



Sea of Faith

Sea of Faith Network in Australia

BULLETIN

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2018



Benalla

photo Robin Ford

The SOFIA website and archive of articles: www.sof-in-australia.org
The SoFiA blog at: www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php

E X P L O R E
religion faith meaning

EDITORIAL

Most of this *Bulletin* is about our name. Thank you for all your contributions. I have introduced a new banner heading for this topic: "Conversation". Other than saying that all contributions demonstrated commitment, thoughtfulness and insight, I won't comment on them here: I want to let them speak for themselves. But later on (page 16) I will explain how I chose to set them out.

The cover photograph was prompted by the centenary of the armistice at the end of the Great War; commemorations occurred while I was beginning to set out this *Bulletin*.

Now, as I finish setting it out, we are on the run-up to summer activities. It's time to wish you: "a Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year".

What will 2019 bring? Could it be as eventful as 2018?

I hope it brings me a continuing supply of items for the *Bulletin*. Please send them (by your preferred method) via one of the addresses below.

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Conversation

SoFiA: A Brief Retrospective

To set the scene for our conversation on the name of our organisation, Greg Spearritt reflects upon his involvement with SoFiA from its inception.

Sea of Faith in Australia is 20 years old. (Happy birthday to us!) Bearing in mind the creativity inherent in memory, here are my recollections of our origins.

In the early 1990s I heard (through that enduring but battered gem, the ABC) an English chap describing how, in his view, the vertical dimension of life had disappeared. He used the analogy of a long-legged fly on a pond: its life is essentially two-dimensional, with signals sent and received only on a horizontal plane. To shift to another of his images: we live on the surface of a “heaving, glittering sea of meaning” where we exist entirely within merely-human signs and signals (ie language). No longer can we pretend that a God’s-eye view of things is possible. Language is outsideless.

I was intrigued. Over some twenty years, Don Cupitt became my unwitting shaman, a liminal being assisting me through the portal from theological liberalism to radical theology (and ultimately to atheism and a near-complete rejection of religion).

By the late 1990s I was frustrated at my inability to find people willing to explore unconventional/unorthodox ideas within my local Anglican community. In 1998 I wrote a letter to the editor of *Focus*, the newspaper of the Brisbane Anglican Diocese, seeking anyone who might be interested in discussing ideas such as those espoused by the likes of Karen Armstrong, Jack Spong and Don Cupitt.

I had one response. Neville Buch, at that time leader of the Brisbane Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (BUUF), indicated that he’d been viewing Cupitt’s 1980s Sea of Faith documentary series with his group and was interested to meet. He mentioned that he’d seen an Alison Cotes piece in Brisbane’s *Courier-Mail* mentioning Don Cupitt and the UK Sea of Faith Network.

When I contacted Alison she initially denied any knowledge of Don/Sea of Faith, but finally recollected something about it and was willing to meet for a discussion.

On Easter Sunday 1998, Neville, Alison and I (plus some BUUF hangers-on) met at Alison’s place in Toowong and held what we came later to regard as the first SoFiA meeting. We were initially considering ‘Sea of Faith Australia’ as a name, but someone soon pointed out that ‘SoFA’ sounded way too comfortable for a group dedicated to openly exploring the wilds of ideas on religion, faith and meaning.

Subsequent meetings were held, and in large part through Alison’s journalistic endeavours, a few new people came along, notably Judith Bore and Rodney Eivers, both of whom became long-term SoFiA members and dedicated activists. We met with a couple of representatives of the UK SoF Network and were put in touch with the NZ mob.

We pottered along for a couple of years, shifting our meeting space to the Brookfield Centre for Spirituality, courtesy of the sympathetic priest there, David Binns. In 2000 we managed to inveigle Don Cupitt to come to Brisbane to speak at a conference we held at Brookfield. (Our Brookfield group remains our longest-running SoF group.) He also spoke at St Michael's Uniting Church in Melbourne. Gradually we were building membership.

In 2001 I stumbled on the news that Bishop John Shelby Spong was visiting Australia on a speaking tour to promote his new book, *Here I Stand*. There were no plans for him to come to Brisbane, so a small group of us persuaded his publisher to include an event in the Brisbane CBD on his tour schedule.

We publicised the event as best we could, but a superior publicist stepped up out of the blue for the occasion. Then Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane, Peter Hollingworth, decided the Episcopalian Bishop Spong was too radical for sensitive local Anglican ears and banned him from taking services or preaching while he was in Brissy. The papers loved it, as did we!

Spong's talk at Albert St Uniting Church on June 24, 2001 attracted a full house and a huge surge in membership for little ol' SoFiA. We were on our way!

Twenty years down the track we still exist, though much reduced in numbers from those halcyon days. The churches have always been our chief source of new members as people pass from youthful naivety to dissatisfaction with often paltry intellectual offerings. Our main recruitment fields no longer yield like they did. Nonetheless, we soldier on while we still have interested members and a small core of active-but-ageing management committee types.

Conversation

What's In A Name?

Phil Roberts

Background

The Management Committee of SoFiA will no doubt have its own process for canvassing opinion on the question of a possible name change, which I don't wish to pre-empt, but as it's already been aired in the *Bulletin* I thought I shouldn't hang back

Baseline considerations

The threshold question in this issue is whether we need a name change at all. Naming and thus branding are important in any organisation, both for members and their identity and for others who might be interested. The current name has a lot to commend it, as I'll discuss below, but it requires constant explanation and doesn't really describe what we do.

It does not help that we seem to be a little unsure as to what we do or who we are, even though the mission statement, in my view, is a good summation – “promoting the open exploration of issues of religion, faith and meaning.” From time to time there's a drift in emphasis and we move into other areas which are broadly philosophical and not related much to faith, but faith or religion or spirituality seems to remain at the core, and the mission statement is sufficiently broad to capture all this. However, how all this can be translated into a (supposedly) better name is another matter.

Organisational names typically have at least four elements or properties:

1. something that makes the name memorable or distinctive
2. a reasonably clear or self-evident indication of what the organisation is about
3. a word describing the type of the organisation, such as society or company
4. a qualifier where necessary, which may be geographic such as Australian or some other term like 'independent'

Not all of these are essential but they need to be at least considered if a name is being, as now, made or remade.

Let's consider each of these in turn.

Distinctive name

"Sea of Faith" is itself a distinctive name, but we in Australia also have our acronym SoFiA. SoFiA has a fortuitous connection with the Greek word for wisdom, 'sophia', which underlies our word 'philosophy' and has been personified in religious (Christian and other) contexts as 'Sophia'. What are we about if not wisdom? The distinctive spelling of SoFiA is reasonably good for branding, even if it happens to be perilously close to the name of the capital of Bulgaria.

The name 'Sea of Faith in Australia' is discussed separately below.

Organisation purpose

Given an organisation of such diversity, how do we find words to describe ourselves, other than those of the mission statement? What words are sufficiently simple and striking and pleasing in combination? We have a set of words like religion, faith and spirituality which describe, so to speak, our base, and others like meaning, reason, progressive and philosophy which describe our movement away from base – our direction.

For the former I lean to either 'spirituality' or 'faith', both of which are terms with suitably wide compass. I've heard that there are concerns about the word 'faith', but it is no more than a term for what anchors us in life. It does not have to imply an absence of reason. Nor is it particularly a Western term, for words like 'Interfaith' and 'Multi-faith' are widely accepted as spanning the globe.

For the other side of SoFiA, that which is progressive and rationalist and rigorously logical and philosophical, I think 'progressive' and 'philosophy' might be the words nearest to the mark. I'm also inclined to 'wisdom', which is something we all aspire to, though this may be harder to work into a meaningful name. 'Progressive' has of course been appropriated by the Progressive Christians, which makes it a term harder to embrace.

Organisation type

A word denoting organisational type is not essential but it is common. In the case of SoFiA I suggest 'forum' is the most appropriate word, a forum being a medium for exchange of ideas. 'Society' would also suffice.

Geographic (or other) qualifier

A qualifier such as this is only really necessary when there might otherwise be confusion with a similar body. This was the reason for 'Sea of Faith *in Australia*.' If other elements of the name are sufficiently distinctive and/or robust, such a qualifier can be dispensed with.

Bringing it all together

The core considerations, I suggest, are the first two: distinctiveness and descriptiveness. The possibilities are legion. One part of me leans to something very simple like:

Faith and Philosophy Forum

Faith-Philosophy Society of Australia

However, the discussion in *SoFiA Bulletin* July/August 2018 inclines me to thinking that 'SoFiA' should be kept together with a suitable tagline, for example:

SoFiA the Faith Philosophy Forum of Australia

SoFiA the Spirituality Wisdom Society of Australia

There is, of course, beauty in brevity. Perhaps 'SoFiA Faith Philosophy Forum'? Thus, amongst ourselves the name 'SoFiA' would normally be used, while in conversation with others we'd be telling them about something interesting we heard through the Faith Philosophy Forum. That would avoid the need for lengthy explanation of our otherwise somewhat esoteric name.

Sea of Faith

The Sea of Faith is a wonderfully rich metaphor, and as a poet who loves writing about the sea I'd be more than sorry to lose it. It speaks to me of concepts like free association, numerous currents of thought, wholeness, depth, exploration and adventure. But if for good reason we choose to remove it from our name, as a compromise we could at least keep it as the name of this publication. The word 'Bulletin' could be dropped – it is a news bulletin but it is also a vehicle for articles and high-level discussion – and we could rename the publication quite simply *The Sea of Faith in Australia*.

Conclusion

I don't think a change of name is absolutely necessary, but if it breathes new life into us and makes us more accessible to the wider public, then I'm all for it.

'SoFiA' is a name with such association that I'd be sorry to lose it, hence my suggestion is 'SoFiA Faith Philosophy Forum', which is reasonably short, descriptive and euphonious.

Finally, organisational name change or not, I'd be keen to see the Bulletin retitled as *The Sea of Faith in Australia*

Conversation

To Sea Or Not To Sea

Greg Spearritt

Throwing our Network's 'Sea of Faith' name overboard is a no-brainer from my point of view. It's the 'F' word.

'Sea of Faith', as insiders know, is an allusion to a poem, a fact which must be explained every time somebody new comes along. Unfortunately, to the uninitiated, the name implies pretty much the opposite of what our Network is about. Don Cupitt's 1980s BBC documentary series (from which we most directly

take our name, and which is even less well-known than Matthew Arnold's poem) charted the decline of religion and religious belief over two centuries.

In contrast, 'Sea of Faith' to the average Josie or Joe is clearly an organisation which practises and/or promotes religion; the phrase is inevitably taken at face value.

On a number of occasions over the years (including this year) I've had potential SoFiA members and potential speakers for conferences reject my approaches out of hand, all because of the 'F' word. By the time you launch into an explanation – if you even get the chance – the damage is done.

Some will suggest that 'faith' doesn't have to mean 'religious faith'. I don't buy that argument. In popular discourse 'faith' just is synonymous with religion.

Retaining and redefining the 'sofia' acronym is a genuine option in my view, with the significant caveat that an appropriate phrase is going to be hard to find. A new snappy title might be good, if we could find and agree on one. 'Renew' pops to mind, but that's already taken by an Australian renewable energy/technology mob.

I think we also need to change our motto. 'Openly exploring' is fine, but our concerns have broadened over the twenty years of our existence to encompass culture, philosophy and ethics. To be sure, religion is still there, but it is one strand among many in these inter-related fields, and it's a strand becoming less relevant to our society year by year, as successive census figures attest.

The solution? I rather like a suggestion by John Carr which retains our current title, but not as an acronym, and I'd ditch the capital 'f' and 'a':

Sofia: wisdom, ancient and modern – openly exploring issues of life and meaning through reason, philosophy, ethics, religion and the arts (with just the short version 'openly exploring issues of life and meaning' as the motto on much of our publicity).

I'd like 'science' in there too, but perhaps 'reason' takes care of it. John's idea has some elegance, since those of us in the know about the old SoFiA can still see a link to our origins.

Conversation

My Thoughts On The Name

I agree that a new name would probably be a good idea as the current one is ambiguous.

Having trouble thinking of an alternative. The best I can come up with at present is "Quest for Meaning".

Marie Cameron



Conversation

My Story On The Name

Barrie McMahon

I have a long association with the *Uniting Church* (and the *Methodists* before it)

In my local area (North West NSW) the Bingara UCA is dwindling away to nothing – and musings on the possible (????) resurrection include the thought that the old denomination names probably don't help – maybe call it a Community Church.

I win few friends in the area by maintaining that the only achievement of the creation of the *Uniting church* four decades ago was the disastrous elimination of the *Methodist church*.

In my private musings on a good name for a church I reflect on *Society Of Friends* – that has a good secular ring about it.

I do know that the *Quakers* (a bad name) already have it.

But Wikipedia tells me that the *Society Of Friends* really is a 'broad church' and that a non-theistic branch is very close to (wait for it) *The Sea Of Faith*.

Now – I am not accusing SoF of being a church and I look forward to an elucidation on the name.

I guess the SoF is a play on the tradition church's *Rock Of Faith*.

But faith is not a solid, unchanging, matter – but something much more fluid.

Regards

Conversation

Change Of Name "Sea Of Faith" In Australia

Rodney Eivers

I have been aware for some time that suggestions are being made that the words "Sea of Faith" be dropped from the name of our network.

I understand that the rationale for this is that "Sea of Faith" has become something of a dirty word among those of the populace from whom we would hope to draw to our membership. These would be mainly those who, if not already in exile, have the potential to become believers in exile from the mainstream Christian denominations. There seems to be a sense that the 'Faith' in 'Sea of Faith' identifies us with religious extremism thus alienating us from those who might consider membership, and also institutions that might otherwise be prepared to give us a hearing.

I recognise that some practical issues such as access to venues for meetings have arisen from this issue. While I can sympathise with such difficulties it seems to me that if it is just the name 'Sea of Faith' which is causing the problem this is not insoluble when it comes to promoting our groups and conferences. Many

organisations, commercial businesses charities and religions market their services under a variety of names. The larger Australian insurance companies would be examples of this. At another level, how many people of the public are aware that the Sanitarium food company is an arm of the Seventh Day Adventist Church?

Having said that I would personally find it a matter of regret if we were to sever our clear connection with the name 'Sea of Faith'.

This is because for me 'Sea of Faith' represents something that I can identify with. You will be aware, from other correspondence, and articles that I am one who likes to belong to an organisation which “stands for something” I had a part to play myself in establishing our SoFiA mission of “open exploration” and I remain satisfied that it was, and remains, an appropriate statement of purpose.

Internationally, Sea of Faith has come to be associated with a certain approach to questions of religion, basically as seen through the works and words of philosopher and theologian, Don Cupitt. I have even been surprised in my reading once or twice to see a certain theological attitude described as “Sea of Faith thinking”. Noted commentator on Australian society, Hugh Mackay, has been heard on national ABC radio naming Sea of Faith as a way of the future. There are Sea of Faith networks in Britain and New Zealand and links to the Snowstar Institute in Canada

For me the association of this thinking with Sea of Faith in Australia is vital. Although it is not spelled out in our mission statement it is described as such in some of our publicity material. It recognises the importance of religion to human society. While not being bound to take a stance one way or another on any specific view point, participants may comfortably express a faith position rather than observe complete objectivity. A neutral passive stance, by contrast, would be, or should be, required in a University study on comparative religion.

I enjoy being part of Sea of Faith in Australia because, in a sense, it does stand for something. To a large extent we are “only” a talk shop. That in itself, however, can be of value in contributing to a better world. To have a recognisable label like Sea of Faith helps to serve that purpose. To name ourselves something like the “Australian Philosophical Discussion Group” would lack punch in distinguishing ourselves from a myriad of others of the chattering class around the nation.

Conversation

My Thoughts On The Name

Dear Robin,

I love the name “Sea of Faith.” It is absolutely universal and can apply to any philosophy of life from atheist to any religion. It is also positive as underlined by the word 'faith' and a symbol of the great matrix of Creation as embodied in the word 'sea'.

Best wishes,

June Fox

Hi Robin

Maybe make it the plural – Sea of Faiths or Sea of Meaning

Other suggestions-

Interfaith In Australia

Australian Explorers of the Spiritual

Seekers of the Sacred in Humanity

Kerry Kelly

Hello Robin

I like the current name. It has historic significance, links to UK foundations, etc, and SoFiA has good meaning (wisdom). I can understand some concern though. If necessary to change to drop 'faith' the name needs to provide a clear concept of what the group stands for eg *Philosophia* which has a good set of meanings for thinkers and an interesting history. This would keep the term *Sophia* in an indirect way. Whatever you decide...

Paul Inglis

Emerging Religious Thinking, Ideas and Practice

Funny, the things that cross one's mind!

Jim Tunstall

Hello Robin,

I don't have any problems with 'Sea of Faith in Australia' and, of course, it fits the acronym SoFiA ('wisdom'). If one goes through a thesaurus and considers all of the synonyms for 'faith' they pretty well suggest what most of the members would state what their motivation in joining would be – conviction, hope, transcendence, etc., in something transpersonal. I can't see how the word 'faith' can be a problem, in fact, I think it's perfect.

Warm regards,

Will Hartley

Conversation

My Thoughts On The Name

SoFiA The thorny subject:

to change or not change our name!

According to the Oxford Dictionaries, *faith* is the
"complete trust or confidence in someone or something"
"strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on
spiritual conviction rather than proof"

In my first endeavour (September/ October *Bulletin*)
into the potential rebranding of Sofia, my reasoning was
driven by the second definition.

Over the years, I found so many people couldn't get
their heads round the belief that the word 'faith' could
mean anything else but that our organisation was a church
or religious belief, thinly disguised.

So, for our survival, I saw no alternative but to
change our full name to something different with the same
initials, so we could retain the same acronym, SoFiA.

But the more I mused on the subject, I thought of all
the occasions when I had used the word 'faith' (or I heard
others use it) in relation to something totally secular, in
other words, the OUP's first definition: "complete trust or
confidence in someone or something".

And now I think we would be very foolish to lose the
word, and its link to our history. So, I'm no further on with a
name change!

Rachel Matthews

Hi Robin

I can understand some reticence about the use of the
word 'faith' although it doesn't worry me unduly- we all
have to have faith in *something* or life would be rather
tricky. I've always been attracted to the SoFiA acronym
because of its direct association with 'wisdom' for which
I'm sure most of us are striving.

Regards

Ian Brown

...by any other name...

At Robin's urging I am hoping to write a little more about the [name] in due course. [It is on page 22, Ed]. I am loath to do so because my good friends take an opposing view.

Instead of giving in to the negativity I would prefer to see 'faith' reclaim an honoured place in human aspiration. I am inspired by having, just by coincidence, started reading (possibly for a future book review) Francis McNab's *Discover a New Faith*.

Rodney Eivers

Hi Robin,
to be honest: I just like the name...A *Big Ocean* of different belief systems, faith traditions; maybe for some people it's more about what's leading them if it's not the *Faith*.

And the *Sea* is enormous, it contains all different streams; it's like a wonderful vessel with all its different troughs and depths. What other word would reflect that?

Claudia Barduhn

"Sea of Faith" doesn't worry me for the following reasons:

1. Its origins refer to the poem which used this imagery.
2. Faith of a kind is a position of some members (including myself) and founders, no matter what their present position is.
3. The statement of the objects of the organisation refers to religion as man-made.
4. Some members are members and leaders of Churches
5. A change of name would have us possibly removed from other branches of the organisation in other countries.

yours faithfully(?)

Noel Thomas

Conversation

Swimming In A Sea Of Faith

Andrew Walker

- If we want our faith beliefs and thoughts to reflect reality we must acknowledge the part that faith plays in our perception and functioning.
- When stripped of its poetry. Faith is a belief in the form of a thought and/or feeling that holds within it an expectation of future value or meaning.
- Often achieving such faith requires believing that you know things that you don't know.
- Achieving such faith gives value and meaning to the now.
- All knowledge is created within a frame of ignorance, and being able to recognise the borders of that frame, perceived through the fog of illusion, delusion and denial, is nigh on impossible. In spite of this we appear to be able to achieve a degree of knowledge.
- Degree of knowledge, degree of faith, degree of belief – are often nigh on impossible to express except as an absolute so we are often left denying our knowledge, belief or faith.
- All knowledge is built upon previous knowledge and is dependent on the accuracy of that which has come before.
- Distinguishing between Instinctual knowledge and learned knowledge, and understanding the influences between the two are still mysteries for us to explore.
- Identifying the degree of faith and knowledge as two separate things.
- 'Sea of faith' seems apt as it indicates the fluidity that we should require of our faith.
- To be accurate the group should be named: Sea of ignorance, knowledge, belief, faith, experience, memory, thought, imagination, story, truth, untruth.
- Which ones can be left out? What ones could be added?
- To deny the value of faith is to deny reality.

In my opinion rather than deny faith we should explore it to discover what it is and how best to utilise it.

This transcript was copied from emails

Cordelia Hull: How about changing it to 'Pebbles on the Beach' – more in line with what Arnold was implying anyway – like, what's left after the Sea of Faith recedes?

Cordelia

ps I'm joking, of course – Not for publication.

Robin Ford: Thank you Cordelia.

I'd love to include 'pebbles on the beach' Can I at least mention it?

Robin

Cordelia: Hmm - I don't want to offend anyone by not taking things seriously. But if you think it is OK, sure.

Cordelia



Origin Of The Name

Dover Beach

Matthew Arnold

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Conversation

Arranging A Conversation

The Editor describes how he put this conversation together

My aim when assembling the this *Bulletin* was to let the items on our name speak for themselves. I have done my best to avoid hidden bias

The articles I received:

- had word-counts from 1030 to 39,
- were written in a variety of styles and
- followed various themes.

If you have been working your way through this *Bulletin* from the beginning you will have already seen some of the choices I have made.

The conversation got going with an introduction to our organization from Greg Spearritt. Greg was there from the start.

A wide-ranging reflection on the current position of SoFiA from Phil Roberts raised many issues for us all to ponder.

A second article by Greg Spearritt explained why he thinks a name change is necessary.

There were spaces at this point for a few shorter items, before I included Rodney Eivers' article advocating for the status quo.

Shorter items filled the next few pages before I concluded the conversation with Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach* – a canonical text many contributors referenced.

The word 'faith' was central to this conversation. It arose in comments both long and short. I have included as a postlude a longer item on faith from Rodney Eivers.

And, here is another item related to our name.



It is an image from the British sea shore; not from Dover Beach on England's South Coast, but rather from deep in Cornwall's West. I took it when we visited in March 2018.

There was sand there at low tide, but high tide was much more dramatic. The Atlantic rollers were unimpeded from the west, driven by a high on-shore winds. All we could see were rocks, breakers and blown spume.

And yet some locals had donned their all-encompassing thick neoprene wet-suits and gone surfing. Now. Here's a question. What would Matthew Arnold have made of that?

Regular Items

Digitalia

The Editor's review of activity on the SoFiA website, the SoFiA blog, and Facebook. See the SoFiA website www.sof-in-australia.org for instructions and links on accessing the SoFiA Facebook page

SoFiA website www.sof-in-australia.org : This post caught my eye.: **Gay people should not join Catholic clergy, Pope Francis says** (*The Guardian*, Australia)

Dec 2 - Pope Francis is "concerned" about what he describes as the "serious issue" of homosexuality, saying in an interview published on Saturday that being gay is a "fashion" to which the clergy is susceptible. Gay [as] a 'fashion' to me sounds like a view that has been overtaken by both science and public opinion.

SoFiA blog www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php or via the website. In the previous *Bulletin* I noted that Greg wrote "The item on freedom of religion highlights an important debate. "The culture and gender wars are in full swing in Australia at present. One of the upcoming skirmishes concerns 'freedom of religion'." This issue is still active.

Facebook Sea of Faith in Australia: I was captivated by the image of our Prime Minister drinking a XXXX Gold beer from the can. I found this quote from the original *Crikey* article instructive "...he's now like the chaplain brought in for compulsory RE who must endure 2000 years of theological questioning from teenage smart arses."

In the gaps

The Law report on ABC Radio National (Tuesday 4 December 2018) reviewed recent interviews with families of those who had been radicalised. It included excerpts from some of the interviews. Most families had no idea of what was going on. This, they pointed out, was not a surprise – teenagers are often adept at hiding their activities.

Robin Ford

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.

15 November 2018

Rev Dr Paul Tonson ([Progressive Agnostic Christian](#))

"Exodus, Resurrection and Divine Agency: Does God Move Anything?"

20 December 2018

Dr Joe Sampson

([Humanist Society of Victoria](#))

"The Theology of Bishop John Robinson's 1963 book, 'Honest to God'."

21 February 2019

Rosalie Tremaine (Evangelical Christian)

"Is Science the Answer?"

Regular Item

Science & Religion

The intersect between religion and science seems to be one of perpetual interest. This column draws attention to recent scientific research that may have implications for our understanding of religion, or for religious belief and practice.

Meaning in life

A June 2018 American study published in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science* suggests those who are politically conservative have a greater sense of meaning and satisfaction in their lives than liberals. The God factor is not necessarily at play here, however. One interpretation of the finding links conservatives with a greater acceptance of inequality (thus, presumably, less angst about it) and with resistance to change (engendering a greater sense of order).

Web reference:

www.livescience.com/63094-conservative-meaning-of-life.html

Anonymity boosts bad behaviour

This may seem like a no-brainer, but new research has shown a greater willingness to insult and a reduced sense of moral outrage at insults/menacing language in anonymous online situations. Victims are seen as less 'harmed' than if the same words were said to them in person. The depersonalising effect of anonymity is suggested as a major contributor to this.

Web reference:

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/11/181119162324.htm>

Spare the education, spoil the child

A long-running randomized controlled study of the effects of early childhood education in low-income and high-risk American families has shown that intensive early education correlates with higher levels of fairness in midlife, even when being fair comes at a cost.

Web reference:

www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/11/181120125811.htm

The Buddhists have it right

A new Canadian study in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine* suggests that being able to 'chill' when confronted by stressors such as a long wait in a traffic jam is conducive to better brain health in older adults. It was found that being more emotionally reactive to stressors than usual contributed to worse cognitive performance. Note to self: take up Zen Buddhism.

Web reference:

www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/11/181119155943.htm

r

Review

Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress, Steven Pinker, Allen Lane, 2018.

John Carr

The history of science and the humanities is populated by many great polymaths – men and women who have reached the heights, not in one domain, but several – in ancient times, people like Aristotle and Hypatia; in the Middle Ages, Hildegard and da Vinci; in modern times, Franklin, Humboldt and Russell. In the past, it is true, science had not begun to be compartmentalised into separate disciplines; even the broad domains of religion, philosophy and science were still largely undifferentiated. What seems incredible versatility to us would not have been regarded as quite so remarkable in the past.

Over the last century or so, the process of differentiation has accelerated as the sciences and humanities have become more complex and research has become much more specialised. It's a common joke that 'experts' now know a great deal about very little and PhD topics are sometimes held up to a degree of derision. The annual Ig Nobel Awards are good clean fun, much appreciated by scientists themselves.

What is not so commonly discussed is that inter-disciplinary research is also an essential feature of academic inquiry. The two movements may appear to be in opposition – towards specialisation and towards unification – but they are both essential to the progress of modern science and knowledge. In simple terms, in such a vast enterprise as the continuing search for understanding of ourselves and our world, more and more detailed research is essential. But it is also essential for the parts to fit together to make a whole. This is particularly true in communicating with non-specialist audiences. If we are to have wide public understanding, discussion and support, relatively simplified overviews are needed in education contexts and the media. Any eminent scientists who can explain the essential complexities of their subject to the rest of us are invaluable and deserve whatever celebrity status they can attract. My own modern polymath pantheon includes: Carl Sagan, astronomer; Oliver Sachs, neurologist; Jared Diamond, geographer; Richard Dawkins, biologist; and Lawrence Krauss, physicist.

Steven Pinker began as a psycholinguist, well-known in the world of language and cognition for such works as *The Language Instinct*, 1994 and *How the Mind Works*, 1997. In recent years (he's now 64) Pinker has moved to explore areas of applied psychology, encroaching on disciplines such as history, philosophy and genetics. His *The Better Angels of our Nature*, 2011, was a best seller, albeit controversial, as scientists who move beyond their special area risk censure by both their peers and specialists from the disciplines they have 'invaded'. The affronted experts from the 'other' disciplines take delight in identifying errors and exaggerations perpetrated by the invader.

Pinker's latest publication, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*, 2018, builds on the main thesis that he put forward in *Better Angels* – that people living today are generally much better off than those of all past generations. His main thesis in the new book, as the title suggests, is that the improvement of human well-being – in health, wealth, environment and security – is largely due to the wide acceptance of the teachings of the Enlightenment.

Like my other hero, AC Grayling, Pinker sees the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the subsequent UN Conventions as key evidence of an almost universal acceptance of humanistic Enlightenment values. He focuses particularly on the drafting of the Declaration chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, a process involving dozens of eminent people from a wide range of countries. The finished product was passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations without opposition. India, China and seven Muslim countries voted in favour, with only the Soviet bloc, South Africa and Saudi Arabia abstaining. This is important to remember in light of more recent claims by some Islamic and developing countries that issues like democracy and human rights are alien Western concepts being foisted on them in neo-colonial arrogance.

Such attacks on Enlightenment values are to be expected, says Pinker, motivated by the irrational and harmful agendas of either religion or ideology. The received 'wisdom' of the world religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam – still overrules rational, humanistic, scientific debate and decision-making in many contexts. In fact, these have become more dominant over the past decade or so. If anything, largely secular ideologies have been even more destructive to humanistic principles, not just Fascism, Capitalism and Communism, but also idiosyncratic personality cults, such as those created by any number of failed-state dictators. The book was being written during 2016-7, the era of Trump, so it's not surprising that the widespread trend towards what he calls 'nationalistic authoritarian populism' is dealt with in some detail as the current manifestation of anti-Enlightenment forces.

As can be seen from these examples, Pinker is even-handed in his criticism of extremism whether of the Left or the Right. Humanists can be irrational and arrogant in their certitude, too, and he singles out influential Left theorists like Heidegger, Sartre and Foucault for censure., labelling them Romantic Pessimists and Prophets of Doom. He explores the work and legacy of Nietzsche in some detail, identifying what he believes were some of his positive and negative contributions to modern thought. He is particularly critical of the state of academic Humanism today, which has naturally not endeared him to Enlightenment specialists in history, literature or philosophy. They charge him with having a seriously uncritical understanding of the Enlightenment writers, leading to an absurdly positive view of science and progress. Nevertheless, I believe that *Enlightenment Now*, has much to offer the general reader, even if it would be wise to set your hyperbole-detector on High. The book provides a very substantial, readable overview of the Enlightenment and examines a wide range of related social and political movements and events that have arisen over the past two centuries.

Review

Boy Erased and The Children Act

Two very good current movies both concern the relationship between fundamentalist Christian parents and their teenage children: *Boy Erased* (Baptists/Gay conversion therapy) and *The Children Act* (JWs/Blood transfusions).

Reviews or a joint review would be very appropriate for the *Bulletin*.

John Carr

I wasn't expecting much from *Boy Erased*, but I thought it was excellent. I found Russell Crowe and Nicole Kidman utterly convincing, and at the same time, it delights me to know they are both familiar Aussies whom I have seen in umpteen different roles! Plus Lucas Hedges as Jared, the rest of the cast, screenplay and locations were all spot on. In my opinion, the whole turned out to be greater than the sum of the parts.

Stop press! John has written a review for the January/February 2019 Bulletin
It's on the web now so you can read it, http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php?blog_id=1795 go to the movies, and write the editor a review from your own perspective.

Postlude

A Monopoly On 'Faith'?

Rodney Eivers

I have previously written specifically on the issue of the use of the word faith in relation to a perceived negative public response to the moniker 'Sea of Faith' for our Association. Both then and now, I feel some hesitation about expounding my thoughts on the matter. This is partly because several of my good friends take an opposing view and partly because in my role as President of Sea of Faith in Australia Inc. it befits me perhaps to restrain myself to a more neutral role. Let it be emphasised then that any comments here are my own personally and are not to be taken necessarily as those of our association.

I understand some of the reasons why my colleagues see value in a change of name and perhaps a playing down of the very word, 'faith'. I am concerned though, that by displacing that label we are yielding the monopoly use of a beautiful English word – one of the trio of faith, hope and love – to the fundamentalists and the religious Christian orthodox. Shades of General Booth of the Salvation Army when he was criticised about adapting bar-room tunes, "Why should the devil have all the good songs". Why should those of narrower mind have exclusive claim to the word 'faith'?

With this additional note I shall fall back on another commentator on the subject of faith. It so happened, by coincidence, that for this month's reading I picked up the title, "Discover a New Faith" by Francis Macnab of Melbourne. He has devoted the whole 250-page book to the very issues we are discussing here. I would strongly recommend it to readers¹. The whole book is relevant to our conversation but, with the need to be somewhat brief, let me quote in full (opposite).

So let's not give in to those conservatives who would want to exclude us from the vision of a positive faith. If we were a creed-making organisation in this 21st century I would hope that the concept and power of faith would have an honoured and significant place in the philosophies by which we live.

¹Discover a New Faith, Francis Macnab, 2011, Spectrum Publications

We Need To Have Faith

Faith in ourselves

Faith in some designated people

Faith in the future

Faith in the goodness of humanity

Faith in our agreements

Faith in other people's agreements

Faith in the order of society

We do not need faith in a supernatural being

We do have faith in our being in the world

We do not need faith in eternal life

We do have faith in life in the here and now.

We do not need faith in a holy spirit to change the world

We do have faith in a good spirit that makes a difference to everyone

Faith in the process of healing, hope and humility.

Francis Macnab

Epilogue

Progressive Christianity And Me

Valerie Birkett's personal testimony has a story line that many SoFiA members have shared.

I refer to the interesting article *My Response to Progressive Christianity* by Deon Naude. I resonated with this article in many but not all ways. Traditional Christian dogmas and creeds still have strong validity for many Christians at this present time but will maybe not have for the generations to come. Many of us grew up in a more literal and conservative period of Christianity than now. A well-known and respected Minister once said to me in answer to my question as to why today's theological knowledge is not being presented in churches generally, "We are in a Reformation now." Reformations, of course, do not suddenly appear. They gradually take place over time. Sadly, our churches are declining in membership. We need this progressive and evolving theological understanding now.

Many years ago, after attending an emotional fundamentalist Christian church service, I realised I no longer believed much of what was being presented. I mentioned this later to a friend who said, "You should read Spong". I said, "Who's he?" Since that time I have read, and read and read books by 'progressive' biblical scholars and theologians. I have all the books mentioned in the above article as well as many others by these writers and others. I have attended seminars and meetings all regarding a more progressive approach to Christianity.

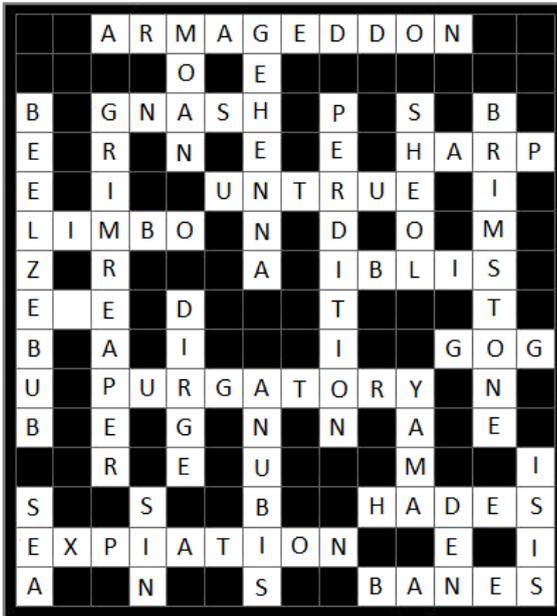
A book published this year written by John Shelby Spong is well worth reading - *Unbelievable - Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor The Reformation Can Produce A Living Faith Today*. It will be his final book, and while it covers some ground from his previous books, it goes further in many instances.

A line from a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Gerald Stinson, a now retired Minister in the Episcopal Church in the United States, really stands out for me -

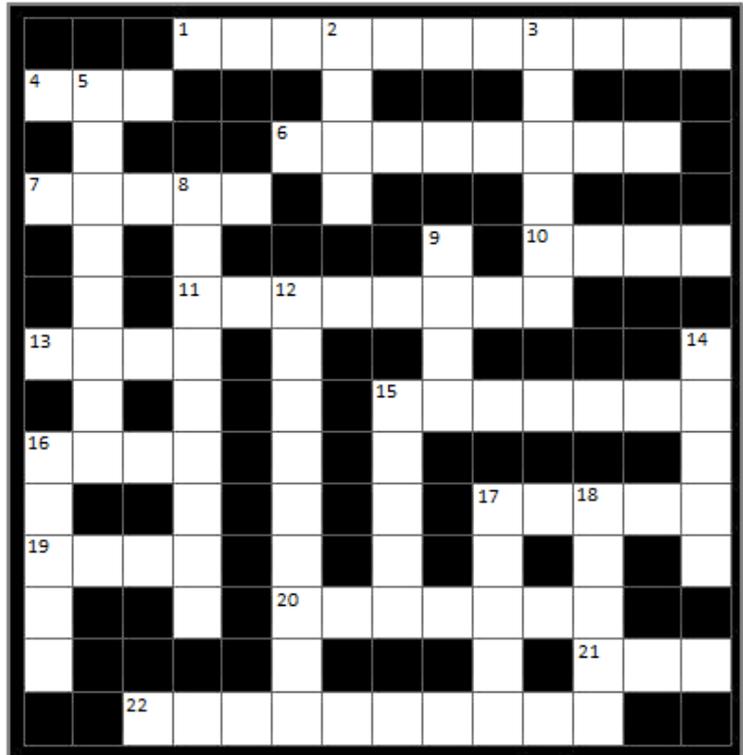
GOD is a word symbol or metaphor of the best and most enduring values of humanity.

God is the godness within us; God is the love, care, compassion within us; God in you helping me, God in me helping you; and on ... and on ... and on ... In the words of the title of a book by John Shelby Song published in 2000 - *HERE I STAND*.

SoFiA Crossword #37



SoFiA Crossword #38 Prepared by Greg Spearritt



Across

1. Spiritual journeys
4. That which you do not want to be if you're interested in largesse from a jolly demigod
6. 4th century Christian belief that Christ was created by the Father
7. That which ye ought to do, along with praying always (Lk 21:36)
10. Devotee of Guru Nanak
11. Sanskrit term for well-being with a darker modern history
13. Jesus's garment lacked this
15. Nine-branched candelabrum
16. The active male principle of the universe in Chinese philosophy
17. Collection of sacred writings
19. Story or question focusing on intuition rather than reason
20. Fish
21. Deity-invoking colloquialism expressing surprise
22. The largest individual group in the religion category of the 2016 census (2, 8)

Down

2. Teacher
3. Non-violence (Jainism)
5. Excised from the Church
8. Story or model of the universe's origin
9. Number of points on the star in the Islamic symbol of the star-and-crescent
12. Greek goddess; patron of prostitutes, seafaring and civic harmony
14. Symbol commonly used to represent the Buddhist Dharma
15. Hebrew prophet foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem
16. Married, hopefully not unequally (KJV, 2 Cor 6:14)
17. Monotheistic religion often represented by a nine-pointed star
18. Higgs's 'god particle'

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.

8D I thought I had this one sorted, but I couldn't get it to fit 16A or 19A. I later recognised that I had a related word for knowledge rather than a "story or model"
 21A It's an abbreviated form.
 19A got me beat! But it was clearer after I fixed up my error in 8D

Sea of Faith in Australia

promoting the open exploration of issues of religion, faith 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.

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 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)

Sea of Faith in Australia Inc.: 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 *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.....