

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

From Our Chairperson

Since you received the June Newsletter, members of the Steering Committee have been extremely busy finalising details of elective lecturers and workshop leaders for the forthcoming Conference as well as working on all the other aspects of the Conference programme. On your behalf I thank the Steering Committee and also the Arrangements Committee who are into full steam ahead in their preparations. By now you should have received a registration form for the Conference and I hope that if you haven't already sent off your registration you will seriously consider joining us for what is shaping up to be an interesting and thought-provoking conference.

The format of the Conference will be similar to last year's but also reflecting the suggestions made by attendees in Auckland. The keynote speakers and elective lectures should provide plenty of intellectual stimulation and the workshops have been especially designed to ensure maximum group participation.

Core groups, which were introduced for the first time last year, will again feature. Each person will be allocated to a group and will remain in that group for the three sessions in order to build up some rapport and trust in the groups and hopefully for participants to share their views with each other. Last year several people who came to the Conference on their own commented how helpful it was to have a small group whom they could get to know and who became familiar faces to join at mealtimes.

At the end of June the Wairarapa, Mana and Wellington local groups gathered for a regional day when we heard from Lloyd Geering and Jim Veitch about their current writing. It was good to be at such a gathering which could be likened to the "nibbles" before a splendid dinner—the dinner of course is yet to come (the Conference). I'm sure other local groups meet together from time to time for regional days—do let us know about these as I'm sure many people will be interested to hear of such activities and it well might provide ideas for other groups.

Since the June Newsletter Noel's wife Robyn has died after a long battle with cancer. We all extend our sympathy to Noel as he adjusts to life without his soul-mate of over thirty-six years.

Jane Griffith, Chairperson

Conference Arrangements Committee

Wellington is looking like a warm and interesting place to be in October.

We hope that you are beginning to confirm plans to come to this year's conference at Heretaunga where arrangements for a stimulating discussion of the topic **Inventing Reality** are well under way.

All registration information was posted to member households on 31 July.

Return one registration form per person please and remember that places are limited to 200 this year.

We all look forward to seeing you in

REMEMBER

- Conference registration material was posted to each member household on 31 July.
- Places at the Conference are limited to 200.
- The Conferences are getting better every year.

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Wellington for the weekend 9 to 11 October.

Janet Lambie
1998 Conference
Arrangements Committee.

Book Reviews

The Many Faces of Christ

The Many Faces of Christ by James Stuart, St. Andrew's Trust, 1998. Reviewed by Lloyd Geering

Based on his lunch hour lectures delivered in 1997, Jim Stuart, minister of St. Andrew's-on-the-Terrace, has produced a book that should not only be read by every church member but will be of interest to many in the SOFN. It is a clearly written distillation of the most important scholarly books on the subject most central to Christianity—the figure of Christ.

The book is a blend of the latest New Testament scholarship and the history of Christian thought. What Karen Armstrong did in relation to God in her book *A History of God*, Jim Stuart has done for Christ. This is "A History of the Christ" (to be distinguished from the life of Jesus).

A remarkable amount is packed into only 60 pages. This book could have been written only by a person who, as a one-time theological teacher, had extensive knowledge on which to draw; yet this book avoids all the complexity of theological jargon and can be easily read by anyone.

The author leads the reader from Jesus the Galilean through Jesus the Lord of the Roman Empire, through the scholastic Christ of the Middle Ages, to Jesus the man in the modern global society. Even those who have received a theological education can benefit from this succinct and balanced summary of sound scholarship, while for the layperson looking for the best readable introduction to Christianity this book is a godsend. This historical

sketch helps to make clear why Christianity has become so open-ended in the 20th century.

The book is available from St. Andrew's Trust, PO Box 5203, Wellington for \$10, plus \$2 p&p).

Lloyd Geering

The Religion of Being

The Religion of Being, by Don Cupitt, SCM Press, 1998. Reviewed by Lloyd Geering

This is not a book for the faint-hearted for it is not easily read. Yet it could prove to be the most profound book Don has yet written. His jumping off point is Martin Heidegger, the German existentialist philosopher, whose book *Being and Time* is itself notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to understand. Nevertheless Rudolf Bultmann drew from this work by his academic colleague for his now well-known programme for demythologizing the Christian Gospel.

Don says his book is "not an academic study of Heidegger but an experiment in religious thought". He agrees that Heidegger is an obscure writer but says we need to demythologize him. It is perhaps because Don attempts to do this in the opening chapters that I found them heavy-going, though in looking back I find I have marked many passages.

Only when I had got nearly half way through did I really start to be excited. For example he makes a parable out of comparing Hans Christian Andersen's story of the Emperor without Clothes with H.G. Wells story of *The Invisible Man*. In the first there is a body but no visible clothes; in the second there is no visible body and the clothes need to be visible to show where the body is. Ordinary people, he said are Andersenites, or realists, while non-realists (or anti-realists) are Wellsians. The latter understand that there is no world to be seen except through language.

Later he writes, "Everyone builds and

inhabits a little world of her own, with her own values, beliefs and angle upon the common world. But the larger common world of our language itself...is a very large and massively-strong social construction, built by accumulation over a very long period". I found myself on his wave length here for that was one of the chief themes of *Tomorrow's God*, whose sub-title was "How we create our worlds".

Don then goes on to show that the new global technological culture, which promises to bring the power of heaven down to earth, remains a thinly veiled form of the old theological culture. He proceeds to make a powerful critique of today's technological culture, in which there is no place for religious and poetical thinking and where we are content to hand over our rational thinking to machines which do it better than we do.

In a very Nietzschean mode he declares, "We are already at the end of thinking. 'Man' has already died. Consciousness is redundant, and is vanishing. Nobody is complaining; people are happy to collaborate with the market research that improves the efficiency with which they are induced to play their assigned part in economic life. We help the system to exploit us, and so connive at our own elimination".

In the last chapter Don surveys his journey of thought in five stages over the last thirty years. He has warned us elsewhere that this may be his last book. Let's hope not! But if it so proved to be, this book makes an appropriate conclusion to his creative work even though, as he says, there can be no conclusion and no final stage. "We living, changing, temporal beings are bound to be rest-less....We are all of us, every one of us, world-builders, agents of creation, makers of meaning".

Lloyd Geering

More reviews on page 6

The End of Metaphysics

"The whole history of Western metaphysics from Plato to Nietzsche rested upon a mistake, and it was a very bad mistake. We were running away from time, finitude and contingency. We forsook Being and took refuge in dreams of absolute security, rational necessity, timelessness and total knowledge and control. But now with the end of metaphysics, philosophy is at long last returned to its original and founding question, the question of Being."

Don Cupitt: *The Religion of Being* p106

Editorial

Tension is in the air. In addition to what Aldous Huxley didn't call The Perennial Animosity—the debates between longstanding religious factions—religion has some new tensions, courtesy of twentieth century tolerance.

While the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in New Zealand are approaching meltdown over gay clergy, (see Lloyd's item on page 7), the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury in the UK has asked Bishops John Spong and Peter Lee to set out the issues in a "catechesis"—a sort of polite dialogue. They have done so and are asking their fellow Anglicans to make no precipitate moves for ten years. We have a SOFers Digest condensation of that document in this Newsletter. Meanwhile NZ Presbyterians are following the example of the US Army with a "don't ask, don't tell" approach to the sexual orientation of prospective clergy.

John Spong, like a latter-day Martin Luther, has nailed on the door of cyberspace his theses for a New Reformation. We carry that copy too.

In this Newsletter, Lloyd Geering, John Spong and Irvine Roxburgh all distance themselves from Fundamentalism, Lloyd describing it as "idolatry of the Bible".

Then there's the ongoing "cerebral v. experiential" debate. Duncan Park (UK SOF) reckons that we should be more evangelical. David Boulton doesn't agree—all summarised in the item about the UK SOF Magazine. And, in Britain, the annual conference of Methodists has voted against church union talks with the Anglicans!!

Noel Cheer

Letters to the Editor

Dear Sir,

Many people like me who had a connection with evangelical churches in their youth will remember the importance placed on an inner experience or conversion to signal a change in their relationship with God. These experiences could signal a change from eternal damnation in the fires of hell to an eternity of bliss in heaven. Certainly significant events! Although such an interpretation of those experiences is no longer credible it is interesting to rethink their significance from an older (but not necessarily wiser) perspective. These moments of decision, of special insight or new resolve, spiritual experiences if you like, seemed important then and I would be interested in hearing of other peoples experiences and how they are currently understood.

Andrew Meek, Dunedin.

Dear Sir,

I myself prefer Matthew Fox's "original blessing" to Augustine's "original sin" and note that in Stories of the Beginning: Genesis 1-11 and other Creation Stories, Ellen van Wolde, Professor of Old Testament Exegesis and Hebrew in the Theological Faculty of the University of Tilburg, The Netherlands 1995 (translated by John Bowden from the Dutch 1996, SCM Press Ltd), contends that continued talk of original sin arises from modern man's making himself central to creation at earth's expense. She finds no suggestion in the Hebrew of wrongdoing by humans in eating the so-called apple, which she associates with discernment or, as Fred Marshall says, of awareness. Rather the "Fall" reads as progress in human development -- from dependence to autonomy.

Just as Adam and Eve are not presented as individuals I think Jesus represents an impulse from conformity towards authenticity and growth in all areas of life. By refusing to acknowledge an educated public and address real issues and motivations in concrete terms, I believe the church has ensured its own demise.

Lois Wells, Christchurch

Letters to the Editor close at the Conference.

Religion Still Matters

The title comes from a talk by Don Cupitt at the 1997 SOFN Conference in the UK. It was the subject of the Auckland Central's workshop on July 19. Excerpts from the talk follow:

- What we should be trying to persuade people of is that just the production of a religious life and the creative work of religious thought is far more interesting and exciting than any system of doctrinal conclusions. We don't have any true doctrines to offer, and we don't even want true doctrines because they block thought, and in any case because there aren't any. The end of metaphysics [see page 2] is also the end of "doctrine" -- that is, the end of ideology, the end of belief in a ready-made truth to live by. What we should offer instead is the discovery that just the creative work of religious thought and the expressive living of the religious life is itself the saving reality.

- It is possible ... to live by the religious imagination: to be the creator of one's own religious life.

- Codified religion, believed and practised according to ready-made rules, is dead religion, whereas living religion is something we must make up ... all the time and as we go along.

- The idea of an immutable ready-made truth is authoritarian, and it destroys people's creativity.

- Doctrine has always been used in our tradition not to stimulate but to inhibit religious thought, and people still fear that they are not allowed and not competent to develop new religious ideas.

- The life of religion is not in the ideal finished system constructed by scholars, but rather in the ways in which individual people construct their own lives day by day out of the varied materials that come to hand.

- Religion is entirely human, language-bound and historically evolving, just like the rest of culture; and once we have clearly seen how and why this is and has to be so, we wonder how anyone manages to think otherwise.

- The same ordinary individuals must in principle be capable of major religious innovation. After all, ordinary human beings are evidently capable of just inventing great art, so why shouldn't they also be capable of inventing great religion?

- But today we should no longer accept the views that true religion consists in obediently holding only authorized opinions. We should shake off the old fears and say that we are glad to be heretics. It is religiously profoundly liberating to think for oneself.

- Apparently, culture is no longer about the perfecting of the human being. It is about objectified "growth", at the expense of the human being. As "the economy" grows, we shrink.

- There is still a vital need for religion. Not all the problems of life can be solved by good management, technical progress and economic growth.

- Man does not live by means alone: there has to be thought about ends.

Submitted by the Auckland Central group.

A Call for a New Reformation

by John S. Spong

Bishop John Spong, following in the footsteps of Martin Luther but using the Internet in place of a cathedral door, has posted his 12 theses and has called for a response.

There have already been many responses and, as one might expect, they range from strongly for to strongly against. These theses might form the basis of a Local Group discussion session. Due to space constraints, the preamble has been abridged.

In the 16th century the Christian Church, which had been the source of much of the stability of the western world, entered a period of internal and violent upheaval.

In time this upheaval came to be called the Protestant Reformation Yet, when looking at that ecclesiastical conflict from the vantage point of more than four hundred years, there is surprise at how insignificant were the theological issues dividing the two sides. Neither side was debating such core teachings of Christianity as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, Jesus as the incarnate son of God, the reality of heaven and hell, the place of the cross in the plan of salvation or the role of such sacraments as Baptism and Communion. These rather were faith assertions held in common. ...

The Reformation was not an attempt to reformulate the Christian faith for a new era. It was rather a battle over issues of Church order. The time had not arrived in which Christians would be required to rethink the basic and identifying marks of Christianity itself.

It is my conviction that such a moment is facing the Christian world today.

The very heart and soul of Christianity will be the content of this reformation. The debate which has been building for centuries has now erupted into public view. All the past ecclesiastical efforts to keep it at bay or deny its reality have surely failed and will continue to do so.

[He then cites the new world-views of Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and Freud.]

The God understood as a father figure, who guided ultimate personal decisions, answered our prayers, and promised rewards and punishment based upon our

behavior was not designed to call anyone into maturity. This view of God issued rather into either a religious mentality of passive dependency or an aggressive secular rejection of all things religious. After Freud, it was not surprising to see Christianity degenerate into an increasingly shrill biblical fundamentalism where thinking was not encouraged and preconceived pious answers were readily given, but where neither genuine questions nor maturity were allowed or encouraged. The renewal of Christianity will not come from fundamentalism, secularism or the irrelevant mainline tradition. If there is nothing more than this on the horizon then I see no future for the enterprise we call the Christian faith.

My sense is that history has come to a point where only one thing will save this venerable faith tradition at this critical time in Christian history, and that is a new Reformation far more radical than Christianity has ever before known and that this Reformation must deal with the very substance of that faith.

This Reformation will be about the very life and death of Christianity. Because it goes to the heart of how Christianity is to be understood, it will dwarf in intensity the Reformation of the 16th century. It will not be concerned about authority, ecclesiastical polity, valid ordinations and valid sacraments. It will be rather a Reformation that will examine the very nature of the Christian faith itself. Martin Luther ignited the Reformation of the 16th century by nailing to the door of the church in Wittenberg in 1517 the 95 Theses that he wished to debate. ... I will post my theses on the Internet and send copies with invitations to debate them to the recognized Christian leaders of the world. My theses are far smaller in number than were those of Martin Luther, but they are far more threatening theologically. The issues to which I now call the Christians of the world to debate are these:

1. Theism, as a way of defining God, is dead. So most theological God-talk is today meaningless. A new way to speak of God must be found.

2. Since God can no longer be

conceived in theistic terms, it becomes nonsensical to seek to understand Jesus as the incarnation of the theistic deity. So the Christology of the ages is bankrupt.

3. The biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which human beings fell into sin is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense.

4. The virgin birth, understood as literal biology, makes Christ's divinity, as traditionally understood, impossible.

5. The miracle stories of the New Testament can no longer be interpreted in a post-Newtonian world as supernatural events performed by an incarnate deity.

6. The view of the cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world is a barbarian idea based on primitive concepts of God and must be dismissed.

7. Resurrection is an action of God. Jesus was raised into the meaning of God. It therefore cannot be a physical resuscitation occurring inside human history.

8. The story of the Ascension assumed a three-tiered universe and is therefore not capable of being translated into the concepts of a post-Copernican space age.

9. There is no external, objective, revealed standard writ in scripture or on tablets of stone that will govern our ethical behavior for all time.

10. Prayer cannot be a request made to a theistic deity to act in human history in a particular way.

11. The hope for life after death must be separated forever from the behavior control mentality of reward and punishment. The Church must abandon, therefore, its reliance on guilt as a motivator of behavior.

12. All human beings bear God's image and must be respected for what each person is. Therefore, no external description of one's being, whether based on race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, can properly be used as the basis for either rejection or discrimination.

I set these theses today before the Christian world and I stand ready to debate each of them as we prepare to enter the third millennium.

A Catechesis on Homosexuality

22 May 1998

The following is an abbreviation of a document, called a "Catechesis": (a dialogue between believers) on the subject of homosexuality written at the suggestion of the Archbishop of Canterbury by the Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong, Bishop of the Diocese of Newark (USA) and the Rt. Rev. Peter John Lee, Bishop of the Diocese of Christ the King (Southern Africa).

One hundred years ago there was no debate about homosexuality in the life of the Christian Church. Today that debate is raging in every part of Christianity, sometimes above ground and sometimes underground. In some parts of our [Anglican] communion this debate threatens to separate Christians into warring camps. In our Communion we have already heard threats to excommunicate from one side and invitations to leave from the other and we have seen evidence that this debate can erupt in hurtful or contemptuous words and even into physically violent behavior.

Underneath the debate, which is posed in biblical, moral and theological terms, we believe is a disagreement in the definition of homosexuality. If homosexuality is an evil activity chosen by morally depraved or mentally ill people and condemned by God, scripture and tradition as sinful, then the Church can hardly make an accommodation with this style of life. To do so would be to violate everything that one who takes this point of view holds sacred.

On the other side of this debate are those Christians who have become convinced by insights from the field of modern science that a homosexual orientation is a natural and normal, albeit minority, aspect of the human sexual experience, that it is not something one chooses, or is conditioned into, but something one is. Homosexuality is, for those who hold this point of view, like being left-handed, which is statistically a deviation from the norm of human life, that was also once a cause for both discrimination and persecution. Our Church has esteemed and faithful bishops who stand on both sides of this debate. There are still other

members of this Communion who stand between these two definitions with uncertainty. They feel both tentative and fearful in this debate. They have not come to firm conclusions and are uncomfortable with all those who have. Members of this group are striving conscientiously to discern the mind of God in these matters and are not ready at this time to make decisions.

Trying to avoid division, but not at the price of stifling debate or limiting the search for truth, we, representing vastly different constituencies, offer to the Lambeth Conference the following proposal. We do not suggest a compromise because we do not believe compromise is either possible or a proper way to proceed in reaching moral conclusions. We offer rather a way that members of this Church might walk together into the future without requiring those who hold diametrically opposed convictions to feel that they are being asked or driven to sacrifice either their convictions or their understanding of the Gospel.

In our conversations together we identified six major issues on which this debate hinges. We believe that it is possible to reach a consensus on three of them. We believe that all we can do with the other three is to describe the differences between us fairly. So we lay before the Lambeth Conference, first the areas where we think agreement is possible and express the hope that the Lambeth Bishops will speak with the voice of unity on these issues. Then we intend to describe the areas of our disagreement, seeking here only to discover clarity in those things which divide us deeply and to state these issues with the integrity that each side requires. We will then ask the Lambeth Conference to commend these divisions to the appointed panel for further study.

[from this point the document is heavily abridged — ed]

I. Areas where we think agreement is possible:

A. First, we believe that homosexual people are God's children who with the entire human family share in God's love and they must therefore be treated with fairness,

justice and equality before the law. B. Second, we stand together in upholding the sacredness of marriage and the importance of the family unit in every society.

C. Third, we believe that the vast majority of the bishops of this communion are ready to declare that any sexual activity that is predatory and unwelcome, any pattern of sexual behavior that seeks to impose upon a weaker person the will of a stronger person is wrong and should be condemned by this body.

II. Areas in which we believe agreement at this moment is not possible:

A. The blessing of same sex couples. Is celibacy the only option for gay and lesbian persons if they wish to be Christians? Here the voices of our bishops proclaim both a loud yes and a loud no.

B. Ordaining to the priesthood gay/lesbian people who live in faithful, monogamous relationships. Should non-celibate homosexual persons be ordained into the Church's priesthood? By non-celibate no one means "promiscuous." We mean rather can a person living in a faithful, monogamous, committed and presumably a life long relationship serve the Church as an ordained person?

C. The authority of the Bible. Implicit in these disagreements is a third issue on which we cannot now find consensus. It has to do with conflicting views on the use and authority of Holy Scripture. The Bible can certainly be read as condemnatory of homosexual practice. Both sides admit that.

It is our hope and our prayer that the Anglican Communion, through the example of its bishops, can model for the rest of the world a method of dealing with conflict, even rending conflict; namely, to treat those with whom we disagree with dignity, to recognize as legitimate the competing and seemingly irreconcilable points of view that divide us, to hold them in a dynamic tension, and to commit ourselves to live prayerfully into the solutions, confident that the God we serve will in time lead us all into God's truth.

**Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong
Rt. Rev. Peter John Lee**

Book Reviews

Re-laying the Foundations

Re-laying the Foundations

by Rinny Westra, ColcomPress, 1998.
Reviewed by Lloyd Geering

Rinny Westra, a member of the SOFN and minister, until recently, of the Presbyterian church at Devonport, has here collected together the material he has prepared for study groups and preaching over the last four years. Published sermons are notoriously unreadable. What makes this material unusual is that it assumes two premises: the collapse of Christendom and the collapse of theism (the belief in God as an all-powerful and loving metaphysical Being). What is today's preacher to say?

The author first looks through the rubble of shattered Christendom to see what there is to be salvaged. The Westminster Shorter Catechism so beloved by Presbyterians in the past he then rewrites to make it relevant to the current religious situation.

The main body of the 280 pages is devoted to short sermons which cover the whole Bible, 59 from Genesis to Malachi, 3 on Easter and 31 on the New Testament.

The book sells for \$30.

Lloyd Geering

Honest To Jesus

By Robert W. Funk published by HarperSan Francisco.

We printed a "publisher's-blurb" review of *Honest to Jesus* in Newsletter 25. This review is by Alan Goss.

A definitive book about the historical Jesus has never nor ever will be written, but this volume by Robert Funk, the founder of the Jesus Seminar, is a significant milestone. Even Funk's staunchest opponents must give credit where credit is due.

The aim of this book is to rescue Jesus from the creedal and scriptural prisons in which he is incarcerated. He needs to be distinguished from the reports about him preserved in the gospels since that Jesus is, in large part, the product of his early admirers. Scholars must therefore try to sift out what we can know historically about Jesus the Galilean from the portrait of Christ produced by each of the evangelists.

Those engaged in this new quest sharply distinguish the historical Jesus from the Jesus of the gospels and the Christ of the creeds.

Funk contends that Jesus' followers, rather than focussing on Jesus' vision of God's kingdom or domain—which was his priority—directed most of their attention at Jesus himself. The vision was replaced by the visionary, the iconoclast was converted into an idol. The intention was to market the messiah. In so doing Jesus followers cloaked the irreligious, irreverent and impious Galilean sage with layers of interpretation, transforming him into the martyred righteous one or the dying/rising lord of Gentile christianity.

The real flesh and blood Jesus, which we yearn for, was displaced.

This book will help not only those within the church who are questioning its beliefs and practices but also those outside the institution who think christianity is a tradition worth reforming and saving. Robert Funk's visit here later in the year will inevitably precipitate some thunderstorms. But at least they help to clear the air.

Alan Goss

For more about Robert Funk's lecture tour of New Zealand (Aug 28—Sept 11) phone Continuing Education on 04-499-4745 or visit <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/conted/tjs/>

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*This book was reviewed
in Newsletter 26.*

Ten Confessions

by Robert Funk

1. My confession may be a cover-up. Reader be warned!
2. I fear the confession Christians make when they recite the Apostles' Creed is very likely a cover-up (of the real Jesus).
3. I'm more interested in what Jesus thought about God's domain than in what Peter and Paul thought about Jesus of Nazareth.
4. I'm inclined to think that Jesus caught a glimpse of what the world is really like when you look at it with God's eyes. That glimpse is reflected in parables and aphorisms (subversive proverbs).
5. My glimpse (of the real Jesus) stealing a peek at God's domain is informed by, but bypasses, the Jesus of the gospels—the Christ superimposed by the evangelists on their own glimpse of the real Jesus.
6. I'm convinced the New Testament conceals the real Jesus as frequently as it reveals him.
7. I believe that the world "out there", the world we take to be real, is a product for the most part of our descriptions of it ... I confess that there is a world out there and that it is solidly real. I just don't know for sure which aspects are real and which are illusions supplied by our myths and descriptions.
8. I believe in original sin = the innate capacity of human beings to deceive themselves.
9. The self-deception inherent in "original sin" prompts human beings to believe that what they want is what they are really entitled to and what they will eventually get -- things like unending life in another world and absolute justice in this. I doubt that it will work out that way.
10. I'm inclined to the view that we are free to cross over to the kingdom of God, to God's estate, so long as we never arrive. Perpetual leave taking and the hope of homecoming is our common human fate.

Submitted by Alan Goss

Presbyterian General Assembly

As many in the SoF Network have been or still are members of the Presbyterian Church, they will have been interested in the recent General Assembly which was attempting to deal in a reconciling fashion with the tensions currently felt in the church over the question of homosexuality and whether those in gay or lesbian relationships should be eligible to hold office in the church.

The genuine sincerity with which representatives of opposing sides tried to find a compromise which would enable them to stay together in the one church is to be commended and even a newspaper editorial suggested that politicians could well learn from it.

On the other hand, the attempted temporary compromise they came up with thoroughly deserved the ridicule to which it was subjected when the McPhail and Gadsby TV programme had a field day at the Assembly's expense.

The chief reason for the ridicule was the failure of the Assembly to face up to the dilemma they faced. Either the question of gay and lesbian leadership in the church is a matter central to Christianity (in which case there can never be any compromise) or else it is not central (in which case the Assembly should not attempt to legislate for it but deal with more important issues).

What lies behind this dilemma is an even more serious one, which has not been adequately recognized. Is church teaching and practice to be based on a fundamentalist commitment to the

Bible or not? This battle has been going on in the churches for most of this century. The fundamentalists are now winning the battle as a famous scholar, Kirsopp Lake, prophesied they would back in 1925 when fundamentalism first arose. It is too little realised that fundamentalism is a modern movement and not the guardian of the tradition that it claims to be.

A knowledge of the history of Christianity shows it to be a tradition which remained sufficiently fluid to adapt to changing thought through the ages, albeit with some difficulty. From 1850 to 1920 it was adapting to the rapidly changing modern world. The Presbyterian church of New Zealand was then much more in touch with what was going on in society and hence was liberal, relative to the times. Today it is rapidly losing touch with society and has become much more conservative, relative to the times we live in. The fundamentalists have been winning the battle because the more liberally-minded people have just abandoned the church as it failed to keep in touch with modern thought.

And what is wrong with fundamentalism? It is not Christianity but a modern form of idolatry—the idolatry of the Bible. It is even worse than that, for fundamentalists do not idolize every bit of the Bible equally but only those parts they agree with. The rest they conveniently ignore. This causes fundamentalism to descend into the idolatry of one's own ideas, which, incidentally, is what they accuse humanists and liberal Christians of doing. The only way to avoid idolizing one's

own ideas is to remain self-critical and to keep one's mind open. Fundamentalism has abandoned the open mind, something which is the strength of any genuine path of faith, be it Christian or of any other name. Current events in the Presbyterian church suggest that the prognosis for its future is not good.

Lloyd Geering

Reality Systems

This item, by Graham Shearer, originally appeared in the June Newsletter of the Auckland Central Group.

Let us consider some "reality systems" of which we are already aware.

1. **Western Religions** (Monotheistic Judaism, Christianity and Islam.) Belief, from an original orthodox point of view, was in a "real" world created (from nothing) by a "real" God. Emphasis was placed upon the "real" body, and if we played our cards right it was in the "real" body that we would be resurrected when Christ returned. However there is growing belief in the God that is "non real" and that we too, on death, will become "non real". The orthodox belief is that there is an ultimate reality/truth in God, Christ, Allah.

2. **Eastern Religions** (Buddhism, Hinduism etc.) These religions

Archetypes

"BUT, ALTHOUGH OUR WHOLE WORLD OF RELIGIOUS IDEAS CONSISTS OF ANTHROPOMORPHIC IMAGES THAT COULD NEVER STAND UP TO RATIONAL CRITICISM, WE SHOULD NEVER FORGET THAT THEY ARE BASED ON NUMINOUS ARCHETYPES, I.E. ON AN EMOTIONAL FOUNDATION WHICH IS UNASSAILABLE BY REASON. WE ARE DEALING WITH PSYCHIC FACTS WHICH LOGIC CAN OVERLOOK BUT NOT ELIMINATE."

Carl Jung
Answer to Job p.xiv

share the basic notions of karmic fate and cyclic existence but the particular Buddhist emphasis is *maya*: nothing is permanent, nothing is as it seems, there is not even a real notion of "self"—all is flux, moving in and out of "being". A Buddhist monk enters the Sanga to attain *anatta* or "nonself". The aim of the Buddhist is Nirvana (extinction). The ultimate antonym to all that this life presents. Hindus seek *Moksha* or ultimate liberation from the wheel of life/death, and blissful reunion with divinity, by a variety of "ways". (works, knowledge, devotion, faith, etc.)

3. **The New Physics.** (A scientific view of reality.) Professor Paul Baker, in his 1996 address to us, explained that we had progressed through Newtonian Mechanics to Einstein's theories of Relativity and now onto the Field Theory of the new physics. We now know that there is no need to postulate any ultimate particulate matter. Everything can be explained as existing by virtue of a pulsating field. It all depends on the view taken by the observer—there is a subjective element in the "real" equation. So your "real" table can now be properly regarded as, "non real", is not "out there" and does not exist (physically as matter). The outstanding corollary to this is that all existence (being) is identical, one in the same. (Paul has said, all are one in Christ, all are joined.)

4. **Humanistic Psychology.** (The human potential movement.) Affirms that joy is the natural state of being. Development of self awareness leads to personal and interpersonal experience and self-actualisation. Peak experience can make us fully aware of the "Ground of Being".

5. **A Course in Miracles.** (Transformation of relationships. First published in 1975.) Reality is not in this world of form and time. We live in a world of our own making which is illusory. God and mankind are

eternal and formless (in spirit), never born (only in body), and never die; their reality is spiritual.

We have to decide what is truth and what is most meaningful, important, desirable and above all other concerns for each of us. This is our reality. Think seriously, (invent?) and come prepared for group discussion.

Graham Shearer

From the UK SOF Magazine No. 33

Nice Try

Duncan Park wrote an article which puts the case for evangelicalism in the SOFN. He sought to dismiss "myths" (better to say "fallacies" in SOF circles where "myth" is a positive characterisation) that evangelicals are, *ipso facto* fundamentalist, supernaturalist, realist or anti-intellectual. "The concept of 'reasonable faith' [the title of a SOFN UK publication] is nonsense, a contradiction masquerading as a paradox."

He was taken to task in the following article by David Boulton who wrote "We know nothing if we have not learnt that where reason sleeps, monsters breed ... to denigrate the rational is to embrace the irrational."

Reported by Noel Cheer

The UK *Sea of Faith Magazine*, published quarterly, contains well-thought-out articles by a variety of people and will provide you with stimulating reading in addition to our own Newsletter. Subscribers outside of the UK should send £11 sterling to: Ronald Pearse, 15 Burton Street, Loughborough LE11 2DT, UK

In Defence of a Scholar

Irvine Roxburgh supports a scholarly reading of the New Testament.

A few weeks ago a person being interviewed on the Brian Edwards show said that in the Southern USA he had seen bumper stickers with the words: "When the rapture happens this automobile will be without a driver". For those of us who see this as ludicrous it is hard to credit that in 1998 there are Christians who still believe that metaphysical

(supernatural) interventions can serve as history. When I told a friend about the message on these bumper stickers he immediately said, "How would it happen? I suppose they would go straight up thro' the roof".

This practice of accepting supernatural interventions into our history from out there, is a relatively modern phenomenon. Not even the ancients were guilty of this. Right up to the end of the 12th century, as R.W. Southern says in *The Making of the Middle Ages*, the Bible was commonly treated as allegory. So students approaching the Song of Songs saw the Church as a beautiful woman and her teeth representing the saints.

The practice of regarding the Bible as history and, at the same time, retaining a belief in metaphysical (supernatural) interventions, is relatively modern. It was highlighted with the formal advent of fundamentalism as late as the early 20th century. Professor James Barr in *Religious Fundamentalism* says that Fundamentalism supposed that it was based on the Bible, and it claimed that it had found a path avoiding the vagaries of modern thought while offering security and certainty. Nor is it surprising, he says, that the dubious practice of trying to combine an acceptance of history with a belief in supernatural interventions in history, is still very much alive. "For in Anglo Saxon countries there is a strong tradition which easily leads in this direction."

Indeed, sadly, it broke out in my own Presbyterian Church of New Zealand in 1969 when the Assembly passed a list of deliverances headed "Fundamental Beliefs". Since then, ordinands are bound to subscribe to a belief that "the resurrection ... is a saving act of God in history". Well, it doesn't alter history—a Church may officially believe what it wants to believe.

But now it seems that the practice of trying to combine an acceptance of history with a belief in supernatural interventions, may now have arrived in the universities.

I have just read an article which appeared in the *Otago Daily Times* on 23 April. The article was written by Paul Trebilco who is an Associate Professor with the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the

University of Otago. The item is headed "Jesus and His Historical Authenticity". The burden of the article seems to be that the Gospels are basically a collection of historical statements. And in the professor's view, Dr Jim Veitch and others—who see a development in the doctrine of the church even in the first half century—are "playing fast and loose with history".

I recall that when the first religious studies departments were being set up in the universities, some other departments were fearful that the authorities were setting up Sunday Schools. From the moment that Lloyd Geering delivered his inaugural (1972) address, "Why Study Religion?" such a fear was never warranted in the Victoria University of Wellington. But perhaps in Otago there is now a cause for fear. It appears we have a professor who, in his teaching makes no distinction between teaching about religion and religion itself—between history and religious proclamation. "Many scholars have rejected the bodily resurrection of Jesus", he says. "However, many would argue that alternative explanations of what happened are far harder to accept than the historically reliable stories the gospel writers give us ..."

I was amazed to read such an article. Has Otago ceased to be a secular university? What has happened to open minded research and to a serious consideration of literary and Biblical criticism?

Thirty years ago Archbishop Schillebecke, sometime Professor of Theology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, (the Netherlands) pleaded with his peers to allow an approach to the Bible without having our thinking shaped by ancient Greek Platonic metaphysics.

And in the sixties (about the time that Bishop Robinson wrote Honest to God), Roger Huber wrote another called No Middle Ground in which he said that we can't, **at the same time**, have a regard for history and believe in metaphysics. In one passage he quotes from Eberhard Bethge who had been a close friend of Bonhoeffer. He was certain that before we can be positive and creative in our faith we must be specific about what we 20th century folk can reject because we no longer need it and because it demeans us. And

one of these was "all metaphysics and supernaturalisms, (beyond the physical or material) which locate reality outside our known world and thereby provide an escape from that world".

Despite the title of Paul Trebilco's article, no one is here questioning the authenticity of Jesus. The authenticity of his sayings is another matter. At one stage in his article he says that the question of the authenticity of Jesus' sayings is complex. He then appears to give a simplistic answer by saying that the acceptance of the gospels as history solves any problem about why Jesus was killed and why Jesus began a movement with the expansive power of Christianity.

Now, I think that Jesus was killed simply because he, along with zealots, rebelled against the status quo—especially on behalf of the poor. And of course Jesus didn't start the Christian Church. At the beginning of the book Jesus before Christianity (1977) by Albert Nolan, DLT, we have these words, "If we take an honest look at the man who lived in Palestine and try to see him thro' the eyes of his contemporaries [we will discover that] Jesus cannot be fully identified with that great religious phenomenon in the West, known as Christianity".

And in a much more recent book, Honest to Jesus, Robert Funk adds, "the whole idea of the practice of the priesthood and clergy appears inimical to what Jesus would have wished."

Well, if Jesus didn't start the worldwide Christian church, who did? It was Paul and what an opportunist he was. On this matter, I find that I can identify with much in Hyam Maccoby's books: Paul and Hellenism and The Mythmaker: The Invention of Christianity. Perhaps if Paul Trebilco recommended these books to his students they would gain a rare new insight.

I feel sure that Dr Veitch has not ignored Hyam Maccoby's work. When Jim spoke to those of us who gathered for a recent Sea of Faith seminar, I was envious of his students. One reason why I trust Jim Veitch is because he himself was brought up in a conservative camp. But he has been honest in his researches and gradually he has come to see that reactionary or status quo views will not do. At the same time he does not come across as one

who knows or ever expects to know all the answers. He is positive. It is Jim Veitch who wrote: "We have need to affirm the values that give us a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging to our world, a deep sense of our own worth as humans and a compassion for others especially all who are crushed by injustice and who are hungry and thirsty—and to do this as Christians is to recognize 'God with us'. There are few other ways of enabling us to affirm that life is worth living and nurturing from generation to generation. Hopefully, if we can get some of this into perspective, we will not only be able to live well - but also die well."

Irvine Roxburgh

Local Groups

Dundin

The contact for the Dunedin group is Andrew Meek Phone 03-477-1295

Their group has either considered or intend to consider the following topics:

- Why there is such intense interest in the year 2000?
- Lloyd Geering's book Relativity.
- Sin versus Illegality
- The yearning for Longevity. (Including life expectancy and euthanasia)
- The Sanctity of Marriage.
- Poverty and Riches. (Including child labour.
- Our patch v. international patches)
- Health.
- Human Rights. (Are human rights rights or merely privileges?)
- Animal Rights. (Suffering for the benefit of mankind. Are animals sentient?)
- Education. (The purpose of education. Is spirituality enhanced by education?)
- Death and the Fear of Death. (Including the brain-dead and the chronic sufferer.)
- Science and the natural world as a source of awe and wonder.
- New Idols for Old by Lloyd Geering.
- Why are ideas of meaning and purpose so important to us?
- What should we teach our children and grandchildren?
- Ideas of sin, shame and guilt from a non-realist position.
- The Jesus Seminar.
- Gaining an appreciation of other

faith communities.

- the 'question of animal rights or the ethics of using animals in medical experiments.
- Coming to terms with our past spiritual experiences and present spiritual practices;
- Ideas of sin, shame and guilt;
- Our place in the wider scheme of things i.e. where our world fits in the 'quite large' cosmic universe.

Auckland Central

They recently had Val Grant speak to them on "withdrawing and withholding medical treatment" and Jean Holm talked about "Jews and Christians". Their newsletter drew attention to Nancy Eisland's latest book The Disabled God—Towards a Liberation of Theology.

Their programme for the remainder of the year is:

- 21 June: Graham Shearer "What is reality for you?"
- 19 July: Owen Lewis "Religion Still Matters"
- 16 August: John Salmon "Post-Modern Ethics?"
- 20 Sept. Not yet decided.
- 18 Oct. Rosemary Calver—a review of this year's NZ Conference
- 15 Nov. Leo Hobbs—a review of this year's UK Conference.
- 13 Dec. A Social Function.

Rotorua

Their contact is Mrs Esme Kissock, 545 Te Ngae Rd. Rotorua, Phone 07-345-7978

Nelson

There is now a group there. Contact is Elizabeth Duncan, 73 Brooklands Rd., Nelson Phone 03-545-2003

In Brief

SATRS to outsell Amazon.com?

Perhaps it's an exaggeration to think that the St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society could compete with the world's largest Internet bookseller but their stock of books and tapes is likely to prove interesting to SOFN members. All your old favourites are there: Cupitt, Geering, Spong along with that emerging heretic Jim Veitch! The subject matter and the low-impact cost of the books

make them ideal for group study.

The catalogue and ordering instructions are at:

<http://www.futuresgroup.org.nz/satrs.html>

If you are a contact group leader without access to internet then contact the editor who will provide you with an old-fashioned paper catalogue!

Remember, SATRS discounts shamelessly for quantity!

Hikoi of Hope

A hikoi, says Bishop Whakahuihui Veroe, is a time-honoured journey of expectation, setting out to find a new place that God intends for you, as well as a form of providing a united voice and a physical presence against unjust structures. This September, from every corner of New Zealand people will be walking to Wellington to tell the Government and the nation that the level of poverty in our country is intolerable.

The Anglican General Synod believes that poverty is structured into NZ society more deeply and despairingly than ever before.

The hikoi will arrive in Wellington on October 1 and will demand: real jobs; a trustworthy public health system; benefit and wage levels that move people out of poverty; and affordable housing and accessible education.

The hikoi will also call for a series of hui across the country next year to explore the real causes of poverty and find strategies for change.

For more information contact Stephanie McIntyre at the national coordinating office, PO Box 7492, Wellington, phone 04-384-6240, email stephanie.mcintyre@acnet.net.au

In London in November?

You're invited to a conference on the theme "Is Nothing Sacred?" organised by the London Group of SOFN UK. It will take place in London on Saturday November 7th and the cost is £15. Speakers are Don Cupitt, Karen Armstrong and David Hart. Contact the editor if you want more details.

Thank You

My heartfelt thanks go to the SOFN (both in NZ and elsewhere) for the condolences expressed on the recent death of my wife, Robyn. She had been diagnosed with incurable cancer

19 months earlier. Robyn's quality of life was sustained until the end by a loving circle of family and friends as well as the compassionate skills of the Mary Potter Hospice in Wellington. At Robyn's request the funeral was "non-religious" although I made provision for a minute in which anyone who wanted to do so could offer private prayers. Robyn died as she had lived—peacefully.

Noel Cheer

Next Newsletter

This will be published a few weeks after the Conference and will contain, as much as possible, excerpts from Conference speakers.

If you want to submit copy then please send it to the editor by October 11—or bring it to the Conference.

The Sea of Faith Network (NZ)

The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) is an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.

The Sea of Faith Network itself has no creed. It draws its members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions.

It publishes a regular newsletter, assists in setting up of local discussion groups, and holds an annual conference. The WWW home page is at www.futuresgroup.org.nz

For membership details and for the address of your nearest local group, contact the Membership Secretary, Roy Griffith, 82 Kinghorne St., Strathmore Park, Wellington, Phone 04-388-1885.

The only copy appearing in this Newsletter that may be construed as reflecting Sea of Faith policy is that which is accompanied by a by-line of a member of the Steering Committee.

To offer a comment on any material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact the Editor, Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay, Phone 04-236-7533, Fax 04-236-7534, noel.cheer@ibm.net