

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

[www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)

A recovered old Newsletter

## SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NZ)

NEWSLETTER 18

October 1996

### The Dunedin Conference

#### *Ian Harris Reports*

*Ian is the outgoing chairperson of the NZ SOF Steering Committee.*

The conference at Knox College, Dunedin, in August was a good one. There was plenty of intellectual meat to chew on, a pleasing balance in speakers and activities to ensure that we didn't live the whole weekend in our heads, and ample opportunity to be social. Superb spring weather helped—it was scarcely believable that a few days later the city relapsed into snow.

A pattern has developed where the Steering Committee in Wellington attends to the programme content and the local Arrangements Committee puts the framework in place—venue, accommodation, meals, registration, bookshop, the works.

This worked well. The Dunedin team, led by Marjorie Spittle and administrator Jeanette Scott, proved energetic, imaginative and practical. It was also innovative, adding a ceilidh to lighten the Saturday evening programme, and taking responsibility for a different kind of celebration on the Sunday morning, *Kaleidoscope of the Senses*.

In organising the conference, two new tools proved invaluable. One was a computer programme to handle registrations and all associated details, the other a speaker phone which allowed the Wellington and Dunedin committees to "meet" regularly, thanks to the \$5 weekend tolls.

I mention these details to encourage the Christchurch, or Palmerston North, or Hawkes Bay, or Tauranga SOF groups to think seriously about offering to host a conference in 1999, 2000 or beyond, following those in Auckland next year and in Wellington in 1998.

Reports elsewhere in this newsletter describe workshops and other happenings at the conference. The workshops offered a breadth of topics and approaches: as usual, the problem was narrowing the choice to only two.


For those who missed the conference, tapes and videos of the speakers made by Eccent Communications is available from the SOFN Resource Centre, Box 262, Te Puke. A video summary tape will be made available for borrowing in about six months.

#### *Jeanette Scott Reports*

*Jeanette was the chairperson of the 1996 Conference Committee.*

The birds sang, the flowers bloomed, the sun shone, the people smiled—the successful elements of the Sea of Faith Conference held at Knox College, Dunedin, at the end of August.

People have been asking "what makes a successful conference?"—and, to me, it was the friendliness of the people who came, who listened, who shared and who gave of themselves to the spirit of the occasion. The highlights would be different for each individual. The standard of speakers was high—providing a challenge for some and confirming for others. The range of workshops was such that nobody could attend all that they wished to, but hopefully the choices made were the right ones. Our local group in Dunedin is hopeful that we may be able to have repeat performances from our local workshop leaders to enable those of us unable to attend during conference to have a second chance. The material given to us by the main speakers can also provide material for a second chance to discuss the ideas as we read through the copied addresses.

The conference was the combined work of both the Steering Committee in Wellington and the Local Arrangements Committee in Dunedin and we had some very successful telephone conferences where we discussed some of the issues of how things would proceed. It was interesting for me to put faces to the voices at the registration desk on that Friday August 23rd. As the administrator of this conference I found that, while I was in the middle of everything, I was also a bystander and could not fully participate in all events—I'm looking forward to the Auckland Conference when I can admire the work of another team. Good luck John ...  Page Break

**For your diaries, please note that next year's conference will be held at King's College, Auckland, from October 3 to 5. It's not too early to plan to be there.**  
*Ian Harris*



## "There is a desperate need in every secular society to 'remake' the sacred" ... Penny Jamieson

1996 Conference

### Keynote Speakers

There were four keynote speakers and between them they provided transcripts sufficient to fill about ten Newsletters. Below are some of the highlights from their speeches to provide a "flavour" to those not able to attend. Although the excerpts are printed in the order that they appear in their respective addresses, they do not necessarily "link" to each other.

#### **Bishop Penny Jamieson: *Diving Deep and Surfacing***

- In much that I have read [about the Sea of Faith Network] I sense a group of people seeking a common identity. I noted that you shied off identifying a common purpose, but that you have a determination to respect the values and beliefs, whether present or absent, in each other. I suspected that the real thing that you had in common was attending conferences such as this. But like most groups in search of identity it is important for you to define yourselves by what you are not, and you are very clearly not rooted in the credal church.
- Was this I wondered, this rejection of the objective "out there reality", one of the basic tenets of Sea of Faith, a defining fundamental perhaps, a credal non-realism?
- Perhaps, like so many others who have diagnosed and attempted to cure the dualistic disease, you have promptly contracted another form of it.
- In this post-modernist world there is no such thing as the 'view from nowhere'. The question must always be asked "whose reality?", and it is then that questions of social location, ethnicity, gender, power and generation come to the fore.
- So let's have another look at this non-realism, or as I prefer to think of it, another dimension of reality, that 'other reality'. I want to ask whether even if religious language is human and historically evolved, it is really all we have? [Doesn't that] limit us to cognitive ways of knowing, all very heady, very intellectual[?] What of the heart, the emotions, what of the raw edges of our being, what motivates us, what drives us beyond the world of our own limited vocabulary?
- Such stories are places where the human spirit grows. Some such stories have acquired the status of religion, which says more about the respect, or lack of it in which they are held, than it does about the stories themselves.
- So then, I believe that most religious traditions have diminished the sheer wonder of their faith by succumbing to the urge to reduce them to words. Language divides us into fragments, segments the universe, [it] does not explain it or explore it. My search is for the wholeness beyond the limits of our language. So we turn, like all human societies have done, to art....
- Yes, there is a language of art that reaches beyond the limits of our language, that draws us into experience that words cannot touch, and we become, as the saying goes, lost for words.
- It is part of the task of religion to map the human spiritual quest, to give signposts for the spiritual journey, to touch the deepest longings and urgings of the human heart. And most religions do a reasonable job. The trouble starts when the vision, the way that is

so alive and full of promise gets captured, first by words as scriptures are written and creeds debated and demanded, and then by institutionalisation, as that which was fluid and free-flowing becomes codified and rigidified. As the Americans are quoted as saying this is 'routinising the vision'. It's deadly.

- There is a desperate need in every secular society to 'remake' the sacred, in the sense of restoring our relationship to the sacred. This is a supreme art or craft, the ability to track down the sacred, to revive and restore it, without falling into religious literalism, fundamentalism or dogmatic thinking.

#### **Professor Charles Birch: *Asking The Right Questions About God***

- Interestingly enough, Darwin asked many questions about God but he never got any answers that seemed reasonable. Even so Darwin was very important for theology as he pointed out quite clearly concepts of God that were no longer credible. This enabled others to think in different directions.
- Dawkins correctly makes the point that the mere fact that it is possible to frame a question does not make it legitimate to do so. It is legitimate to ask what is the temperature of the sea. But you may not ask what is the temperature of prayer. You can ask in a scientific spirit "why" questions such as the purpose of mudguards on a bicycle but it is not reasonable to ask the "why" question of, say, a boulder or Mount Everest.
- What were the questions which I now regarded as the right ones to ask about God? Nietzsche said that truth is the metaphor that matters for you. I think I have two such metaphors. One comes from Paul Tillich. The metaphor is ultimate concern. Ultimate concern is that concern that fulfils life. All other concerns are secondary. This is his metaphor for God. The other comes from Whitehead. It is the idea that there was inherent in the universe from its foundations the potentialities or possibilities of the future. From a universe of pure hydrogen some moments after the big bang eventually some billions of years after came us. In contemplating this cosmic evolutionary process Whitehead argued that the potentiality of the universe must be somewhere. By somewhere he meant some actual entity. He named that actual entity the mind of God. Divine potentiality becomes concrete reality in the universe by means of persuasive love, never by coercion. So my second metaphor is: at the heart of the universe is persuasive love.

#### **Joy Cowley: *Taking Down Fences***

- I do believe that we must follow a path in order to make spiritual progress. As a wise Vedanta friend once said, we can be like hens scratching in the dust, scratching here, scratching there. That is no way to dig a well.
- For me, a satisfying metaphor for spiritual journey is the circle. When we start out on the way to the centre, we seem at a distance from other paths. Indeed, some seem opposite to us, but as we progress the paths begin to converge until they all merge at that one point of light in the centre. The writing of mystics of all religious traditions, are virtually interchangeable. These writers are at that point where there are no divisions, symbol disappear in light and words can go no further.



## It is the love song of Being claiming its Divinity ... Joy Cowley

• I believe that [the Jungian "shadow"] is nothing else than our primary instinct for survival. What we call evil is something we share with all life on this planet.

• This progression is simply put in the words of an anonymous 15thC monk. *"Find thyself - tis half the path to God. Then lose thyself and the rest of the way is trod."*

• The trappings of my journey are probably the same as yours, but I shall share them with you, anyway. In practical terms, journey means a time of meditation each day. ... Journey means a regular ritual of worship with others. A cluster of souls leaning towards the Beloved, are empowered and nourished by the act.

Worship, like poetry, is metaphor. It is the metaphor for a loving that cannot be defined in another way. It means regular reading of a wide variety of material which is going to increase my awareness and diminish my prejudice relating to the journey of others. It means ongoing attempts at seeing everyone else as divine drops in the Sacred ocean.

This knowledge is an effective way of dealing with the fences built by the voice of my survival instinct, that voice of my ego. It means recognition of the ego, laughing at it when it needs laughter and stopping to love it when it starts bellowing like a neglected child. It also means living life as a small love song that is in harmony with the love song of every single manifestation of God in this universe.

It is the love song of Being claiming its Divinity.

### ***Clive Pearson: Shifting Horizons in a Sea of Faith***

• The breaking down of tradition [set out in the TV documentary series *The Sea of Faith*] was opening up the prospect of living a "wholly secular life" in terms of both a culture's structural and intellectual life. The human rather than the divine was becoming the subject.

• It would not be long before Cupitt would be saying ... that [systematic theology] ... is now impossible. "Old-style realistic systematic theology of the sort that prevailed for a thousand years after Augustine is no longer attempted by anyone." ..... [However] such claims stretch the point .... There is a great irony in this complex, post-modern world, in this cultural milieu where the language of spirituality often gains a hearing at the experience of the word theology. .... Cupitt is over-stating the case here: it is not true to say that no one now tries to construct an overall vision of a Christian system of belief .... but he is right in observing that much of this systematic theology is ecclesiastical or "church theology" .... its pre-suppositions are internal to the church and the discipline struggles to engage with the diversity and specialist nature of human knowledge in general.

• The comparison [in Harvey Cox's *Many Mansions*] is made with an airport terminal: so many people on the move, all being dis-placed at altitude and speed, a global village in one concourse. In this world of hi-tech mobility, computer ticketing, smiling hostesses ... and an underlying economic capacity to pay one's way, the chapel is tucked away in a corner of the complex, seldom found, seldom visited—besides which it is often constructed in such a way as to be not only doctrinally offensive, but its very being is multi-purpose. Whatever your religion, the chapel is simply a space. Theology, worship, God-talk ... is

privatized, interiorized, marginalized in the public world of what counts, what happens.

• What would happen to this sea of faith if we became more playful, more poetic? Why shouldn't we be? Across the Tasman the same case has been put by Michael Godfrey. "The catchment of God-talk is as large as the canon of the arts: finite but only just." Closer to home Nan Burgess has been "diving deeper", and exploring through an heuristic approach, the spirituality to be found in the stories of Witi Ihimaera, Frank Sargeson, Patricia Grace, Dan Davin and Joy Cowley. To these we might add the religious experience, so often one of oppression, to be found in the novels of Noel Virtue, Maurice Gee and Elspeth Sandys. "The catchment of God-talk is as large as the canon of the arts."

• When we talk about the sea of faith I wonder: what kind of horizon are we looking at? Is it the 'big picture' — the continental debates on whether or not God exists, is God real? What is the nature of language, what is religion's province of meaning? ..... Or is our horizon more immediate, closer to home, in front of us, within us? One of the theological developments which the sea of faith has not taken seriously enough has been the rapid growth in the contextualizing of theology and beliefs systems and values. It is so much an area of growth that some critics would say that in this post-modern age, the most important theological and religious questions concern "how does the local relate to the global?" ... how do we respond to this increasing plurality and fragmentation of value and knowledge which calls into question master narratives, metaphors and storylines which seek to tell the whole?

### ***A Review of the 1996 Conference***

## **"A History of God in Three Days"**

Irvine Roxburgh writes: "At the first meeting of the Mana group after the Conference, Michael and Eva Palairat engrossed us with their review of the Conference, and capped it off with a video."

"Clive Pearson brought us up to date. He spoke constructively of a new axial age of faith where, as Don Cupitt says:

- all ideas are guilty until proved innocent
- on board, on the Sea of Faith, atheists are as welcome as anybody else

"From Charles Birch we get the positive impression that, in an open-ended future, our task is to respond to life by being creative—encouraging creativity. At the same time I think we should be excused for feeling that Charles is still fairly sure there is a God of sensibility at the heart of the universe involving himself or herself fully in the process.

"Obviously a deeply religious person, Penny Jamieson leaves no doubt where she stands: firmly in the status quo (of 1571!). She is quite certain that there is a separate and sacred realm elsewhere of which the church is the vicarious proprietor on earth. She seems to say: What are all you atheists on about? Why don't you get back to the church?



**"We need to ... leave room for mystery, for the chaos and darkness of life ... as well as the ordered, with everything figured out. " Thomas More**

"But, as Don Cupitt says in his excellent paper Free Christianity, many 20th century folk have trouble with the required intellectual submission. Many churches still use their interpretation of the word "God" as a shibboleth (password) in order to exclude. Cupitt goes on to say that today there is no point in theologians trying to prove the existence of God or even asking what God is. Rather we should simply ask in what ways we can still use the word "God" in building our world and our lives. He feels the churches still have a chance to embrace or at least "go into coalition with" those varieties of philosophy that oppose dogmatism and supernaturalism.

Is there anything left? Well, it's true, as Cupitt sees (and as Nietzsche and Tolstoy saw), that once heresy ceases to exist, we are challenged by important and largely unexplored possibilities in the teaching of Jesus. We have lots to do along the way.

"And along the way there is joy in the company of people like Joy Cowley. Incidentally, we disagreed with Joy that her jokes are simply to grab attention. We think that they are most relevant to what she said about taking down fences and realizing that the difference between another person and oneself is illusory. Yes, she said, recognize the ego but be ready to laugh at it when it needs laughter and to stop loving it when it 'starts bellowing like a neglected child'.

"It is the love song of Being claiming Divinity."

1996 Conference

## Workshop Reports

• **"Thomas Moore's Care of the Soul", led by Colleen Saunders and John Craighead, reviewed by Verity Doak.**

After introductions, we listened to a Radio NZ interview with Thomas Moore by Alison Parr from a couple of years ago. Moore described soul as the deeply-rooted source of life in a person, a family etc. We need to nourish our soul, to leave room for mystery, for the chaos and darkness of life ... as well as the ordered, with everything figured out. We need to feed our souls daily and deeply and not just respond to the symptoms of malaise that can be "dealt with" and "put right". We reach deeply into our souls with imagination and dreams, myth and story. "We are the artist of our own experience".

People responded to the tape with some very moving stories of care of the soul. We looked at the "who", "when" and "where" we are nourished and at what gives us energy. We looked at the layers and compartments of our lives and at what enables us to go deeper.

Someone quoted "a tidy house is a sign of a wasted life" and we again looked at how soul takes us to the unexpected, the messy, creative, the unorganised. We talked and shared, as a group.

The workshop was a superb balance to the largely cerebral intellectualism of the lectures and some of the other workshops. It left us feeling revitalised for the journey.

• **"Futures Thinking Seminar: The Institutional Church and the Year 2000", led by Yvonne Curtis, reviewed by Keith Fuller.**

To say that our perception of the future will grow out of our own personal experience might seem to some to be an obvious statement but with this realisation we all came to see that the future is ours to claim as the fleeting present.

Informed and informative discussion led us to some statements about the institutional church of the future:

- it would have a smaller community base
- the need for a natural structure would be determined by values and not the other way around
- it would be people-centred rather than denominationally- or doctrinally-centred
- it would be characterised by a loving respect for all people
- it would be a resource for people's thinking on moral and ethical issues
- it would promote a sense of identity as well as being a source of identity

These statements are not definitive or exclusive in any way, but are simply the representation of some ideas that emerged out of our lively and spirited discussion which was ably facilitated by Yvonne whose experience and learning in the field of Futures Thinking we were privileged to share.

• **"Creating Our Own View Of Heaven, Nirvana, Utopia or Idealised World" led by Louis Statham, reviewed by Marie Lockie.**

A wide range of views accepted that the negatives in life are a spur to seek an idealised world, concluding that self-awareness is the critical first step!

• **"God In The Space/Time Continuum" by Francis de Hamel.**

Francis set the scene for the 12 questions we discussed by exploring the implications of some of the present theories about time, space and God. He talked about "black holes" and the reality of time.

The questions that the group discussed, with some passion, included:

- Is God a Big Bang?
- Was God the Big Bang?
- What happened before?
- Can God have an accident?
- Does God obey the Second Law of Thermodynamics [which says that the universe is running down like a clock spring — ed]?
- Is God capable of doing anything in the universe without intention? Could God be Space (= "spirit of the place") rather than Time (= "Eternal Father")?

Francis concluded with:

- Is the whole thing absurd?
- Is our current concept of God absurd?
- Why *not* Turtles?

• **"Is it possible to have a Just Society in NZ", led by Neville Glasgow, reviewed by George Ridley.**

Neville, along with some others, has recently founded the "Directions 2001 Trust". Its primary aim is to make a fair society in New Zealand. He was hoping that the group would come up with ideas about the nature of a fair society, the balance between individual freedom and cooperation and methods of measuring fairness. Much of the discussion, however, revolved around the present problems in society. The Directions 2001 Trust



## "the Scriptures were written for adults, not children" ... Jean Holm

aims to be a network of assistance for all groups wishing to promote a fairer society and has as its trustees a number of notable persons such as Dame Cath Tizard, Prof. Lloyd Geering and Charmaine Pountney. Anyone wishing to join the Trust, whether as an active or as a passive member should write to "Directions 2001 P.O. Box 12428, Wellington".

Some of the discussion centred around the prevalence of depression in our society; the possible use of slogans in any campaign and the major influence of the Business Round Table on our society. There was a general feeling that BRT policies, instead of providing solutions to society's problems, were themselves responsible to many of the problems.

Thanks to Neville for indicating another way in which we can all make a contribution to the future.

### • **"A New Sexual Ethic" led by David Bromell, reviewed by Marion Blackbourne**

Seventeen participants attended this workshop which was notable for the openness of discussion which was most ably facilitated by David, a gay man and a Christian theologian.

He believes that currently the Church says that lesbians and gays should be either single and celibate or in a monogamous relationship. He expressed some doubt about the push for marriage rites for lesbians and gays, because of a possibility that this will be seen by some as the [only] desired situation.

David then played the "what if" game where he posited three different situations involving genital sex and asked the group what outcomes might ensue. All the responses were negative ones. He quoted material from Karen Le Bacqz, James Nelson and Rowan Williams, including the point made by Williams that one is vulnerable in situations of sexual intimacy but that sex is a positive, intrinsic good.

### • **"Three Visionary Artists of the 20th Century" led by Albert Moore, reviewed by Neil Lambie**

In his inimitable style, Albert Moore introduced the group to three significant artists who had developed religious art not only as a universal medium, but also as a reflection of their local environment. Concomitant with the theme developed by Clive Pearson, Albert Moore was at pains to ensure that the group understood the works of Barlach, Chagall and Spencer in the context of their own locality as well as being of global significance.

The three artists were demonstrated to the group through slides of their works and through careful background notes and analysis by Albert. Group members were encouraged to inject their interpretations.

Just as poetry and film present insights into the progress and development of a culture, so the work of artists provide commentary and provocation.

Albert Moore is to be thanked for his insightfulness yet modest leading so that deeper understanding results.

### • **"What Kind of Religious Education In Secular Society" led by Jean Holm.**

Jean told of her experiences of training teachers for Religious Education (RE) in Cambridgeshire, and her hopes and endeavours for RE finding a secure place in the New Zealand education curriculum.

Her experience began in 1959 when RE ... [meant] teaching for belief: "to help children come to know and love God".

RE is now an academic subject, not preaching. "To enable pupils to understand the nature of religion, its

expression and influence on people's lives and on society". She illustrated her session with brief outlines of some of the ways in which RE can be taught.

On the topic of teaching Bible stories to children, Jean pointed out that the Scriptures were written for adults, not children, and can present great difficulties. She expressed the hope that children will grow up into the Bible, not grow out of it.

### • **"Living Buddhism in New Zealand" led by Cathi Graham and Losang Dawa, reviewed by Jean Herbison.**

Cathi introduced the topic by explaining how she became involved in Buddhism on her return home from Europe through the Middle East and Asia. She stayed in a northern Indian Tibetan Community for some years prior to her return to New Zealand and to setting up the Buddhist Community in Dunedin.

During these years she has worked with Losang who is a [Tibetan] Buddhist interpreter translating the Tibetan Buddhist teachings into English. The workshop was very much a cooperative endeavour between Cathi and Losang.

Cathi explained her involvement with Buddhism and showed extracts of a video of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama of Tibet. Cathi also demonstrated some of the daily rituals which helped Buddhists to focus for the day on the importance of their attitude and intent, in all in which they are involved.

The workshop group was small so it was rather an intimate gathering. We were able to share in discussion as Cathi and Losang explained the terms used (Karma, Trantra, Samsara, Reincarnation, Nirvana), the basis of Buddhist Morality in actions of Speech, Body and Mind similar to the Ten Commandments of Christianity and with the principles of Altruism and Service, Wisdom and Compassion to guide us in our journeying through life. The nature of this journeying is a process with our mental continuum changing all the time. The fact of interdependence was stressed.

Cathi and Losang also explained the effect of the Chinese invasion. Prior to this, the isolation of Buddhism in Tibet enabled it to develop a pure tradition. The Tibetans' belief in Pacifism meant that the Chinese invasion was accomplished without war and it also resulted in many Tibetans fleeing from their country. Through this experience Tibet entered into the political arena of the world with a mission to have their country returned to them.

It is difficult to give a brief report on this workshop. One had to be there to experience the atmosphere which came as a result of Cathi and Losang sharing their life experiences. It was a very real learning experience for each one of us. It clearly showed how our faith can be enhanced through mutual understanding of other religions.

### • **"Can Jesus Walk On The Sea Of Faith" led by Ian Harris, reviewed by Ted Johnston**

Ian presented a lecture-type session, also inviting questions and comments—of which there were quite a lot. He asked: If we think of God in a non-realist way (which he assumed for the purposes of the workshop), then where does that leave Jesus?

Ian asked the group (of 28 participants) to make three leaps of the imagination into contrasting worlds: first to become 1st century Jews; then 4th century Greeks; and finally back into the secular culture of 20th century New Zealanders.

We looked in turn at: the prevalent world views in



## **"On opening a church door one enters a medieval world."**

Contributor at Charles Birch's workshop

each of these cultures; the questions of ultimate meaning and purpose that weighed on them; the religious contexts which determined the way they thought through those questions; and the process that each culture followed in doing so.

Jewish Christians, for example, used the midrash technique to identify Jesus imaginatively with key figures, events and rituals in their history—such as Moses, Elijah, the deliverance across the Red Sea, and sacrifice. Paul applied the process on a universal scale by making Jesus the new Adam who gave humanity a new start.

Greek Christians brought their own cultural presuppositions and religious traditions to their understanding of Jesus' person and work. Their concern was not so much how to overcome the gulf between a righteous God and sinful humanity, as with the Jews, but the sense of their alienation from the ideal and divine world, and how that might be bridged. The creeds that emerged from the theological battles of the 4th century show them finding the answer in Jesus as "fully man and fully God".

Though very different, those world views and solutions that centred on Jesus had a common belief in the supernatural and in God as a Being with an objective existence of his own (the "realist" view). The secular understandings of the nature of reality that have emerged over the past 200 years do not share this supernatural framework. The question is whether there still can be a place for Jesus and a faith centred on him.

Ian suggested that there are three constants giving continuity with the core Christian tradition: Jesus himself; the way; and the process of engaging with these in the light of the contemporary understandings of the way the world is. Jesus, as an historical character, is not enough however — there have been plenty of other people who have led selfless lives and left deep spiritual teachings. The distinctive element is that it was the life of Jesus that gave rise to after his death to the faith in Christ, and it is "The Christ of Faith", not "The Jesus of History", who will always be the defining myth of Christianity. Myth and mystery are carried in the "Christ" word.

Finally, Ian proposed some building blocks for reworking the faith experience of the 1st century Jews and the 4th century Greeks in today's secular culture. They are the right contemporary questions; our secular understanding of the world; the God whom we create and who becomes an integrating focus in our lives; the three constants of Jesus, the Way and the process of engagement with them in terms of our contemporary world view; imagination, creativity, and honesty; and sharing in an open faith community as the crucible for exploration, experiment and experience. With these criteria, it is possible for Jesus to walk on the Sea of Faith.

### **• "Science and God" led by Charles Birch, review by Ian Crabtree**

Charles Birch had a large group for this workshop which set out to discuss the modern scientific and technological world view in relationship with the post-modern theistic world view.

Charles first outlined three models of the ways in which science and religion can be seen to relate:

1. Conflict: where the scientific theory can be seen to be in conflict with a religious view or, as with Dawkins, where the religious view is irrelevant.
2. Contrast: where the scientific view of the world

deals with "how", while the religious view deals with "why".

3. Integration: here modern physics has moved from a mechanistic model. Although biologists tend to stay with this model in the post-modern world, a more subtle view of science and a deeper religion can relate constructively, as with A.N Whitehead. This view is currently held by a small minority.

Comments made in the group discussion included:

- people are much more up-to-date with science than they are with religion
- on opening a church door one enters a medieval world
- new theological ideas are not (always? usually?) accepted in the church
- school children are taught to think, but even when they go to church they enter a different world
- World Council of Churches' information on science and religion doesn't get down to the pews
- new physics is opening a door of opportunity
- consciousness was not much studied 20 years ago, but now there are many books dealing with it
- feelings are the most real things we know

The discussion continued to the end of the time available.

To sum up: while some of the group found the current attitudes of the churches to science very frustrating, there was clearly another interesting and more hopeful dialogue emerging, and group members appreciated the opportunity to discuss and become more aware of this dialogue.

### **• "Eco-Humanism", led by Lloyd Geering, reviewed by Alan Goss**

The workshop considered how we may draw on the Christian past in order to meet the challenge of the ecological age. The world faces a frightening future and Christians—even Christian atheists—have only the Christian tradition to draw upon.

The Christian story, in its older form, began to collapse in the nineteenth century. Now we have to adapt to a new story which is 15 billion years old.

The new story of the universe, which includes the "big bang" theory of its origins, is an evolutionary story. We are now in an ecological age, discovering the unity of all life and our dependence on the environment. This is our new story. We have to abandon or deconstruct the old dualities, like "heaven over against earth" or "God the creator over against the whole created world." When we abandon these dualities, what happens to the following?

- *God the Creator*: We abandon the idolatry of on opening a church door one enters a medieval world conceiving God as a object
- *Christ and Salvation*: We need a radical incarnation in which we become the Christ: the salvation of the world is our responsibility. In ourselves we see the growing enfleshment of the divine. The divine and the human have become one.
- *Personal Immortality*: The Old Testament accepted mortality. We need to continue our recovery of that concept of mortality. The concept of immortality is more appropriate to the species than to the individual.
- *Resurrection*: Originally, Easter celebrated the remarkable capacity of the world to renew itself. Resurrection therefore takes up again from where it began.

A very stimulating workshop.



## "Originally, Easter celebrated the remarkable capacity of the world to renew itself" ... *Lloyd Geering*

### • *"Life and the Bible as Energy" by Lois Wells, excerpts*

Christianity, indeed any religion, is about ending double messages. It is about finishing unfinished business, setting records straight, becoming real. It is about picking up the proffered threads of relationship rather than letting them dangle and knot. It is about becoming objective with the accent on quiet cogitation; on *being* rather than *doing*. It challenges up to mature by reclaiming and taking charge of our lost energies, instead of letting them control use.

### • *"The Upanishads" led by Jan Lawson, reviewed by Gavin Watson.*

Jan brought considerable knowledge and experience to her subject, The Upanishads. Most of us had heard of them, but knew no more. We learned that "Upanishads" means "to sit down close". Jan explained the effect of Northern peoples coming into India and influencing Indian philosophy. We were impressed by the relevance of the Upanishad writings to today.

• *Anonymous reviewers: I'd like to be able to give credit for all of the reviewers but some reviews came in without an author's name. I'd be happy to give you the credit in the next Newsletter if only I knew who you were! .... ed*

## Dunedin on Tape

Dave Mullen from Eccent Video (20 Tui Grove, Paihia, phone 09-402-8071) recorded much of the Conference on video and audio.

Dave comments: "Those who ordered the set of audios will have received the Cupitt lecture as a bonus."

"None of the audio is as good as it should be because we were not able to get a satisfactory direct line and had to use a camera microphone. This picked up all the noises of the system and the hall generally. Any audio or video which is not acceptable will be replaced or its cost refunded if you return it to Eccent Communications."

"The **Highlights** video will not be available for hire from the Resource Centre for a few months. This is to keep faith with the people and groups who made the project possible by paying for their own copies."

"Further copies of sets or individual lectures may be ordered from me at any time. Cost \$25 each video (including the **Highlights** documentary) or \$75 the set of four lectures and \$10 each audio or \$30 the set. Additional videos may be ordered of the Cupitt lecture or the final Dance presentation by negotiation. Either could be added to a video you've already purchased if you like."

## The UK Conference

*The following excerpts come from a report about the UK SOF Conference held on July 25 to 27 and sent to potential North American SOFers by John Klopacz.*

More than 250 people participated in the lectures, discussions and workshops on the theme "Creating Human Values". Whether we had come from religious, humanist or atheist traditions, the theme invited us, in the words of the Steering Committee Chairman Stephen Mitchell, "to work together to create and

sustain the values needed to meet the social and global issues facing us today."

Participants were assigned to "base groups" of twelve members and a facilitator. The base groups met four times to express hopes and goals for Conference, to discuss the principal speakers' presentations and to formulate questions for the concluding panel. In addition, more than thirty workshops were presented. Participants had to sign up in advance for the workshops as many had limited enrollment.

This year's principal speakers were Mary Warnock and Don Cupitt. Their lectures will be published in *Sea of Faith* Magazine and most likely put on the home page, so I shall offer only brief summaries and impressions.

Mary Warnock, a philosopher, educator and Life Peer, has chaired several Royal Commissions and Government Committees concerned with education and with medical ethics. While Warnock takes Cupitt to task for what "is plainly a galloping and, I believe in the long run, destructive relativism," she also says that we can no longer claim "objectivity" in the values we place on things. She interprets traditional language about immortality and life after death as "useful metaphors."

Cupitt's lecture "World Religion" was a slightly edited version of closing sections from his forthcoming book, *Religion after the Gods* (1997). He urged us not "to lament the passing of old ways and old certainties," but rather to "welcome as a liberation the revolutionary changes in religion and morality that are now spreading the world." He touched on the topics of "globalization and the end of the Other," "the end of morality and the return of ethics" and "world religion."

Lloyd Geering, author of *Faith's New Age* and *Tomorrow's God*, and his wife Elaine were visiting from New Zealand. Geering presented his lecture "Economics, Ecology, Ethics: Making the Connections Theologically" twice as a workshop session. I was fortunate both to attend and to read a printed version.

Geering and Cupitt have been in contact since 1980 and there exists an affinity between their thinking. Geering, however, does not like to use the term "non-realist," preferring to call his use of the word God "symbolic," as opposed to "objective." He, unlike Cupitt, does see a "Grand-Narrative" arising when "for the first time in the whole history of humankind all races and cultures are beginning to share one cosmology, that which is provided by science. It is in the cosmology that we see some of the first signs of a global culture." Geering quoted and referred to the works of the North American theologians Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Sallie McFague, Gordan Kaufman and Jay B. McDaniel.

*John Klopacz jklopacz@well.com*

## Local Groups

### Dunedin

Ian Cairns wrote: "In May, Barbara Nicholas facilitated a stimulating discussion on 'Euthanasia'. Barbara has a degree in theology and is now part of a research team in Otago University's Bio Ethics Department."

"Points emerging in discussion included: the giant strides in medical competence that have enabled 'miraculous' advances in the



## "What's Past is Prologue"

Shakespeare (who was not at the Conference)

preservation of life; life may now sometimes be prolonged long after its quality has eroded; how long is too long?; have the various interested parties the right to say "enough is enough"?; these so-rapid advances in medical technology are in danger of outstripping the community's funding resources—who decides on priorities?; who decides whether a life should be terminated, patient? caregiver? doctor?; under what conditions?; what are the rights of each?; where the patient is lucid, what criteria should the patient use in considering whether their life should be terminated?

"The June topic "Whose Genes" was presented by Grant Balance, a research graduate in Bio Ethics and proved a neat follow-on. Can one draw a valid line between acceptable and unacceptable genetic manipulation? On what criteria? Is the non-realist's approach different from the realist's? Knowledge, once discovered, cannot be suppressed: will it inevitably be utilised? Has vested interest the right—or the power—to "buy" (monopolise or suppress) genetic secrets? Will democratic consensus inevitably eventually prevail? What of the power struggles that may emerge in bio-ethical, and indeed all, research?

"As the [Cupitt-group] series nears its end, some of us who were diffident at the outset have discovered the excitement of Cupitt, through the realisation that this is "poetic theology". It *may* be read as rational argumentation, but may, with equal profit, be used as meditation."

### Remuera

Joy Lewis wrote: "At the June meeting, Dr. Val Grant introduced her topic "will our children have belief?" and then put forward questions for group discussion.

"In July, at an extended meeting, two of our members prepared statements on Euthanasia: George Dodd's was titled Historical Background and Definitions and Christine Robe's A Doctor's View. These speakers then presented topics for discussion in four groups: (a) Personhood and Choices (b) Euthanasia Practicalities (c) Assisted Suicide (d) Making Choices for Others, Quality of Life and Future Issues.

"Dr. Paul Barker at the August meeting gave us a lecture on background material for the discussion of Lloyd Geering's God and the New Physics. This book, together with Ian Harris' Creating God will be offered for study at the October and November meetings.

### Two Pleas to Please

We need *more* contributions to this section and we need the reports to be meaty. What ground did discussions cover? What conclusions did you reach—or fail to reach?

## Middle East Tour

More than a dozen members of the Sea of Faith Network were on a Holyland Tour of Syria, Israel and Jordan during April this year and led by Lloyd and Elaine Geering.

The Tour Director, Ken Ward, has asked them to lead a similar tour in May 1997, leaving about April 30 and returning about May 28. This tour is now being planned to go via London; tour participants are free to stay on in London or Europe after the tour and return on a date to suit them. The tour is being costed to cover all travel, accommodation, and meals (except midday lunches), and includes travel insurance, visas, departure taxes and tipping. It will be in the vicinity of \$7,000.

Anyone interested in getting further details should write to **Global Encounters**, 28 Forest Road, Raumati South Phone 04-298-5900. Fax: 04-298-5205.

## Subscriptions

Its **Red Dot** time again. If there's a red dot on your Newsletter its a signal that your subscription is due and that if not paid, this Newsletter could be your last. Send \$10 to Jane Griffith, 82 Kinghorne Rd, Strathmore, Wellington.

## Next Newsletter

Copy deadline November 25th. Please send it to me (floppy disk or hardcopy) at 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay ... or e-mail to me at [cheer@vnet.ibm.com](mailto:cheer@vnet.ibm.com)

*Noel Cheer, Editor*