

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NZ)

NEWSLETTER 21

May 1997

From the Steering Committee

At this time of year the main energies of the Steering Committee are directed towards the Conference. Since the March Newsletter we have received confirmation that Charmaine Pountney will join Lloyd Geering and John Spong as keynote speakers for the Conference. With these eminent and diverse speakers, and a series of elective lectures, workshops and core groups all exploring the theme "Faith on the Margins", this year's Conference promises to be a stimulating one.

"Where are our registration forms?", you may be asking. After talking with the Arrangements Committee and remembering that the Conference will be six weeks later this year than it was last year, it was decided that the July Newsletter would be the appropriate one in which to include registration details.

You may like to pre-book your flights to Auckland in order to benefit from cheaper fares. Note the earlier starting time when planning your travel: we anticipate that the Conference will start at 2:30pm on Friday 3 October, with registration from about 12:30pm. As usual, the Conference will close after lunch on Sunday.

It was good to join with the Mana and Wairarapa Sea of Faith Groups at their annual week-end seminar which was this year organised by Wairarapa members. [Details below - ed.] Regional events such as this are a great opportunity to pursue our common interests, to challenge each other and to encourage new exploration.

Jane Griffith

The Great Satan

This item, written by Fred Marshall of Hamilton, is a modified version of a contribution that he made to an ongoing debate being conducted on the Internet by those members of SOF who have Internet access. He wants us to understand that it is a "snapshot" of where the debate was at the time he wrote. He uses the term "Softies" which was coined by an earlier contributor to refer to members of Sea of Faith. We think it is a term of affection.

To Softies everywhere,

Patti's CPR job on the network after the Palestine debacle [Patti Whaley soothed some ruffled feathers after that debate became heated ... ed.] has produced a non-real resurrection of miraculous dimensions. The SoFnet has not known activity anything like it in its whole life. A kaleidoscope of views, frustrating in its way because just as you are ready to formulate a response to one point the ground shifts again, and we are off on another tangent. But from the mass of points a picture of the Softie in the round is emerging. Above the background noise of disillusionment with

the traditional church and the excitement of new directions two traits stand out for critical review.

The Sea of Faith is an intellectual movement which concerns itself with "the book I read last week", and argues ideas. Some criticisms have already been levelled at this esoteric approach, calling rather for a down-to-earth wrestling with human need.

The second aspect is its increasing dogmatism. Some would see the SoF as a code, an attitude(?) embracing any and every belief syncretically, although it is not clear yet to me what the product of this syncretism is envisaged as being. But the *sine qua non* of every scintilla of opinion that has appeared on the net is the belief in a non-real God, or the non-belief in a real God, or the *reductio ad absurdum* -- christian atheism -- and the triumphant crowing that there is now nothing for the atheist not to believe in.

Two reflections: Is there anybody out there in the SoF who has not come to his or her perception of the cosmos without much soul-searching, much intellectual and emotional angst? And how many others out there are still struggling and in need of a fabric in which they can evolve at their own pace to their own conclusions? The dogmatic imperative "Your God is a human creation, i.e. a delusion" is not much help to them on their journey. If the SoF is to be an framework embracing all beliefs, it must retain a space in the debate (not just a splinter) for the notion of God. The problem with the Renaissance, which was evoked on the network an age ago (i.e. some time before last week), is that the wonderful liberating notions that were effervescing in the 1520s and 1530s fell into rigid positions by the time of the Council of Trent and it has taken 450 years to recapture the best of them. Is the SoF, which evokes in its name the surge of eddies from every source, going to concretise its position around the dogma of godlessness?

The second point: the movement has been a great stimulus to me to jettison errors, misconceptions, the human trivia which we have used to label and tame God -- a god made in our own image. But even if we recognise that all that has been said about God in the past is balderdash, is that the same thing as saying there is no God? SoFties seem in general too inclined to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Which brings me to Jesus who is the nettopic ["topic under discussion" ed.] of the moment.

Whatever view one takes on the stories about Jesus they are only a peripheral issue alongside the incontrovertible fact that he was a not a myth but a real person who lived a real life. Just as the picture of a SoFtie emerges from the kaleidoscope, so the stories, whatever the detail, throw up some features of the man. He taught **not** beliefs but an attitude to which he gave the name "The Kingdom of Heaven" and promised that its product would be peace. Unlike the intellectualism of the SoF, this attitude was accessible to everyone, child, moron, genius, woman, man and provided a framework for personal growth for all. This attitude had two components: an attitude of love to one's neighbour and oneself and an attitude of openness to the cosmos which he called *abba* --

father. Love is a notion which in our time must be extended to include the whole natural order; and our place in it and our neighbour's are currently being "restructured". The openness to the cosmos, which we feel as "guidance" seems to have been abandoned in our thinking; and yet it forms the essential *leit motiv* of the OT writings, it is at the heart of Jesus' teaching, it has been the driving force to lead all the proponents of the Sea of Faith to their various positions and paradoxically has brought most of them to the point where they deny such "guidance" exists.

It is my contribution to the debate to suggest that this openness to the Cosmos, to God, to Evolution, whatever you like to call it, is the essence of our humanity and the crux of Evolution or the Becoming of God (the term of your choice). We focus on trivia when we concern ourselves with *this* theology or *that*, with *this* belief or *that*, with *this* morality or *that*. What matters is the believing, irrespective of the belief, the work of conscience that makes us opt for this action rather than that. It is the moment by moment options of individuals that are making the future of the world for better or for worse; it is the moral tension, *not* the morality which is transforming us slowly into human beings. We are the pivotal point of evolution, and the path it takes will depend on the exercise of our free will as individuals.

The Great Satan is not this heresy or that, not the materialist American Dream, not the Holocaust, not the butchery of Hutus or Tutsis, or Serbs or Bosnians or the oppression of Palestinians but the mindset that closes off the mind to "guidance" or communion with the Cosmos, or, more conveniently, God. It is pentecostalism, it is zionism, it is islam, it is the dogma of the Non-Real God.

Fred Marshall

Local Groups

Warkworth

Ina Shaw reports on their April meeting:

Jenny Dalebrook brought a painting of great impact to display and which became a pivotal centre of discussion. Her opening point -- "As the mind explores the symbol it is led to ideas beyond the grasp of reason", provoked us to either silence or comment.

Expanding into art or poetry can give substance to expand ideas -- and as Jenny continued to talk of symbolism in the use of colour, especially the red, black, white in which her picture was painted, she spoke of the Life-Death-Life cycle which is contained in mythology and traditional stories.

In Christianity, Christ's journey was of accomplishing the tasks of life -- knowing that the

ultimate task is death -- until he comes to the point "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

So the picture -- the face of Christ. Jenny gave analogies in our own life's journey as we search for meaning. She explained how she'd used the red, black, white colours symbolically, in expanding how they were used repeatedly in mythology and how these ancient colours were used in primitive art and also the alchemical process -- birth, descent, life, death, rebirth.

She and the group explored symbolism and expanded on this in the painting. In finally describing the thoughts and feelings behind the painting, interest and discussion centred on the impact and the importance of "The Shadow".

Auckland Central

In his address on March 16th, John Salmon referred to naive realism, critical realism and creative non-realism. These are expanded on in the book The Mouth of the Dragon which he co-authored with Susan Adams and which was reviewed in Newsletter 20.

On April 20th, Gordon Hambly will lead them on a discovery concerning *A Course of Miracles*. In explaining its core concepts, Graham Shearer refers to John Salmon's March lecture in which he distinguished between reality that is **physical** and reality that is primarily in the **mind**. The concept of God in "the Course" is nearer to the older critical realism than it is to the theological non-realism of Don Cupit.

Their meeting on September 21 will be addressed by Professor John Bishop of the Philosophy Department at Auckland University. He will talk on "Alternative Concepts of God."

North Shore

John Spong's latest book Liberating The Gospels -- Reading The Bible With Jewish Eyes [reviewed elsewhere in this Newsletter -- ed.] will be the occasion for a series of four weekly lectures by Darryl Milner at St. John The Baptist Anglican Church, Northcote, starting on April 22 at 7:30pm.

Christchurch

The group Convenor, John Goffin, writes:

We have an enthusiastic group which meets fortnightly on Fridays, 5 till 6:60 pm, at St Ninian's Lounge, Riccarton, with a mailing list of forty-two, and attendances of fifteen to twenty. Our year started with a barbeque at the country home of two of our members, which was a great occasion.

We have had some difficulty getting started with a programme of talks and discussion for 1997, to suit all interests, which is natural, and the discussion which this involved was itself quite educational and stimulating. We sorted ideas into five categories:

"For me ... the mystery of God's nature is such that even to speak of its existence is to go further than we can/should/dare go. That is why I prefer to stick with our own ideas about God ... without making claims for what there might or might not be 'out there' objectively corresponding to them."

Anthony Freeman (UK Managing Editor, Journal of Consciousness Studies)

Science and Religion, Ecology Conservation and Evolution, Theology in the Contemporary World, Cupitt Geering and SOF Conference topics, Different Spiritualities.

On 14 March, Ian Crumpton and Brian Lilburn led on "The Universe as Habitat".

On 4 April Bob Perks led a critique of the realism-non-realism debate, pointing out that they should not be seen as a dual set, but as a continuous spectrum from one to the other, with room for mystery and awe. Bob has videos for loan (write to R.E.Perks, 15 Van Asch St., Sumner Christchurch for details).

On 18 April Sr.D.Melton will speak about Hildegard of Bingen, and in May we will study Lloyd Geering's "God and the New Physics". Winter programme will look at other spiritualities. We also hope to link up with other South Island groups for combined meetings, and to stage a public meeting in say August, to raise the SOF profile (does anyone know of a good speaker or workshop leader passing through about that time?).

Mana/Wairarapa

On April 12 and 13 the Mana and Wairarapa groups held their annual regional seminar at Frederic Wallis House, in Lower Hutt. The Convenor, Adam Floyd, submitted this report:

This was an intellectually stimulating seminar in which we were asked to look at a diverse group of subjects, but all in their own way connected to the subject of the environment on planet Earth.

Dr Jim Veitch gave us an overview of the environment from many other spiritual and religious dimensions. In many ways these other religions had a more sensitive concern for the earth's environment than our own Judeo-Christian inheritance.

Dr Jim Stuart from St Andrew's on the Terrace gave us an equally compelling address on the history of some of the early pioneers of the Western environmental tradition.

In the afternoon Noel Cheer was brave enough to give us the Transnational viewpoint, not as radical as the theme of his address would suggest, but it still gave us plenty of food for thought. Take the power from trans-nationals that all countries give them by law, and we may have a return to some form of sanity and compassion in our society.

At end of Saturday we had Dr Frank Andrews from the Carter Observatory giving us the latest research data from the Hubble telescope in outer space. That whole address was mind-blowing and made us all realise that we were just a mere speck of dust in the vastness of the universe. If we were to vanish as a planet or become utterly polluted, then in the scale of the universe we are just a mere bagatelle.

On Sunday we had a compelling address from Irvine Roxburgh [see the next item -- ed.] about the origins of Islam and just what a bad press Islam gets from the West. We finished with the theme of the Seminar in the capable hands of Jane Griffith and parted in thoughtful mood from the friendships made at the seminar.

Adam Floyd

"What God Was, Culture Now Is"

The following is a summary, by Noel Cheer, of an address given by Irvine Roxburgh at the Mana/Wairarapa Sea of Faith Regional Seminar on the 13th of April, 1997

After disclosing that the title is a quotation from Don Cupitt, Irvine told a series of anecdotes which illustrated the "culture of credulity" in Christian Fundamentalism; that declarations of faith might be merely statements of nationalism in disguise and that although Islam was thought of as a culture by Ali Jinnah (who helped set up Pakistan), it was a religious faith at its inception.

He then traced the history of Islam and its interaction with Judaism and Christianity. He noted that, whereas the status of Christianity in respect of monotheism can and has been disputed, "from its start there was never a doubt [about] Islam being a monotheistic religion Nor ... was there any

New Feature

"Books That Made A Difference"

This is the first item in a new regular section in the Newsletter which features books that have made a difference in the personal faith-journeys of members of The Sea of Faith Network.

My choice is to recommend Situation Ethics by Joseph Fletcher (SCM Press 1966,1976).

Fletcher takes the position that there are three logically-possible approaches to ethics: **Legalism** or "prefabricated rules and regulations"; **Antinomianism**, by which he means *ad hoc* ethical decision-making without reference to principle or maxims; and **Situationism** in which: "The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, ... he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. Just the same, he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside in the situation if love seems better served by doing so. (page 26)"

In order to avoid a conflict of principles, Fletcher argues that the Christian (at least) is bound only by the law of love. All duty is concerned with **implementing** love. All other principles are malleable in the service of love. Although Fletcher argues in a Christian context, any red-blooded syncretist will find inspiration in what he writes!

The chapter-structure of Situation Ethics is such that it would make an excellent group-study book: especially; Love Only Is Always Good; Love Is The Only Norm; Love and Justice Are The Same; Love Is Not [the same as] Liking; Love Justifies Its Means; Love Decides There and Then.

Noel Cheer

Please send your contributions to the Editor (Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay) in time for the next Newsletter -- cutoff date is June 15th.

confusion [regarding] the role of Mohammed ... [who] saw himself simply as a servant and agent of God. And, what is more important, from the beginning, his followers have never deviated from this line."

He applauded the generally healthier attitude towards sex expressed by Islam and attributes to it the social justice and equal rights for all, including women. Western women didn't catch up until the 20th century.

The efforts of Mohammed blended cultural elements into a simple, powerful, tolerant religious faith. But what went wrong? He quotes Karen Armstrong as saying that "Islam, like Christianity before it, was hijacked by men". He gives the examples of the Islamic conquests from soon after the death of Mohammed until nearly 1800 and parallels their effects to that of the Christian Crusades and their style to the "16C macho buccaneering" of Sir Francis Drake and others. It was these events, among other factors, that lead to Jinna's characterisation of Islam as a *culture* and to Cupitt's similar characterisation of Christianity.

In the case of Christianity, Irvine points to Constantine in the 4th century as contributing to the process which resulted in the condition where "the church has been allied with worldly power to force people to accept Christian belief" (quoting D.L. Edwards). He quotes Felix Donnelly's view that we now have a "schizophrenic society": one that applauds the principle of compassion but instead of rewarding actual caregivers it rewards the ruthlessly competitive. He traces some of these attitudes back to Constantine (354-430CE) whose Platonic dualism gave him a gloomy view of human nature in general and of sexuality in particular.

For Irvine, as for many others, "the 'Sea of Faith', books, video, network came not a moment too soon." The other options were not good: on the one hand the churches -- cultures trained in self-interest and with declining statistics, offering metaphysical doctrinal schemes, while on the other our "western culture" which is directed by the mass media in what it offers to us as a world view. Cupitt offers us the same way out as the one that Abraham took who "left behind all that was once so certain to set out, not knowing

where he is to go -- and along a way that is new each day." He quotes Cupitt's metaphor "that we do not think of ourselves as soldiers waiting for orders from above but we think of ourselves as artists who may have chosen to work mainly in one tradition."

Irvine ended with a quotation from Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy:

"We are the music makers, we are the dreamer of dreams. Each age is a dream that is dying and one that is coming to birth."

Letter To The Editor

Judgment on Thiering

Lois Wells of Christchurch writes ...

Although [Barbara] Thiering has been dismissed by many, her books extended my knowledge and suggested interesting possibilities. They reminded me of studying Shakespeare, when background, plot, characters, themes were considered, but the real thrill was suddenly *becoming* an indecisive Hamlet or a guilt-ridden Lady Macbeth.

Likewise, the Bible's value lies in suddenly identifying with the woman who finds her lost coin or with the prodigal realising parents' worth. There are layers of meaning, many deeply symbolic, which, when they resonate within, may convulse one into re-thinking one's principles. We may be challenged to sort priorities like the rich young ruler or to wonder what type of soil we represent.

Despite almost a life-time's study, Thiering affirms that her reconstructions do not change Christianity. Indeed, she shows Jesus agonising over decisions involving principles, as we do. It suggests that *believing* means following Jesus' model, rather than expecting rewards through faith alone.

I found her work thought-provoking in line with the root meaning of 'repent': *thinking again* so as to become more oneself, which is my interpretation of religion. For me, Christianity is about relationships. From this viewpoint Thiering's books, even if historically inaccurate, have a religious value, as I believe has everything.

Lois Wells

Still Looking for a Logo

The Christchurch Group made these suggestions: The Sun, or a sunburst; The Sun dawning up out of the Sea; A Tree (deciduous or evergreen?!); A Ship; combinations of these.

The Sun is a powerful though overworked symbol, but typifies the present age while linking to worship and symbolism through the ages. Considering the all our energy and life come from the sun, we should adopt it as a symbol and object for celebration, and a link with the whole of the Universe.

Combining it with the Sea, or with a silhouette of a Tree would link our energy source with life on earth, or with the idea of voyaging. A stylised tree would link with the Genesis story of the tree of knowledge and the crucifixion (if you want that). Come to think of it, "Sea of Faith" is an unfortunate choice, with the strong implication of drifting around all at sea, compared with "Voyage of Faith" or "Journey of Faith".

A Ship would be consistent with the theme of Voyage, but note the Council of Churches(?) uses this symbol, so we could be accused of "passing off", but the implied linkage is intriguing.

Jane Griffith suggested using the same logo as used by the UK S.O.F. but with an outline map of New Zealand in the background. She was challenged by the idea of a tee-shirt (while preferring a sweatshirt!) and preferred a rainbow "all over, back and front" because "a rainbow represents all primary colours and provides plenty of choice, one colour merging into another. I perceive a rainbow representing all faiths as each links with others through the colour range and at the same time the contrasts of colour accommodate all spectrums of belief."

Lois Wells presented several possible logos, one almost identical with Jane's. One way that Lois suggests to "New Zealandise" the logo would be to make the lower curl of the "f" a stylised fern. Her suggestion for the printing on a tee-shirt was a cross with either lilies or candles along each arm.

Keep the ideas coming -- but we must make a decision by the end of May

Portrait of a Baby Boomer

This is a summary, by Noel Cheer, of the lead item in the Summer 1997 edition of re:SEARCH, the quarterly bulletin of the Christian Research Association. You can contact them on (09) 525-4179.

The author, David Clark who is Minister at St. Luke's Presbyterian Church in Remuera, opened with a description of the life of "Rosemary", a fictitious but typical baby-boomer whose education and life-experiences have left no place of relevance for the Christian church in her life. She seems to find some of the afterglow of Christianity palatable but she yearns for "Something Else" and holds no hope of finding it in the church. She has looked at New Age and Eastern alternatives to Christian participation.

David observes that the baby-boomers were once called the "me generation" but, since becoming parents, they are "concerned to pass on to their children the values of caring for others, respect and tolerance for others' opinions and lifestyles, and respect for the environment, but no longer have a specific religious basis for such values".

Because baby-boomers consider themselves to be "spiritual" while denying that they are "religious", the suggestion is made that, if the churches are to become attractive to them then they will need to move "experiential", participatory, pluralistic and open.

In an accompanying summary of the "Key Points" of the survey activity, a striking observation (but one that many SOFers will recognise) is made: "concern for others and personal integrity are seen as crucial values; these need no external religious validation and are common human values rather than exclusively Christian".

David ends with a quote from Wade Clark Roof: "... religion itself was never the problem, only [the] social forms of religion that can stifle the human spirit. The sacred lives on and is real to those who can access it."

Contribution

Balancing Faith With Reality

A brief look at belief in our economy and in our technologies

The author, Rob Harris, is from Wellington.

One of the assumptions made under our current western economic paradigm is that a functioning market economy will continue to develop new technology *ad infinitum*. There is another related assumption that technology in the limited sense of machinery and product is a solution to all problems. The growth of emergent ways of doing things is in fact contingent on whole rafts of things which relate to how a society thinks and feels about itself and the environment.

Technology in its more useful sense includes the ideas and approaches that people have to understanding their physical and social world and how they respond to it. Thinking about technology includes an element of the imponderable and the unknown as well as statements about ought and is. No fully

The Moral Mess or Forward To Basics

This item is taken from one of the same name in the Spring 1997 edition of the UK Sea of Faith Magazine. Subscription details for the Magazine appear at the end of this Newsletter.

An initiative was taken last year by the UK School Curriculum and Assessment Authority in organising a **National Forum for Values in Education and the Community**. Those taking part put together a statement of spiritual and moral values "shared by society as a whole": a "new ten commandments" which would reflect and identify "the prevailing consensus on these matters".

They came up with a four-part statement which they propose that school children learn by heart:

"We value ...

Self

We value each person as a unique being of intrinsic worth, with potential for spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical development and change.

Relationships

We value others for themselves, not for what they have or what they can do for us and we value these relationships as fundamental to our development and the good of our community.

Society

We value truth, human rights, the law, justice and collective endeavour for the common good of society. In particular we value families as sources of love and support for all their members as the basis of a society where people care for others.

Environment

We value the natural world as a source of wonder and inspiration, and accept our duty to maintain a sustainable environment for the future.

The U.K. Education Secretary refused to publish it until the Forum placed "more emphasis on marriage". One commentator, seeking to dismiss it, summarised it as "Be nice to yourself, be nice to other people, be nice to trees". But, if widely adopted, in either this form or in the full form, this set of attitudes would surely produce immediate benefits ... *ed.*

healthy society can afford uncritical belief in the efficacy of markets and information technology. An adolescent belief in inevitable salvation is no more correct for business and politicians than it was for marxists and priestly autocracies.

In the latter part of the 20th century we have moved away from the mistaken understanding that science could make everything objective and usefully calculable (some things are calculable but not usefully so and other things may never be capable of reduction, but can be understood in other more poetic ways). Just as science and critical enquiry helped move us from traditional parent centred religion, so too has it been replaced as the infallible arbiter of faith and place to stand. In its place, unfortunately, we have accepted a market based technological system as inevitable and all pervasive, whereas it is in fact an ephemeral social construct that doesn't even have the self critical elements of true western science.

This begs two basic questions. Firstly, what are markets (read distribution mechanisms) meant to do and how does their operation affect our direction? Secondly, what information is worth communicating and for which purposes? These are the age old questions that mystics and pragmatists alike have asked down the millenia, although they have chosen different routes to answer them and conceived of them in different ways to the technocrat or manager.

The package of world views about how we do things and for what, vary even within the western paradigm and vary enormously between traditional small scale societies, eastern autocracies and socratic views of the world. To understand technology in a balanced and realistic way we should place more emphasis on studying the social and ecological matrix into which each of these societies fits, instead of relying on hidden hands and scientifically half baked evolutionary theory about the survival of the greediest.

Semi cult authors such as Charles Handy (Age of Paradox) and John Saul (The Unconscious Civilisation) have tried to deal with these issues in writings on the shape of business and the social enterprise, although as yet there is reluctance to incorporate the 'social and cultural' into day to day strategy of the firm and state.

The tyranny of the discount rate which discounts the less obvious, the long term and the multi faceted against the immediate, the simple and the easily quantifiable, is leading us towards a technological cargo cult, which is more sophisticated but just as intellectually and culturally bankrupt as any New Guinea post colonial group of 'rascals'.

Studying technology legitimately includes studying how we generate and disseminate knowledge, the implications of social organisation and learning paths for technological use, in short, belief about the world and how it should be reconstructed in the prevailing or desired image.

Viewed in this light, belief is the underrated component of technology which should receive more study by those who make decisions. Belief is belief about cause and effect; belief about equality and equity; belief about who is an actor and what is acted upon in the world; belief about importance and priorities in how we treat the world; belief about faith

Win Some, Lose Some

Ronald Pearce, secretary of the Sea of Faith Network in Britain, asked former New Zealand chairperson Ian Harris (who met him on a trip to the UK in January) to pass on his greetings to members of the NZ Network. Ronald Pearce said an intriguing feature of the British Network is the way that it loses a third of its membership at each renewal date, and then builds up to the same level over the following months. He wonders whether they drop out because the Network fails to satisfy a large number of those who join it (often with initial relief and enthusiasm), or whether it is because the Network has provided an appropriate staging post for them and they move on.

in goodness and its opposite; belief about the companionship of life; belief in the importance of knowledge and who should keep it.

As we examine the wide ranging implications of how ideas about the world affect what we do and say, we often neglect the paths less travelled. Unfortunately, our reactions against the tyranny of the facile can often lead us into the equally facile new age (instant) solutions that the New Zealand Anglican archbishop seems to link with the Sea of Faith medley. He should remember that Christianity has at certain times been a world leader in providing facile and unthinking religiosity to the faithful flock (baa). After all, what is fundamentalism at times but facile solutions for those wanting to be secure?

We sometimes forget that one of the glories of our civilisation was the glory of critical enquiry (sometimes unfortunately at the expense of sensing and liking), although the opposite pole of sterile scepticism is also at odds with thinking and feeling coherently about social, technological and economic directions. To feel faith in life and its processes is to some not logical or supportable, but is probably an inevitable counterpart of critical enquiry particularly for the most knowledgeable and experienced. A sense of awe in the world is important in retaining perspective on technology and our surroundings, just as it is also necessary to want to query the workings of life. Pleasure in asking questions goes hand in hand with the pleasure of liking the things that you ask questions of.

It is also probably inevitable that the stronger the relationship one has with living things, the stronger will be a sense of community which in part relies on faith. The corollary is that this faith must be inculcated at an early age, partly based on trust and partly on freedom to question and partly based on access to the world so that experience can teach. Any world view that teaches denial of these things by focussing on the letter of sterile technique cannot be said to provide for a positive faith, belief, positive science, or even civilisation. Civilisation is a fragile human flower that can vanish away before people are aware, leaving its historical shell behind.

The central issues in any society of social organisation and purpose sometimes fall off the end in the modern world, partly because we are driven by the demands of how we coordinate to produce wealth to see things in the context of the needs of technology and economic structures. This is not new and can also be seen in the religious and ceremonial imperatives of tribal and pre-capitalist social histories.

There may however be a pervasive assumption that our 'science based' belief systems are immune to the belief calcification affecting these more 'primitive' societies. This can be disproved quite readily by examining the current paradigms driving us into the scientific and social deserts of the mind. The uncritical application of the information highway and 'flexible' just in time models are an obvious example.

Sometimes technology may be better advanced when one just sits and thinks and feels, fulfilling social responsibilities and smelling flowers, while wondering why it is that flowers produces hay fever and cures for anxiousness all in the one package.

Rob Harris

Off The Net

Improvised Faith and Jazz

Ian Stubbs, of the SOF UK, contributed this to the on-going dialogue undertaken by SOFers on the Internet.

I've recently discovered a cool French guy, Pierre Bourdieu. He's an ethnographer and sociologist and has had quite an impact on cultural theory. A number of people are reading him as being able to find a way through some of the current impasses eg. subjectivism v. objectivism, idealism v. determinism etc.

Bourdieu is quite famous for his notion of the 'habitus'. What this refers to, in my understanding, is the collection of ways of perceiving, thinking, appreciating and acting which we inherit from our common culture but to which we are able to give our own distinctive spin.

Bourdieu uses sporting examples, for example, in the way that players have a 'feel for the game' so that, in the heat of the moment they make the right decisions and moves. But he also uses a metaphor from jazz. The habitus is a culturally regulated set of perceptions and actions within which improvisation typically occurs.

I find this a really helpful idea in relation to faith which gets me beyond the realist/non-realist impasse. It seems to me that we inherit a faith 'habitus' within which we are typically able to improvise. The idea that we 'create' faith is very misleading. For me it is more helpful to say that religious faith is a human improvisation.

In jazz there is a bewildering proliferation of styles, stars and different approaches, so religious faith has its own dizzy line-up. The scope of 'jazz' and 'faith' is so expansive even the words demand constant re-defining. Is there such a thing as 'real' or 'true' faith any more than there is 'real' or 'true' jazz? Another interesting parallel between the two is that even when a creative movement has peaked it is not over and done with. Nearly all styles and approaches, ancient and modern and postmodern, continue to exist simultaneously. As an Anglican who likes to go back to my roots from time to time I find a helpful parallel between Sung Evensong and Original Dixieland.

And Jesus, the Miles Davies of faith, the brilliant improviser and innovator. "You heard it like this, but I play it to you so ..." as well as Mark, Luke, Peter, Chloe, Dorcas, Paul and the other great band leaders

who brought their own distinctive interpretations to the old tunes.

Someone has written about jazz,

"A jazz musician should function not only with his/her own generation in her/his bones, but also with a sense of the music's entire history existing simultaneously behind (or even within) the work of its living practitioners. Each new generation of players subtly shifts the balance of the whole existing order....." [Ian Carr (1987) *Jazz the Essential Companion*]

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Contribution

Another Way of Seeing

This review was contributed by Ian Harris of Wellington.

Seafarers of Faith who have not given up on the Judeo-Christian tradition will find Bishop John Spong's latest exploration into the Bible, *Liberating the Gospels*, both stimulating and provocative. For the gospel records he offers "another way of seeing" — through the Jewish eyes of those who wrote them, and of those for whom they were written.

The wonder is that after 2000 years of Christianity this should come as a novelty. But through the centuries Christians have been more adept at culturally adjusting the Christian story to their own times and circumstances than peeling it back to reveal the underlying attitudes, understandings, circumstances and experiences of 1st century Jews.

Spong charges that the gospels were hijacked into a gentile captivity and, worse, have been used for centuries to denigrate everything Jewish. He says it is time to free them so that people today can catch something of the gospel writers' world and their purposes in writing as they did.

His pivotal proposition is that *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke* took shape at a time when the first generations of Christians were still very much part of the worship of the synagogues. They were therefore written with a view to complementing the Jewish festivals and the readings from the Torah set out for the Jewish liturgical year with a kind of Christian counterpoint, showing how Jesus both fitted into the sacred story and went beyond it. *John* came later, and Spong's treatment is skimpier and less sure.

He acknowledges his debt to a former Anglican priest, Michael Goulder, whose studies opened up the new vantage point. He also develops a theme familiar from his book *Resurrection: Myth or Reality*: the importance of the Jewish literary technique of "midrash". Midrash makes imaginative links between the sacred past and the present experience, so that "the experience of the present can be affirmed as true inside the symbols of yesterday".

For Spong midrash, like spring, is busting out all over. Some of the parallels he draws between the gospels and the Old Testament are strong and convincing, others are tenuous to the point where any historical content in the gospels seems incidental. Spong unscrambles the Old Testament references that helped shape the story of the Virgin birth, Jesus'

betrayal and suffering, his resurrection and ascension. Some figures long assumed to be historical, such as Joseph and Judas, become midrashic creations, important for the story but not to be taken literally.

Spong sums up: "The Jews who created the Gospels knew they were not history, but they also knew that their experience was true -- not literally true, but profoundly true. The Gospels were midrashic interpretations of the meaning of Jesus told in the traditional way of the Jews. The great pity is that later non-Jewish, Western readers had no idea what that meant and so they literalised these texts."

Strange, then, that having dealt so severely to literalness, Spong writes in terms suggesting a lingering literalness of belief in an objective God. Of the resurrection he asks: "Can we deliteralise the explanation without destroying the reality?" That would be a fascinating question to put to him about God when he attends the Sea of Faith Network's conference in October.

I found the book valuable in presenting a new perspective on the gospels and a new way of taking them seriously which does not demand the negation of our experience as secular people in a secular culture. It confirms that the Judeo-Christian tradition is still rich in possibilities for a lively, creative and honest religion, despite what the Churches continue to do to it. For me, and I suspect for many skimming the Sea of Faith, that is most encouraging.

Ian Harris

Contribution

The Journey of a Great Soul

The Other Half of My Soul -- Bede Griffiths and the Hindu-Christian Dialogue (Compiled by Beatrice Bruteau, Quest Books 1996 XV + 397pp) is reviewed by Vladimir Loncar of Wellington.

This is an encyclopaedic tribute to the journey of a great soul. The twenty four contributors, most of whom were personal friends of Father Bede, share his journey through poems, memoirs, awesome philosophical investigations and dialogue.

The authors are mostly Catholics striving to realise more fully the significance of their name-universal. Even the title of this book is fully transcended by Father Bede himself, going beyond England and India, Eastern or Western, to a spiritual unity which most of us can barely think of.

All these essays and poems are profoundly evocative. While the main theme is inter-religious dialogue, there is music, meditation, mysticism, ecology, God as feminine, the Bhagavad Gita and Christ and Buddha embracing.

Beatrice Bruteau addresses a complex philosophical problem in her essay "The One and The Many", throwing more light on similar issues raised by Frederick Copleston in his *Religion and the One* (Search Press 1982).

Matthew Fox is there. So are Protestants Paul Knitter and Rupert Sheldrake. Raimon Panikkar offers a tribute. Monks, nuns, scholars all, while avoiding facile syncretism, strive towards a transcendence that will overcome exclusivism, that

virus which, for too long, has been programmed into our religious psyche.

If mountains of theology have to be moved, they will move them. There are many essays worth going back to again and again. They haunt the reader with the sense that here are metaphysical vitamins essential to one's theological diet. No "easy read" here.

These essays are the Western Wisdom meeting the Eastern Wisdom in the lives of those who had a lifelong dedication to the Spiritual Quest. Their's is the more difficult path; it has always always been easier for East to meet West, for example in Ramakrishna and M.K. Ghandi. Dom Bede Griffiths' life and work has been dedicated to this harder path.

This book is an outstanding tribute to his endeavours, and will be a further inspiration to many others who pursue this crucial adventure.

Vladimir Loncar

Miscellaneous

Lloyd Geering's Lectures

Lloyd's speaking engagements for the rest of 1997 include:

27 Sep	New Plymouth	"New Idols for Old"
3-5 Oct	SOF Conference	Keynote Address
17 Oct	Auckland	"Synchronicity"
18 Oct	Auckland	"New Idols for Old"
25 Oct	Wellington	t.b.a.
9 Nov	Picton	"Relativity -- The Key To Human Understanding"

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Errata

Bay of Islands Group: Some copies of Newsletter 20 may have the contact entry for this group missing. The contact is Mary Johnson, P.O.Box 345, Kaikohe, Phone/Fax (09) 401-0412

Dunedin Group: the phone number for Mae Cairns in Newsletter 20 is incorrect: it should be (03)468-5058

Next Newsletter

July 1997: Copy deadline is June 15th. To offer a contribution, send a floppy disk or hard copy to Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay or e-mail to cheer@vnet.ibm.com

Noel Cheer, Editor