religious intensity often, some would say always, fuels and promotes violence. A world hell bent on violent solutions to disagreement urgently needs to hear the peace making wisdom we have accumulated, both positively and negatively across the centuries. In each of our traditions there is a sensitivity to the inter connectedness of all reality and a conviction that all humans belong to a single family, a reality awaiting embodiment in social, political and economic structures. At the conclusion of her book, "Fields of Blood, Religion and the History of Violence" Karen Armstrong reminds readers that in spite of shameful encouragement of human aggression and violence toward those described as 'enemies', "somehow we have to find ways of doing what religion – at its best- has done for centuries: build a sense of global community, cultivate a sense of reverence and 'equanimity' for all, and take responsibility for the current state of the world." We have a continuing and urgent responsibility to build compassionate non-violence into the mentality of our times. We need not be imprisoned by past failures.

We Have Wisdom to Share About the Problem of Human Greed

This is wisdom most notably represented in the Buddhist tradition but present in each of the great Faiths. We are embraced by an economic system that is driven by greed and by limitless growth. These taken for granted values have led to the destruction of natural environments in a frantic search for raw materials and to the destruction of human communities in search of cheap labour. The great religions are unanimous in their warnings about the dangers of worshipping money and of galloping greed. They seek societies where meeting the needs of the poor has priority over the desires of the already wealthy. Global Free market

Capitalism has become the dominant religion of our times. It is built upon lies that need to be exposed. Addiction to affluence is a most destructive condition. The wisdom of the great religions has a role to play in promoting a just economic system and exposing the dangers of a greed driven world economic system. We need to be in conversation with the guardians of Free Market Global Capitalism, the dominant religion of our era.

[We Have Wisdom to Share as We Confront the Possibilities and Perils of Artificial Intelligence](#)

The questions are simple yet overwhelming. Will human flourishing be helped or hindered by the rapid development of artificial intelligence? Does the development of technology with the capacity to make decisions affecting the wellbeing of us all yet without direct human involvement represent a creative or a destructive step in human evolution? What ethical wisdom is available as governments and entrepreneurs make these 'god-like' decisions – or will marketplace profit and power - seeking nationalism determine the future for artificial intelligence. Will robots be programmed to do only those tasks that are helpful to humans or will robots be developed with the capacity to self-programme in ways that could threaten humanity or marginalised parts of the human family? As we enter this ethically uncharted territory ancient spiritual wisdom that understands humans to be responsible and responsive to creative energy, a purpose, a possibility that is greater than our own comfort or captive to our own ingenuity, seems relevant and needed.

[We Have Wisdom to Offer a World Facing Chaos Within Climate Change](#)

It seems likely that nations lack the political will to reduce the limits of global warming to a level that will enable us to avoid the worst-case scenarios for our future. Human civilisation as we have known it for the last 400 years is no longer sustainable. Some suggest we may be heading for what they call the 'sixth extinction'. On five previous occasions the dominant species on our planet have been destroyed by climatic changes or by an asteroid. They wonder aloud if we are headed toward the sixth extinction event, this one caused by the foolishness and greed of its dominant species - humanity. Perhaps we will muddle through in a muddied sort of way but the natural environment that has provided such nourishing conditions for human social and physical evolution casualties will be damaged beyond repair. The human cost will be enormous. Wars fought over access to water could become common; migration from water-deprived regions could become a social and humanitarian nightmare. Even in places like New Zealand social division will increase. How will we live together in such a time? The

great religious traditions are sources of wisdom for living together in tough times, about sharing, caring, innovating for the common good, caring for the most vulnerable.

What Do We Owe the Future?

William Macaskill, in his thoughtful book, “What we owe the Future”, describes our present time as being one where society is in a moment of ‘plasticity’, where ideas or events or institutions can take one of many forms, followed inevitably by a period of rigidity and inability to change. Like glass in the care of a glass blower our time is molten and malleable, it can be blown into one of many shapes. Current ethical norms shaped by racism, greed, sexism, white supremacy, colonialism, have proved to be bankrupt. Now, he says, is a time for the discovery of moral and spiritual norms that will see us through the ethically and socially demanding future towards which we seem to be headed.

The interfaith community is among those who have a positive contribution to make toward a future worth living toward.

The next vital step in the interfaith journey I suggest is to become a network of committed groups exploring the resources of renewal and human flourishing that lie within our traditions and finding ways whereby we may make it available in the places where decisions are made. Our pursuit of friendship in the presence of difference will include disciplined research, thoughtful writing, and courageous and compassionate action as we share ancient, yet strangely contemporary, wisdom in a wounded world.

Some Helpful Books to Encourage Us On the Journey

Paul Knitter and Chandra Muzaffar, *Subverting Greed: religious perspectives on the global economy*, Orbis 2002. Essays by notable spokespersons from many faiths.

Ed. Catherine Cornille and Glen Willis, *The world market and interreligious dialogue*, Cascade Books 2011. Similar to the above but including responses by professional economists.

Ed. Daniel L Christopher- Smith, *Subverting Hatred: The challenge of nonviolence in religious traditions*, Orbis 2007. Peace scholars from the great religious traditions draw on ancient wisdom for pathways to peace.

Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the history of violence*, Bodley Head 2014. A thorough historical and theological exploration of this key issue. She explores the experience and teaching of the great religions.

Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, *World views and Ecology: religion, philosophy and the environment*, Orbis 1994. Essays written by scholars from many faiths exploring the wealth of wisdom on environmental care.

William Macaskill, *What we owe the Future: a million year view?* One World 2022. Macaskill explores issues we face and asks how we may factor in our responsibility and care for future generations' the world where our grandchildren will live.

Philip Clayton and Wm. Andrew Schwartz, *What is Ecological Civilisation? - Crisis, hope and the future of the planet*, Process Century Press, 2019. The authors name the dreadful plight humanity is in but refuse to give way to despair. They ask how we may build a world, even though dreadfully mutilated by climate change and environmental destruction, that nourishes nature and neighbour? Though written from a liberal Christian perspective their vision is universal. They represent a similar vision to that witnessed to by the encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*.

Hans Kung and Karl-Joseph Kuschel, *A Global Ethic – the declaration of the parliament of the world's religions*. SCM Press 1993. Contains the important 'Declaration toward a Global Ethic' of the 1993 Parliament of World Religions along with reflection and comment. It includes the following: "We affirm that a common set of core values is found in the teachings of the religions, and that these form the basis of a global ethic. We affirm that this truth is already known, but yet to be lived in heart and action. There already exist ancient guidelines for human behaviour which are found in the teachings of the religions of the world and which are the condition of a sustainable order." It was formulated a while ago but is still relevant.

Keith Rowe

Book Review: Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business

By Neil Postman

Many readers of this newsletter will be familiar with Marshall McLuhan and his saying "the medium is the message." This book makes a similar, but different claim; that the media we use shapes the way we think and what counts as truth. The medium itself isn't the message, but it shapes all the messages it transmits. We live in an Age of Television, which has supplanted the Age of Typography, of print. Images trump the word. Originally published in 1985, this book could do with an update. Unfortunately, Postman, who chaired the Department of Communication Arts at New York University, passed away in 2003.

Television has generally been hailed as an unmixed good, even by educators and by politicians seeking election. People advocate for television but haven't done the hard work of analysing it carefully, in particular looking for any potential downsides. His book is a profound, clear-headed analysis of the effect of television on our culture, pointing us to features we are reluctant to acknowledge. His argument is strange and foreign to us; television changes us but we don't notice it. We may be familiar with the idea that television brainwashes us and dulls our critical faculties, but Postman's argument does not depend on any such claims. Indeed, he is open to the possibility that as-yet-unseen benefits may come from television. The new media (television) changes what is communicated; this can be a mix of good and bad.

Postman provides a wide-ranging background to his analysis. He announces what he is going to do in relation to television on page 79, but only starts in on that analysis beginning on page 102, more than halfway through the book.

In an age dominated by print and the word, long political speeches were nothing unusual. A serious and rational conversation is natural in such a world. The first of the famous debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas was planned for three hours. Other debates were even longer. People back then had long attention spans and were trained to comprehend complex sentences aurally. Their speeches were modelled on print.

The monopoly of the printed word came to an end in stages. First came the telegraph, invented in 1858. The telegraph annihilated the space between parts of the States. In partnership with the penny press, it enabled the production of a glut of detail devoid of context or practical application. Telegraph uses the language of headlines: sensational, fragmented, impersonal. Telegraphy was followed by the image: first the daguerreotype and then soon after, the photograph, especially the ability to provide many copies of a single negative. Photography is an odd name, since it literally means "writing with light" when images are diametrically opposed to the written word. The picture quickly forced exposition into the background, as you can see from magazines like Life.

But it was television that really gave the image its potency and finally supplanted the world of print. Television is the unquestioned background of our lives. We may discuss the content of a TV programme, but we don't reflect on television as a universally accessible, all-pervasive medium. We don't notice that instead of hour-long speeches, we are told that our prime minister likes sausage rolls. No matter how devastating the news, the next item, or a commercial, is a maximum of 45 seconds away, which detracts from any need to take it seriously.

Newsreaders are likely to spend more time with their hair dryer than with their script, indicating that their image is more important than the content of the message they convey.

Television prioritises the image. It does not lend itself to complex, nuanced argument. Even when it tries its best to be serious, debaters are likely to have no more than five minutes to make the case, and one minute to respond to counter-arguments. Television is best suited to entertainment, and indeed tends to turn even news into entertainment. Talking heads do not make good television. Postman distinguishes television technology from television as a medium. In cultures other than the US, television can be a different medium but use the same technology. It may be used in authoritarian nations predominantly to disseminate government propaganda, for example.

And what about the churches? I'm sad to say that they are mostly still in the age of typography; hence the unsuitability of church services for televising. However, enterprising conservative pastors (such as Pat Robertson and Jimmy Swaggart), have invested heavily in religious television and built up huge empires. Postman's conclusion, after watching 42 hours of such programmes, is that religion is presented as entertainment. The preacher comes out as the main feature; God is a lower priority. The second commandment, forbidding the making of graven images, is a salutary warning here. Christianity is a demanding faith but is presented as easy and amusing. It tells people what they want to hear. For example, if they have faith and donate generously to the church, God will see that they have health, wealth, and happiness. Oral Roberts preached "seed faith," according to which money donated to his ministry would return to the donor sevenfold. The medium of television necessarily distorts the message. Religion in the age of print was dominated by an austere, learned and intellectual style that is largely absent today (just compare Jonathan Edwards with Jerry Falwell!).

Now think what has happened since 1985! We have multiple channels 24/7 and competing streaming services such as Netflix, Neon, Disney+ Sky Sport, Acorn TV and Youtube TV. We have cellphones and social media. We need another Postman to analyse the effects these new technologies are having on us and on what now counts as knowledge.

The Editor