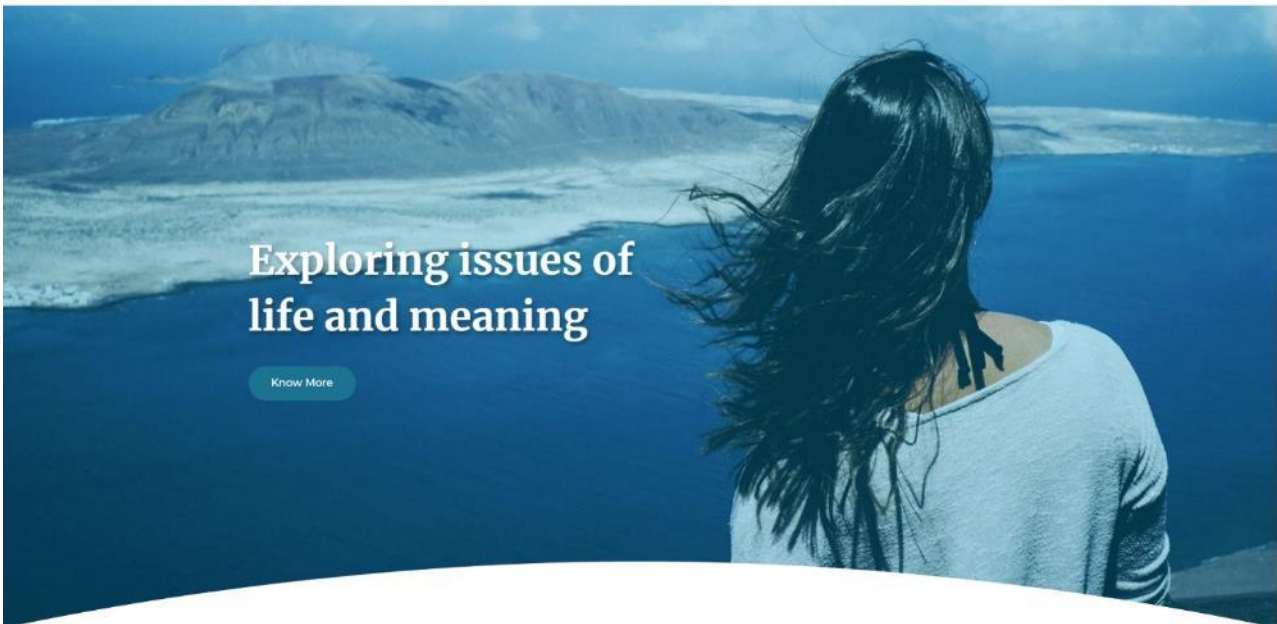


the SOFiA bulletin november-december 2019

SOFiA exploring issues of life and meaning

SOFiA

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Exploring issues of
life and meaning

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Welcome

SOFiA is a network of Australians interested in openly exploring issues of life and meaning through reason, philosophy, ethics, religion, science and the arts. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives.

SOFiA has no philosophical or religious position beyond a desire to 'openly explore'. It is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and possibilities.

Any who find themselves in sympathy with our purpose – exploring life and meaning in an open and non-dogmatic manner – are most welcome to join us.

[Know More](#)



Introducing our new website – Fresh new look; easy to navigate

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

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website and archive of articles: www.sof-in-australia.org

blog: 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.

Copyright remains with the author.

EDITORIAL

We have a new website. I've used the front page of this bulletin to show off its home page. There is more detail. As well as looking terrific, it is easy to navigate your way to all the excellent articles there.

Congratulations Greg (the web-master). It's a great Christmas present.

Christmas is the harbinger of summer holidays, though it can be a tough time if you are experiencing a drought, or you are lonely, or at odds with your family. Jeremy Fraser reminds us of struggles like these with his article *Homelessness*.

Do Christmas and Easter still bring in the 'irregulars' – the 'Chreasters'. Rodney Eivers explains why he is more of a 'regular' in his article *On Going To Church*.

Now that we have a fantastic new website, and a Facebook Page, do we still need *the SOFiA bulletin*? This edition shows its value in generating a considered dialogue. Paul Wildman responded to Phil Roberts' extended articles *Ethics of Civilization (the SOFiA bulletin June-September 2019)*, and Phil Roberts has replied. Both items are in this edition.

John Carr has continued to produce timely book reviews. One of them is on Bruce Pasco's *Dark Emu, Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia And The Birth Of Agriculture*. It's timely because there has recently been some controversy over it in the media. There are two other reviews from John. I hope others might write about their Christmas reading.

There are all the usual items in this Edition, and I will end with my customary request for copy, which you can send to me at one of the addresses below.

Merry Christmas.

Robin Ford,
Editor *the sofia bulletin*
robinford@a1.com.au
14 Richardson Street
Lane Cove 2066

News

Expedition to Victorian Gold Fields

The team that brought you trips to Carnarvon Gorge, The NSW Blue Mountains, and: Fraser Island is planning another one to the Victorian goldfields

If you would like to join it, for now send expressions of interest to Greg Spearritt (best email to use: sofinau98@gmail.com) unless we've already heard from you.

We will need firm commitments by the second half of December 2019.
More information on page 18.

Management Committee

Email from Umesh Chandra to the Management Committee

Good Morning Everyone,

I was hoping to make it to the meeting this morning, unfortunately I have been called in to fill for a presenter who was scheduled to interview a high profile Federal minister.

I had planned to formally announce my resignation from the management committee at the meeting. Please accept this as my formal resignation from management committee.

I am finding it hard to fit everything within my timeline. I love the work you all are doing, I have learnt a lot, it has given me a broader perspective. I wish to continue my membership and assist with any specific project as and when required. I feel bad not being able to contribute to the management committee, maybe in the future I may be able to come back in, but for now I feel that Management Committee should co-opt another member in my place.

Please keep me in the loop with the meetings, I will forward the videos and a report on the conference in due course, wishing you all the very best, and apologies for any inconvenience caused.

Kind Regards

Umesh Chandra J.P. (Qual)
CEO Chantex Pty Ltd

Hi Umesh

We accept with regret your resignation from the SOFiA Management Committee. Your positive attitude was appreciated in your time on the committee, as were your efforts in organising last year's conference and drawing the crowd we had.

We hope you might help us keep in touch with the interfaith groups you have contact with, and we hope to see you at any SOFiA events you're able to make next year.

Kind regards,
Greg Spearritt
Secretary
SOFiA Management Committee

Website For A New Decade

by the Editor

Our old website couldn't keep up with changes in technology; it was past repairing. Greg Spearritt (our webmaster) recommended that we start afresh, and the management committee agreed.

Working with Morningstar Digital, Greg has produced something that is simple, effective and elegant. It is easy to navigate and I hope you will explore it after you read this (or maybe as you read it).

First of all, how can you find the site?

I found the best way was to search the web for *Sea of Faith in Australia*. That put the link it found at the top the first page of search results. Searching for SOFiA saw it pushed down to page 3. I'll look forward to the day that I can find it by searching for *SOFiA*.

Here's what the link looks like.

SoFiA – Sea of Faith | Exploring issues of life and meaning

<https://sof-in-australia.org>

SOFiA is a network of Australians interested in openly exploring issues of life and meaning through reason, philosophy, ethics, religion, science and the arts.

The website will look different on different devices; here's how the home page appears on my laptop.



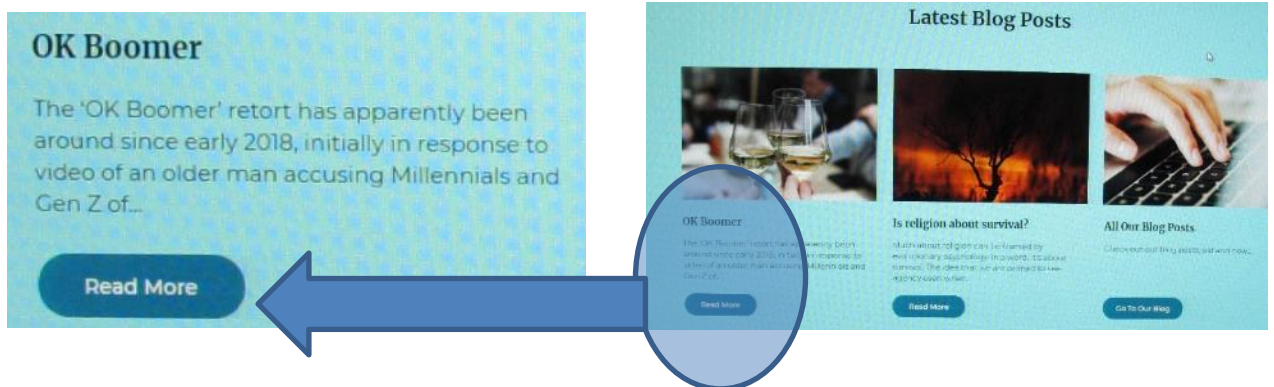
Scrolling down gives you a brief *Welcome* which explains SOFiA, with a 'know more' button.

If you continue scrolling you come to *news and events*, and after that *Latest Blog Posts and Articles*.

News & Events



I'll take *Latest Blog Posts* to show how it works.



Suppose you were reading *Latest Blog Posts* and wanted to read the article *OK Boomer* which is listed there. The diagram highlights the link and adds a larger image so you can see the button more clearly. Clicking on the button will take you to the article *OK Boomer*.



On my laptop this page has some navigation on the right.

When I checked out the new website on my mobile phone I found that it worked well there as well. The three-panel design made it easy to accommodate the two machines (and no doubt others also), because the three panels that are side by side on the laptop are transformed into a series of single panels on the phone, with the panels one above the other.

So that's it. Easy to navigate and elegant. It's well worth a look.

Homelessness

Jeremy Fraser

While visiting family in Melbourne a few years ago I attended services at the Anglican Cathedral opposite Flinders St Station, at the time I was struck by the number of homeless people in Melbourne's CBD, and saddened by a government that seemingly (perhaps falsely) was focused more on shifting them out of sight rather than trying to fix the issue.

One story in particular touched me. A woman in her late twenties to early thirties had escaped an abusive relationship. She was offered social housing on the proviso that she surrender her dog – the one last positive element of the life she had left behind. Rather than have her dog suffer and possibly be euthanised she chose homelessness as her only option.

The 2016 Census found that the number of homeless people had increased by 14% over the previous five years to in excess of 116,000 people Australia wide. This increase is in part due to the lack of affordable housing, and the scarcity of public housing, particularly in the major cities. This is especially the case for those on low incomes or unemployment benefit.

Homelessness isn't just someone sleeping rough on the streets or in local park because they can't afford the rent or pay the mortgage. It also includes those living in crisis centres, overcrowded accommodation or couch surfing in the homes of friends and acquaintances. Many others live in cars or vans, both in large cities, and in rural Australia.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data illustrates a diverse population that doesn't match the stereotypes of homelessness, that is a middle aged to elderly male, who is mentally ill and an alcoholic. Rather, the ABS figures indicate a significantly more nuanced reality. For example, 25% of homeless people are between the ages of 20 to 30, and 42% of homeless people are women (the proportion of women is increasing, with domestic and family violence being a major contributing factor in their homelessness.)

In a letter, Mark Coleridge¹ wrote,

House prices and even rents are spiralling out of reach of too many families and placing huge financial stress on ordinary people, even where they are employed. For those living on pensions or allowances, finding secure housing can be a far greater challenge – one that often takes a terrible toll on social well being and mental health.²

In a similar vein, Bishop Van Nguen asks us,

To confront an economy that has allowed housing to become out of reach of so many; to reach out, like the Samaritan, to the wounded and helpless; and to call on our governments to make hard decisions that will allow everyone in our communities to find secure accommodation"³.

¹ Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane

² *'Homeless tragedy demands action'*. Justice Trends. Secretariat of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. September 2018.

³ Ibid.

While important, the provision of affordable accommodation isn't the only issue to be addressed. All Australians have the right to live above the poverty level, with meaningful employment and a living wage; those on *Centerlink* allowances such as *Newstart* or *disability payment* should have access to a system that treats them with the dignity and respect due to all people.

Australia is a prosperous country, we are a contributor to global politics and economics and a member of the G-20 yet despite being the lucky country that has provided so much for so many, sadly for a significant number of Australians homelessness is a reality that neither of the major political parties wish to adequately address.

After the Morrison government's election win, Australia's political leaders seem to endlessly congratulate themselves on an impending budget surplus (despite not achieving it yet, and it being based as much on hope as skill). We must ask our ourselves,

Is economic prosperity the only metric our nation should be guided by, and are we truly the lucky egalitarian country we once prided ourselves on.

Be you a member of a religion or not, we who have plenty are called to think and act for those who don't, we are all responsible for those most in need among us. Rather than priding ourselves on our affluence, we are called to consider that

This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy⁴.

The next federal election is not for several more years. In the meantime, when we examine the policies of the major political parties, we must look beyond our own needs and assess which party will not only meet our needs but will help those who need it the most. And all the while we should hold both sides of government to account in delivering help to those who need it the most.

We need institutions such as churches, business and governments to act on homelessness and do significantly more than at present in caring for the needy. However, it isn't just the responsibility of large institutions; we all must look at ourselves and our own attitudes and ask,

What can I do and what have I really done to help the least of my brothers?

Point of view

On Going To Church

Rodney Eivers

At a recent meeting of the Progressive Christian Network at Merthyr Road New Farm, Queensland, Tim O' Dwyer posed the questions:

Do you still go to church?

If so, why?

If not, why not?

⁴ Ezekiel 16:49

I was not able to be present at the gathering but responded to his invitation to contribute, making the following remarks from my own experience

I have attended church probably from the time I was a baby in my mother's arms and presumably before then when in my mother's womb.

My earliest memory of any sort, as related in my up-coming memoirs, was of returning from some church function (perhaps a birthday party) alone. This, remarkably, was at the age of about three or four years. I looked down on my family home from the adjacent traffic bridge and pondered life and the future.

It would be easy to say that from that period until now, 80 years on, I have more or less regularly attended church because I accepted the invitation to be a Christian. More accurately, I would put it this way today, to be a follower of the ethical principles proclaimed by the wandering sage, Jesus of Nazareth some two thousand years ago.

But those questions being put by Tim are part of a wider issue and we need to narrow it down quite a bit.

For the sake of this discussion I shall assume that 'going to church' and being Christian in ethos and practice is not necessarily the same thing.

I shall be referring to belonging to a specific congregation and attending weekly services on 'the Lord's day' more or less regularly. I have been doing that for nigh on eight decades.

Why have I been doing this? It is largely habit. It is one of my life's rituals. Presumably this routine has some benefit to it. That need not have been the case for everybody. Only the other day when I suggested that the church is an institution which undertakes to make the world a better place, my table companion responded that this has not been the experience for her.

An immediate response to the original question may be that the church is my 'community'. It is a community which caters for our social, personal and some might say 'spiritual' needs. It does that, in contrast to just about all our other communal institutions, from the cradle to the grave. We engage in that community at our baptism, we engage in that community at our marriage, we engage in that community in the moral guidance of our children and grandchildren, we engage in that community (often in sickness) and at our ending with our funeral.

Another aspect of a church community is that it can be a great social leveller. The people in a church congregation are not usually people with whom I would mix and interact with in daily life. I don't have any problem with this. Indeed, I welcome the variety. No matter what our station in life (and in the best of congregations no matter what our gender, race or other differentiation might be) anyone may hold office and anyone may preach. I belonged to one congregation in Western Australia, where the local mill manager would share a pew with his employees.

I am reminded of the large part a congregation played for so many of my family and acquaintances in our entertainment and social interaction. Most of my social dancing was with church groups, any girlfriends I might have had would have come from church congregations (not necessarily my own). I met my wife outside the doors of a church in Port Moresby. I have written recently on the

impact of Christian Endeavour in nurturing confidence as a public speaker and office-holder in secular as well as religious groups.

One concern I have with the loss of attendance at church by children and young people is the disappearance of an important source of 'moral guidance' for those growing up and establishing a place in an adult world. That a congregation provides moral guidance is not taken for granted these days and I would be the first to challenge the negativity which comes from the supernaturalism and rules for living that come from the preaching in most of our churches.

Some of the old stories in the Hebrew scriptures of vengeance and slaughter are truly horrifying. When reading or preaching from the Bible one does need to be selective. In practice this is what preachers and especially Sunday school teachers do.

One can take stories from a recent Sunday as an example. The lectionary reading was from Luke Chapter 13 where Jesus was chided for healing on the Sabbath. The moral guidance from this surely is that acting in a caring spirit is more important than complying with restrictive rules and regulations which can entangle us in exercising the practice of love.

Or take the Bible story that my grandson absorbed this morning at his Sunday school class – Paul and Silas freed from prison because of an earthquake. After returning home the youngster – six years old – was able to repeat the whole story. It clearly provided for him the lesson of caring for others through its punch line. That is that Paul and Silas, the two prisoners, chose not to run to freedom because they recognised that this would mean big trouble for their prison guard.

A congregation also provides the opportunity to develop administrative and leadership skills. It is rare for me to be associated with an organisation and, in due course, not end up holding some office or other. Such offices are usually within that congregation or with other associated entities. It provides a vehicle through which to further my life-long aim of seeking to leave the world a better place than when I came into it.

Some might respond,

But how can you put up with all that supernaturalism and convoluted gobbledy-gook language which goes along with the enjoyment of companionship and familiar music, songs and liturgies?

Well, one may well be swamped by outdated, irrational, unintellectual tradition but there is also the opportunity to introduce congregation members to new songs, new ceremonies and even new ways of looking at the scriptures. You have to be in it to win it and it may be that some of the examples we set as 'progressive' Christian individuals may rub off to become new ways of being Christian appropriate for a 21st century congregation.

One privilege that we have in the Uniting Church is that anyone may address a congregation from the pulpit and additionally there is always the opportunity to express points of view in the variety of study groups. My recent sermon on the Trinity (available at

<https://ucforum.unitingchurch.org.au/?p=2990&cpage=1#comment-273795>)

led some to say, "I had never thought about it that way before!"

So yes I continue to 'go to church' and what's more, I enjoy 'church crawling' when I am travelling to other places and other countries. I enjoy seeing how other Christians express their faith through their church services. The familiarity of the liturgies and the communal environment helps me to sense the connection which Christians have with one another all over the world.

So I anticipate that I shall continue to go to church until they put me in a box. Hopefully this will be after I have cautioned my family and the presiding minister to express none of this supernatural "in my father's mansions" falsely-comforting hope at the final "celebration of my life".

Point of View

**Response to
Phil Roberts' Ethic Of Civilisation Series
From Paul Wildman**

As Editor, I was delighted when I received an email from Paul Wildman that said, "Robin I offer the following comments and questions on the most excellent Ethic of Civilisation series by Phil Roberts you have in this issue [July-October, Ed]. Perhaps we could have a discussion through SOFiA around same." I forwarded the email to Phil Roberts and his reply follows Paul's article below.

SOFiA is to be congratulated for including such extended learned, considered, controversial and well written material. Thank you editor/ Robin and the contributors, especially Phil.

Here are my thoughts.

1 Civilisation has traditionally been defined as 'within city*' that is an urban or taming savage area, both of people (always indigenous) and land (does nothing as it is 'wild'erness'). This comes from Ancient Greco-Roman ontology and gives us modernity which of course therefore has a remit to destroy/civilise the 'other', for instance, indigenous, women, and Nature – nature today we see all around us as 'the other', commodified and absorbed into the grand cruise line that is Western Neo Liberalism.

2 Civilisation, for me, leads to society which leads to Government which leads to oppression and destruction of ordinary people (civilised). One example is the Royal Commission into Aged Care and another is how we approve murder of hundreds of Australians for corporate gain.

And we destroy the world, as contrasted with Culture which leads to community which leads to mutual aid (indigenous).

3 The issue of deep corruption arises especially. in 'anglo' countries such as the US, Australia, Canada and the UK. The centre does not hold. We see perversity that boggles as almost every aspect of these anglo, once imperial, nation states, disintegrate, as seen in Australia in the outcomes of our various Royal Commissions. Effectively the corruption is exposed and basically nothing is done about it. So I posit a sixth challenge to civilisation, that of endogenous systemic public corruption. I posit that the situation today is like Nazi Germany, whereby I say

'it is easier to make a good person bad in a bad system, than to make a bad system good.'

Indeed, the reflection of Arendt on Heidegger *et al* revealed the banality of evil, that is, that good people individually ran the gas chambers; today we are all running the gas chamber that is Global Warming. Our systems of Governance are now so chaotic and corrupt that doing nice Xtian things individually risks meaning in the end zip (zero) collectively.

4 I agree that human rights come through the humanist aspects of the French Revolution, yet (of course) 'liberty, equality and fraternity' has no ecology therein and herein is the structural failure of the humanist modernity that it represents. The 'othering' of Nature and humanism that I mention above will, I posit, by definition never be able to even broach the question, say, of the carrying capacity of the planet.

Humanity in humanism is prime and trumps all care for other species as we see globally today. Possibly this could be balanced by a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities as per Malcom Fraser in 1998. Consideration of Transhumanism (TH) is important, as Phil Roberts indicates, and I have published on this some decades ago (2000), and more recently (2013). Clearly, TH will carry the day, as we exist in a decaying culture – decaying sociologically yet creatively technological, that is, the Techno-Utopian-Drift has such momentum it is today largely unchallengeable – along with its partner Neo-Liberalism.

5 Phil Roberts re-interprets the meaning of civilisation, away from the traditional meaning, in a most intriguing way and one I find quite magnetic. He does so with three criteria:

- 1 it is what it is,
- 2 Golden rule,
- 3 kaizen.

I ask, "Are these his three?" If so, well done. This is, I suggest, the basis of a Thesis. This reinterpretation has got me back looking at dictionaries etc. and yes, for me, this works. Thx

6 I am interested in

- a) Phil's view on *my second stream of meaning* above in no 2, and
- b) how and where does mutual aid come in to his three criteria?

7 Does Phil see an emergent role for say 'Planetary Ethics' as contrasted with 'Civilisational Ethics' and what is the relationship between the failed concept of the 'nation state' and 'civilisation', I wonder.

8 As Christianity is supposedly intertwined with Western Civilisation the disintegration of the latter leads to/says what about the former, again I wonder.

Point of View

Civilisation: Applications Of An Ethic

I was able to send Paul Wildman's response to Phil Roberts item in time for him to respond in turn [Ed].

Paul Wildman has done me the honour of commenting on my article *An Ethic of Civilisation* in the July/October issue of *the SOFiA bulletin*,. He raises four main questions:

1. Is civilisation a good, as I have interpreted it, or does it have inherently negative aspects, such as corruption and abuses of power? If the latter is true, maybe a distinction can be drawn between 'civilisation' and 'culture': on the one hand is 'civilisation' the product of society and government (which is flawed), and on the other hand is 'culture' the relatively benign product of community and mutual aid.
2. If civilisation is a good, does it rest on three criteria: "It is what it is", Golden Rule, and kaizen (the Japanese business notion of continuous improvement)? How does mutual aid fit within these three criteria?
3. What is the relationship between the failed concept of the nation state and civilisation? Given that the nation state has produced systemic public corruption, is this corruption a challenge to civilisation?
4. Is there a role for planetary ethics as opposed to ethics of civilisation?

This essay is an attempt to answer these questions.

Civilisation versus culture

My use of the word 'civilisation' is global. In broad terms I see it as the condition of human society as a whole at any one time, with the assumption made that it is an ever-advancing condition. This is not to deny that there are serious flaws in the level of achievement, as Paul Wildman has observed. Without making value judgements, we note too that there are different types of achievement in different parts of the world, for example modern European society as distinct from indigenous societies. However, I reiterate that my argument is set at the highest level of generality, namely the totality of human society.

Paul has a somewhat different view, which in effect is that civilisation and culture are two antithetical products of human development. In this view, civilisation exists at the level of society and requires the exercise of power, which leads to government and ultimately abuses of power. Culture, in contrast, is seen as something belonging to community, requiring rather the exercise of mutuality or reciprocity, or in simple terms care for one another. This distinction is an interesting one, but I believe it to be the subject of a different discussion, one which is about the different outcomes of power and mutual aid.

That said, it is entirely true that any theory of civilisation has to contemplate the dark side of life, including the failures of government: official corruption, abuses of people in care, and oppression of asylum seekers, and so on. This I do below under the heading 'Civilisation and failures in government.'

Determinants of civilisation

My ethic of civilisation is a three-part one, based on three kinds of commitment. The first is a commitment to truth, not only living honestly but also seeing things squarely as they really are. This means practising all the virtues we are taught in analysing news, opinion pieces and the like: taking a holistic view, emphasising accuracy, minimising bias, looking for alternative explanations, and so on. It also means accepting harsh realities when they occur, while at the same time appreciating the beauties of life. Commitment to truth is nothing if not balanced.

The second kind of commitment is that of goodwill. The Golden Rule is one expression of this commitment, but there are others. One of these is Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative, which is that we should act in a way that we would

wish all rational people to follow, as if it were a universal law. Another version of the same general idea is that of John Shelby Spong, loving wastefully. Less romantically and more pragmatically, we can see mutual aid as also fitting within this overall basket, the essential point here being that mutual aid is a voluntary form of giving – giving which happens to be reciprocated. The precise nature of the commitment to goodwill is something that can be discussed endlessly; the Golden Rule is simply a shorthand version.

The third kind of commitment is the desire for continuous improvement. Paul Wildman has invoked the Japanese idea of kaizen as shorthand for this idea. Continuous improvement can also be seen as the boundless and endless urge throughout all forms of life – the urge for ongoing creation. The imperative to preserve, to keep things going, is a given, provided of course that the status quo is worth preserving, but the desire to do better is never far away.

If I argue that this ethic will advance future civilisation, it should be possible to demonstrate that it has already done so. It should be possible to argue that truth, goodwill and commitment to improvement are reasons why we have reached our present more-or-less happy condition. Unfortunately, this is a proposition so large that it is beyond proof, but a couple of examples may be helpful. I choose two examples from the history of European universities, illustrating different but complementary paths to the one overall ‘good’. The University of Bologna formed as a self-regulating community of teachers and scholars, effectively a mutual aid society which recognized a need for more learning to contend with an oppressive legal system. This was in 1088. Two centuries later the University of Naples was established as an act of state philanthropy by a highly cultured ruler, Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor. In these two different examples we see a vision of truth enacted by a process of goodwill coupled with a commitment to ongoing improvement.

Civilisation and failures in government

Civilisation, like the human individual, has a massive dark side. Without this ever-present dark side, we would have no need for the first leg of my ethic, that is, the recognition that things in and around us are less than perfect. Steven Pinker argues at length that the dark side is gradually being pushed back and that *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (the title of his 2011 book) are asserting themselves and making us more civilised. His argument is partly persuasive for in many ways we have made life better, gentler, less savage. Yet still we have a genius for finding new ways to thwart this civilisation. Simultaneously we humans are our own best friends and worst enemies.

Unlike Paul Wildman, and as a part-time student of international relations, I would not say that the nation state is a failed concept. I would, however, agree that it is under challenge just as democracy is challenged. The question then arises whether the nation state is absolutely necessary and integral to civilisation. The answer I would give is that I don’t know. The nation state has been one of the pillars of civilisation to date, at least in the West, but we can’t know how it will fare in the future (the very long-term future). The nation state for all its faults has been an instrument of organisation, a way of giving muscle and energy to basic human impulses, but so too is the voluntary association, including the corporation. It too has its flaws.

To the extent that governments have fostered corruption, tyranny and other ills, they are of course challenges to civilisation, at least in part. Taking a longer view, however, we see that evil and pain and suffering - whatever might be called 'bad' in life – is spur to improvement of some kind. When we're in the thick of suffering, even just vicariously by way of images on TV, as people of goodwill we find it intolerable. Yet (and I say this a little tongue in cheek) there are always Royal Commissions and new laws and administrative bodies that will make things better, even if very, very slowly.

Civilisation and the planet

Paul's commentary has invited me not only to reflect more deeply on the meaning of civilisation but also to consider applications of my ethic in relation to three current and emerging challenges to humankind: failures of government (addressed above), climate change and artificial intelligence and robotics. These challenges are huge and need to be approached through all manner of frameworks including ethics.

Ethics in practice are a guide to conduct, setting out ways of thinking and doing what hopefully will lead to a better future. In the case of civilisation this is a problem, for civilisation is forever the horizon we cannot see and indeed can barely imagine. Civilisation is a constantly receding goal. Notions of civilisation in 2019 are different from those of 1919 and 1819, and presumably different from those which will obtain in 2119. Ethics have to change, at least to a degree, in order to keep up.

Of the challenges in question, climate change is perhaps the most discussed. In consequence there is a generally shared view that the end goal is environmental sustainability. The other two topics have not yet reached the same maturity of thinking. Guaranteed human rights for all might partly be the end goal of government, but does this necessarily imply democracy, and is democracy necessarily good? For that matter, what is democracy? Artificial intelligence and robotics are even more in their infancy in terms of public discussion. The core question here is how we humans can live in harmony with the next species emerging in the long march of evolution – our own progeny, the products of computing.

A lot more work needs to happen to bring ethics to a point where we can say it provides satisfactory answers to our questions. Fortunately, ethicists in climate change have been active for a long time already; I have a 1990 book by Roderick Nash, *The Rights of Nature*, (Sydney: Primavera Press) which is testament to that. Nash does not argue a case but he accepts it as given that "morality ought to include the relationship of humans to nature" (p. 4). If ethics for civilisation is our starting point in this discussion, the key question has to be one of value, that is, what value do we as humans attach to other creatures or other forms of life. Another approach is through the prism of rights, which Nash has made the theme of his book: what rights might other forms of life have?

The same sort of extended thinking can be applied to artificial intelligence and robotics. Some of us might struggle with the concept of jellyfish and stinging nettles having rights, so the idea of rights associated with drones and neural networks is a double challenge. If rights might be extended to other parts of the natural world, might they also be extended to the artificial world? This is a conversation I am not able

to even begin, except to say that Hal (in *2001: A Space Odyssey*) and R2-D2 and C-3PO should of course have rights. How they might be embraced within a broader concept of civilisation is another matter.

Conclusion

While atrocities, oppression and inequality persist, we are forced to admit that humankind in general is ethically very limited in its approach to life. We are a long way from any ideal that one could glory in, at least in the regulation of our own human affairs. Lacking a proper ethical foundation, we do not even have a proper vision for ourselves, let alone a larger vision for the planet and for other species. It seems to me that an ethic combining truth (or honesty), goodwill and commitment to constant improvement has to be a good start.

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

19 December 2019

Andrew Bush

The Trouble with Christmas

20 February 2020

Robert Bender (Humanist Society of Victoria)

Thomas Payne, the Enlightenment and the Rights of Man

19 March 2020

Lev Lafayette (Lightbringers)

Is Pantheism the Answer?

16 April 2020

John Noack (Carl Jung Society)

Galilean Folklore in Judaism and Christianity: Part

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 for instructions and links on accessing the SOFiA Facebook page)

SOFiA website: www.sof-in-australia.org. The big news is that the website has been completely rebuilt. Web Master Greg Spearritt has gone on a writing spree. I won't suggest any articles; but I encourage you to check it out – so easy to navigate.

SOFiA blog: www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php or via the website. I was taken by [Is religion about survival?](#) posted by Greg Spearritt. It explains that "much about religion can be framed by evolutionary psychology. In a word, it's about survival. The idea that we are primed to see agency even when it's not there makes sense and is at least plausible as an explanation for why humans are so enamoured of gods and spirits."

Facebook: Sea of Faith in Australia And, talking about survival, [Leslie Allan](#) shared a [post](#) that advertised a support group meeting, to be held 15 November 2019. It sounded interesting. Did anyone go? Here's the introduction: "If you've ever left a religion behind or are thinking about how your life would be like without religion, then please join us in Melbourne this Sunday morning for our next meeting of the *Ex-Religious Support Network (ESN)*. We'll be viewing and discussing a short video created by ex-Mormon, Chris Johnson. Come and hear his fascinating story and share your experiences on leaving religion."

Review

**Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia And The Birth Of
Agriculture,
By Bruce Pascoe*Reviewed by John Carr**

In recent months, the CBD Brisbane Group has devoted two meetings to reflecting on Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of Agriculture*. Pascoe's main claim is that historians have wrongly classified the Aboriginal people as 'hunters and gatherers'. (For background, see the accompanying boxed text.) Rather, he argues, like indigenous people in other parts of the world, they had developed a range of advanced agricultural and pastoral practices appropriate to the climate, landscape and indigenous plants and animals of their country. They were, he claims, "at the very least, in the early stages of an agricultural society".

The main evidence he presents for this claim are reports by early explorers and settlers, reports that they had seen extensive areas of reaped and stacked grains, stores of grains and tubers, and waterways that had been modified as large, complex traps for fish and eels. They also reported seeing housing that was more substantial than the stereotypic flimsy 'gunyahs' normally used to show what most, if not all, Aboriginal buildings were like. Some of the most detailed evidence of the existence of true agricultural activity comes from the diaries and reports of explorers Thomas Mitchell, Charles Sturt, George Grey, John Batman and George Robinson.

Mitchell, explorer and Surveyor-General, while responsible for some brutal treatment of Aboriginals, wrote lyrically of some of the fruits of Aboriginal agriculture that he had seen. Some explorers wrote of being rescued, fed and cared for by Aboriginal communities.

Many of the reports, including those of Mitchell and some of the early settlers, exhibit a remarkable paradox. A description of a thriving community is often followed by a gratuitous racist put-down. For example, the invention of an ingenious fishing machine was branded as proof of the inventor's

The term 'hunters and gatherers' was coined less than 100 years ago after archaeologists and other researchers had reached a consensus on the theory that a major stage in the history of *homo sapiens* had been the birth of agriculturalism. For hundreds of millennia, it was agreed, humans had led largely nomadic lives, hunting, fishing and collecting the fruit, root vegetables and grains available naturally in their locality. Some ten thousand years ago, in the area of the Middle East between the Tigris River and the Caucasus Mountains, an 'agricultural revolution' had taken place. This had led to groups settling down in one place to cultivate local plants and domesticate appropriate animals. The results included the development of towns, specialisation of work, invention of new technologies and a greater abundance of food, though of a more restricted variety. In a relatively short time, populations increased exponentially and the selective breeding of plants and animals usually provided enough food for the growing population. Social structures became more hierarchical and were dominated by elites; more efficient tools and weapons were made using stone and metals. The first writing systems were developed and religion, governance and education became more structured. These were seen as the defining characteristics of 'Civilisation'. And they saw that it was Good!

More recently, researchers have acknowledged that 'agricultural revolutions' had actually occurred independently in other places, including areas in China, America and New Guinea. Grudgingly, it was accepted that the indigenous peoples in many regions might have been, in their own ways, 'civilised'. It is also acknowledged that the revolution had brought many unwanted effects, some of which have proved deleterious and potentially catastrophic for humanity. Think social inequality and global over-population to the tune of almost eight billion people, and all that follows from them!

'laziness'. On 'discovering' and naming Australia Felix, Mitchell infamously gloated, "A land so inviting and still without inhabitants".

His vision for the future of the landscape was for neatly fenced fields, quietly grazing sheep and cattle, rows of cottages and a neo-Gothic village church with tower, spire and bell. And 'real' inhabitants! Evidence of any advanced indigenous culture was sometimes suppressed by settlers who wished to play up the many difficulties and dangers of pioneering in what was, for them, an alien environment.

One of the difficulties we now face in assessing the level of agriculture of pre-1788 inhabitants is that not much visible evidence survives. The indigenous land-owners were quickly driven from those parts of the continent attractive to the settlers, forests were cleared and the soft soils suitable for growing yams and other tubers were trampled hard by the hooves of sheep and cattle. The predominantly plant- and animal-based artifacts, such as dwellings and clothing, soon rotted or burnt. What has survived are stone tools and some of the substantial stone weirs and fish-traps. The massive middens where people had feasted on shell-fish for centuries may not speak of 'pastoralism', but they do point to long-established, settled communities.

Initially, publication of *Dark Emu* in 2014 did not attract a great deal of comment, either positive or negative, though its publication history suggests that it has gradually gained momentum. With the appearance of the 2018 edition, it has won a number of awards and an increasing number of advocates and detractors. (See, for example: <https://www.dark-emu-exposed.org/>) In the past week, News Corp journalist, Andrew Bolt, well-known for his attacks on perceived exaggerated claims of Aboriginal disadvantage, has written articles questioning the accuracy of Pascoe's claims. As he has with other Aboriginal activists, he questions whether Pascoe is, in fact, Aboriginal.

One aspect of Aboriginal land management that has generally been widely accepted for many years is their use of regular, selective, small-scale burning of forests and grasslands. This is the centerpiece of the argument that Pascoe puts forward in the second half of the book, that contemporary Australia can learn much from Aboriginal culture and practice. In the context of the present horrific drought and bushfire season, it is a case that is attracting wide support. Aboriginals lived sustainably in this, the driest continent, for at least 50,000 years. The European occupiers appear not to have had any understanding, let alone appreciation, of Aboriginal culture or of how benign their management of the environment had been. In two hundred years, crops and domestic animals unsuited to the climate and soils, over-cropping and over-stocking, widescale mining and the ever-widening spread of urban construction have destroyed much of the best land, some of it irrevocably.

Whether flawed by exaggerated claims or not, *Dark Emu* is an important book for all Australians and the claims made in it deserve our fair and balanced consideration.

* Pascoe, Bruce *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of agriculture*, Magabala Books, 2014; 2nd Edn 2018.

Regular Items

Science News

In line with the official broadening of SOFiA's interests, this little column has been renamed. The intersect between religion and science is one of perpetual interest, but philosophy, ethics and the arts also figure in scientific studies from time to time. Contemporary 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.

Universal music

Looking for universals and commonalities across cultures or religions can be fraught with danger. Arguably, it can contribute to downplaying, overlooking and even disrespecting genuine difference. The latest edition of *Science*, however, features two articles suggesting there may indeed be significant commonalities in music across the world.

University of Vienna researcher Tudor Popescu reflects positively on these articles:

Human musicality fundamentally rests on a small number of fixed pillars: hard-coded predispositions, afforded to us by the ancient physiological infrastructure of our shared biology. These 'musical pillars' are then 'seasoned' with the specifics of every individual culture, giving rise to the beautiful kaleidoscopic assortment that we find in world music.

Web reference:

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/11/191122113300.htm>

Justice for future humans

According to the IPCC, halving our greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 – just 11 years away now – gives us a one-in-two or

two-in-three chance of keeping global warming to 1.5 degrees. Every year we fail to act releases another 40 billion tonnes of CO2 that future generations will have to Hoover out of the atmosphere to save any corals or Arctic ice.

So, can human behaviour be changed in time? It's an issue recently discussed in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. There's some suggestion that reflecting on sacrifices others have made for us in the past may help people feel a greater moral obligation to future generations.

Web reference:

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/11/191120121145.htm>

See also:

<http://theconversation.com/why-protesters-should-be-wary-of-12-years-to-climate-breakdown-rhetoric-115489>

Ethics in the financial sector?

Best sit down for this one. New evidence from a large-sample study suggests that even in the world of big finance, ethics training actually affects behaviour for the better.

Web reference:

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/11/191121134517.htm>

Covet not they neighbour's... house

It does rather fit our instincts I think, but research from Iowa State University indicates people are more likely to be dissatisfied with their house if it is smaller than those of their neighbours.

Web reference:

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/08/190819164342.htm>

Postlude

Two more books on the Catholic Church

***The Dark Box: A Secret History of Confession*, by John Cornwell, 2014[†], and *Comment L'Amérique Veut Changer de Pape*, by Nicolas Senèze, 2019[‡].**

Reviewed by John Carr

The previous edition of *the SOFiA bulletin* carried a review of Frédéric Martel's *In the Closet of the Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy*, Bloomsbury, 2019.

Another French journalist, Nicolas Senèze, has written what might almost be considered a sequel to Martel's book. Unfortunately, it is still available only in French, *Comment L'Amérique Veut Changer de Pape*, but an English translation will surely follow. It will probably be called something like, "How America Wants to Change the Pope". In fact, Senèze does not claim that all Americans want to get rid of Pope Francis, only the ultra-conservative Catholic ones, some of whom were among the cast of *In the Closet*. The usual suspects, one might say.

In the meantime, SOFers seeking more information on the history and present state of the Catholic Church will probably find John Cornwell's *The Dark Box: The Secret History of Confession*, Profile Books, 2014 a worthwhile stop-gap.

As one would expect, it was written very much in the shadow of the revelations of worldwide systemic child abuse. Cornwell's exploration of the possible adverse effects of auricular confession to a Priest goes far beyond the issue of the Seal of the Confessional, which seems to have been the main focus in this country.

I think that most readers will be surprised to discover how often and how much the Sacrament of Confession has changed over the last millennium or so. Some of the most potentially harmful changes date only from 1910, when compulsory confession became a requirement for First Communion at age seven.

[†]Cornwell, John, *The Dark Box: A Secret History of Confession*, Profile Books, 2014

[‡]Senèze, Nicolas, *Comment L'Amérique Veut Changer de Pape*, Nicolas, Bayard, 2019.

Epilogue

SOFiA Travels

Greg Spearritt reports on behalf of a group of enthusiastic SOFiA Planners.

The story so far.

Trip 1: Carnarvon Gorge (QLD). Trip 2: The NSW Blue Mountains. Trip 3: Fraser

Island (QLD)

Now read on.

If you like travelling in company and are masochistic enough to enjoy bad puns, you might consider joining a bunch of us SOFers as we sample the delights of the Victorian goldfields and (at least for us Queenslanders) educate ourselves about the dubious ways of Southerners.

The trip will be over the five days of March 18 - 22 next year.

Depending on numbers we'll probably be car-sharing.

For now send expressions of interest to Greg Spearritt (best email to use: sofinau98@gmail.com) unless we've already heard from you.

We will need firm commitments by the second half of December 2019.

If you send an expression of interest we will email you the final deadline.

SOFiA Crossword #42



Christmas is coming
The goose is getting fat

Across

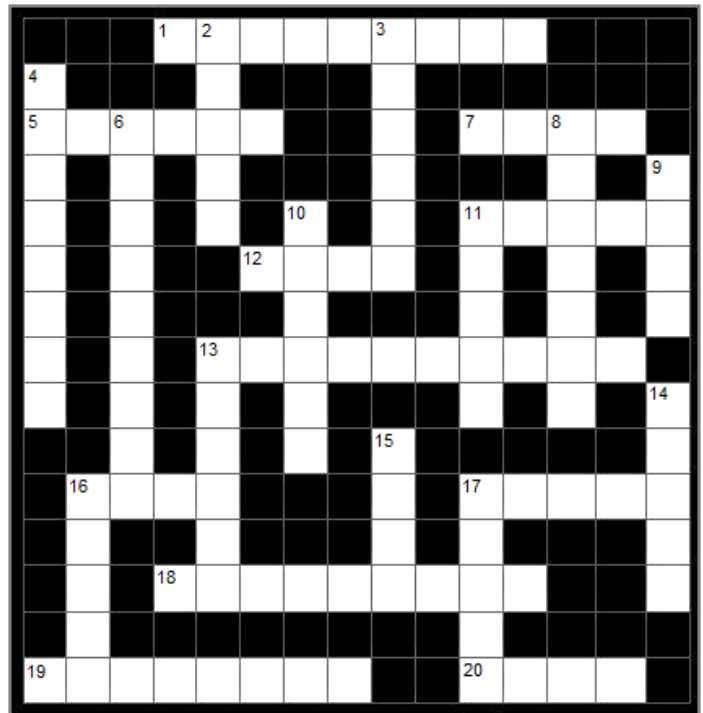
1. Nature of Mary's virginity, acc. to Luther, Zwingli and Wesley (*hint: Google 'Brothers of Jesus'*)
5. Christmas, prefigured
7. Apparently astute, generous home-visiting types
11. A song for inclusion in the local Mayor's Christmas do
12. Anticipated size of Australian Christmas retail sales in 2019, in billions according to Roy Morgan
13. Serenading while offering a 'wee drap'
16. Habitation of Santa's original prototype
17. Fat feller with a fetish for reward and punishment
18. Busiest time of the year for domestic violence incidents
19. The real Reason for the Season
20. Traditional European Christmas element making the Aussie Christmas a little surreal

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 Christmas theme made it easy at first — Santa of course, and the wise men (twice, one quite surprising) and what "...my true-love gave to me..." on the seventh day of Christmas. But then I struggled to find words I was sure I knew. I got them in the end
12A There seem to be many definitions of 'Christmas sales. There aren't many numbers that fit!

SOFiA Crossword #43 Prepared by Greg Spearritt



2. Boredom (likely effect of over-exposure to relatives at Christmas)
3. Number of Wise Men according to Eastern Orthodox (esp. Syriac) traditions
4. Canonical gospels ignorant of nativity story (4,4)
6. Alleged state in which Mary conceived her firstborn
8. Country of origin for the Christmas tree tradition
9. Response of Mary & Joe (acc. to Matthew) to the (wholly unhistorical) threat from Herod after Jesus was born
10. Artificial ice to spruce up the joint
11. Putative Reason for the Season
13. Common traditional Christmas ornament
14. Traditional gormadizory (is that the adjective?) practice on Christmas Day
15. Traditional Yuletide transfer for obligation or pleasure
16. Gifted resin extracted from a number of small, thorny tree species of the genus *Commiphora*
17. Gift for the seventh day of Christmas

13A Do you remember the old carol "Here we come a'nnnnnnnn among the leaves so green"
10D caught me unawares. I had not seen this as "artificial ice" before, but I see it now.
13D likewise caused me grief — not so much an ornament perhaps as a decoration.
For some questions it might help if you turn up your cynicism for a while!
But mainly just enjoy Greg's usual interestingly oblique views of common features.
Merry Christmas

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.....