SOFiA Newsletter 181 December 2025

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

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

The Council of Nicaea (325): Lessons from the 1700th Anniversary

By Dr David Gwynn, Reader in Ancient and Late Antique History, Royal Holloway, University of London. The following is a reprint of the talk he gave at the 2025 AGM.

The Council of Nicaea in 325 – for which 2025 is the 1700th anniversary – is remembered as the first ecumenical council of the Church, its decisions recognised by all branches of Christianity. Above all, the council is remembered for composing the original Nicene creed, which is still used every Sunday in many modern churches.

Actually, this is not precisely true. The original creed composed at Nicaea in 325 is on the handout at the end of this article. Those familiar with the creed used in modern churches will realise they are not quite the same. What is called the “Nicene Creed” used in modern churches is a modified version of the original Nicene creed, and is technically the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381. I will circle back to the need to revise the original Nicene creed towards the end of this paper. But the fame of Nicaea is genuine, and the council was a crucial landmark in Christian history.

To understand why requires a short explanation. I am a historian by profession, and when drawing lessons from past events historical context matters. So, before I turn to consider some of the lessons that the Council of Nicaea offers to modern audiences, a little background is necessary.

One admission needs to be made at the start. We actually know very little about what really happened at Nicaea in 325. There are no Acts recording the debates, unlike for other major councils where we can reconstruct the order of proceedings and even some of the arguments as they unfolded. All we have are a scattered collection of letters and other documents, together with the reports of three eyewitnesses who unfortunately contradict each other. Pulling that evidence together is highly complex. Under "Further Information" below, I have noted a forthcoming book collecting the evidence which I am currently preparing together with two Emeritus Professors and a Syriac language specialist from Leuven! That book is due to appear in December 2025, and provides the research on which this paper is based.

Happily, for my current purposes, most of the academic debates surrounding the Nicene evidence do not concern us here. We do know the key issues debated at Nicaea and the key decisions reached, and a basic outline is not hard to summarise.

The council met in the year 325 in the city of Nicaea in Asia Minor – modern Iznik in Turkey, not far south-east of Istanbul. In 325, the Roman empire was still at almost its greatest extent, spanning from Britain to the Northern Sahara and east towards Mesopotamia and controlling the entire Mediterranean Sea. But Christians were still only a minority group within that empire, perhaps numbering c.10 million in an empire of c.60 million.

Moreover, the status of Christianity had fluctuated drastically in the two decades leading up to Nicaea. In 303 the last attempt by the pagan Roman emperors to crush Christianity began, the Great Persecution. All the clergy who attended the Nicene council lived through that Persecution, and some had been imprisoned or seen colleagues killed. Yet in the years immediately before Nicaea the Church's fortunes had been dramatically transformed. In 312, Constantine became the first Roman emperor to embrace Christianity and offer imperial support to the Church. Originally Constantine only ruled the western half of the empire, but in 324 he conquered the east and united the entire empire under his control. Now all Christians within the empire could

benefit from his patronage, and the Council of Nicaea in 325 thus met at a turning point in Christian history and in the presence of the Christian emperor.

The Christians who had experienced the Great Persecution understandably welcomed the rise of a Christian emperor. Imperial patronage brought increased Christian numbers, prestige and wealth, reflected in elaborate church buildings and bishops able to influence imperial policy. But imperial involvement also intensified debates that were already ongoing across the Church. Christians had always proclaimed their unity in Christ, yet there had also always been differences – in theology, organisation, and style of worship. Constantine promoted unity, but what he discovered when he conquered the Roman east in 324 was that Christians were particularly divided on two crucial issues.

One issue concerned Easter, the most important early Christian festival, and specifically when Easter should be celebrated each year in relation to the Jewish Passover, with different Christian communities following different dating practices. The other and still more complex issue concerned the theological relationship between the Father and the Son, and how to reconcile the Christian belief in one God with the divine Trinity. All Christians agreed that the Son was in some sense divine, but how could the Son's divinity be expressed without either separating the Son as a second God or blurring the identities of Father and Son? This theological debate became known in Christian tradition as the "Arian Controversy", as it began with a dispute in Alexandria between the presbyter Arius and his bishop Alexander and then spread across the eastern Church.

Both these issues were of fundamental importance to Christianity, and both had caused increasing conflict in the years before Constantine unified the empire. Constantine also wanted a united Church, but he recognised that these were not debates that he could resolve alone. His solution was to summon a great council, the largest gathering in Church history down to that point and the most representative Christian assembly since the apostolic council of Jerusalem.

The traditional number of bishops present at Nicaea was 318, but this was a later figure taken from the number of Abraham's servants in Genesis and the real number was around 250. The council was not in fact truly "ecumenical" (literally worldwide, and really meaning across the Roman empire). Only a few clergy came from the west – one bishop from Spain, one from North Africa,

and 2 presbyters representing the bishop of Rome. There was also a bishop from the Persian empire further east. But the vast majority were Greek-speaking bishops from the eastern Mediterranean.

The council began in late May 325 and ended in early July. Each of the major issues was debated in turn, and the council issued a series of decisions – the original Nicene creed, an Easter decree, and 20 canons on questions of discipline (one question not apparently discussed was the canon of scripture which was broadly agreed by 325 although with ongoing debates notably concerning the Catholic Epistles and Revelation). Their work complete, the council ended with an imperial banquet which one eyewitness compared to an image of the kingdom of Christ.

The Council of Nicaea was without question one of the most remarkable events in Constantine's reign and a landmark in Church history. But – as you have probably realised – the story is not as simple as I have outlined nor was Nicaea as successful as Constantine believed. The council and its aftermath raised a series of issues that are still highly relevant to religious and political debates today, and I want to highlight a few of those themes here.

1. One core issue Nicaea raises is how to resolve disputes – who should have the authority to decide on questions which divide a religious community, particularly on questions leading to conflict and potentially open violence? This is an issue that every major religion has faced with the passing of its original leaders – Christ and the apostles, Buddha, or Muhammad. In theory, Christianity can appeal to scripture, which all recognised as authoritative. But on major questions, as at Nicaea, scripture does not provide definitive answers. The key term included in the original Nicene creed, that the Son was *homoousios* (consubstantial or of one essence) with the Father, came from Greek philosophy and has no scriptural basis.

One alternative when disputes are raging is simply to let people argue. This was in fact Constantine's first reaction when he heard about the theological debates, writing to Arius and Alexander and asking why they could not agree to disagree like philosophers did. But inaction is difficult when the debates are leading to social disruption, and particularly so for a religion like Christianity which emphasises a single truth. The Council of Nicaea was a remarkable attempt to gather as many bishops together as possible and so settle the argument by a public consensus. But even then the council could never be fully representative, and those in attendance disagreed on what the decisions

meant including the theology of the creed. The council was also led by bishops, with lay voices absent from our evidence, with the sole exception of emperor Constantine.

2. A second issue raised by Nicaea, which flows directly from the question of authority, is the relationship between religious debates and wider government, or in Christians terms Church and State. This is not a simple division between sacred and secular as the government often holds its own religious views, which was certainly true of the emperor at Nicaea. Constantine was a committed Christian (although only baptised shortly before his death in 337) who believed strongly that uniting Christians was a political goal and his spiritual duty.

But involving imperial power inevitably changed the nature of Christian debates. Imperial patronage made a gathering the size of Nicaea possible (the bishops travelled to the council using the imperial postal system, which Constantine placed at their disposal). And it was Constantine who legally enforced the council's decisions and sent Arius, whose teachings were condemned at Nicaea, into exile.

Constantine wanted unity and favoured those prepared to compromise over more extreme viewpoints. Strikingly, however, the emperor did not attempt to impose his own judgements on Nicaea. He repeatedly insisted that it was the bishops who had to decide, and hailed the verdict of the council as divine judgement. The relationship between Constantine and the bishops thus worked in both directions, and set a precedent that would be followed to varying degrees in subsequent centuries. Direct conflict between Church and State was not the solution, and here Nicaea does offer a valuable model.

3. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly in our modern climate, the debates surrounding Nicaea highlight the tension between the ideal of unity and the reality of difference, and where we might seek a middle ground.

Unity was a central theme at Nicaea. All bishops had to sign the creed, even though it was widely agreed that the divine mystery surpassed human understanding. All churches were instructed to celebrate Easter on the same day, as Constantine insisted in his letter after the council (a passage from which is quoted on the handout). And the disciplinary canons laid down the need for uniform practices, with the final canon (quoted in full on the handout) requiring all to pray standing.

For Christianity, unity was unquestionably important both spiritually and in the historical context of Nicaea. The Church's unity as the body of Christ is a core theme from the New Testament texts onwards, just as Constantine saw unity as essential to secure divine favour. And at a time when Christians were still a minority within the Roman empire, unity was vital in holding the religion together. A repeated argument in the Nicene documents is the fear that Christian divisions will make non-Christians laugh and discourage potential converts.

But unity comes at a price. The Council of Nicaea was part of a wider process which saw Christianity increasingly tightly defined, a process which accelerated from Constantine onwards. Yet defining what was acceptable also meant hardening the lines, with less scope for innovation and greater condemnation of those who were excluded. After all, it has always been easier to define what one rejects than exactly what one believes.

Thus the original Nicene creed included anathemas against views which were no longer acceptable. Arius became remembered as one of the greatest enemies of Christianity, and attributed with a range of erroneous views many of which he never held (most famously that he denied that the Son was divine at all). His writings were ordered burnt, which is why few survive. Many of the actions against Arius were then repeated against later figures condemned as heretics, and the entire approach focuses on condemnation rather than conciliation – much like most political rhetoric today.

Finally, there is one last lesson I would like to suggest could be taken from the Council of Nicaea. Judged by the aim of achieving unity, the Council of Nicaea failed! Short term unanimity was achieved, partly by exiling anyone who refused to agree. But long term, the differences remained. Christians continued to pray in varying ways, as they still do today. Easter is still celebrated on different dates, notably between the western and Orthodox churches. And the theological debates over the relationship between Father and Son continued. 50 years after Nicaea, a Christian writer in Constantinople wrote about his experiences in the city:

"If you desire someone to change a piece of silver, he philosophizes about the Begotten and the Unbegotten. If you ask the price of a loaf of bread, you are told by way of reply that the Father is greater and the Son is subordinate. If you enquire whether the bath is ready, the answer is that the Son was made

out of nothing" (Gregory of Nyssa). Those are all theological doctrines that were under debate in 325.

This is not to suggest that the Council of Nicaea did not matter. It was a remarkable gathering that happened at a crucial time for Christianity. But the council was not the beginning or end of debates. To return to the point I raised at the beginning, the reason that the Nicene Creed was reworked in 381 into the form widely used today is that it took another 50 years of debate after Nicaea to agree on what the creed should mean. And that debate was not decided by bishops in council, or by emperors passing laws. It was wider discussion across the Christian communities in both east and west which led to a gradual consensus. There could be a lesson there that some modern religious and political leaders might benefit from learning.

Further Information

David M. Gwynn, Richard Price, and Michael Whitby, with Philip Michael Forness, *Documents of the Early 'Arian' Controversy and the Council of Nicaea* (Liverpool University Press, 2025)

Young Richard Kim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea* (Cambridge University Press, 2021)

https://www.fourthcentury.com/documents-of-the-early-arian-controversy

Also by David M. Gwynn

Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father (Oxford University Press, 2012)

Christianity in the Later Roman Empire: A Sourcebook (Bloomsbury, 2014)

and D. Brakke, *The* Festal Letters *of Athanasius of Alexandria, with the* Festal Index *and the* Historia Acephala (Liverpool University Press, 2022)

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA (325)

The Original Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, Father, Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten from the Father as only-begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father, through whom all things came into being, both those on heaven and those on earth, who for us men and for our salvation

came down, was incarnate and became man, suffered, and rose on the third day, ascended into heaven, and is coming to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Spirit. Those who say, 'There was once when he was not', and 'Before being begotten he was not', and that 'He came into being out of nothing', or assert that the Son of God is from another subsistence or essence, or is changeable or mutable, the catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.

Canon 20 of Nicaea

While some bend the knee on Sundays and during Pentecost, the holy council, in order that all things may be observed in the same way in every diocese, decrees that prayers are to be offered to the Lord standing.

Constantine, Letter to the Churches after Nicaea

When as many as possible had gathered together (and I myself was present as if one among them, for I would not deny something about which I am especially happy, that I was your fellow-servant) every matter received a proper examination to the point where a doctrine pleasing to God who supervises all things was brought to light for agreement in unity, in such a way that no scope was left thereafter for dissent or controversy over the faith.

There was also a discussion about the most holy day of Easter, and it was resolved by common consent that everyone everywhere should celebrate on one and the same day. For what could be better for us and what more hallowed than that this feast, from which we derive our hope of immortality, should be observed by all without fail in a single rule and with a clear rationale?

As It Was in the Beginning (of the Jesus Way) Part 2

Walking forward looking back . . .

Maori have a proverb *Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua*: *Muri*, backward; *mua*, forward. So "I walk backwards into the future, with my eyes fixed on the past." For Maori, past, present and future are intertwined, so you look to the wisdom of the past as you move into new situations and challenges.

Ideally that's what should also be true of the churches, looking back to gain inspiration to move forwards. But all too often in their institutional life they look back and get stuck there. And they're all too sluggish in recognising that while they are faithfully preserving their institutional traditions the world has changed around them. In the past 400 years a huge expansion of knowledge in

physics, geology, astronomy, biology, anthropology, psychology – our whole basic understanding of nature and of life itself – demands a wholesale rethinking of faith and its place in the life of the world.

Given all that, how do we move forward?

First, in line with the Maori proverb, we'll look back. Right back. Back beyond when most of us grew up within our own denomination, back beyond Wesley and Knox and Henry VIII, back beyond Luther and the Reformation, back beyond the high days of Christendom in the Middle Ages, back beyond Constantine when the newly universal church gradually took on the trappings of a fading Roman Empire, back beyond the bitter doctrinal wars of the 3rd and 4th centuries, right back to the earliest years of the Jesus movement – or rather Jesus movements – that sprang up in the light of Jesus' life and ministry, his death and the resurrection experiences of his earliest Jewish followers. In other words, *After Jesus, Before Christianity.*

That's the title of a book produced by 22 scholars of the Westar Institute in the US after combing through everything they could find relating to the first 200 years of the Christian era. I want to pick up a few salient points from the book to reflect on. It would help if you approached this by doing three simple things:

Turn down the volume of your logical left brain;

Dial up the energy of your imaginative right brain;

And make a real imaginative effort to enter into the minds of those very first people who had known Jesus and found themselves re-orienting their lives around him. That's going to be tricky, so here are a few aids from *After Jesus, Before Christianity.*

■ First, you are Jews thoroughly immersed in your Jewish faith, and you interpret your whole experience of Jesus in light of your Jewish heritage. That doesn't make you Christians – you're good Jews, it's just that you've begun to see Jesus as fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, and you're teasing out the implications of that for your own life and your Jewish religious community. It was much later, after Rome destroyed the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70, that rabbinic Jews and the Jesus faction drifted further and further apart, and in time their ways parted.

■ Second, you get together in small groups in homes or shops or wherever you can, to focus on the meaning of Jesus for you. It's just one of many similar

groups, clubs, communities, gatherings – but in those early years you certainly don't think of yourselves as "churches". You have no scriptures beyond the Old Testament, no shared creed or hierarchy to organise you. Every group is doing its own thing in its own way.

■ Third, you're aware all the time that you live under the domination of the Roman empire and its supreme god, the emperor. As Jews you're allowed a degree of freedom in your religion as long as you toe Rome's political line, but it grates that the emperor is being proclaimed as Son of God, Saviour of the world, Lord, Redeemer, harbinger of peace. As a good Jew you mutter "Not for me!", and you're building an alternative model inspired by Jesus.

■ You don't call yourselves "Christian" – that didn't come till much later. So what do you call yourselves? The answer tells us a lot about where the emphasis lay. You and your friends use labels centring on Jesus as the Anointed One, that is the one who is their messiah, and in your Jewish tradition the messiah is associated with high priests, prophets and kings. So in these early days you call yourselves Believers of the Anointed One, Friends of the Anointed One, Sisters and Brothers of the Anointed One, Confidants of the Anointed One or in Greek, of the Christ. And when you think of Jesus as the messiah or Christ, you are actually challenging a central tenet of the Roman empire. You're saying Jesus the Christ, not the emperor, is king in the *basileia* or kingship of God. He, not the emperor, is Saviour of the world, Son of God, and all the rest. A very different kind of rule, obviously, but you have chosen to be sisters and brothers of the Anointed One. Politically, that's subversive stuff.

■ But what do you and your friends do when they meet? You remember Jesus, what he said, what he did. You talk about connections you see between him and key events, concepts, people, symbols, festivals in your Jewish religious heritage. You mull over the cruel horror of his death. You find it appropriate to draw Jesus into the way you worship God. In our own day many people have sidelined or even dismissed terms like messiah or Christ because of all the supernatural barnacles that have attached to them in later centuries. But if we're to enter into the imaginations of people living after Jesus, before Christianity, we have to find a way to re-engage with them, only in a manner more appropriate to our time.

■ A central feature of the gatherings you attend is that when you meet, you eat together. You share a meal and conversation in a space where everyone is

treated as equals and with dignity and respect, man and woman, rich and poor, artisan and peasant, young and old.

■ Occasionally you may bathe together in the manner of the day. Rome had built public baths where people could do that. They're venues not only for bathing but also for socialising. The Greek word for bathe is *baptizo*. In time baptism became a ritual where you become a full part of a Jesus community, and bathing was central to it.

In *After Jesus, Before Christianity* the scholars paint a detailed picture of what life was like for "the party of the Anointed One". But they do very little to explain why and how they became so gripped by this new Jesus strand in the Jewish religious experience. To my mind it's the pivotal question: What exactly was it that impelled them to make Jesus central, vital, to their faith experience?

What now?

I'll sketch three possible explanations for you to consider. There've been many more out there, but these three are current today:

■ They experienced the power of the presence of the human Jesus among them, even after his death. They felt they had somehow inherited his Spirit, and somehow his Spirit was also God's Spirit. For them he was everything that the Jews had ever hoped and prayed for, and they determined to follow his Way.

That's the conclusion of a South African Catholic priest, Albert Nolan, in a book called *Jesus Before Christianity.* Nolan says, and I quote: "The faith which Jesus awakens in us is at the same time faith in him and faith in his divinity. This was the experience of Jesus' followers. This was the kind of impact he had on them." I was struck that in in his final chapter he doesn't once mention Christ. That departs from the experience of those earliest followers. They were "the party of the Anointed One", the party of Christ.

■ The second living option is the one that took centre stage in later centuries as the imagination of the church honoured and glorified the significance of Jesus. In creeds, doctrines and the way many people thought of him his divinity waxed and his humanity waned till Jesus and God became pretty much identical, the ultimate supernatural entity. Jesus and Christ fused into interchangeable terms, talk of one and it's assumed you're talking about the other.

I once asked Shirley Murray how she decided which word to use in her hymns, and she said when she needed two syllables, she used Jesus, when only one syllable Christ. Sorry Shirley, there's a bit more to it than that. Paul is sometimes accused of being responsible for this exaltation of a divine Christ at the expense of the human Jesus, but that is to misread him.

■ In our own day, a reversal has been taking place – this is the third option. The Christ has been downplayed or even dismissed (except where a single syllable is needed in a hymn), and the human Jesus has been disinterred – you could say resurrected – to become the prime focus of theological interest, as with the Jesus Seminar.

But also in our own day a brand-new tool for exploring faith has been delivered unto us, in the seminal psychology of Carl Jung.

For him, religion has its rightful place within the psychic reality of the right brain. That reality carries the currency of dreams, myths and symbols, and those symbols have power. They channel psychic energy. For Jung God is not real in the way we usually use the term, yet is certainly "for real": God or Godness is experienced in the brain as a source and symbol of totality, of the interconnectedness of all that is, imprinted deep in the psyche. God is one of those symbolic images or patterns or dramas experienced in cultures all round the world, and taking shape in myths.

There are other universal images, such as the mother, the father, the hero, the jester, each in Jungian language an archetype of a quality or character that affects us. And for Christians, I suggest, it's Christ, who figures as the inner dynamic of Christian experience, just as the Buddha within is the inner dynamic of Buddhism. Two thousand years earlier Paul latched on to the same basic idea with his concept of Christ as the archetype of love, grace and transformation – "Christ in you and you in Christ," he says. It would be going too far to call him the first Jungian, but in this regard he foreshadows what Jung was on about.

So Paul takes us squarely back into the first two centuries and, as I see it, into the experience of those belonging to "the party of the Anointed One". I'm going to be provocative and suggest that their pivotal experience was not of Jesus as a supremely good man, a clever teacher, a wise sage, a moral guide, true as all those are. It was of resurrection – not of the human Jesus, but of the Christ as archetype of love, grace and transformation, gathering up all that

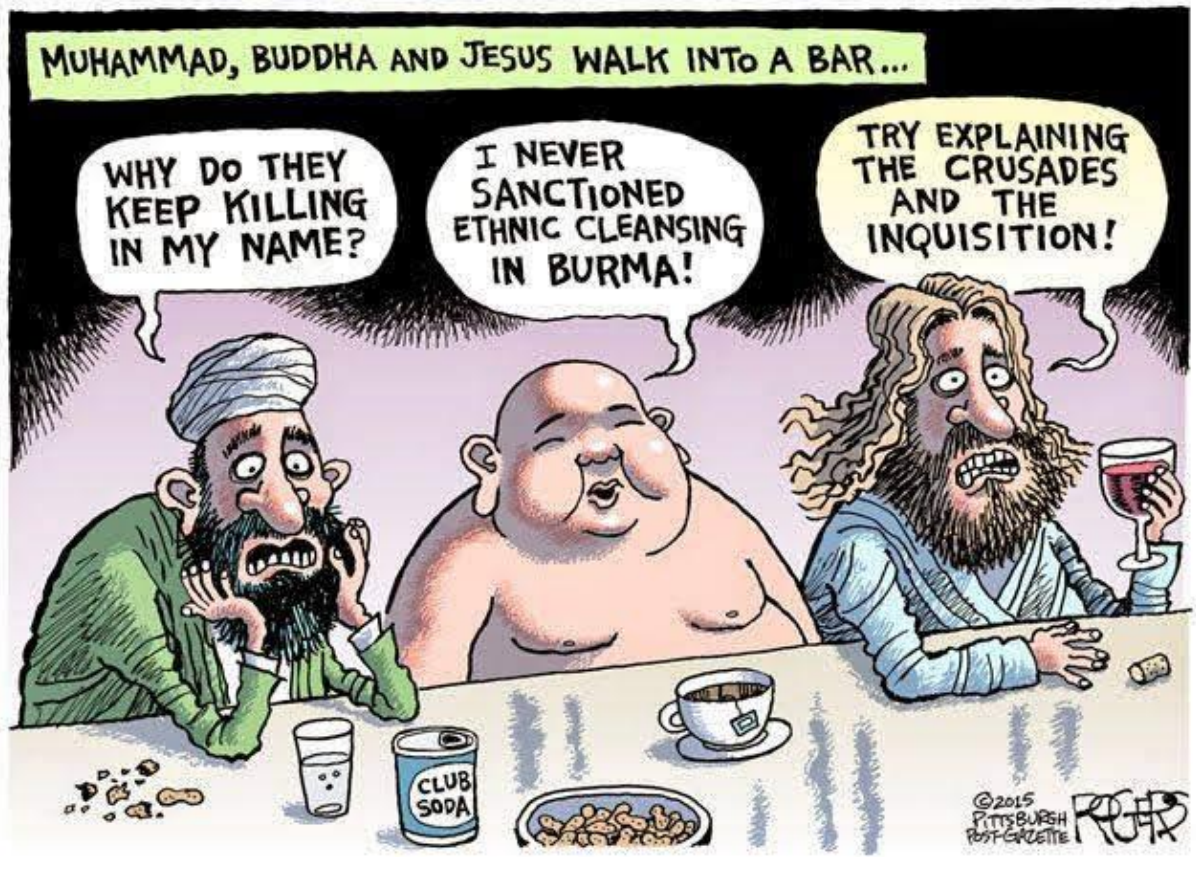
Jesus meant to them, but now a dynamic within, a dynamic to live out in daily life.

That's what excited them. That's what they carried into their synagogues as they proclaimed Jesus as the Christ, fulfilment of the promise of their Jewish scriptures. That's what held them steadfast in their faith. That's what Paul was on about.

And as Jung has shown, the experience is completely valid in a modern psychological understanding, without recourse to anything supernatural. And it all takes place within the human brain.

Ian Harris

To conclude, some light relief…



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 February.