

## Peace is Her Song: The Life and Legacy of Hymn Writer Shirley Erena Murray, by Anne Manchester

The author's working life is as a journalist and writer, having served as Editor for the Methodist and Presbyterian newspaper *Crosslink*, and Editor of the nursing journal *Kai Tiaki Nursing New Zealand*. *Peace is Her Song* was published in 2024 by Philip Garside Publishing. Contacts for enquiries/sales: [bookspgpl@gmail.com](mailto:bookspgpl@gmail.com)

*Peace is Her Song* is 338 pages in length, and set out in six parts: Early Life, Finding Her Voice, Publishing in New Zealand and Abroad, Beyond Parish Life, Working with Shirley, and Shirley's Legacy. The reviewer reprints some passages from the book without quotation marks. I acknowledge Anne Manchester's five years of research, interviews within and outside Aotearoa – all with the skills of a professional journalist.

The first four chapters are based on a history of Shirley's early life written by herself for her grandchildren. We are fortunate to have this account of that private part of her life, with some additions from other sources. Anne writes: 'As much as possible, I have let Shirley tell her own story.'

John Thornley, as reviewer, while 9 years younger than Shirley, my own life story criss-crosses Shirley's, starting in Invercargill, where Shirley Cockroft was born in 1931, and joined the Bible Class at the local Methodist church when my father Robert was minister. She writes eloquently about our family, and particularly the example set by Dorothy my mother: 'Dorothy had a huge influence on me. As a young mother she wore slacks at home, wedgie shoes, and was informal in her dress. She didn't worry about hats and gloves and continued to teach maths while having the last of her five children. She simply went on with her intellectual life and wasn't too bothered about what didn't get done. She was a keen teacher and was always trying to help people get on. The ladies of the parish may not have appreciated her in the beginning, but wartime changed women.'

The book does follow a chronological order to the end of Part Four, Beyond Parish Life, but the time/date sequence moves easily to future events before resuming historical time. This 'looping' easily in time gives the work a cyclical movement, with the inevitable repetition reinforcing and expanding key points.

From 1975 to 1993 John Murray (Shirley's life partner) was minister at St Andrews on the Terrace in Wellington. It was an eighteen year appointment that rescued St Andrews from being sold by its small and ageing members to becoming a vibrant worship centre, with outreach arts and cultural activities, and commitment to radical social activism.

Both John and Shirley experience the social and theological divisions within the Presbyterian church and public arena, including the heresy trial of Lloyd Geering, anti-Vietnam War and nuclear testing, the 1981 Springbok Tour, gay rights and euthanasia campaigns. Shirley had her own campaigns, with a leading role in founding Amnesty International in New Zealand. In coverage of these issues Sea of Faith members will have their memories revived.

An in-depth picture of life in the Murray household is given, once the author had gained the confidence of family members. The three sons - Alistair, David and Rob - and their children shared freely in personal and online contacts. Shirley did her own hymn writing in private, when the children were in bed, off on school trips, or had finally left home. The full significance of their mother's achievements only came much later in life, and then after her death.

The sons' insights into their parents provide an insider viewpoint of manse life. 'There was a bit of yin and yang between Mum and Dad,' said David. 'Dad was outgoing and sociable while Mum was more introverted.' Alistair recalls his father being away all day then home for half an hour, by which time the phone would ring. 'His dinner would get cold, then he would go off to a meeting. Mum did seven-eighths of the parenting. Dad worked a lot in his study, especially late on a Saturday when he was preparing his sermon. Mum was his support staff.'

None of the sons have maintained church links. A close friend of the Murrays, Canadian Ron Klusmeier, believed that both John and Shirley were disappointed that none of their sons kept any church connections. Shirley worried that their sons' view of the church had been poisoned by what they saw as the church hurting their parents. I think Shirley felt the church had hurt

both her and John, yet she was also proud of what John had achieved within the church.

The adoption of Shirley's work in the United States is covered in Part Three, under Chapter 11, Embraced in America. The British hymnwriter, Rev Dr Brian Wren, introduced Shirley to Hope Publishing Company. In early 1991, George H. Shorney, then President of Hope Publishing, wrote a memo stating 'that Hope represent all of Shirley Murray's hymns here in the United States and Canada'. Six Hope publications have been published, with the final titled *Life into Life Shirley Erena Murray New and Collected Hymns 2019*. Shirley's fifth publication with Hope was *A Place at the Table: New Hymns Written Between 2009 and 2013*. This time, her dedication was to George H. Shorney, 'who never having met me before, greeted me with an instant hug. In happy memory of his large vision, encouragement, friendship and marvellous generosity of spirit, with love'. Hence, Anne's choice of heading for Chapter 11!

The rest of this article looks at those sections dealing in depth with the hymn writing. Immediately following Embraced in America there are Chapters 12 and 13 on the Art of Hymn Writing, then Chapter 14 Introducing New Hymns, which should be compulsory reading for all leaders of worship. The better part of these three chapters are Shirley's own words. One sentence will suffice to bug my readers: 'I am not that attached to the great classic hymn writers like Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley – perhaps I sang too many of their songs in my youth'.

I move to Part Five titled Working with Shirley. New ground will be opened up for many readers, with portraits of nine hymn writers who have corresponded and collaborated with Shirley: Colin Gibson and Rev. Ian Render of New Zealand, Ron Klusmeier of Canada, Jim and Jean Strathdee of California, Rev Per Harling of Sweden, Lim Swee Hong of Singapore, Carlton ('Sam') Young of United Methodism in the United States, and I-to Loh of Taiwan.

Their stories illuminate how and why Shirley Erena Murray is regarded as one of the most significant hymnwriters of the twentieth century, carrying the torch of congregational singing into the twenty-first century. One new hymn arising from these friendships will serve as illustration. Shirley sent the Strathdees a text titled 'Where the Green Will Rise Again'. As Jim said, 'It had been around for a few years, and she said, 'It doesn't have a home, you need to give it one'. She would send us stuff from her "bone pile", as she called it – these were often texts that needed redoing'. The tune chosen was the

Strathdee arrangement of 'Wild Mountain Thyme', a Swedish/Irish folksong. Shirley's hymns addressing the environment are central to the roving ministry of Jean and Jim Strathdee.

The coverage of the two Asian hymn writers gives some explanation of why Shirley's hymns appeal to Asian church people. From I-to Loh: 'I have not seen any poet in Asia who has covered such wide and serious issues for social justice, human rights, ecology and peace as Shirley has done. All these issues are also my concerns. I am grateful to Shirley for inspiring me to compose in Taiwanese and Pan-Asian musical styles, to feel God's glory through Asian artistic expressions. Although Shirley was a Caucasian, she was from the Pacific or Oceania, and had much contact with Asians and Maori people. She understood Asian culture and feelings, so most Asians could resonate with her feminine, motherly, introspective yet at times bold, courageous and provocative hymns'.

Part Six titled Shirley's Legacy covers six hymns of special note, illustrating how easily a hymn becomes a sermon. Different writers contribute. The chosen hymns: 'Where mountains rise to open skies', 'Star- Child, Earth- Child', 'Touch the Earth Lightly', 'Who is My Mother?', 'For Everyone Born a Place at the Table', 'Lift High the Cross'.

Anne was able to have a face-to-face interview with Colin Gibson, in March 2021, before his death in December 2022. As Shirley's lifelong and closest collaborative hymn writer, he should have the last word! Colin's contribution to this book is extensive, including a reprint of the eulogy given at the funeral of Shirley Erena Murray, 31 January 2020.

I share three quotations from Anne's interview titled An Instinctive Poet, the opener to Part Five, Working with Shirley:

'One of my great disappointments is that most clergy are profoundly ignorant about matters musical and hymnological. Theological colleges spend their time talking about how to create a sermon - and that's about it. But for consumers or churchgoers, a third of every service is musical. Sadly, there has been little recognition of this in the training of ministers over the years.'

'Shirley's poems were finished in the way a Mozart sonata was finished, completed in her head before written down. Her hymns had that sense of being well thought out, well understood, before being committed to paper.'

‘She is an acquired taste. Young people may grow into her when they are tired of the loud, happy-clappy stuff, when they become more interested in the words they sing.’

And I can hear Colin’s voice in my head!

John Thornley

## BACK to the FUTURE

A journey through 5000+ years of Theology by the Rev Dr Clive Yates. This is the print version of his address to the 2024 SOFiA AGM.

Some say that nothing ever changes in the Christian Church! And, that it is in rapid decline. I merely wish to point out something which may have escaped close attention.

Theology is talk about ‘spiritual’ things and is the formal language of all Religion. It has always been on the move; changing, adapting, discarding, yet continually evolving. This is true today still despite the numerical abandonment of Christianity (in the forms as we have known it). But the claims of terminable ‘decline’ undervalue the undercurrents of ‘spiritual awareness’ which are still present in Western societies. It is this specific, overlooked area of ‘awareness’ which is the basis of this address.

In the distant past, humankind looked at the night sky and were aware of the moon and stars. They were aware of objects and others around them. Thus, awareness grew out of their own self-identity. This was the start of ‘rationality’ as their observation eventually led to looking for similarities and repetitious patterns. Eventually, human minds looked for explanations of these phenomena based upon the possibility that regularity served some rational purpose. Clearly experiences which were pleasant were looked for, and some things were to be avoided. They had ideas of what was ‘good,’ but they also developed fears of bad or ‘evil’ things. Life seemed governed by a repetitive system which they identified with our Solar system, and from that recognition arose the ‘Stonehenge’ calendar and other Neolithic monuments. They measured and established the seasons and also their knowledge of the availability of food sources.

By about 4000 BCE, Egyptians were exploring the ideas of death and provision for their ‘afterlife’, and as a result built these funeral mausoleums we know as the Pyramids to await their future life. Elsewhere, in the Eastern Empires of Babylon and Persia, astronomical observations morphed into Astrological thought patterns predicting ‘Fate’ by the conjunction of these

observed stars. The Persian religion of Zoroastrianism developed a complex dualistic belief system which attempted to explain the notions of 'Good' and 'Evil.' These two concepts were accorded 'Divine' status and called Ahura-Mazda and Ah-Riman: corresponding to good and evil respectively.

Judaism's Exilic period in the East encountered these dualistic concepts and the Jews incorporated the concepts of a 'Creator' and a 'Satan' into their belief system. The Jewish contact with other nations<sup>1</sup> had assisted them in identifying their Tribal peoples as a Nation with ideas of some form of afterlife. This developed into the ambiguous notion of 'Sheol'<sup>2</sup> which was essentially some underground place, gloomy and dark; where the dead who were buried in the 'pit,' resided awaiting judgement. The 'dead' might no longer live active lives, but somehow were still 'alive'! (From this developed a pre-existent idea of 'Resurrection' as a possibility (at least as a concept: --the 'dead' were not actually 'dead & finished & gone' irrevocably.)

Although tinged with Satanic dualism, the 'Sheol' concept informs us that a complex body of ethics aimed at 'sinlessness' was embedded into the Jewish Torah's 'Monotheism.' And so, Jesus and Christianity appear at a time where Judaism finds itself under Roman oppression and exploitation, and Pharisaism has suppressed worship and religion into a rule-based, legalistic 'righteousness'-compliance which could look the other way and tolerate a society where poverty and depression was endemic.

It was to that complex scene that Jesus of Nazareth appeared, lived, taught his followers, and was crucified by the Romans. Today, we have the Masoretic 'Old Testament' writings, as a guide to first Century thought.

The Christian community has been bequeathed the Canon of Scripture determined by Irenaeus of Lyons about 160 CE<sup>3</sup>. What seemed defined has actually become a muddle of textual inaccuracies<sup>4</sup> and mistranslations; to

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<sup>1</sup> "Israel" had been under the successive domination of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and finally Rome

<sup>2</sup> SHEOL: the buried 'dead' were assigned to four areas depending upon the gravity of their 'offence'. These were 'waiting rooms' for their eventual Day of Judgment' with those in the lowest, least pleasant room being continually 'punished' with fire (; i.e. Gehenna.) Interestingly, the Ven. Bede, - in 7thC Northumbria puts this idea forward in his 'History'

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus defined the Christian Writings as today's Bible but NOT 3-John, Philemon, and not Jude.

<sup>4</sup> My recent Readings included a quick look at '**p66**' – a **papyrus manuscript** dating to the late third Century and it was a recent research paper which pointed out that Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary's house after Lazarus's death contained varied permutations of which characters were present apart from Jesus! It was Didymus - a 'Blind scribe who asked the questions because he had heard differing accounts and wanted to be correct. Proof of continued copyist errors etc.

which we have added our denominational distortions. The Constantinian Council of Nicaea essentially solidified doctrine as the Nicene 'Creed'; -- a propositional formula which forms the backbone of today's 'belief' structures with some additions.

Medieval times also added considerably with doctrines concerning child-baptism, and the major fourth century corruption in which Augustine added the new rationale of 'Original Sin'<sup>5</sup> whereby human sexuality itself became 'the Sin' which appeared to explain why 'all were sinners' and conversely 'None were righteous' regardless of any other human activity or strict compliance with the Decalogue.

It took another six centuries before the ambiguity created by the original attempts to explain exactly how Jesus' death on the Cross led to "*the forgiveness of sins*" being granted by the Divinity. To this specific problem, a Norman named Anselm followed Anglo-Saxon logic in seeing 'sin' as an offence which required God's Justice to punish such acts, but instead, to be 'satisfied by a suitable and perfect 'blood' offering or 'atoning sacrifice'. It was said that Jesus allowed himself to be that 'blood sacrifice' upon the cross<sup>6</sup>.

It took other Medieval brains to turn the 'Sin' concept into the idea of Pilgrimages, then into monetary Penances, and ever onwards towards Indulgences and Pardon for payments made into the grasping hands of Clergy. The REFORMATION, already rumbling for some three centuries prior, was almost inevitable. Luther may have dispensed with the previous Theological abuses, but he bequeathed a new mistress, namely *sola fide*, but controlled by *sola scriptura*, ( --hard and fast Biblical authority!).

I have taken the trouble to re-state all this to make you aware that Theology has never been absolutely fixed and, it was capable of 'inadvertent and intentional change through time.' So why is there such resistance today against another Reformation to bring Christianity up to date for today's people<sup>7</sup>?

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<sup>6</sup> Here , I am merely re-stating the interpretation; not arguing that it was correct although ROMANS Ch.3 vs.25. as correctly pointed out in the post-lecture discussion 'appears' to argue for that position. However, a survey of differing translation of the actual Text into English from Greek shows a remarkable set of further interpretations and use of Denominational theological words suiting their doctrinal positions.

<sup>7</sup> The most pressing issue is the absolute control of the Theological training for the Ministry. Instead of diversity of opinion, there is prescriptive regulation and insinuated Fundamentalist thinking. Many years ago, I personally rejected two opportunities to teach in a college here in New Zealand because of the restrictions in place.

In my studies, I have taken note of the American 'Jesus Seminar' of Robert. Funk *et al.* and their efforts to separate 'What Jesus did actually teach?' from the continuing accretions of the first three centuries. Latterly, I owe a debt to the late Bishop Spong who clearly enunciated the problems inhering in present-day Christian dogmatics. His popular writings and the work of others, beginning with Bishop John Robinson's 'Honest to God'; and continuing with the populist Don Cupitt's Investigation of language used in Biblical texts and Religious Rituals<sup>8</sup>. All these books were eagerly sought by many in Church congregations, resulting not in changes, but inertia. They faced determined, dogmatic, strident, counterclaims falling only just short of 'Heresy!' if not legal accusations of 'Blasphemy'. It seemed that the 'faithful, having read them, assumed the final 'word' on religion and theology had been spoken!

Not so! Even Spong recognised the need for change but gave few clues as to the new paths to be followed. He did say it was time to "end de-construction and start re-construction of Christianity ..." compatible with 20<sup>th</sup> Century minds obsessed with scientific 'truths' and distracted by 'worldly' scepticism, status, and dreams of wealth.

However, it is one thing to recite (ad nauseum) the inherent problems: it is another to state firm foundations upon which to reconstruct! I therefore cite two foundation statements. Firstly, leaving aside the miraculous stories, Jesus and his ethical teachings affected the lives of a multitude of people throughout the Roman Empire. The reality of its meaning was more than the mere propositions it came to represent. We can usefully call it 'spiritual awareness' experienced personally. Secondly, people everywhere have always had an inner awareness of 'forces' outside of themselves which seem to act directly on their own consciousness in some way. Let us just stick with these 'experiences' as our accepted and unequivocal principles.

My re-construction starts with the premiss that we must each find God for ourselves. It is in fact that 'awareness' which Jesus recognised, and, from his own Jewish background, drew attention to that recognition. He taught that we should not only respect God as present in life, but we should respect all our neighbours too. In his teachings we are asked to care for others and share with others. Jesus' teachings are the converse of today's individualism; and cult of

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<sup>8</sup> Cupitt Don After God: The Future of Religion, Basic Books, 1997, ISBN 0-465-04514-6



self-gratification, summed up in the old Scot's phrase "*the de'il tak the hinnermost.*"

Considering where to start this Reformation, I suggest we choose what is common to everyone: --we ALL have 'experiences.' We experience gravity, fear, anger, beauty, awe, Music which inspires us, friendship, joy, and hope.

The question arises; "Are these experiences from God?" The true test is one of ethics. Are they helpful or self-harming? When you decide they are the former, then they can be counted as not only Christian, i.e. self-affirming, but real, and to be believed.

So, when I 'experience' or become aware mentally of these 'good' experiences, they confirm me in my Christian journeying. In the words of Martin Luther, "*Here I stand*" and if you adhere to these aspects of Jesus' own teaching of 'Love God and Love your neighbour and your enemies too,' then you too are a Jesus follower (disciple.)

However, this demands that we need do practical things to make Christianity intelligible to this modern age. The 'Mission' is no longer "Get bottoms on Church pews and all will be well!" Christianity and its survival now rest upon us (-no-one else,) becoming agents of our own change! The following paragraphs highlight simple illustrations of where we necessarily need to make these changes.

The WORDS that we choose to use in our worship must be chosen with great care avoiding some of the doctrinal formulations or Terms as these no longer resonate as they may have done in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. References to 'Heaven' or 'up-there' are meaningless nowadays. An anthropocentric Deity somewhere above the cloudy stratosphere no longer resonates with science's Hubble telescope or NASA. Thus, the choice of scripture(s) used should avoid 'talk of Heaven /Hell and 'moralism' which points towards repercussions for either good or bad behaviour! The 'Creation' account in Genesis should be treated as an early attempt to explain Creation and simply placed alongside other hypotheses floated in this modern age about 'Big-Bang' or expanding 'Quantum' Universes.

The use of Prayer and its language ought to be carefully examined. It is one thing to praise the world of nature around us and its store of bounty by way of food and resources. It is right to acknowledge each day and what it brings; but quite another to request and look to invoke some form of aid from a Deity who

no longer operates from a Throne on high dispensing blessings or curses (--for that matter) randomly or intentionally. Some words must have corresponding equivalents, e.g. "Father/Mother"/ God/ Lord; Angels / Holy Spirit. It may be helpful to think of '*Intercessory Prayer*' as a community process which involves ethical thinking of human social care problems, while '*Prayers of Approach*' acknowledge our awareness of the bounty of the hidden forces present in our daily lives and homes.

One point of difficulty foreseen is the need to adapt our traditional 'Ritual' to accommodate some of these proposals. Ritual is necessary, just as 'Orders of Service' and Programmes help us to keep the place. Thus, adaptive change is needed and to be encouraged. All the people present are ministering to each other. This is the most profound change to be undertaken!

**MUSIC and the ARTS** have always played a most useful, didactic role as illustrations, or mood-setting variations. (The Reformers whitewashed Parish churches and stripped them of all visual representations which instructed the populace) Hymns have always been sung as 'Praises.' They have been 'teachers of Theology' as well for many people, writers included. It is to be noted that some Hymn words are now regarded as 'outdated' or expressing dubious theological ideas. Many were written in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century and seem fixated on the 'Redeeming blood'. Some so-called modern hymns express vague ideas not in accord with the directions sought.

What may be needed here is a genuine 'mix' of styles, using classical, modern, and even podcasts (where suitable) to reflect the chosen topic area. These are best used visually. There is no objection to using music's emotional possibilities to enhance the experience of worship. Here there is a vital lesson. The visual illustration not only enhances interest, focus and mental engagement, but is remembered by an audience<sup>9</sup>.

ETHICAL teaching and examples. Suitable stress is to be place on Jesus' 'teachings' especially on interational relationships. This includes 'charity' and the need to aid those truly less fortunate. It follows that topics of ethical interest and involvement are suitable for intercessory Prayers. Constant attention needs be drawn to our own attitudes towards others, like smiling and greetings.

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<sup>9</sup> Recent Research suggests that topic retention is 85% enhanced over the spoken word!

This leads to the most important function or purpose which is to stress and build COMMUNITY and TOGETHERNESS as a corporate act requiring participation at every level. Church has become a Sunday-hour only event for congregations. The stress now must be on acting together corporately in one or more ways in the public domain. We must learn that our passivity of the past occasioned by lengthy Sermons must be replaced with an activism which engages not only complete attention but encourages personal participation. This can be done effectively by use of PowerPoint with visual and short Videos emphasising self-learning through engaging eyes, ears, and minds; not ears only! There must be opportunity for everyday chatting and simple meals without reliance on others to provide hospitality every time.

It will be noted that some of these suggestions are already being explored by more progressive ministries. The biggest change these suggestions involve is to return worship to the people rather than 'experts' and professionals. These may now be outdated in the future!

Rev Dr Clive Yates

Biographical Note: CLIVE YATES earned an Honours Degree in History and Philosophy studying part-time with the Open University. He went on to study Theology and Divinity earning an Honours Degree in Divinity at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. After a Probationers Licencing year in Corby and Shetland with the Church of Scotland, he undertook a further period of original research at St Andrews with a Thesis entitled "***A Demographic and Sociological Analyses of Patterns of Church Membership in the Church of Scotland in the Urban Setting (Dundee.)***", to earn a Doctorate in Philosophy. In 1992 he emigrated to New Zealand and took positions with PCANZ first in Te Kuiti and then in Auckland.

. On his retirement to Gisborne (-far from the maddening crowd), he was Stated Supply Ministry at Gisborne St. Andrews in 2005/6 and then a Supply Minister in Unst, Yell & Fetlar, Shetland in 2006 & 2007. He undertook further Research at Westminster College, Cambridge. In 2014. he was awarded a Scholar in Theology Degree for a Thesis entitled '***Economy with the facts and selective hyperbole: assessing how Bede's account diminished the Irish monastic contribution to Anglo-Saxon Christianity.***'

Since then, he has read widely continuously to keep abreast with progressive thought in the Theological academic world.

## An Introduction to 'The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion'

I use the word 'introduction' advisedly. I think I can accomplish this in one article. A 'review' would take longer and may never be done.

The book is by Tom Wright. He is Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St Andrews. He has written many books, but for the purposes of this article, we mention the series *The Bible for Everyone*, co-written with John Goldingay, as commentaries on the New Testament books. Clearly the writer is not satisfied to write academic texts for colleagues in other ivory towers. He wants to address lay readers, whether

churchgoers or 'outsiders' curious about what contemporary religious teachers might think about the serious questions of the day.

The book is organised into four sections: Introduction, The Stories of Israel, The Revolutionary Rescue (focused on the Gospels and Paul's letters with focus on Romans), and The Revolution Continues (the Holy Spirit and the continuing life of the church).

As a teacher, Wright introduces what each section is about, and then concludes summing up what has been said. If you get lost in the middle – and I certainly did especially in the exposition of Paul's theologising in Romans – you will be enlightened by the closing summaries.

While the subtitle suggests the book is about the Cross as 'atonement', the writer avoids using this word if possible. As he writes: 'I shall use the word sparingly as my argument proceeds...I want to try to promote the focus on the ultimate question, the question has to do with the launch of the revolution. By six in the evening on the first Good Friday, according to the early Christians, the world was a different place. What was different? Why was it different? And how might that revolutionary difference challenge us today, summoning us to our own vocation as followers of the shameful, scandalous crucified Jesus?'

This book is about more than the Cross as 'saving me from my sins so that I can go to heaven', though the writer doesn't dismiss this completely. It is a revolutionary idea! But it demands a much deeper understanding. As suggested in the outline of the four sections, 'atonement' unwraps the history and stories of the Jewish people, offers the insights of the Prophets and the poetry of the Psalms. And that's just the Old Testament. Four gospel writers give a multi-faceted portrait of Jesus' life and teachings, while the gospel of John and writings from Paul lay the theological groundwork to a reasoned Trinitarian faith.

While the scholar John Dominic Crossan gives us a symbolic interpretation of the Cross, Tom Wright argues for a historic basis. Both scholars have shared publications, stating where there is both agreement and disagreement. Or, to put it more kindly, where there is room for further thought and discussion.

In my preparation for lay preaching, I'll find more depth of meanings in this book.

I conclude by quoting some concluding words, which have a poetic ring that strongly appeals: 'We lift up our eyes and realise that when the New

Testament tells us the meaning of the cross, it gives us not a system, but a story; not a theory but a meal and an act of humble service; not a celestial mechanism for punishing sin and taking people up to heaven, but an earthly story of a human Messiah who embodies and incarnates Israel's God and who unveils his glory in bringing his kingdom to earth as in heaven. The Western church – and we've all gone along with this – has been so concerned with getting to heaven, with sin as the problem blocking the way, and therefore with how to remove sin and its punishment, that it has jumped straight to passages in Paul that can be made to serve that purpose. It has forgotten that the gospels are replete with atonement theology, through and through – only they give it to us not as a neat little system, but as a powerful, sprawling, many-sided, richly revelatory narrative in which we are invited to find ourselves, or rather to lose ourselves and to be found again on the other side. We have gone wading in the shallow and stagnant waters of medieval questions and answers, taking care to put on the right footwear and not lose our balance, when only a few yards away is the vast and dangerous ocean of the gospel story, inviting us to plunge in and let the wild waves of dark glory wash us, wash over us, through and through, and land us on the shore of God's new creation.

The message for us, then, is plain. Forget the 'works contract' with an angry, legalistic divinity. Forget the false either/or that plays different 'theories of atonement' against one another. Embrace the 'covenant of vocation' or, rather, be embraced by it as the Creator calls you to a genuine humanness at last, calls and equips you to bear and reflect his images. Celebrate the revolution that happened once and for all when the power of love overcame the love of power. And, in the power of that same love, join in the revolution here and now.'

John Thornley

## Stop Press

### A mighty totara has fallen

We are sad to have to report that Don Cupitt has died aged 90. Virtually all SOFiAns will know that his BBC TV series *The Sea of Faith* from 1984 led to the formation of Sea of Faith networks in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. More about him in the next newsletter. In the meantime, check out

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/24-january/news/uk/don-cupitt-champion-of-non-realist-theology-dies-aged-90#Echobox=1737374486>.

## 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, and/or attend a local group. 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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Copy deadline for the next Newsletter is 1 April.