

the SOFiA bulletin march april 2020

# SOFiA

exploring issues of  
life and meaning



Photo R Ford

Seen in a studio on an open day for artists in  
Greenwich NSW

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full...  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar  
*Dover Beach*, Matthew Arnold

Bulletin Website Blog Facebook page  
Meetings One-day conferences Expeditions

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website and archive of articles: [www.sof-in-australia.org](http://www.sof-in-australia.org)

blog: [www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php](http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php)

Facebook : <https://www.facebook.com/groups/sofiatalk/>

### Origin of SOFiA

SOFiA creates a space for people of all faiths and none to explore issues of life and meaning. Religion no longer provides satisfactory answers. SOFiA is a non-dogmatic environment in which to continue conversation.

It began in the UK in 1984 with a six-part television series on religions presented by renegade Anglican priest and academic Don Cupitt. The program's name is from lines in Matthew Arnold's 1851 poem *Dover Beach*:

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full...  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

With its gentle irony, 'Sea of Faith' nicely held a tension between religion and a realisation that we humans had made it up.

Later we set up The Sea of Faith in Australia. Did two extra words undermine the irony, so 'faith' reverted to its face value? Maybe. Just in case, we de-emphasised it by using SOFiA as name and logo.

As well as *the SOFiA Bulletin*, SOFiA organises monthly meetings (in Queensland and Victoria), a web site, a blog, expeditions, and a one-day conference.

### DISCLAIMER

Views expressed are those of each author and not necessarily those of the Editor or SOFiA.

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## EDITORIAL

Covid 19 has certainly shaken us up. No announcement of its coming. No sandwich boards proclaiming “Repent; the end is nigh”. No, just a tiny virus, small enough to ride on droplets in the air, but multiplying into a veritable army. “My name is Legion, because we are many”.

It was all too much to get my brain around, so instead I’ve looked at how *the SOFiA bulletin* can best integrate with the other SOFiA publications, and be more sustainable. I explain my thinking on the next page, and give examples of how it could work later in this *bulletin*.

Up to now I have produced two versions of the *bulletin* – two columns for the paper copy; one column for the electronic copy. I will rationalize this and use the single column version for both – starting with this editorial.

Each of SOFiA’s activities has its own communication style. I aim for a SOFiA *bulletin* that is respectful, yet direct; considerate, yet honest; iconoclastic, yet thoughtful. It is certainly eclectic, ranging from longish scholarly articles to short one-liners. And because it comes out just six times a year there is time to be reflective. These characteristics will continue.

So, as our globe, full of disparate creatures, spins through space, what will each *bulletin* hope to say?

In this one we first have to clear up a jumble not of our prompting – cancellation of the Conference and the Victoria trip.

Next comes an example of the reflection that is typical of *the SOFiA bulletin*. It is an article on Nationalism. This generated some responses via an email discussion. Helen Mason brought them to my attention and suggested that *the SOFiA bulletin* might be a good place to air them. Thank you Helen. I have taken short extracts so that the primary author didn’t get swamped.

Book reviews suit *the SOFiA bulletin*, and we have a powerful example from John Carr.

And the Postlude and Epilogue are assembled from email conversations.

There are the usual items too.

And the AGM is announced on page 4.

I always need copy. Please send it to one of the addresses below.

Robin Ford,  
Editor *the SOFiA bulletin*  
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Integration

## **“You In Your Small Corner...” Integrating Sofia Activities**

The Editor

SOFiA is full of free spirits, so each organiser does their own thing. This means that its activities often stand on their own –so we have *the SOFiA bulletin* the website, blog, groups and Facebook page acting autonomously most of the time. But are we missing out by not looking for synergies? I think we are. And I think we can gain those benefits without losing that delightful freedom.

In the end it boiled down to this:

The distinctive feature of *the SOFiA bulletin* is that it is curated – I assemble items into a document that is distributed. This is in contrast to the other activities, that generally leave it to an individual enquirer to decide what to access, and when to access it.

Which brings up the next question “How should *the SOFiA bulletin* be integrated with the other SOFiA publications?” I concluded that the hub of SOFiA’s activities should be the website. The *SOFiA bulletin* would then become its curated expression. Currently I link SOFiA’s various activities in *Digitalia* (my review of the website, blog and Facebook page, see page 14) but this is brief. I have expanded this on the next page, and I have plans for more.

Also, I have been finding it difficult to put together *the SOFiA bulletin* in the time I have available, so I next considered how I could reduce the effort while retaining the curated aspect.

As I write, Physical Distancing requires us to minimize interactions in our daily lives. This has seen a remarkable rise in the use of digital alternatives. It will become the norm. So I propose down-playing the postal delivery option. Of course, there’s something delightful about receiving a paper object in the mail, but unfortunately, I no longer have the time to produce this separate option.

With all this in mind, the following motion was passed at a recent Management Committee Meeting:

1. That the website be SOFiA’s central hub for all activities
2. That *the SOFiA bulletin* be one part of SOFiA’s integrated suite of publications
3. That SOFiA cease producing the postal version of *the bulletin*
4. That members be asked for their ideas and opinions.

Although this states that postal delivery will cease, I will send this to our printers to see if they can print and deliver (To save effort, I will use the single column version.)

And, finally, I’d be interested in your reactions to this change. Please send your thoughts to the address on the Editorial page.

Integration

## Integrating SOFiA Activities

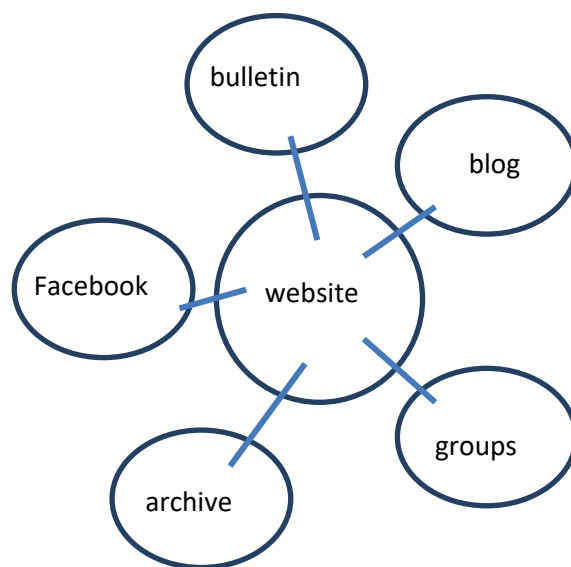
**SOFiA Blog** [www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php](http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php) (Or via the SOFiA website)

Copied below are the latest listings of articles on the SOFiA Blog

Anyone can comment on existing blog posts.

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To start a blog of your own, email the Webmaster (Greg Spearritt) at [sofinau98@gmail.com](mailto:sofinau98@gmail.com) with the text of your post and if possible (not essential) a link to a suitable (non-copyright) image. Greg will post it for you, attributing appropriately.



SOFiA's activities in diagrammatic form

[Real-world ethics in a crisis](#) by [Greg Spearritt](#) | 21 Mar 20

On climate change and on the summer of bushfires, and at great cost...

[\(Anti-\) socially mediated?](#) by [Greg Spearritt](#) | 16 Mar 20

Social media seems increasingly to be defining life in the 21st century. The question is, for better or worse? There are sceptics who point to the...

[Possumbly the worst restoration ever](#) by [Greg Spearritt](#) | 2 Feb 20

Wandering recently through the British Natural History Museum I was impressed by many of the exhibits. An actual-size blue whale skeleton is truly...

Integration

## Facebook

For those not familiar with Facebook, it's a collection of informal conversations. Register with Jim Norman, then join in. More in *Digitalia*, p14.

Integration

## Website

This is an archive for recent *bulletins*, a select list of recent articles on religion and related topics, and an easy way into the Blog. More in *Digitalia*, p14.

**Announcement**

## **Conference Cancelled Due To The COVID 19 Emergency**

### **The Uluru Statement And Related Issues**

Saturday 20 June 2020, 10.30am-3.00pm

South Bank, Brisbane

We are left with the thought of what might have been:

*“We invite you to walk with us in a movement  
of the Australian people for a better future.”*

*Uluru Statement from the Heart*

We expect to return to this topic when the emergency is over. Until then here are the links we supplied should you wish to follow them up.

#### **Some Relevant Internet Links**

The Statement from the Heart:

[https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/2017-05/Uluru\\_Statement\\_From\\_The\\_Heart\\_0.PDF](https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/2017-05/Uluru_Statement_From_The_Heart_0.PDF)

The Information Bulletin from the University of Melbourne:

[https://law.unimelb.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/2791940/Uluru-Statement-from-the-Heart-Information-Booklet.pdf](https://law.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2791940/Uluru-Statement-from-the-Heart-Information-Booklet.pdf)

Quick Guide from the Parliament of Australia:

[https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/5345708/upload\\_binary/5345708.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/5345708/upload_binary/5345708.pdf)

Rachel Perkins, the 2019 Boyer Lectures, ‘The End of Silence’:

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/boyerlectures/>

Saturday Paper Bolt and Pascoe:

<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/media/2019/11/30/bolt-pascoe-and-the-culture-wars/15750324009163>

The SOFiA internet address is: <https://sof-in-australia.org/>

28 January 2020

**Announcement**

## **Trip No North East Victoria Cancelled**

*Another casualty of the COVID 19 crisis*

All that remains is to thank Cordelia and her team, and hope that in the future, SoFers might once again be able to explore this fascinating landscape and its stories.

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**Point of View**

## **Nationalism**

Phil Roberts

Human beings need identity and draw much of this identity through association with others. These others may be different kinds of groups such as family, work colleagues, fellow hobby enthusiasts, political confreres, and people of similar ethnic or geographic background – including people of the same nation.

Nation is convenient as a focus for identity because it represents a degree of shared values, culture, history and contemporary experience.

### **The object of our association**

In some instances we may not identify so much with a nation per se as with distinctive characteristics of that nation: in the case of Australia, this might be our beaches or outback landscapes or the tradition of mateship. These parts may be more important to us than the whole, ie Australia.

Nationhood is at any time a fuzzy concept, meaning different things to different people.

In addition, the nation to which we attach ourselves changes over time, so that the meaning of “Australia” (for example) is necessarily fluid. There are aspects of Australia today which differ from the Australia of my youth.

### **The nature of our association**

Identification with one’s own country is not in itself a bad thing, but the way in which we make this identification may be bad.

Our personal brand of nationalism will be shaped by the way we see our country. Personal biases will enter into this view. For example, extreme right-wingers will see Australia in terms of so-called traditional values and will have a vision of this country as Judaeo-Christian, not the glorious mix of indigenous and diverse non-indigenous cultures which are the reality today.

Nationalism may all too easily become exclusivist. At best, we may simply be blind to the faults in our own country or the merits of other countries. At worst, we may carry this into hostile actions, even war.

Religion has a role here. Some faith traditions are tied very much to a particular ethnic group (Judaism) or a particular set of cultures (Islam). A more open outlook is preferable.

## **Alternatives**

In these days of easy communication with all sorts of other people, we are probably being lazy if we limit ourselves to a narrow kind of nationalism.

It is quite reasonable to attach ourselves to a particular aspect of our country and see the country itself as a symbol of that aspect. We may, for example, attach ourselves to egalitarianism and have a great pride in Australia as an egalitarian society.

We can be attached to our country and still predominantly citizens of the world. I travelled once with an Indian engineer who was very much a citizen of the world but always found a curry wherever he could. This has always been a model for me. In other words, identify with all, but keep a special place in your heart for the distinctive and special things you associate with home – whatever home may mean.

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Response

## **A Response to Nationalism**

Rodney Eivers

Yes, Phil. Thank you.

A good exposition on the nature of nationalism. My own specific concern is what we *do* about the bad side of nationalism. These include primarily, the propensity for war, but also, economic self centeredness, (trade wars) exploitation and repression of minorities, restriction of agricultural benefits, through patent law, inhibiting or blocking labour mobility (and where there is labour mobility, confining workers to second class citizenship) etc. Of course, nationalism is also often tied up with “culturalism”. Burma, China, Russia, the Middle East, and one might even say Aboriginal Australians where criteria for belonging to a nation are narrowly defined.

Do we want to give up something ourselves of national interest in order to make the world a better place? Or do we just let it be and go along with making our own countries great (patriotism by another name).

I am mindful of the helplessness we feel at the slaughter of the mother and three young children through a domestic violence scenario this week. What do we do about these bad things?



Response

## A Response to Nationalism

Vanessa de Vos

I look back to our origins where we had what was then an enormous world, just about all of which was unknown to the simple hunter-gatherer probably confined to a few square kms. Consider also in the 1840s most people in the UK never moved more than 10 miles from their birthplace to their place of death.

My point is throughout centuries and millennia indeed, 'nationalism' - a belonging to what you knew, was really the only mode of being. Think of the Chinese/ Japanese keeping out the savages/predators/conquerors. Nobody wants to be conquered/enslaved as the unfortunate 'third world' countries were.

So for belonging and self defence, let alone the conquering of others, read eventually nationalism, hence patriotism which becomes the understandable norm.

With the march of progress, more and more people moved from any part of this globe to another, perhaps safer, spot. They settled, assimilated (somewhat). A lot of this could be considered peaceful/successful. A percentage isn't,

Today we are at a zenith (as we know it) of millions of people living in countries with cultures they do not essentially share, forced there by economic considerations, or often fleeing their own rabid, monstrous dictators in search of a better life. As said, some do assimilate into their foreign milieu and do very well. Others, and there are substantial numbers of them it seems, so often carry their resentments and different cultural beliefs with them. Can we say they carry their 'national' pride with them?

Whilst I see the present state of global trade/interaction has produced great wealth for a few individuals and much more comfort for many, it perhaps comes at a cost. Within each nation there are huge differences of wealth. The top echelons of most countries wield enormous power over the lives of the remainder. This has become a frightening aspect for the future where we see a 'few' major players seeking to control not only their own country, not another country, but many other countries through political and financial domination. Trump's return America to its greatness' is being repeated in China, Russia, N Korea, Iran, the UK and I'm sure many other places. The domination of those who make laws! over its citizens is extreme in some nations but we need not be far behind

Response

## A Response to Nationalism

David Miller

The most notorious examples of "secular religion" are Nationalism, Fascism and Communism. These three give an imagined assurance of superiority to the 'in-group', be it based on nationality, race or class. And they often express intense hatred toward the 'out-groups'.

I have come to the conclusion that if humans are not adherents of a supernatural religion, then they are quite likely to be adherents of a secular religion.

Footnote

I find that many of my fellow Atheists and Agnostics do not like this concept of *secular religion*. They claim that secular religion is a contradiction in terms. They want to reserve the use of the word 'religion' for supernatural belief-systems only.

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Response

## A Response to Nationalism

Garth Everson

Regarding nationalism.

Perhaps it does not carry any *personal* brand: it is ultimately "the cult of the Nation". And one's nation is simply a classification made at birth...entirely circumstantial.

Subsequent experience (of Life) should surely be reflected by using relevant categories (political, ethnicity/culture/religion and so on). In other words, one cannot ever become more or less Australian, British, Chinese and so on.

When comparing cultural attributes of any sort, we should surely stick to the subject (ie the attribute) not these circumstantial connotations.

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Response

## A Response to Nationalism

Jennifer Robertson

Nationalism to me is a very broad subject and of course it has its positives and negatives. This will invite us to consider its effects on the problem of countries today.

The positives for Nationalism for me are attractive – think of the value of sense of belonging, cultural pride. Why do the Olympics generate so much joy and pride of achievement. And toleration of the values of others could come into play.

Negatives of Nationalism include its use by Nazism and feudal leaders to control a helpless and hopeless populace. However, our forefathers had stood up for freedom and human rights, making them the building blocks of national pride.

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Review

## Essential Reading

**Adam Rutherford, *How to Argue with a Racist: History, Science, Race and Reality*, W&N, 224 pp, 2020.**

Reviewed by John Carr

British geneticist Adam Rutherford has a great reputation for his ability to explain the complexities of his science to the general reader. (See for example *A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived*, 2016.) As a half-Guyanese Indian born in Ipswich, Suffolk, he knows a lot about racism. While the concept of 'race' is no

longer recognized in the biological sciences, it survives as strong as ever as a social construct in the minds of the general populace and is the principal obsession of white supremacists and assorted conspiracy theorists the world over.

Contemporary notions of race had their origin in European colonization of much of the world over the past 500 years. From the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, so-called 'scientific racism' has identified anywhere from three to sixty-something supposed races. In most of these systems, pigmentation has been the major defining feature.

Even many Enlightenment philosophers and leading 19<sup>th</sup> Century scientists said and wrote things that can now clearly be seen as racist – and scientifically untenable. Racist diatribes usually focus on alleged deficiencies of the derided peoples, but Rutherford also deals at some length with those positive qualities that racists sometimes cite to demonstrate their 'fairness', such as the superiority of Afro-American sprinters, and Jewish composers and scientists. These, like the supposed negative qualities, almost certainly owe more to environment and culture than heredity.

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**Announcement**

**SOFiA Victoria**

Thursdays, 7.30pm. Gold coin donation appreciated.

Lectures are followed by questions, discussion and refreshments.

All viewpoints are welcome.

VENUE: Carlton Library Meeting Room, 667 Rathdowne Street (corner Newry Street), North Carlton. Melways Map: 2B J2

16 April 2020

John Noack (Carl Jung Society)

*Galilean Folklore in Judaism and Christianity: Part 2.*

21 May 2020

Andrew Rooke (Theosophical Society, Pasadena)

*Group Souls, Soul Groups and Soul Mates.*

**Book Review**

**Christos Tsiolkas, *Damascus*, Allen & Unwin, 2019**

*In this powerful review, John Carr finds this book an unflinching study of life in the raw "is not an easy or comfortable book to read" but don't be put off:*

Australian author, Christos Tsiolkas, has had great success with his earlier novels, particularly *The Slap* and *Barracuda*, both of which were made into television mini-series for the ABC. His most recent book, *Damascus*, is significantly different in a number of respects, but especially in that it has a historical setting and characters. Based loosely on the life of St Paul, it should be a breeze to market, as a couple of billion people already know something about Paul's life and enigmatic character from his Epistles and the Book of Acts. However, it is not an easy or comfortable book to read. It explores serious issues – historical, religious and psychological – and paints a picture of people whose lives were blighted by almost unrelieved brutality, suffering and injustice.

In the first page of the book, set in 35 AD, the reader is plunged into a horrific, barbaric event, the stoning of a young Jewish girl condemned to death for fornication. It is told from the perspective of the terrified girl herself, bound and hooded. Her seducer and accuser is one of the men carrying out the stoning and her Pharisaeic prosecutor, observing from the sidelines, is Saul. The following six chapters, set across the Roman Empire, all include Saul/Paul as a character, except for one, which is set in Ephesus more than 20 years after his death. Some of the characters are Biblical, including Thomas, James, Timothy and Lydia, while others are largely or entirely fictitious. One of Paul's imagined Roman jailers, Vrasas, plays a major role, as does Able, a renamed and fictionalised version of Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave.

In all episodes, the brutality of First Century life is depicted in detail. Poverty, misogyny, slavery and violence all appear to be expected and, largely, accepted as normal. – Greeks, Jews, Romans, it makes no difference. Except, that is, for the members of the shadowy underground Jesus Movement, who have been taught to love peace and their fellow Christians, whatever their past. Compared with pagans, they are blind to race, class and gender. But like devout Greeks, Jews and Romans, the Christians are manically fervent in their Faith and, even more than the pagans, are quite prepared to suffer torture and martyrdom for it. Even more than devout pagans, they are committed to quite specific beliefs and practices and have no patience with other views, however slight the difference appears to the outsider. The divisive questions that led to 2,000 years of division and schism within Christianity are already present – Who exactly was Jesus, what was his relationship to the Hebrew God and what was his true message?

For readers with an interest in theology, Tsiolkas's apparent views on these questions may be enough to sustain them through the drama and pain of the events. Paul's disputes with the Jerusalem apostles that we hear about in the Epistles and Acts are explored in some detail. For the modern Christian, the battle over the right of Gentiles to become Christian without becoming Jews is no longer an issue, but some of the other divisive issues explored here remain with us to

this day. Mainstream Christians will almost certainly call foul at the doctrines put into the mouths of Thomas, Timothy and Paul himself. For those of us with a less than passionate interest in the precise definitions of the Persons of the Trinity as battled over for centuries and set down in legalistic precision in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, there are other issues to think about.

In the wake of Tsiolkas's earlier books, it was expected that his Paul would be gay, seriously conflicted by the Hebrew Law. This is certainly how he is depicted — in both thought and action he is shown to be sexually and emotionally attracted to men. However, homosexual acts are much more common in *Damascus* than just those involving Paul. Few of these encounters are tender or life-affirming, but more typical of the types of violent homosexual attacks perpetrated by possibly gay men adopting homophobic attitudes and behaviour to cover up their own sexuality. It must also be said that there are more homoerotic descriptions than would be usual from a straight writer and an obsession with circumcision. But many Church-goers, startled a few times a year by liturgical readings of the Letter to the Romans, probably think that Paul can be accused of that, too. As expected, this fictionalised Paul also agonizes over the legitimacy of his claim to be an Apostle.

One of Tsiolkas's themes that struck a chord with me was his exploration of the effects of the central doctrine of the Second Coming. To his credit, Tsiolkas's Paul recognizes the cruelty of the continuing promise of imminent salvation to the suffering members of the 'third and fourth generations' of believers: They remain passionately committed to their prayer, 'Come, Jesus, come!' even as their fellow Christians die around them. God knows, they needed Jesus' promise to be true and can be forgiven if they thought they were being conned.

So where are the personal beliefs of Christos Tsiolkas, a non-theist brought up within the Greek Orthodox Faith? Throughout, he presents the ethics of Christianity as a good starting point for living — 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Like many liberal and progressive Christians, he views Jesus merely as a 'good man', a great teacher. Thomas is his main mouthpiece for this view; Thomas, who had the task of burying his 'twin' and believes that it is only Jesus' words that survived. Like many others, Tsiolkas believes that the facts of human sexual reproduction have been seriously warped by the Abrahamic religions. His liberal contemporary views on the naturalness of sex are most clearly articulated by a pagan, the Priestess of the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. 'Your brethren', she tells Timothy, 'hate that our bodies give birth to children' (p 299). In preparing to write *Damascus*, Tsiolkas undertook a great deal of research, reading the Bible, the Quran, the gnostic gospels and many biographies of Paul. But this is a novel, not a history book, and Tsiolkas's Paul is drawn from his imagination as much as from the fragments of his life that history can provide for us. Nevertheless, depending on our own knowledge and beliefs, we may be able to develop a richer understanding of what he might have been like, both as a man and as the most influential

Christian of all. Personally, I value even more the insights I gained of what it might have been like to be an inhabitant of the Roman Empire in the First Century. There is nothing abstract about Tsiolkas's depiction of life; it abounds in flesh and blood, pain and terror, and some moments of hope and joy.

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**Announcement**

**Sea of Faith in Australia 2020 AGM  
(2019 Financial Year)**

Provisional date and time

Saturday 20 June 2020, 2:30 pm to 3:30 pm

(Possibly ZOOM enabled)

No one knows what the status of travel in Australia will be in June 2020.

It might be possible to have a formal meeting, but it is equally likely to require creative solutions, such as a meeting enabled by the software ZOOM.

Watch this space.

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**In The Gaps**

**Punctuated Changes**

*Robin Ford*

Imagination fails me, I'm afraid  
I can't create a future that makes sense  
Of places we have been or things we've made  
And starts from where we are – the present tense.  
When we arrived the old folks would recall  
A time before the street in front was sealed  
When they had built the tennis court and hall  
And dairy cows roamed in a local field.  
When our old house was built long years ago  
The Spanish influenza ruled the mind  
Move forward for a century or so –  
Another virus of a wilder kind  
Bright visions of a future seem to fade;  
Imagination fails me. I'm afraid.

Regular Items

### ***Digitalia***

*Here the Editor reviews activity on the SOFiA website, the SOFiA blog, and the SOFiA Facebook page. (See the SOFiA website [www.sof-in-australia.org](http://www.sof-in-australia.org) for instructions and links on accessing the SOFiA Facebook page)*

**SOFiA website:** [www.sof-in-australia.org](http://www.sof-in-australia.org) . This item caught my eye: [We broke the rules – and coronavirus is our punishment](#) (*Sydney Morning Herald*)

Mar 21 – (Opinion: Elizabeth Farrelly) Absence wakes me. No planes..” Here’s another quote from the article “Under the escalating panic it’s hard not to suspect some kind of punishment. Perhaps humans are the plague and the world’s immune system is trying to shrug us off, force a moral reset. Some cultures achieve humility, to paraphrase Shakespeare’s Malvolio. Some have it thrust upon them.” It’ an article to challenge us.

SOFiA blog: [www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php](http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php) or via the website.

[Real-world ethics in a crisis](#) Greg Spearritt. The opening paragraph of this article sums up the thoughts of many: “On climate and on the summer of bushfires, some of our key politicians with the power to act have been found wanting. At great cost to Australians, they showed they weren’t interested in good information and long-term planning, just in spinning their own combative, party-political messages.”

Facebook: Sea of Faith in Australia: I didn’t get past the most recent post: *An open letter to the church from a millennial – this is why we are leaving* by Anna Dimmel on January 30, 2020. She begins: “I remember when I was serving as a pastor receiving emails, flyers and promotions for ‘solutions’ to the issue of why millennials are leaving the church. Truth be told, I didn’t realize I was actually a millennial until recently. (Apparently I am in the last year that they include millennials. And, ironically, I find myself joining them on this subject). Her post received five replies from SoFers. Maybe it’s old news – but I thought I was worth a look.

Regular Items

## Science News

*The intersect between religion and science is one of perpetual interest, but philosophy, ethics and the arts also figure in scientific studies. Recent scientific research may have implications for our understanding in all these fields, and more importantly (of course) for how we make meaning in our lives.*

### Fake news?

COVID-19 is usually illustrated in our media as a coloured sphere, often using a bold red, either for the sphere's surface or its projections (its 'corona' or crown) – see the ABC's depictions, for example.

While the general shape seems valid, the colours are all merely artists' impressions, since the virus is too small to be seen using light microscopy (and reflected light is what endows objects with colour). Scientists do sometimes add colour to help distinguish features, but again these are entirely arbitrary.

The most accurate portrayal would be a grey blob, but that obviously lacks a certain pizzazz. Does it all matter? Perhaps: it does give the wrong impression about the science of light, but arguably it has the effect of making the virus seem threatening (which evidently it is!, though unnecessarily stoking anxiety may not be so good).

Greyness, however, would also fit the idea that viruses are zombies of a sort, neither truly living nor dead.

Web reference:

[www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-31/coronavirus-images-more-than-meets-the-eye/12103336](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-31/coronavirus-images-more-than-meets-the-eye/12103336)

### Thought you were special?

Since they first stood up and took in the view, humans appear to have considered themselves something more than mere animals. It remains a popular idea, especially with many of the Faithful, but it's a little like the God of the gaps: our uniqueness has slowly been chipped away as we discover tool-making birds, problem-solving octopuses, laughing chimps and empathetic capuchin monkeys. (Charles Darwin, of course, was of the view way back in 1871 that the differences were ones of degree rather than kind.) To add to our outrage, dolphins have now been found exhibiting a behavioural trait once

thought to be unique to humans: synchronous moving and calling while working together.

Web reference:

<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rspb.2019.2944>

### Maybe you're just a glorified fish

An ancient fossil from Canada has provided a link between fish and terrestrial tetrapods. A 380-million-year-old fish with the memorable name of *Elpistostege* is the first known creature to possess articulating digits. Its pectoral fin is considered a precursor to the human hand.

Web reference:

[www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/science/show/ancient-fish-fossil-reveals-how-the-human-hand-evolved-from-fis/12093860](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/science/show/ancient-fish-fossil-reveals-how-the-human-hand-evolved-from-fis/12093860)

### ...Or maybe you're a worm

Fossils of a worm in a rock featuring an ancient undersea burrow have been found in Australia. Not just any worm, however: it's the earliest creature ever found displaying bilateral symmetry. It has distinct front and back ends, and like us is essentially a lump of meat wrapped around a digestive tract (though to be fair we're a little more accessorised than the worm). It's been dated to the Ediacaran period (571 million to 539 million years ago) and is so far the oldest shared ancestor of all today's animals.

Web reference:

[www.livescience.com/bilaterian-worm-animal-ancestor.html](http://www.livescience.com/bilaterian-worm-animal-ancestor.html)

### More than just a Canberra bubble

In a recent physics journal, a paper has concluded that we could be living in a bubble – a bubble at least the size of the observable universe. Our measurements of how fast our universe is expanding get more and more precise, but as they do, different measurement methods are starting to produce divergent results. The new theory proposes that these differences could be caused by the fact that we are in a particularly low-density region – a bubble – of the larger universe. (Maybe multiverse?)

Web reference:

[www.livescience.com/cosmology-hubble-constant-mystery-could-be-solved-with-low-density-galaxy-bubble.html](http://www.livescience.com/cosmology-hubble-constant-mystery-could-be-solved-with-low-density-galaxy-bubble.html)



**Postlude**

## **How To Get The Most Out Of SOFiA:**

### *1 On Self-Education*

*These quotes are from informal email discussions. In keeping with the informality, names have been omitted*

#### **Voice 1**

When describing what SOFiA is to people who show any interest, I start with 'Openly exploring life and meaning', then explain about our not being an activist organisation. If we want to lobby or work for an issue, we join a more relevant organisation. Our involvement in SOFiA is all about educating ourselves about issues. It is unashamedly self-centred.

Recently, in explaining to myself and others why I keep trying to organise events on such a diverse range of subjects, I have come to realise that it is simply manic curiosity. Despite my failing eyesight, ability to organise my life and ability to keep my mind on one thing at a time, I still have a great urge to find out about Stuff.

Perhaps the SOFiA motto should be Julius Sumner Miller's 'Why is it so?'

#### **Voice 2**

I wish I had more time to add my ha'pennsworth to this discussion! It was me reading Dark Emu, finding it revelatory and sharing the lead in a couple of sessions on discussing it, that started this whole journey.

I felt as passionate about the Uluru Statement. I was so impressed with the serious way those 300-plus blackfellas seem to blend indigenous and western thought and language when they first presented the Statement to the press, and then I was appalled and saddened by Malcolm Turnbull's uncouth reception.

While I was on a quick learning curve myself, I realised nobody I knew seemed to know any more than I did – but they certainly had an amazing range of views.

I believe there is probably a grain of truth in everything. But whatever the criticism, my gut just told me there was a lot of clearly provable facts in 'Dark Emu'.

It just seems to me our first peoples deserve recognition. What can I do to help? What can I encourage other people to do? If there is a referendum then all thinking whitefellas need educating.

#### **Voice 3**

Which is why SOFiA holds annual conferences, turns out we all need educating!

#### **Voice 4**

I went through the P&C Association at a local high school and successfully had the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags raised at the school – after 53 years. I tried to network between the Education Dept. ( locally) and the Aboriginal

people. Both sides (for quite different reasons) exhibited passive aggression – no Aboriginal people turned up at the poorly timed and un-advertised ceremony. The flags are now flying – within a week one of them was stolen.

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## Epilogue

### How To Get The Most Out Of SOFiA

#### 2 on organising

*These quotes are from informal email discussions. In keeping with the informality, names have been omitted*

#### **Voice 5**

I guess there is a trade-off between having a wider audience and losing the intimacy and confidentiality which comes from communicating within a limited group.

#### **Voice 6**

One of the threads that have led to this point was ..... simply the planning subcommittee for the Conference. Each year, this is always a very small group, with the power to co-opt others, as needed.

#### **Voice 6**

These email exchanges of viewpoints on Nationalism have been very interesting and illuminating.

But why has it been limited to only a select few?

Why hasn't it taken place on the Sofiatalk Facebook page? That's what it is there for.

And why, out of all the SOFiA membership, is there only 52 people on Sofiatalk?

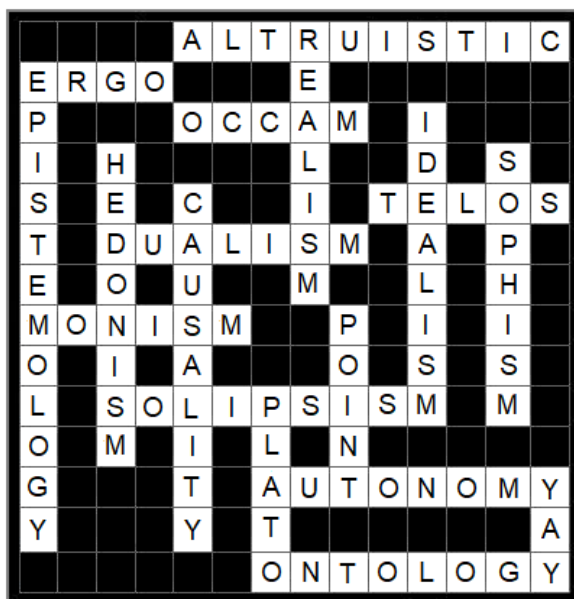
This question of communication has become vitally important, especially since our SOFiA meetings have been (or are about to be) suspended due to the pandemic.

#### **Voice 7**

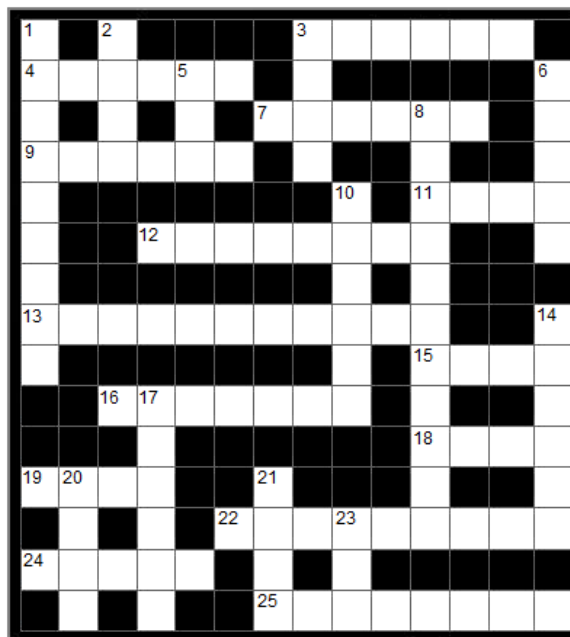
I am fully in agreement here. We have these opportunities for discussion and comment but we do not use them and instead slip into these rather scrappy e-mail lists. Perhaps we should be bolder and be prepared to open up these discussions on Facebook, Sofiatalk and so on. Perhaps the Management Committee needs to give more attention to this.

PS This could be even more relevant now that the mini-conference for 2020 has been cancelled and face to face contact is not an option. Awareness that we were aiming for that topic at the conference led to some inhibition in discussing Aboriginal issues.

**SOFiA Crossword #44**



**SOFiA Crossword #45** Prepared by Greg Spearritt



*Something we all need in these COVID 19 days:  
Peace, Joy & Pleasure*

**Across**

- 3. In good humour
- 4. Enjoy fulsomely
- 7. Comfort
- 9. Items causing pleasure (esp. for Fido)
- 11. Pleasant to others
- 12. Expressing great happiness
- 13. Delightful enjoyment
- 15. Something to whistle happily
- 16. Give pleasure
- 18. State *sans* pain or trouble
- 19. Physically show pleasure and appreciation
- 22. Great, calm joy
- 24. Intense joy
- 25. Calm

**Editor's crib sheet**

When I check the crossword (a task I enjoy) I see how much I can do unaided, then I hit the web. *If you want to do it all by yourself, then read no further* but where the web alone is not enough you might find these oblique angles on Greg's clues helpful.

The words are ones we use every day so the puzzle might have looked more straightforward. In the event it was harder.

Do not despair. The alternative clues below will give you a second chance at finding the solution

**Down**

- 1. Attitude of appreciative indebtedness
- 2. Great merriment
- 3. Collected
- 5. Step one to engage in the Zen meditative discipline of *zazen*
- 6. Amusing tales
- 8. Emotional state of satisfaction
- 10. Quell agitation
- 14. Untroubled
- 17. Peaceful rest
- 20. Laze about
- 21. Energetic enthusiasm
- 23. Soothing infusion

**Notes**

- 11A One of those words that teachers frown on.
- 13A Ladies and gentlemen. For your \_\_\_\_\_ and delight...
- 15A If you do this no one will suspect your emotional state.
- 14D As found in US university singing clubs.
- 20D. I quite led myself astray with words that fitted 19A and 20D perfectly, but I was wrong. That threw me off the scent completely. Take care. Not a common word these days. You might use this to describe someone leaning on a lamp post.
- 21D Some recipes require this – scrape the peel with a specially designed implement.

## SOFiA

*exploring issues of life and meaning*

SOFiA publishes a bi-monthly *bulletin*. It organises conferences, public lectures and regional meetings. Through its website it maintains an archive of articles and a blog. It also runs email discussion groups.

**Contact:** mail: **14 Richardson Street, Lane Cove NSW 2066**, email: **sofnetwork@gmail.com**  
 web: **www.sof-in-australia.org**, blog: **www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php**

**Brisbane Acacia Ridge** 3rd Sunday, 7.30pm. Contact:  
 Rodney Eivers (07 3273 2049)

**Brisbane Brookfield** 1st Sunday, 7.30pm. Contact: Helen  
 Mason (07 3870 8565)

**Brisbane Bayside** 3rd Monday. Contact: Judith Bore (07  
 3207 5428)

**Brisbane CBD** 3rd Sunday, 1pm to 2.30pm. Contact:  
 Rachel Matthews 0408 193 872)

**Chinchilla** 1st & 3rd Thursday nights. Contact: Glen Beasley  
 (07 4662 7738)

**Melbourne** 3rd Thursday, 7.30pm at the Carlton Library.  
 Contact: David Miller (03 9467 2063).

**Sydney** Under consideration. Contact: Lyndell and Robin  
 Ford (02 9427 7078)

**Toowoomba** Monthly on a Monday night. Contact: Greg  
 Spearritt (sofinau98@gmail.com)

### SOFiA Membership Application/Renewal New Fee Structure (AGM 2016)

From January 2017 SOFiA will have a single membership category.

The fee is *\$20.00 for ten years* (non-refundable).

Those who joined at or after the June 2016 AGM will have already paid for the ten years from January 2017.

The standard method for delivering *the SOFiA bulletin* is email. Paper versions are available on request at no additional charge (donations towards printing costs are welcome).

*If your details have not changed there is no need to fill in this form.* Just send your payment as described below, being sure to identify it as "SOFiA subs" with your name.

Name(s).....  
 Address.....  
 .....  
 Email.....Phone number.....

	<i>Bulletin</i> delivery	number	each	amount
Membership (10 years)	email/post		\$20	
Donation				
Total paid on line, (BSB 032 085 A/c 446904 ref your name) or by cheque (payable to SOFiA).				

Signature.....