

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

## SEA OF FAITH NETWORK

Newsletter No 5. . . . . December 1993

### National Conference

The Conference anticipated in our last Newsletter was so successful that it far exceeded all our expectations, being attended by 211 people. All the feedback has been very positive.

During the Conference the Sea of Faith Network (SOFN) was officially formed by a general meeting chaired by Ian Harris.

It was agreed that organization should be kept as simple as possible, that only individual, and not corporate, membership should be envisaged, and that membership fee should stand at \$10 per annum,

The Wellington SOFN ad hoc committee was asked to set up the Continuing Committee for 1993-4 from Wellington SOFN members, and this was to be responsible for the Programme for the 1994 Conference.

John Denny, Warden of Bryant Hall where the Conference was held, and local organizer of the Conference reported that there was likely to be a financial surplus. It was agreed that any surplus should form a Conference Fund for future Conference expenses. John and Gillian Denny were warmly thanked for the work they had put into the Conference. John's invitation to hold the 1994 Conference at the same place, September 2-4, was gratefully accepted and local arrangements were left in the hands of the Hamilton Committee.

The new Wellington Committee was asked to look at the possibility of a South Island Conference for 1995 or, alternatively, a biennial conference, interspersed with Regional Conferences.

### SOFN Statement of Identity

The Conference discussed the provisional Statement about the nature of the SOFN and gave approval to the following:

The Sea of Faith Network is an association of people who have a

common interest in the mode of non-dogmatic and human oriented religious thought and expression which

AFFIRMS the continuing importance of religious thought and practice as vehicle for awe and wonder and for the celebration of key social and spiritual values:

DRAWS freely upon our spiritual heritage without being bound by it;

PROMOTES the quest for meaning and fulfilment as human activity;

PROVIDES encouragement, stimulation and support in fellowship with others engaged in the quest.

The SOF Network itself has no creed. It draws its members from people of all faiths and from those with no attachment to religious institutions. It publishes a regular Newsletter, assists in the setting up of local discussion groups and intends to hold annual conferences.

The SOF Network takes its name from the phrase in Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach", which was used in the BBC television documentary and book The Sea of Faith, written and presented by Don Cupitt.

### SOFN Steering Committee is now:

Ian Harris (chairperson),  
Jill Harris (secretary),  
Jane Griffith (membership secretary and treasurer),  
Lloyd Geering (newsletter editor),  
Marion Blackburn, David Simmers and Ian Crabtree. (Newsletter Distribution).

Jane Griffith's address is:  
82 Kinghorne St., Strathmore,  
WELLINGTON 6003.

Address of Ian and Jill Harris: 129 Grafton Rd., Toseneath, WELLINGTON

### Conference Workshops

The various Workshops held at Conference were invited to write a short report for the Newsletter to

give non-participants some idea of what they had done. Here they are.

(i) Science and the Search for Meaning, based on a video recording of the D.O. Williams Memorial Lecture for Lifeline by Darryl Reaney, May 30, 1993.

Darryl Reaney shares the view that science and religion can now engage in a new alliance because science is no longer ultimately reductionist and deterministic. We understand complexity best when we interpret it holistically from the top down. He invites us to look with awe and wonder at the evolution of consciousness in the cosmos and to find there deep meaning for our lives. This evolution will continue provided that humankind does not cause its own extinction. He suggests a leap in human consciousness may be imminent, perhaps from 3D to 4D space-time consciousness in which our whole awareness of time will change radically; hence the title of his recent book The Death of Forever. He further suggests that we ourselves influence the evolutionary process, positively and negatively, by our attitudes, thoughts and actions. Everybody matters; through every selfish or unselfish act, every act of compassion, every smile, we all lose or gain something.

The language of this video is essentially that of process or creation theology - the universe abounds in creativity - and will appeal to many who are uncomfortable with traditional religious language. About 40 SOFN participants watched it. Their responses were similar to those of other groups to whom it has been shown. A few were sceptical about Reaney's ideas, particularly his drawing on mysticism, but most seemed to be left appreciative and quietly reflective.

The video is available from Lifeline, PO Box 74010, Market Road, Auckland.

(ii) Are gods less real than trees? This began with the story (as told in Margaret Orbell's Natural World of the

Maori) of Tane's relation to trees, creatures of the land, and humans, as creator and as living presence within them. "How real is Tane?", we asked ourselves. Did Maori, following traditional myths and karakia, observing the tapus, and experiencing the natural world under those interpretations and evaluations, live in any less real a world than we do?

And Tane (or any other god) may be real today, for those who share similar networks of discourse, practice and spirituality. Would-be metaphysical distinctions like realist or non-realist, "out there" or "within us", cannot do justice to what is actually going on as people negotiate and re-negotiate their individual and social realities and values, in response to whatever they meet with in life. It is doubtful whether any uniform global culture has emerged or ever will, and it would surely not be a good thing if it did,

(Theological thinking done this way reflects "internal realism" or "pragmatic realism" of philosophers like Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty. See also the Gifford Lectures of Michael Arbib and Mary Hesse, The Construction of Reality, 1986)

(iii) Spirituality and Education

"Mummy, what is spirituality?"

"Ask your father. He'll be able to tell you".

"I did and he said to ask you"

"Well..it's something good inside you".

"Is it something I ate?"

"No, not that sort of good. It isn't anything you can see or touch".

"Can you hear it?"

"No, you can't hear it either".

"How did it get there?"

"You just kind of know what's good - like helping people and making them happy".

"Is it in everyone?"

"Yes, I think it is".

"Is it in Peter? He pushed me over and kicked me".

"He shouldn't have done that. What did you do to him first?"

"I didn't do anything. I only leaned on him gently".

"Try not to lean on him next time".

"Does it get bigger when I grow?"

"Yes, I suppose it does. If you think about it and try to do good things".

"Daddy's bigger than you. Does he have more spirituality?"

"Sometimes I think he does and sometimes I think he doesn't".

"I don't think I want more spirituality. Then I'd have to dry the dishes more often".

"You don't have to do the good things. You decide you want to."

"Mummy, I still don't think I know what spirituality is."

"You do know a little. Think about and talk about it and do the good things and you'll find out more. Daddy and I keep finding out too".

(iv) What are the Chief Religious Issues for today?"

"We each shared where we were in our own Sea of Faith. Almost without exception a very uncomfortable relationship with the Church was declared - if there was any relationship surviving.

People said, "I am angry at the church's peddling of outworn ideas, cliches and liturgical practices".

"It lacks intellectual honesty. It continues to teach or imply beliefs that it knows are no longer tenable'. 'And the church discourages an open questioning of its teaching'.

A major religious issue was how to bring about change in the church. Prospects for this were bleak. The only clear way ahead was to pursue our own spiritual journey.

On our faith journey is there any objective authority to guide or correct the direction we are taking? The unanimous answer was a vehement "No!" And there are no gurus. Truth is self-authenticating but we need to keep in touch with others in the Sea of Faith or as we face the whirlwind.

(v) Up the Creek without a Paddle? - Doing without transcendence.

Someone observed after this workshop that we were not only left up the creek without a paddle - there was a dirty great hole in the canoe as well. As we struggled to cope without any absolute certainties, we found ourselves swimming in a flood of different perspectives. The old oppositional worlds of duality spread out into whirlpools of relativity. If supernatural authority were no longer credible, how might we create value for ourselves? Some of us got buffeted by Realism and Non-Realism, and were rescued later in the day when Don Cupitt explained these terms in the BBC video.

In this workshop, we discovered how important is the process by which we meet. With more than twenty people crowded into a small room, some felt encouraged to speak, but others, particularly some women, felt inhibited and even disempowered from doing so. These ones took the opportunity to move to another room where they could be more comfortable, and we all met together briefly at the end. For this workshop facilitator, the message was that learning to meet co-operatively, developing sensitive listening skills, becoming aware of the power of language (is it sexist, racist, classist, exclusive?) and building up relationships of trust are necessary prerequisites to all the story-telling we must do together to resource our religious life.

(vi) Do we experience a God-shaped hole?

It did seem that most of the participants in the workshop, as indeed most of those involved in the Conference, were experiencing some kind of vacuum or "God-shaped hole" and were going through what might be called a transitory phase.

For one reason or another their early concepts of God had lost or were losing their relevance and

meaningfulness. For some it was because of the patriarchal nature of their early concept of God; for others, because of personal loss or tragedy, they could no longer maintain a concept of God that was both benevolent and all powerful.

I was the only one in the workshop that had never as an adult had a belief in God, but had, some time ago, and to a lesser degree now, experienced a similar vacuum. My vacuum was caused by abandoning an objective view of the world. It tried to point out that they may be in the process of abandoning an objective view of God, and to do so would require doing it in three stages, firstly by de-gendering God, secondly by de-personalizing God, and thirdly by de-objectifying God, the third stage being the most difficult to do. I share three lines of poetry.

"I sought my God, but my God hid from me".

I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see.

I sought my fellows and found all three".

#### Books of Interest

Karen Armstrong, A History of God, Heineman, 1993, 511 pp., \$59.95

Karen Armstrong has been a freelance scholar and broadcaster since 1982, having published a bestseller in 1981, describing her seven years as a Roman Catholic nun.

This book describes the way in which God has been perceived over a period of 4000 years, from Abraham to the present. It sketches the rise of monotheism in the Middle East and then traces the changes which took place in Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought. I know of no other book which has attempted anything like this. For anyone in the modern world who wants to talk about God this ought to be required preparatory reading.

In her two final chapters she observes that in Europe "there is a growing blankness where God once existed in the human consciousness" and discusses whether God has a future

or whether humans will find a new focus of meaning.

The book has already been translated into several other languages and is to be issued in paperback in 1994. She was invited to give a lecture at the SoF Conference in Leicester this year; we now have an audio-tape of that lecture.

Walter Truett Anderson, Reality Isn't What It used to Be, Harper Collins, 1990, \$24.95 (Try Unity Books, or your local Library.)

(Reviewed by Gillian Denny)

Despite the title and rather lurid cover, this little book is an excellent overview of the post-modern world. It is easy to read (not always the case with American authors!) and shows a breadth of scholarship and knowledge of the modern world that marks the author as a 'generalist' in the best sense of that word.

Walter Anderson attempts to show how reality is a social construction by looking first at how societies created and maintained realities in the past. He then describes how post-modern ideas reveal the workings of the reality creating machine, and how new realities are created by our cultural and political worlds.

Describing himself as a 'constructivist'- one who holds the world is an ever changing social creation - he ranges across science, literature, politics and religion to contrast his position with what he describes as the 'objectivist' position.

Anthony Freeman, God in Us, A Case for Christian Humanism, SCM, 1993, 87 pp., (Will be available shortly from Epworth Bookshop, 75 Taranaki St., Wellington. approx. \$29)

Anthony Freeman is an Anglican priest and a member of the UK Sea of Faith Network. At the SoF Conference in 1992 he had a "conversion experience" in which he felt delivered from a Christianity which had become oppressive to one which brought a new

sense of freedom and joy. He began to work this through with his congregation and this book is the result.

But when he submitted the manuscript to his bishop, the latter warned him he would be dismissed from his post as Bishop's Adviser on Continuing Ministerial Education in the Diocese if he went ahead with publishing it. Freeman has now been dismissed but allowed to continue as a priest for one year in the hope that he will relent. His dismissal caused a public stir in UK, where it became a topic for talk-back radio and BBC documentaries.

This is a very lucid and honest account of the faith Freeman now experiences after he has become free from the traditional (or objectivist) view of God. He says, "Only when I had accepted that 'I do not believe in God' (my old God) was I free to discover how with integrity I could still say 'I believe in God' understood in a new way". All those linked with the SOFN are likely to find this a very helpful book.

David A. Hart, Faith in Doubt, Mowbray, 1993, 146 pp.(UK£8.99) A book by another member of the UK Sea of Faith Network.(My advance copy arrived while I was writing this Newsletter!)

Epworth Bookshop already have it on order and the publishers are offering a discount to SOFN members.

Hart is the Anglican Chaplain to Loughborough University and a member of the SoF Steering Committee. He believes "a traditional external deity outside our universe can be of no further use to us at this stage of our religious development", and argues that the Christian heritage must now be radically re-interpreted from a non-realist (non-objectivist) perspective. So his book discusses what it "means to hold a non-realist faith, to believe that language about God is really about the self, and religious belief is part of the creativity we all share in as part of our humanity".

Ruth Robinson, Life Was Never the Same, BBC Talk, one of a series of five, marking the Thirtieth Anniversary of the publication of (her husband) John Robinson's Honest to God.

Some SOFN Members will have heard all five Talks and Alan Goss has supplied the following brief notes of her talk:

"Religious beliefs are human constructions. Language about God gives no information other than about ourselves. It speaks only about experience of the world and our response to it...We each have to find our own way but take with us what is precious to us from our tradition. I start from the Christian tradition, but I don't carry with me all the proper (!) Christian credentials:-

(a) I don't believe that the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible..is a human, though almost exclusively male, story..full of marvellous poetry, insight and wisdom.

(b) I don't believe in a Father in Heaven who sent his son to live as a man or that this son's cruel death was at all necessary to cancel our human sin.

(c) I don't know what happened to the body of Jesus, but I do know that where there is love, death and loss can release a new creative energy.

(d) I don't believe that Jesus was essentially different from other human beings, or that his is the only self-sacrifice that matters, or that Jesus experienced the intimacy of God more than anyone else. What happened in the life of Christ happens always and everywhere.

The real story is more than the record of events that happened 2000 years ago. The story is the drama of being human.

God is not separate from humanity. We are responsible for doing the God-work. Christ is the true self in each of us and in each other. Human compassion and self-giving love is able to transform the world. That is

the Christian hope. Jesus articulated and focused this vision. It required a shift of consciousness which must happen in us too. He forced us to look at things differently; life was never the same again."

#### Discussion Groups

Local SOFN groups have formed, or are forming at Kaitaia, North Shore, Remuera, Hamilton, Kati Kati, Tauranga, Te Kuiti, Napier, Wanganui, Masterton, Kapiti, Mana, Lower Hutt, Wellington, Christchurch, Timaru and Dunedin.

#### Next Newsletter

will probably be issued February-March and will contain:  
(i) Advance notice of Conference  
(ii) News of discussion groups  
(iii) List of resource material by way of tapes (audio and video), useful for group discussion.  
(iv) News of books.

The Editor will welcome all news items from groups, short book reviews, and any short articles of interest to the SOFN.

This Newsletter will go to 330 addresses. As many of these are husband and wife teams, there are now about 500 linked with the SOFN.

All subscriptions and enquiries about membership of the SOFN should go to Jane Griffith (See address above).

Jane and Roy Griffith should appear in the Guinness Book of Records as the first to attend 2 SOFN Conferences in one year, Leicester, UK, in July and Hamilton, NZ, in September.

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