

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK

Newsletter No 7.

May 1994

2nd National Conference

Plans are now well advanced for the Conference at Bryant Hall, Hamilton, September 2-4. Two registration forms are included with this newsletter. Pass one on. Please note that due to limited space registrations will be limited to 250. Since 211 came last year, and, since the membership of the SOFN has now risen to 400, all who intend to come to the Conference are urged to register without delay.

Steering Committee

A simple 6-panel leaflet has been printed to make clear to prospective members the nature and purpose of the Sea of Faith Network. A copy is enclosed for your information and you may be able to pass it on to an interested enquirer. Further copies are available from the Secretary.

The 1995 Annual Conference is likely to be held in the Wellington province and some tentative arrangements are already being made.

Research Questionnaire

As mentioned in Newsletter No. 6, you here receive a questionnaire from a research student Hugo Vitalis. This is entirely voluntary and anonymous but it has the full support of the Steering Committee as it will help the SOFN to plan future activities to best suit the needs of its members.

Local Study Groups.

In addition to the groups recorded in Newsletter No. 6, John Eaddy, 58 Liardet St., New Plymouth, reports that there are two discussion groups in New Plymouth and any interested in joining are welcome to contact him.

Murray Jenkins reports that the Remuera Group is discussing Thirty Years of Honesty.

Terry Douglas reports that there have been two local meetings of the SOFN in Wanganui this year (attended by 30-40). It will now meet on "the third Sunday of each month at 3 pm in the Society of Friends Meeting House, 256 Wickstead St., Wanganui. (Address any enquiries to Terry Douglas, phone 345-6483).

St. Ninian's Presbyterian Church, Christchurch, which has provided the centre for the Christchurch group, recently organized a full day seminar for the public at Christchurch Girls' High School on the topic, "Christianity in a Post-Christian Age". It was attended by nearly 400.

News from SoF Network (UK)

The theme for the 1994 Conference at Leicester is "The implications, at both a personal and a Network level, of viewing and holding religious faith as a human creation". Lecturers this year will include Don Cupitt and Michael Jacobs (Director of Pastoral Care and Counselling for the Anglican Dioceses of Derby, Lincoln and Southwell).

A well balanced three-page article entitled "God in the Dock" appeared in April 1 edition of New Statesman & Society. It discussed the rise of the SoF Network in UK and the circumstances surrounding the dismissal of Anthony Freeman after publishing his book God in Us: A Case for Christian Humanism. (See Newsletters 5,6) Freeman was at first dismissed by his Bishop only from his teaching post in the diocese but has subsequently been asked by his bishop to vacate his parish before the end of July. His case

has aroused a good deal of public debate. There has been strong demand, from bishops and others, for him to resign from the priesthood, while a group of 22 clerics have written in strong support asserting that his views "are held by many in the church, and by many who have left the church because they find no space in it to explore such ideas".

Traditionalists maintain that Christianity stands or falls with belief in God understood as a personal, supreme and supernatural being; they are incensed at the suggestion that religion is a human creation. But, as John Challenor, an SoF member and former Catholic priest, observes, "The idea of man-made religion isn't new. Christians always thought that Hindus and Buddhists had made up their religions. We just assumed that our own religion was an exception to the rule".

Thus the transition from traditional Christianity to that embraced by Anthony Freeman and others may be interpreted as the abandonment of the exclusiveness, or religious chauvinism, which has long characterized traditional Christian claims.

Sea of Faith and Humanism

Many ask the question of where the dividing line is, if any, between the religious stance of the SOFN and that of humanism, particularly as Anthony Freeman sub-titled his book "A Case for Christian Humanism".

The short answer is that, if there is a line, it is a very fine one. A longer and more adequate answer can be given by looking at the origin and changing nature of the term "humanism".

"Humanist" first came into use at the Renaissance when the revival of interest in the

ancient cultures of Greece and Rome began to turn people's attention away from heavenly matters to earthly matters. It's the reason why classical studies became known as the "Humanities", a term now more widely used of all the humanly-based Arts subjects. Petrarch, Nicholas of Cusa, Pico della Mirandola (author of On the Dignity of Man), Erasmus, Catholic Thomas More and Protestant Philip Melancthon, were all humanists. They did not deny the reality of God but they adopted a much more positive attitude to the human condition than had prevailed previously.

The advance of this humanist emphasis in Christian thought was halted by the bitter struggle between Catholic and Protestant, following the Reformation, but it survived in literature and drama. Humanism continued to spread through the essays of Montaigne, the plays of Shakespeare ("What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!...in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!"), and in the poems of Alexander Pope (in his Essay on Man we read, "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan: the proper study of mankind is man").

It was not until the Enlightenment that humanism surfaced again in philosophy and religious thought, particularly in John Locke's Essay concerning Human Understanding, and Reasonableness of Christianity, and in Tindal's Christianity as Old as Creation. The humanist base from which these Enlightenment thinkers were now starting enabled them to become critical of the traditional ideas about God. They abandoned the concept of divine revelation and acknowledged the human origin of all our knowledge. Only very few became atheists but theism (belief in a personal God) was replaced by deism

(belief in God as the First Cause or Creator).

The freedom to think for oneself and to be critical of past tradition, which thus first surfaced at the Enlightenment, gathered considerable momentum in the 19th century; many aspects of social life became emancipated from ecclesiastical control. Because of this power struggle between the new and the old it was not the term "humanist" which was chiefly used but such terms as "secularist" and "rationalist".

The Unitarians, who became a very significant force in the 19th century can be described as religious humanists. They were largely responsible for the revival of the term "humanist" and the promulgation of the Humanist Manifesto I in 1933. This defines religion as consisting "of those actions, purposes and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious". It consistently speaks of "religious humanism", interpreting it to mean that "Man is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement".

Forty years the term humanist was coming to be preferred to secularist and rationalist. Humanist Manifesto II was signed by 114 prominent people and endorsed by many others. This is longer and more critical of the word religion than was Manifesto I, saying that "dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species". It acknowledges that some humanists "believe we should reinterpret traditional religions and reinvest them with meanings appropriate to the current situation". But it warns

that "such redefinitions often perpetuate old dependencies and escapisms and easily become obscurantist" at a time when "we need radically new human purposes and goals".

It is useful to draw a distinction between humanism (as a general cultural trend) and Humanism (as an ideological label). The former is increasingly influencing the whole world today; it is a mark of the emerging global culture. Many people are humanist without knowing it. But Humanism, as an ideology and a self-chosen label, is more specific even though it covers a wide spectrum from Unitarians and other religious Humanists, at one end, to militantly secular Humanists, at the other. It is at the former end of this spectrum that the Sea of Faith most comfortably fits.

Overseas Visitors

Bishop John Spong will be in New Zealand in July. Watch out for any public lecture in your area. In Wellington he will give lunch-hour lectures at St. Andrew's-on-the-Terrace on Thursday, Friday, July 21, 22 and participate in a Saturday seminar on "Resurrection: Myth or Reality?", at Victoria University on July 23.

Karen Armstrong, author of A History of God has been invited to New Zealand. A warm and gracious reply has been received, regretting that commitments prevent her accepting before the end of 1995. It is hoped she may be enticed by 1996.

Books of interest.

Some have asked if Honest to God is still in print. Yes! the last printing by SCM Press was the 22nd, in 1991.

Resurrection: Myth or Reality? by John Shelby Spong, HarperCollins (\$27.95). (This review was written for the

Dominion by Lloyd Geering)

John Spong, a provocative American Anglican Bishop, devoted his last book to "Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism". This one could be called "Rescuing the Resurrection of Jesus from the Literalists". He asserts that if Christians insist on interpreting the resurrection within a literalist framework then they "doom Easter's truth to the death of irrelevance".

Christian orthodoxy currently claims that Christianity stands or falls on the truth of the resurrection. But what is meant by the words "Jesus is risen!"?

Easter faith for Spong is essentially about personal experience - the revival of hope and the overcoming of despair; in this respect (he maintains) there is no essential difference between the experience of the disciples at the first Easter and that of Christians today. It is the inner experience which was, and still is, the reality of the resurrection.

The accounts of the empty tomb along with the other Easter stories in the New Testament are the pious legends in which the first Christians expressed their experience; they are not historical reports of what gave rise to it.

Spong insists these stories should be understood in terms of midrash, the ancient Jewish method of reworking ancient religious themes in new contexts. Because midrash is symbolic and fictional in character it is wrong for moderns to ask the question, "Did it really happen that way?". Rather we should ask - What was the experience of the first disciples which led them to speak in this way?

Spong sets out to answer that question. After thoroughly examining all the relevant biblical texts, and finding some

basic clues, very tentatively he constructs the Easter moment.

Much of what Spong says has already appeared in academic books. Nearly fifty years ago Rudolf Bultmann, perhaps the most famous New Testament scholar of the century, asserted that the resurrection of Jesus referred not to an historical event but to Christian experience.

Unlike many of the scholarly books, however, this is eminently readable for the non-specialist. Writing with the same vigour, clarity and sense of urgency with which he speaks, Spong invites his readers to join him in his search for the origins of Christianity. The search has become the Bishop's own confession of faith.

New Books announced by SCM, which may be special interest to the SOFN. Short reviews may appear in a later Newsletter, once they have reached NZ. Stephen Ross White, Don Cupitt and the Future of Christian Doctrine, (12.50 pounds). White, though critical of Cupitt, sees him as a major theological figure who has been unjustly neglected.

Susan Durber and Heather Walton, (Eds.), Silence in Heaven, (9.95 pounds). Contributions of British women to feminist theology and the practice of preaching.

Sally McFague, The Body of God: An Ecological Theology, (\$53.00, now available at Epworth). A theology developed with particular emphasis on feminist and ecological concerns.

The next newsletter is planned for July. Any material or news you have to offer should be sent to the Editor:

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