

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NZ)

NEWSLETTER 19

December 1996

Review

Geering on Thiering

This article was contributed by Lloyd Geering.

Following the recent visit of Barbara Thiering to New Zealand to promote her books, I find myself continually being asked by people what to make of her radical reconstruction of early Christian history and of the life of Jesus, as presented in her two books Jesus the Man and Jesus of the Apocalypse. Some may be interested, therefore, in a short article I wrote. It was intended for "The Dominion" but they had no use for it. It has subsequently appeared in TheoLit. The following is a shortened version.

Barbara Thiering claims that Jesus lived on for some forty years after the crucifixion, married twice, fathered three children and helped to organise the growing Christian movement from behind the scenes. She arrived at these surprising conclusions on her reading of the Qumran Scrolls and New Testament, using a series of very questionable steps which, in their simplest form, are as follows:

1. **Some of the Qumran scrolls were composed later than 1 AD.** While scholarly opinion on dating is by no means final or unanimous, nearly all scholars place all the scrolls in the BC period. If that is where they belong, all of her claims are immediately falsified.

2. **The Peshar technique is a reliable one for expounding the Dead Sea Scrolls.** Barbara Thiering is quite right in claiming that the Qumran community interpreted some of the sacred texts of their Hebrew Bible by writing what they called a Peshar. By this method the Qumran monks believed they found references to current events hidden in the ancient texts. To quote Thiering, "Scripture, then, in their view contained hidden historical facts. In the case of the Old Testament, they had read the facts into it; they were not really there."

This admission by Barbara Thiering concerning the Qumran community could turn out to be the Achilles' heel of her own work also. For it immediately raises the question of whether her own use of the peshar method (see the following steps 3-6) is any more valid than when it was first developed by the Qumran monks. If it was not valid for them, why should it be valid for Barbara Thiering?

Since the Qumran community believed the Old Testament contained a second level of meaning, Thiering proceeds to her hypothesis.

3. **When the Qumran community wrote new texts they intended their readers to interpret them by the peshar technique.** Thiering says that the peshar "gave them an ideal way of solving their problems. They needed to record in full detail their history, a history that must, by religious necessity, remain partly secret. This time the history would be objectively there in their scripture, because they had placed it there".

But just why "they needed to record their history" and why it was "religiously necessary for it to remain secret" is never satisfactorily explained by the author. Moreover, there is no explicit evidence to support this assumption, except the findings to which Thiering believed herself to be led.

Having made the assumption, Thiering then proceeds to reveal the hidden meanings which she subsequently regards as proof that her assumption was correct. These hidden meanings, when put together, convince her that:

4. **The Scrolls contain a secret history of the Qumran community itself.** This turns out to be much more extensive than anything to be found in the Scrolls by reading them at face value. It is a history, however, which is not confirmed by any other known sources. In particular it leads her to believe:

5. **There is a definite and intrinsic relationship between the Qumran community and the Christian community, including such key figures as John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth.** When the Scrolls were first discovered they were intensively searched in the hope of discovering just such a connection. Great disappointment was felt when the Scrolls were found to contain no explicit reference to anything or anyone from the Christian era (thus confirming they come from the pre-Christian period).

However, having shown to her own satisfaction the validity of her original hypothesis and the truth of the conclusions to which they led her, Thiering then made the boldest of all her assumptions. She argued that, since the Qumran community wrote scriptures intending them to be interpreted by the Peshar technique, and since the Christian community had its origin in the Qumran community, then what applied to the Qumran writers could be applied also to the Christian writers. She concluded:

6. **The Christians wrote the Gospels, Acts and Revelation at two levels expecting their readers also to use the Peshar technique of the Qumran community.** So by applying the Peshar technique to the New Testament, Thiering

has uncovered to her satisfaction, a hidden history of the rise of Christianity. This includes a version of the life, death, supposed resurrection and subsequent life of Jesus.

Even if this were true there is a difference the author tends to ignore. When the Qumran monks wrote their Peshier of the Old Testament they reached hidden meanings which in no way conflicted with the face value meanings. The hidden meanings which Thiering finds in the New Testament, however, do conflict with the face value story. In other words, the two levels of meaning which are supposedly there are in a strange state of contradiction.

Further, there is no supporting historical evidence outside of the New Testament to support this post-resurrection life of Jesus. As with her original assumptions about the date of the Qumran Scrolls, Thiering finds herself alone in the scholarly world and has received little or no support from the world of biblical scholarship. Her reconstruction is more fragile than the proverbial house of cards.

Why is Barbara Thiering so convinced? It is chiefly because of what she maintains is the absolute consistency which operates whenever she applies the clues she has painstakingly uncovered. She speaks of "the very rigorous test of consistency", and of a "very highly structured system" used by the Pesharists. She invites readers to test this consistency for themselves.

When we do so, we find her argumentation extremely unclear. She arrived at her hidden "facts" only by a process of selectivity which ignores all contrary evidence. Like the Qumran monks before her, the "facts" she finds in the texts "are not really there." She claims to have uncovered evidence of new historical facts; no reputable historian would dream of writing history on the basis of this kind of evidence.

But let us suppose, for a moment, that Thiering's reconstruction is correct. Where does it take us? It produces some supposed chronicles of how Jesus married, fathered children and directed some church events. But we learn nothing of what this Jesus thought, taught or felt. It is at this point that we discover the sheer religious barrenness of her so-called secret history of Jesus. The only Jesus who is of religious value to the Christian is the Jesus of the Gospel stories.

The Gospel narratives may be partly legendary and often lacking in historicity (something modern biblical scholars of the last 150 years have increasingly conceded) but these stories are vastly superior to bare chronicles, however historical. This point was well made by Martin Kahler in 1896 in his epoch-making book The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ.

Barbara Thiering's radical reconstruction of primitive origins is not only quite unconvincing, finds little or no support from the academic world, but it is to be judged of no religious value.

Lloyd Geering

Cornelius Cannegieter

It is with regret that we report the death of Cornelius Cannegieter who was the local contact person for the Hibiscus Coast Group. Our sympathy is extended to his wife.

Jane Griffith

Activities of SOF Groups

Hawke's Bay

Alan Goss reports on the Hawke's Bay Group: "In October, the group heard Jim Watt who is on the staff of Manaaki Whenua Land Care Research (NZ Ltd.). Jim introduced the topic **Faith and The Living Landscape**. Jim is also a member of SCHNEHG, the St. Columba Church, Havelock North, environmental house group, which has made submissions to local bodies and which produces a valuable resource sheet for the church newsletter.

"The final meeting for the year will be held in November at Duart House, Havelock North, to plan for 1997 and to socialise in this pleasant garden setting."

In a later correspondence, Alan Goss writes:

"Our group has a mailing list of forty members, of whom approximately fifteen attend meetings regularly. Membership is made up of regular church-goers, self-confessed agnostics and atheists, non-church-going-Christians and a couple of Buddhists.

Within our membership there is a strong preference for the group to retain the character of a forum for study and discussion. The group, as a whole, has no leaning at all towards the "dual agenda" suggested for the United Kingdom Network, by Don Cupitt. [That is to persuade the churches "to go over to non-realism as soon as possible" and "of working out a new global religious vision for the future" -- ed]. Some individual members may be more ambitious.

In 1997 our programme will be based on a theme suggested by the recent series of lectures given in Wellington by Lloyd Geering on the subject of "idolatry" [**New Idols For Old** -- ed].

It is planned to structure our programme so that each meeting is a self-contained segment of a general theme, culminating in a full-day seminar to draw the threads together.

The Planning Committee ... is most receptive to the idea of hosting a future Annual Conference in Hawkes Bay. This possibility will be discussed

Bishop John Spong

Next Year In Auckland

Bishop John Spong will be in New Zealand in October 1997 to present the inaugural Lloyd Geering Lectures for the St. Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society.

He will also be a keynote speaker at the Sea of Faith Conference in Auckland over the weekend of October 3-5. His theme will be "A Believer In Exile", the title of a book due for publication in 1998.

early in the New Year and, if adopted, will be submitted as an offer to [the Steering Committee].

The Rules [of the SOFN as an Incorporated Society] ... make no mention of Local Groups. In Hawkes Bay we feel it would be helpful to have Local Groups positively identified within the ... [SOFN], in the Rules, and we are examining a suggestion that we draft a suitable amendment to that effect. We are not aiming to create a formal 'branch structure' but rather to strengthen the lines of communication and support within the Network. There is a clause in the United Kingdom Constitution which might be suitably adapted to this purpose.

Hawkes Bay members send warm fraternal greetings to all Sea of Faithers and extend to you our very best wishes for the Festive Season.

Alan Goss, Co-ordinator

Auckland

(These are excerpts from their group Newsletter -- ed)

At the ... meeting [of November 17] we will divide onto two groups: one, under Louis Statham's guidance, will continue to think about "God and the New Physics", using Lloyd Geering's book of the same title... The other group is considering issues raised in Ian Harris' Creating God.

It was good to welcome several new members to the October meeting. Some of them had found ... [us] ... after hearing the programme on the Sea of Faith which was broadcast on Sunday morning 6 October in Connexions. [You can order a copy -- see the next item -- ed].

There is talk of a [Sea of Faith] group being formed in South Auckland and an initial meeting to gauge the level of interest will be held ... on Sunday 1st of December. Marie Clark 09-636-8719 has more information.

[On December 8], David Clark, Minister of St. Luke's, will lead a workshop entitled "Re-Mythologising Christmas".

Murray Jenkin, Secretary

SOFN Resource Centre

It is managed by Suzi Thirlwell. On request, Suzi will provide copies of audio tapes and will lend video tapes. Your group contact should have a catalogue. Suzi's postal address is P.O. Box 262 Te Puke and her preferred phone number is 07-578-2775. Suzi can sometimes be contacted on 07-533-3462

Suzi now holds back-numbers of SOFN papers. You can request copies at \$2 each (this covers photocopying and postage).

P1	<u>Perspectives on the Future</u> , Lloyd Geering SOFN NZ 1995
P2	<u>Our Dual Agenda</u> , Don Cupitt, SOFN UK 1995
P3	<u>Passing It On</u> , Val Grant, SOFN NZ, 1995
P4	<u>Islamization</u> , A Progress Report, William Shepherd
P5	<u>Diving Deep and Surfacing</u> Penny Jamieson SOFN NZ Conf. 1996
P6	<u>From Dover Beach to Karitane</u> Postcards: Shifting Horizons in a Sea of Faith Clive Pearson SOFN NZ Conference 1996
P7	<u>Asking The Right Questions About God</u> Charles Birch SOFN NZ Conf. 1996
P8	<u>Taking Down Fences</u> Joy Cowley SOFN NZ Conf. 1996

The audio tape of the "Connexions" programme which dealt with the SOFN in New Zealand was recently added to the Resource Centre under catalogue number A38.

A full listing of all Resource Centre offerings will be included in the February Newsletter.

1996 Conference Statistics

About half of the attendees filled in the evaluation form. The picture that emerged was:

Ages:

58% were over the age of 60

42% of attendees were aged from 31 to 60

Value:

Aspects of the Conference that achieved a rating of "satisfactory" or above were:

99% for the Conference as a whole

97% for the accomodation

97% for the meals

97% for the morning/afternoon teas

97% for the lecture sessions

92% for the Workshop sessions
85% for the "Shared Reflections"
84% for the "Celebration"

Time:

The time allocated to various sessions was deemed "satisfactory" or above by:

94% for the business meeting
84% for the lecture sessions
83% for workshops
79% for free time
63% for discussion (more required)

Number:

The number of sessions was deemed "appropriate" by:

84% for the lectures
56% for the workshops (more required)

Thanks:

To Marion Blackburn, Ian Crabtree and Roy Griffith for doing all the work that lies behind this summary.

Books To Be Published

This item came from the UK SOF World Wide Web site.

Keep an eye out for a new SoF book later this [northern] summer: God and Reality: Essays in Christian Non-Realism, published by Mowbray's. It will include essays both for and against non-realism; prominent SoFers writing essays in favour will include Don Cupitt, Graham Shaw, Stephen Mitchell, Anthony Freeman, and David Hart, while George Patison of King's College, Cambridge, offers an essay that is understanding but critical of our position.

Don Cupitt has also just completed Religion after the Gods, which will be available in the USA and Canada. His next project is The Mysticism of Secundariness, in which he will treat "traditional mysticism as a deconstruction of dogmatism."

Many other publications by Sea of Faith authors are in the works.

- David Hart is working on Sexuality and Radical Christianity.
- Hart and Cohn-Sherbok are collaborating on a volume called Radical Theologians in Conversation.
- David and Anthea Boultons' In Fox's Footsteps is coming soon.
- Alison Webster's Found Wanting: Women, Christianity and Sexuality (Cassell) is now available in the States.

The Next UK Conference

The tenth UK SOF Annual Conference will be held from Tuesday 22nd to Thursday 24th July 1997 at Leicester University. For further details,

contact Ronald Pearse at: 15 Burton St., Loughborough, LE11 2DT, UK or e-mail Patti Whaley at 101335.3561@compuserve.com

Debate This

Religious Education

".... consider the problem of religious education. For liberals, the answer would seem to lie in teaching all children all faiths. The problem is that giving many religions equal weight is not supportive of each but instead tends to relativise them all. It produces a strange hybrid in which the primary value is personal choice, and we feel free to choose bits of one tradition and place them alongside pieces of another, disregarding the different ways of life that gave them meaning in the first place. A multicultural mind can use Zen for inwardness, Hassidic tales for humour, liberation theology for politics, and nature mysticism for environmental concern. But that is a little like gluing together slices of da Vinci, Rembrandt, Van Gogh and Picasso and declaring the result a composite of the best of western art.

Jonathan Sacks, The Persistence of Faith p.65,
Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1991

Proving God's Existence

Anselm at Prayer

"Anselm prayed in all inwardness that he might succeed in proving God's existence. He thinks he has succeeded, and he flings himself down in adoration to thank God. Amazing. He does not notice that this prayer and this expression of thanksgiving are infinitely more proof of God's existence than the proof."

Kierkegaard Journals Vol 1 Chap 11 para 20

Review

All At Sea?

Text in this item came from Portholes, an Internet newsletter of the UK SOF, edited by Stephen Mitchell.

"All at Sea? Some critical reflections on the Postmodernism of the Sea of Faith School of Theologians and Religious Education" is the title given to an article by Peter Kalve, a member of the network, recently published in The Journal of the College of Preceptors Education Today (Volume 46 No 2 June 1996). It will no doubt be required reading for those who form the special commission on education.

Peter is an educational researcher at the University of Hull and Head of Religious Education at Duston Upper School, Northampton.

He begins with a brief but clear outline of the themes of non-realism referring to the works of David Hart, Lloyd Geering and Don Cupitt. Turning to consider the implications for secular religious education, Kalve asks whether, from a

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The question raises some critical reflections. "Non-realism is unable to assert that religious education can have an objective value other than that found in an interiorised, subjective sense. The aims of religious education are not good in themselves because there can no longer be any objective sense of 'good' or 'bad'. All is subjective."

Although admitting that post-modernism provides some serious challenges to traditional objective theism, he concludes that "as a method of religious education, non-realism's appeal must remain both limited and partisan." "How can a philosophical system which denies the legitimacy of tradition, not itself be condemned as a harbinger of a new tradition of certainty: the certainty of uncertainty itself?"

Peter's article is well worth reading and may provoke other questions in response. Does non-realism deny the legitimacy of tradition? Does non-realism assert that all is subjective?

Christian Buddhist?

Text in this item came from *Portholes*, an Internet newsletter of the UK SOF, edited by Stephen Mitchell.

Those who are interested in a comparison between Buddhist thought and Don Cupitt's "Christian Buddhism" may find an article by Gregory Spearritt in the *Journal of Religious Studies* (CUP 1995 no 31 pp 359 - 373) of interest. After a careful examination of Points of Convergence (under the headings The nature of ultimate reality, ontology and epistemology, deconstructionism, The nature of the "conventional" world, The nature of the self,

concern for salvation and emphasis on the particular) and Differences (attitude to the "conventional" world, the nature of salvation, detachment, he concludes:

"That Don Cupitt, a product of western culture and philosophical tradition, should finally and fundamentally disagree with Buddhist prescriptions for salvation is hardly surprising. What is perhaps remarkable is the extent of similarity and agreement that has been possible along the way."

Gregory Spearritt is at the University of Queensland, Australia.

Susan Arblaster also addresses the theme of Christian Buddhism in her very readable dissertation written for a B.A. degree in the School of Education at the University of Wolverhampton entitled *The Cupitt Controversy -- An analysis and evaluation of a debate.*

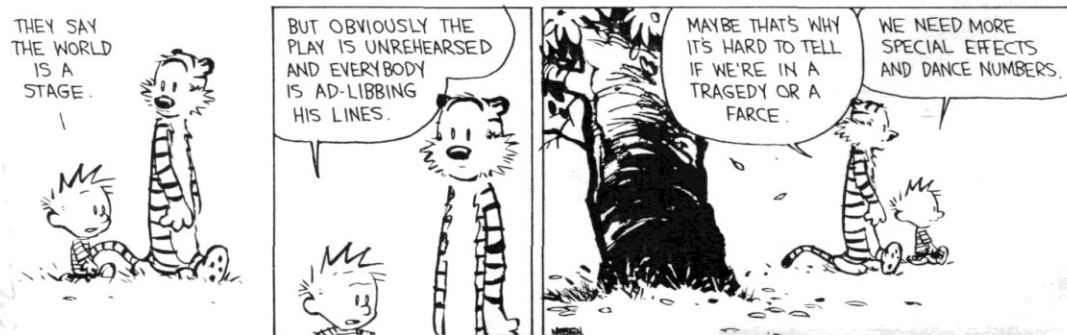
Susan has kindly donated a copy of her dissertation to the Network for the archives. After examining God and the Modern Mind particularly with regard to questions of fact and questions of autonomy and the theme of Christian Buddhism, she asks whether Cupitt should be seen as a defender or destroyer of the faith. Although leaving the question open, her approach is sympathetic.

The SOF in Cyberspace

Resurrection

Patti Whaley of the UK SOF Network wrote the following.

You may remember that, some time ago, an Internet discussion list was being run by Ralph Pannett of SoF NZ. (A discussion list is like a sort of electronic forum; every message gets copied to everyone on the list.) For various reasons this discussion was not very active and the list had lapsed into disuse. Shortly after the SoF summer conference, I tried to resuscitate it, adding several email addresses that I had obtained at the conference and trying to kick it off with some comments that were, if not thought-provoking, at least provoking! After some initial stumbles it now truly appears to have been restored to life;



"Calvin and Hobbes" by Bill Watterson -- buy the books, you'll enjoy them! -- ed

summarize the discussion and wrap it up into neat bundles. Nevertheless, some of the themes that have characterized the past month have been:

- **What is the relationship -- is there a relationship -- between evangelicals and non-realists?**
- **If God is a human creation, what enables a God to "function as a God for us"?**
- **Does SoF have too much intellectual discussion and not enough practical action?** In between our many-layered courtship dance with these and similar ideas, other more straightforward exchanges go on, such as: Information sharing, Asking for information and Joking around.

The list is open to anyone with e-mail access. If you are interested in participating, then contact Patti Whaley (101335.3561@compuserve.com)

The UK SOF Network World Wide Web Site

It has moved to:

www.emma.cam.ac.uk/www_server/fellows/cupitt/sea_of_faith/sofhome.html

SOF NZ is referenced there and we have had several enquiries for membership as a result.

Miscellany

In response to the item on Newsletter 17 inviting comments on "rescuing the Bible from Liberalism", Colin English of Napier recommends Christianity and Liberalism by J. Gresham Machen and C.S. Lewis' Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly On Prayer.

Next Newsletter

March 1997: Copy deadline is February 25th. To offer a contribution, send a floppy disk or hard copy to me at 26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay. e-mail to cheer@vnet.ibm.com

Noel Cheer, Editor

"human beings have no essence, but [instead] create themselves by their actions."
Carol Ochs, Behind The Sex Of God, p35

Steering Committee

Elections were held at the AGM in Dunedin and the following are now members of the Steering Committee. Their roles were determined at the first meeting. In 1996-1997 the Steering Committee of the New Zealand Sea of Faith Network is based in Wellington. In future years it may be located in other centres.

Chairperson	Jane Griffith 82 Kinghorne St. Strathmore Park, Wellington Phone 04-388-1885
Secretary	Yvonne Chisholm 67b Horokiwi Road West NewMands, Wellington Phone 04-478-6086
Newsletter Editor	Noel Cheer 26 Clipper Street Titahi Bay Phone 04-236-7533 e-mail cheer@vnet.ibm.com
Treasurer and Membership Secretary	Roy Griffith 82 Kinghorne St. Strathmore Park, Wellington Phone 04-388-1885
Members	Lloyd Geering, Elaine Geering, Roy Griffith, Janet Lambie, Liz Robinson, David Simmers, Janet Davidson

Those leaving the Steering Committee were all founder-members: Ian Harris, Marion Blackbourn, Ian Crabtree. Their efforts were recognised with gratitude

From The Chairperson

Since the Dunedin Conference, the Steering Committee has met twice. We have welcomed Janet Davidson, Elaine Geering and Liz Robinson onto the Committee and there has been a change of role for some members. Already we are discussing speakers and the format of the 1997 Conference and have made our first teleconference link with the Auckland Arrangements Committee. This is certainly an excellent method of the two committees keeping in close contact.

One issue that the Steering Committee has been asked to address is how the Network can attract younger members. It is an issue that we feel concerned about and which is vital for the continuing growth of the Sea of Faith. If you have any ideas about this we would very much appreciate hearing from you.

As Chairperson, I am keen to hear about the activities of local groups and to know whether there are ways in which you think the Steering Committee can help you.

As the holiday season approaches I wish you a relaxing and refreshing break.

Shalom.

Jane Griffith