

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

## SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NZ)

NEWSLETTER 15

March 1996

### SOFN Constitution

Our thanks to nine members of the Network who wrote in with suggestions on the draft constitution. The Steering Committee has considered them carefully, and the revised draft has gone to a lawyer for checking. The final version will be sent out with the July Newsletter along with voting papers. Since not all members can be present at the Conference, provision is being made for a postal ballot by financial members of the Network to express approval or disapproval. These will need to be returned before the Annual General Meeting in Dunedin in August.

### Dunedin Conference August 23-25, 1996.

Plans are now well advanced. The Steering Committee recently had a fruitful telephone conference with the Dunedin Arrangements Committee. Don Cupitt had been hoping to take up our invitation but, unfortunately, owing to his health, he has had to decline. Key-note speakers are still being arranged but one will definitely be Professor Charles Birch of Sydney, Emeritus Professor of Biology of Sydney University, who in 1990 was awarded the Templeton Prize for progress in religion and who is the author of Confronting the Future, On Purpose, Regaining Compassion and Feelings. A very interesting series of workshops is also being planned. To get the cheapest air fares you are recommended to make early bookings. Enrolment forms will be sent out in the May Newsletter.

### Holy Land Tour

About a dozen members of the SOFN will be accompanying Elaine and Lloyd Geering on a 22-day tour through Jordan, Syria and Israel in April-May.

### Sea of Faith World Wide Web Site

The Sea of Faith Network in the UK is setting-up a World Wide Web home page and they plan to have it operating by the end of March. They have kindly invited us to provide material and contact names. The NZ Steering Committee has decided that the name and address of only our national secretary, Jane Griffith, will be posted on this Web site and that Jane will forward requests to appropriate branch contacts. The reason for this is that the subject of religion has been known to attract some unusual points of view expressed in some unusual ways. By nominating only Jane we narrow the target while still providing for the needs of appropriate enquirers.

We'll keep you posted about progress but, if you already have Internet e-mail access, you might like to contact Ralph Pannett at:

[pannett@flagstaf.wgtn.planet.co.nz](mailto:pannett@flagstaf.wgtn.planet.co.nz)

with a view to getting on the mailing list for SOFNET — an e-mail discussion medium for SOFers in NZ, the UK and the USA.

### News from Branch Groups

#### Mana-Wairarapa

Our second combined seminar will be held on Saturday and Sunday, 30-31 March 1996 at Fredric Wallis House, Lower Hutt.

The theme: **How come Paul's new myth gripped the world?** Other questions include: Where did Christianity come from? How different do people think today? What can this mean in practice? Key contributors include: Barrie Allom, Graham Armstrong, Adam Floyd, Barbara and Paul Morreau, Patricia Rodger, Irvine Roxburgh. At this stage there are a few vacancies. You would be welcome to join us. Contact: Graham Armstrong, 8 Cluny Road, Plimmerton, Ph. 04-2339-498.

### **Christchurch.**

A barbecue at Kirwee attended by 28 started the year's activities. Thereafter they meet in two locations on different evenings, finally combining on March 22, to study and discuss: **"Morality/ Values/ Ethics, are they absolute? Why do we need them? How are they formed and instilled?"**

### **Tauranga**

Drawn together by a common interest in current religious thinking and increasingly strengthened by fellowship the Tauranga Group is in good heart with about fourteen people attending our monthly meetings. We are almost through a study of Crisis in the Christian Way, which taken over a few nights is proving a very worthwhile experience.

The Te Puke SOF Group recently hosted a seminar — **"Understanding God in the 21st Century"** led by Ian Harris, which proved to be very good.

### **Auckland**

Members of the Auckland branch discussed Don Cupitt's paper The Dual Agenda which was read at the 1995 Conference. Edward Fenn summarised the dual agenda as:

1. A message for the Churches "that they must embrace non-realism right away" that is, "all statements about God are symbolic including the statement that God exists". All religion has a human history.

2. A message to us personally. In the light of the above how do we wish to live out our lives in this humanly constructed world? What do we need to shape our future, carry our values, give us a language to debate the ultimate questions of life?

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## **Books of Interest**

► By Henryk Skolimowski, A Sacred Place to Dwell, Element, 1993, pp.148, approx. \$34, and The Participatory Mind, Arkana, Penguin, 1994, pp.395, \$24.95

I am grateful to Aline Pengelly for drawing my attention to the author of these two books, who is Professor of Ecological Philosophy at the University of Lodz, Poland. The first book explores forms of spirituality consonant with the ecological age we are now entering. Out of a wide and an

appreciative knowledge of the many cultural traditions of the world, he sets out to lead the reader to a new conception of divinity, a new conception of our responsibility as co-creators with the universe/evolution/God, a new understanding of ethics and an interpretation for our times of the vision of St. Francis. He does this by leading the reader into the spiritual implications of the ecological age we are entering and expounds what he calls ecological consciousness. This in turn will lead to new forms of spirituality. He is critical of the impersonal and mechanistic character of science, the inadequacies of which are now beginning to show up. He draws from other spiritual traditions as well as the Christian past. Most who share the concerns of the Sea of Faith Network will find his writing not only congenial but very much to the point.

**Lloyd Geering**

► Solar Ethics, SCM, 1995, 71pp. (approx. \$28). This is Don Cupitt's latest book. The title and theme are explained by the fact that the sun is used as metaphor for the understanding of human existence. Just as the sun has no inner life of its own but exists simply as an outpouring of itself, so we human beings have no being apart from our life. By giving up all notions of a life after death and also of a death after life, we must learn to fuse life and death into one, just as the sun does. Solar ethics is said to free us from the illusory dualities of the past, where our inner subjective world was contrasted with the outer physical world, and enables us to live in the one and only real world pursuing a way of life which may be called religious eco-humanism. This book, though quite short, is not as lucid as some of Cupitt's earlier books. It does not make for easy reading but does repay the effort to ponder it.

**Lloyd Geering**

► The Future of God, Samantha Trenoweth, Millennium Books, \$29.95 (A review prepared for The Evening Post).

This is not a theological book in any traditional sense, but a very interesting and well written account of the "personal spiritual adventures" of thirteen quite diverse persons. The sub-title description of them as "eminent thinkers" could well be questioned,

though some certainly warrant that title. But they all show a creative and pioneering spirit.

The author has personally interviewed them all, often more than once, and, in using much verbatim material to unfold their stories, she has shown considerable skill in weaving their comments together into a unified and very readable format.

The very diversity of her subjects would lead one to expect that they have little in common, for only a few are internationally well-known. They include the Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhism, a Jewish rabbi, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, ex-Dominican priest Matthew Fox, an agnostic physicist, a midwife, a physician, an Australian aboriginal poet and a North American Indian, now an actor and song-writer.

So why did the author choose them? She is a journalist, reared on the "borderline between agnosticism and Protestantism". For some years she has been making her own spiritual pilgrimage and these are the people from whom she has learned most. She fully acknowledges that her book is a very personal exploration and that each person she describes "represents a stopover en route" to her own spiritual goals.

At the same time she believes these people illustrate how mainstream religious

thought will be shaped in the years to come. The spirituality of the future will, paradoxically, display both diversity and unity. For, in spite of the variety of cultural background and professional interests, there are some common human interests and spiritual values shared by these people.

In these post-Christian times following the "death of God" (as traditionally conceived), the word "God" continues to be (as it already was in the past) a symbol of personal spirituality.

The values which motivate a person to pursue a particular destiny are that person's god (to borrow words from Martin Luther). This is reflected in the somewhat provocative title. In the stories of these people we are presented with a microcosm of the God the future.

#### **Lloyd Geering**

► Does the universe show signs that it was *designed* to produce human consciousness? Or did our thoughts, culture, artworks and spirituality all arise spontaneously out of matter in automatic processes that led inevitably from the hydrogen atom, through self organising systems to human consciousness? Lloyd Geering leaves us with the second option as the most likely in his God and the New Physics (St. Andrew's Trust 1995, pp.50 \$10)

In helping us to come to terms with the new physics (viz. what they started teaching *after* we left college) Lloyd takes us through the subatomic "micro-world" (right down to 36 orders of magnitude smaller than we are) and into the cosmological "mega-world" (24 orders greater) and then returns us to the only thing that we *can* know with certainty — our own consciousness. But it is at that point that the "old" physics runs out of explanations — it doesn't *account* for consciousness and, in fact, can proceed only by *ignoring* consciousness.

Lloyd deals with the physicists' new accommodation with God, one that arose inevitably out of the ambition to propose a "Theory of Everything" — something that belief in the traditional God of the theists provided for the first 19 Christian centuries and for 10 or so Jewish centuries before.

He shows that new *scientific* knowledge requires us to acknowledge that "religion

### **Situation Ethics**

Only one 'thing' is intrinsically good;  
namely love: nothing else at all.

The ruling norm of Christian  
decision is love: nothing else.

Love and justice are the same, for  
justice is love distributed, nothing else.

Love wills the neighbor's good  
whether we like him or not.

Only the end justifies the means,  
nothing else.

Love's decisions are made  
situationally, not prescriptively.

Joseph Fletcher Situation Ethics  
(chapter themes)



and science, faith and knowledge are no longer in isolated compartments."

On the way he tantalises us with a sort of cosmic geometric progression: it takes 10 billion *atoms* to make a bacterium, 10 billion *cells* to make a conscious brain, and maybe, just maybe, 10 billion *people* in efficient contact (he cites the Internet as a possible mechanism) to realise Teilhard de Chardin's global consciousness.

In the new view of what underlies "solid" matter, of what may have been the origin of the universe and what may be its ultimate fate, and how we account for human consciousness, Descartes is sent packing: after all it was he who provided the dualistic paradigm that nurtured Newton's meccano-set universe, Marx's deterministic view of history and the obsession with market forces exhibited by today's economists. But Lloyd welcomes (among a large cast of others) Heisenberg for giving us certainty from Uncertainty; the inventors of chaos theory for paving the way to complex systems; and Martin Buber for giving us the "I-Thou" model of the spirit *between*.

Though the traditional God of Jew, Christian and Muslim is "pitifully minute relative to the Einsteinian universe" (were you, dear reader, like this reviewer, seduced by J. B. Phillips' *Your God Is Too Small?*), even physicists are finding that "the most basic religious term in our culture, God, proves to be a useful starting point for discussing the interface between the new cosmology and the value and purpose of human existence."

In *God and The New Physics*, Lloyd Geering demonstrates that probably there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in any philosophy to date — but, watch this space.

**Noel Cheer**

## More 1995 Conference Workshops

Jane Griffith introduced her topic "*The Sea of Faith: Towards 2000*" by giving us some of Hugh Vitalis' findings found in his unpublished M.A. thesis *The Sea Of Faith: A*

Non-Realist Alternative To Christian Realism. It emerged from discussion that:

- The Newsletter is of vital importance.
- The Conference also is vital to give the network a certain cohesion

Questions:

- Are we to be *issue* or *leadership* oriented?
- Could ecological concern be a link with younger generations? Could it provide the universal focus we look for?

The group stressed the importance of the autonomy of local groups.

A "self-confessed actor from an early age", **Robin Lane**, very ably encouraged the five rather hesitant participants in his workshop, "*A Pakeha Looks At The Maui Stories*". They became a lively, energetic group of players who very quickly forgot many of their inhibitions.

The three-part session started with a talk about the history of some of the world's great oral traditions. This was followed by the participants recalling the myths or fragments of myths about the life of Maui, from the separation of Rangi and Papa through to his death.

The story of Maui fishing up the North Island was the one chosen for exploration. It was first told as a group story-telling exercise, before it was put into action in the form of a psychodrama which concluded with five bodies lying on the floor portraying a very realistic outline of the North Island.

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## Next Newsletter

The next Newsletter is planned for May, 1996. As Lloyd Geering will be overseas from April until early August, any contributions or news you have to offer should be sent to the other joint editor, Noel Cheer at 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay. Noel's phone number is 04-236-7533.

He especially welcomes copy on floppy disk (he promises to return them!) or sent via Internet to [cheer@vnet.ibm.com](mailto:cheer@vnet.ibm.com)

But paper copy is welcome too!

### "An Honest God Is The Noblest Work Of Man"

Robert G Ingersoll (1833-1899) US Lawyer and agnostic. Probably a modification of Alexander Pope's "An honest man's the noblest work of God" in his *Essay on Man*.