

SOFiA Newsletter 186 October 2026

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



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

Evangelical Christianity is often monotonous and one-dimensional. You are to be convicted of sin and then you accept Jesus Christ as your lord and saviour. A group of young people addressed a Presbyterian General Assembly and has just that as its message. Even though the assembled pastors and elders, all are long-standing Christians with years of service in the church. It's a refreshing contrast to hear of a very different **path to Christianity in Communist Russia**.

Shirley Murray and Colin Gibson are both well-known hymnwriters but sadly no longer with us. John Thornley reports on conversations with them on the theology underlying their hymns, thanks to a special permission allowing heaven access to us here on earth.

Mary Oliver was an American poet with a message about the importance of nature. Jim Burklo/John Thornley goes so far as to call this a gospel.

In the 60s, German theologians were highly regarded, with Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Buber and Tillich top of the rankings. Nowadays not so much, but here are some provocative thoughts from **Eugen Drewermann**, a German theologian of a later generation.

Join our Zoom-based **AGM** on Saturday 17 October at 2 pm to hear Robert Gibb, a retired environmental scientist and modeller, speak on “**Season of Creation -Reflections on Climate Disruption as we head to an Election.**”

Meeting ID: 814 9377 6672. Passcode: sofia.

The Editor

Becoming a Christian in Communist Russia

One of the treasures I brought back with me from Germany is a little book entitled *Talking about God is Dangerous: My Experiences in the East and in the West* My version is in German from 1984. Unfortunately, the book hasn't been reprinted, so you can get a used paperback version for a mere \$NZ256.

Tatiana Goricheva's path to Christianity was nothing like yours and mine and also nothing like that of evangelical and charismatic Christians. A large part of the attraction that this book has for me is the fact that the author became a Christian in a radically different way.

Tatiana (1947-2025) was born in a land from which the traditional values of culture, religion and morality had been deliberately and successfully eradicated. Although she was baptized as an infant, her parents, as conforming citizens of Communist Russia, had nothing to do with the church.

Her first step as an intellectual with a great future, was an enthusiasm for the philosophy of Heidegger. The next step was an engagement with Yoga. Goricheva tried to exercise yoga with enthusiasm in Eastern philosophies in order to free herself from her reality. She wrote that yogic practice helped her to be more focused toward herself and allowed her to escape from a dreary conformity to the reality of a Communist state.

In a little handbook of yoga exercises was a suggestion, as an exercise in meditation, to recite the Lord's prayer. This she did and somehow it became a transforming experience, leading her to make contact with the Orthodox church, about which she knew practically nothing.

The book opens with a scene in which she is being questioned by the KGB. From previous encounters she was suspicious of their attempts to get her to talk about her life; the result was likely to be getting her to unintentionally reveal something. So she refused to answer any questions at all, to the total bewilderment and distress of her parents. As a result, she lost her post as a lecturer in Philosophy after only two months. The only employment left to her was as a lift attendant, the lowliest job of all. The communist regime was brutal towards anyone who did not conform to their system.

She writes,

" I was on a journey from nowhere to nowhere: I had no roots and would go into an empty, meaningless future.

During my childhood I had a friend who committed suicide at the age of fifteen because she could no longer bear everything around her. She died and left a note, 'I am a very bad person' — and yet she was someone with an unusually pure heart, who could not bear other people telling lies and could not tell lies herself. This girl committed suicide because she felt that she was not living as she should and that at some point one had to pierce through the surrounding emptiness and find light. But she could not find the way. My girl friend was too profound, and an extraordinarily conscientious person for her age; she understood that she too had a share of responsibility."

She was converted in 1972. About this, she writes that her sudden conversion changed her total viewpoint as well as her whole life. As was mentioned earlier, she suffered from a lack of love toward others, harbored immense bitterness, and led a nihilistic way of life in order to somehow resist the governmental ideology and understanding of life. She also says that her education instilled in her a sense of being in competition with others and needing to excel. She writes:

"And school only encouraged our external 'competitive' qualities. Praise at school is for those who can work better and higher, who 'distinguish' themselves in some way. That served further to consolidate my pride and bring it to full bloom. My aim was to be cleverer, more capable, and stronger than the others. But no one had told me that the supreme thing in life is not to overtake and to get the better of others, but to love."

Shortly thereafter, she was influential in setting up a feminist women's group, the Maria Club as well as a seminar that would deal with religious and philosophical themes. What concerned the other leader of the seminar (Sergei Stratonovskii), was a cultural problem. He could not understand how religion had always been the beginning of European culture and its breeding ground, so that the word 'culture' is itself derived from the word 'cult.' Sergei proposed that the seminar study the church fathers and contemporary theologians, even though he himself was not a Christian.

One of her first tasks was to go to confession. A friend of hers tells how she went to confession with an old priest. "Have you been involved with sorcery?" "Yes" she says, as she had taken part in seances. "Have you stolen?" "Yes" she says, as she once, as a child, stole a jar of jam. Have you murdered." "Yes" she says, as she had had an abortion. Now the pious old women, waiting in the

queue for confession, shake their heads and murmur disapprovingly. The priest can't believe what he is hearing; he has no idea that he is dealing with a recent convert. She writes,

"The high level of demands in Orthodox faith is connected with its extraordinary flexibility and its gentleness towards human beings. How can this contradiction be resolved? Only through love. This specific, wise love in our pastor, who is endowed with grace to give us freedom."

There weren't enough priests to go around, but Father Leonid suggested that he could become their pastor. During the Khrushchev era, in which many priests were brutally persecuted, the KGB asked him to give up the priesthood. "Only a few old women come to church nowadays and in a few years they will have died out."

10 years later, young people were joining the church again; intellectuals, artists, writers, scientists and philosophers.

Tatiana was also deeply impressed by the Orthodox liturgy.

"I was utterly overcome by the Liturgy, by the beauty of the Orthodox celebration. The more I discovered Liturgy, the less I wanted to leave church after the service had ended; it seemed to me that I that I was leaving Paradise to rejoin Hell. I was caught up by all this, not because of the aesthetic beauty, but because it penetrated deeply into me — to the level of my very being, so to speak, and not to some superficial level."

The result of her conversion and experiences of confession and liturgy was as follows:

"Finally my heart was also open. I began to love people. I could understand their suffering and also their lofty destiny. That they are in the image of God. Immediately after my conversion everyone simply seemed to me to be a miraculous inhabitant of heaven, and I could not wait to do good and to serve human beings and God."

Exasperated by her refusal to conform to the Soviet system, the authorities gave her the alternative of imprisonment or exile. Encouraged by Father Leonid, she chose exile in the West. When she heard her first religious programme, she concluded that it's not only in Marxist countries that it is dangerous to speak of God; the speaker nowhere referred to God for fear of

putting people off. Talk of God is also dangerous in the West and leads people to talk superficially and externally of the divine.

The book dates from the very beginning of her time in the West. After then, she graduated from the St George Catholic Institute in Frankfurt and then from the St Sergius Orthodox Institute in Paris.

You would think that going to the West would be simply wonderful. In Russia, she lived with the continual threats of being bundled into a car and taken goodness knows where, being locked up in prison, or being confined to a mental hospital.

And indeed, when she gave talks in the West, it was to a large, appreciative audience. But she found the much-vaunted freedom of the West comes with its own spiritual vacuity. She characterized it as 'post-nihilistic' in its deep, conventional indifference to religion and the sacred. The capitalistic west has replaced spiritual reality with 'hyperrealities' like banks and stock exchanges and a superficial new 'liturgy' where supermarkets and daily consumer rituals become the new, empty sacred spaces. Her perspective as an 'outsider' can help us to see ourselves with new eyes.

See also:

Why did Tatiana Goricheva Return to and Believe in God.

<https://share.google/lwluoan45b3G3AbPQ>

Laurie Chisholm

Post-death Interviews with Shirley Erena Murray and Colin Gibson

Gillian and John Thornley, hosts for the weekly radio programme of Wesley Broadway, Palmerston North, using the studios of the Manawatu Peoples Radio (MPR), held conversations with the late and great hymnwriters of Aotearoa New Zealand. It was quite a rare and unique 'one-off' occasion. Heaven doesn't often open its door to allow temporary visas to earth.

The partnership between the local Methodist church and Manawatu Peoples Radio has many programmes of hymns by Shirley and Colin on its database. These two post-death interviews were something different! In the

course of the interviews, light is shed on the theology of Shirley and Colin, and a sample of the writer's hymns available on CD recordings was shared.

But first, here's three quotes from the interviews, highlighting the unusual angle of the programme:

Interviewer: How does it feel to attend your post-resurrection interview?

Shirley: Great. One gets a wider, bigger audience post-death.

Interviewer: Colin, do you recall your hymn 'Fancy Noah sailing in the Ark?'

Colin: Sure enough. When Shirley and I want to recall good times on earth, we sit aside each other in our heavenly home, and quietly sing it through.

Interviewer: It's a hymn that gets my foot tapping, and encouraging me to get up and dance around. Can you do that in heaven, Colin?

Colin: A holy dance is totally acceptable. Noah might like to join in, if he's not too busy looking after the animals.

Interviewer: Colin, let's talk about your traditional hymn 'Praise the All-Sustaining Word'.

Colin: I remember it well. Not only did it appear in our collection *Hope is our Song* but also in a Cantata titled 'The Spirit Within'. Singers of Wellington performed it in Wesley Church on Taranaki Street, Wellington. I'd glad the church folk have kept the pohutukawa trees. From our heavenly home we can see their blazing red flowers.

Interviewer: A post-earthly life gives the hymnwriters more opportunity to reflect on the deeper meanings in their hymns. They can talk about their theology. We'll quote a reflection for each writer.

First, from Shirley:

Interviewer: I asked you about your use of the word 'body' in relation to 'God', 'Church', 'World'. Did the body of Christ refer to the 'Church' or the 'World'?

Shirley: I can easily recall my words. That's heavenly power at work for my listeners. My meaning was certainly in 'the world' as the 'body of Christ'. Since you have picked me up on this, I'll try to explain what I mean in terms of my hymnwriting. For a start it has to be with the parameters of reality being defined by the World, not the Church, in the broadest sense. I suppose I grew up believing that the Church tells you what the World is. That is, Church as

‘good’, the World as ‘evil’. The world has to be brought into the church in order to ‘save’ it. Now I live in a world where all the parameters are being pushed out. Hymns convey the Church’s theology in a very profound way. People remember hymns much better than sermons because they sing them and the singing engraves them in memory. Hymn liturgy is probably more important than church membership classes, the creeds, the manuals, the confessions of faith.

Second, from Colin

Interviewer: Your hymn goes further than a dance track, Colin. Tell the listeners a little about its origins.

Colin: The song became popular at an annual Methodist Church conference in Christchurch 1996. I wrote these words to go beyond Noah and the rainbow story. While the narrative of the hymn is biblically based, its theme is the joyous unqualified acceptance of all humanity before the face of God. The vision it offers is of a rainbow world populated by rainbow people of every kind of ‘colour’, including by implication, every kind of sexual orientation. The rainbow is both the symbol of God’s covenant with all life on earth and the adopted sign of the movement for equality for gay people within and outside the church.

And finally, the music.

A radio programme or podcast shares recordings of our expansion of New Zealand hymns since the 1960s. Four collections were published between 1996 and 2009: *Alleluia Aoteroa*, *Carol our Christmas*, *Faith Forever Singing* and *Hope is our Song*.

Three hymns appear on the Interview with Shirley Murray: ‘God of the Galaxies spinning in space’, a carol ‘Set the sun dancing. New life has begun’ and ‘Loving Spirit’.

Three hymns appear on the Interview with Colin Gibson: ‘These Hills’, ‘Praise the All-Sustaining Word’, ‘Fancy Noah Sailing in the Ark’.

For a secular radio station Manawatu Peoples Radio would hold the largest database of New Zealand hymns than any of the other eleven community radio station. Their collection even includes the twenty-four tracks from the 1999 Songs of Praise from Aotearoa, fronted by Graeme Thomson – sadly no longer

on the airwaves. The Wesley Broadway programme is played on other community radio stations.

Note

In the Manawatu, Wesley Broadway's half-hour programme airs live each Tuesday and Saturday at 11 o'clock on AM Frequency 999.

Online: mpr.nz/show/wesley

For copies of hymns (music and words), in print/CD/digital formats, contact Philip and Heather Garside Publishing: www.pgpl.co.nz.

John Thornley

The Gospel of Mary Oliver (1935 – 2019) – a documentary film

This article is a review by Rev Jim Burklo on a recent website article circulated early August. Mary Oliver was a mystic poet and lover of nature. The title of the film, *Saved by the beauty of the world*, is a line from one of her poems. Utube will download this film. In the following article the writer will use Roman typeface for Jim Burklo's words and italicised typeface for the words of Mary Oliver. Subheadings will highlight the different sections.

Introduction

Mary Oliver died in 2019, her passing hastened no doubt by her long addictions to cigarettes and alcohol. She did not fit the stereotypes of sainthood. After her long time partner died she attended an Episcopal church in Provincetown on Cape Cod for a while – but her friends said the main reason she went was because she had the hots for the woman who was the priest! She wasn't religious in any format sense.

Mary Oliver once said 'attention is the beginning of devotion'. In the little poem, 'Instructions for beginning a life' she wrote 'Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.' That's the gospel of Mary Oliver in three short sentences. Here's three verses of a poem.

Poem: Mockingbirds

This morning
two mockingbirds
In the green field
were spinning and tossing

the white ribbons
of their songs
into the air
I had nothing

better to do
than listen
I mean this
seriously

Be Attentive

Those among us with infirmities and limitations that make us useless as cogs in the great Machine of production and consumption still have the supreme ability to be attentive. To watch, to appreciate, to notice. This is what makes us the crowns of creation – that, as Mary Oliver wrote , we have nothing better to do than stare at mockingbirds. Appreciatively listening to mockingbirds is why we are here. It is what we are for. It is the meaning of our lives. It is the culmination of the evolution of consciousness in the universal! Seriously, do we ever have something better to do than listen?

Quotations from three Poems

Black Oaks

For there I am, in the mossy shadows, under the trees.
And to tell the truth I don't want to let go of the wrists
of idleness. I don't want to sell my life for money.
I don't even want to come in out of the rain.

The Sun

Do you think there is anywhere
in any language
a word billowing enough
for the pleasure

that fills you
as the sun
reaches out
as it warms you

as you stand there,
empty-handed -
or have you too
turned from this world –

or have you too
gone crazy
for power
for things?

Row for your life

You are young. So you know everything. You leap into the boat and begin rowing. But listen to me. Without fanfare, without embarrassment, without any doubt. I talk directly to your soul. Listen to me. Lift the oars from the water, let your arms rest, and your heart and heart's little intelligence, and listen to me. There is life without love. It is not worth a bent penny or a scuffed shoe. It is not worth the body of a dead dog nine days unburied. When you hear, a mile away and still out of sight, the churn of the water as it begins to swirl and roil, fretting around the sharp rocks- when you hear that unmistakable pounding- when you feel the mist on your mouth and sense ahead the embattlement, the long falls plunging and steaming –then row, row for your life toward it.

The poem could have been an abbot's advice imparted to a young monk, thirsty for union with the Divine, in a stone hut in the Egyptian desert in the fourth century. The boat isn't just for rowing, it is for sitting and contemplating, attending to the water's flow – and only then, at full speed, rowing toward the sound of the water churning, falling in love with the mist in your mouth, falling in love with steam, taking the plunge of love.

Summing Up

The documentary of her life reveals that for most of her years, Mary Oliver succeeded in not selling her life for money and, as a result, she had hardly any of it. She tried hard to break into the literary world. Her biggest problem was the fact that her writing was so readable, so relatable for most people. I get the *New Yorker* magazine, and every now and again it will run a poem that makes sense to me, but most of its poetry is so obscure in reference and structure that I'm left cold. It's for insiders. Mary Oliver infuriated the literary establishment by becoming so popular. But once she came into fame, those protestations fell on deaf ears. She was and remains one of the most important literary figures, she didn't want to come in out of the rain, she didn't go crazy for power, for things, and we're better for it. She went into the woods and saved the only life she could save by attending deeply to the lives of birds and fish and foxes. In the quietude of the forest she could begin to hear her own inner voice. Her relationship with nature made possible her relationship with herself.

Note on Rev. Jim Burklo: - lecturer in the University of Southern California . Focus on Progressive Christianity, mindfulness and religion in politics Email: Burklo@usc.edu Publishes regularly from website.

John Thornley

Contemporary Thoughts on Jesus

The best that we can say about Jesus of Nazareth in the way of secured results is that he appeared in the manner of a prophet. That is, he spoke out of inner experience. Cascades of images came out of his mouth, which deeply affected people. For him, God could be nearer in the empty hands of a beggar, or in the eyes of a child, or in the ravaged mouth of a prostitute; God spoke to him through living people – much more strongly than out of the traditions of the scribes. And his continual struggle was the confrontation with theologians who refused to understand God out of the present. Instead, they attempted to perceive God out of the traditions of the patriarchs, the commentaries on the traditions of the patriarchs and in the rustling of papyrus sheets. The struggle for life was something for which Jesus went to his death. And I think: we have not only not solved this problem, rather, we do exactly the opposite of what Jesus wanted, when we let a whole class of biblical exponents loose on the

bible, earning their money and gaining prestige and status by explaining that Christ was poor and suffered.

Eugen Drewermann in *Wort des Heils, Wort der Heilung* (Word of salvation, word of healing) vol 1 page 193. Translated by Laurie Chisholm.

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 December.