

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

The 1998 Conference: Workshop Reviews

From the Steering Committee

Since the last Newsletter the new Steering Committee have had their first teleconference meeting in which we dealt with the general business of the Network and the initial stages of planning for the 1999 Conference.

There has been considerable communication with John Goffin, who is leading the team in Christchurch as they prepare for next year's Conference.

With the Christchurch team being on the spot and aware of changing circumstances they have recommended to the Steering Committee a change in venue and change of dates for the 1999 Conference. So as you fill in details in your new diary please note that next year's Conference will be from 26—28 **November** at the **Christchurch College of Education**. You can anticipate further details of the Conference in the next Newsletter—maybe by that time we will have all three speakers confirmed.

On behalf of the Steering Committee I wish you a pleasant and relaxing holiday period.

Jane Griffith, Chairperson
Remember

Conference date 26-28 November 1999

Workshop Reviews

Finding Faith, Mythical Thinking, and Projection, led by Bruce Spittle

Bruce asked us to discuss:

- Have we thrown out the *baby* with the bathwater?
- Have we let the *cat* out of the bag?
- Should we let sleeping *dogs* lie?
- How do we put the (*egg*) pieces together again?

We never came close to the workshop title, but had a lively discussion. As often at the Conference, at the top of our minds was how to survive in a church congregation which has become suspicious of, or antagonistic to, new thinking.

If something is working for someone or a group, we have to be careful about upsetting it. Sometimes dogs are best left sleeping.

However, we can suppress knowledge, and for many people times for change do come. Once the cat is out of the bag, there is no putting it back.

We can then be in danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater; we should not underestimate the importance of myths and spirituality.

We are still working at putting the pieces together again. It would help if ministers kept reading, shared more with their congregations, and encouraged acceptance of variety.

David Simmers

The Vocabulary for Sharing Spiritual Experiences, led by Helen Wylie and Dorothy Brown.

Collective unconscious, healing, loving presence, magnified awareness, integrated, absolute peace, unreal, connectedness, beyond self, at one with the absolute, empathy, heightened emotion, opening the mind, intense feeling, awe, love wastefully. These are just a sample of the some 100 expressions of spirituality contributed by the group at this workshop. They highlighted to me and others, firstly, the limitation of our language to adequately express deeply emotional experiences and secondly how each of us has a unique concept of what a spiritual experience actually is.

My dictionary devotes some 20

Number 29

December 1998

The Steering Committee ..	1
Workshop Reviews	1
Editorial	3
Letters to the Editor	3
Jesus The Bastard	5
Is Nothing Sacred?	6
Why Do I Need Religion ..	6
Book Reviews	7
Stages of Faith	8
The Revelation of Being ..	9
Local Groups	9
SOFN In Australia	9
In Brief	10

column-centimetres to explain the various meanings we give to the words **spiritual** and **spirituality**. The meaning which I consider came closest to what we were all groping for was "pertaining to or affecting the immaterial nature or soul of mankind." Part of the human psyche.

Among my notes I have written, "Spiritual experience is an experience of the highest quality—something beyond our individual or collective mental capacity to fully understand."

Often such an experience is diminished by our attempts to explain it. Something experienced rather than understood.

There was a discussion on how we could differentiate between an **emotional** experience and a **spiritual** experience, or whether there was a difference. In very general terms it could be accepted that an emotional experience was more ephemeral, more transitory, whereas a spiritual experience was longer lasting and character altering toward the compassionate and loving.

Full marks to Helen and Dorothy for leading us through this very intricate path.

There was a unanimous thought among those who participated in this workshop that this topic should be explored more regularly at our conferences and perhaps expanded upon. The frank, understanding and warm atmosphere created by all participants was clearly evident and acknowledged at the conclusion of the workshop.

Ivan Frost

Healthy Decisions in a Pluralistic World, led by Marion Dodd

This workshop was led by Dr. Marion Dodd. It took the form of group discussions on certain aspects of modern health practice. It soon appeared that there was little support for the restructured health system, from the dozen people attending. In answer to the question "What values must determine an acceptance of new treatment?" the group stressed a trusting relationship with the doctor, and a

knowledge of the consequences of the choice taken.

The "placebo effect" present in most "alternative medicine" was also discussed and the comment made that this effect could be central to some modes of treatment. The final question "What values are currently underlying our choices for the health dollar?" prompted the following perceptions — profit, politics, age and locality.

It is fair to point out that a short 45 minute workshop could only skim the surface of such an important subject. Many of the underlying issues of health in New Zealand today, i.e. dwindling resources, high costs and the ageing population, cultural issues and preventative medicine, were scarcely mentioned. One comment was that some religious groups that insist on certain diet prohibitions, are contributing to the health of their members. Otherwise social issues i.e. housing, education, and changing attitudes, were seen to be the key towards health in a pluralistic world.

Alan Kissock

Preaching as Conversation, led by Jim Cunningham.

And it all started so well as we were taken briefly through the various theories of preaching that had evolved over recent times. Preaching as Conversation was an approach Jim Cunningham had encountered in the States and had the opportunity of trialing at a church in New Zealand.

But for the bulk of our time we participated as pew fodder for a sermon on the Good Samaritan using this new method. I gritted my teeth at the thought of the Good Samaritan for the thousand and first time.

Steps we went through;

- the bible passage is read to us—ho hum,
- each person memorizes the passage as best he can and recites it to his neighbour who critiques his efforts and has a turn himself—works well, can still remember the minutiae, in

November,

- next we tell the story to our neighbour from the perspective of one of the characters in the parable and then we listen as the neighbour has a turn using another character—feel a bit childish,
- discussion phase where we all say what we think—and get appropriately corrected where we have erred in our understanding,
- preacher tells a modern parable conveying a similar message to the Good Samaritan but relevant to our times! Story was told very well, but punch line failed among us SOF liberals,
- dialogue starts in earnest as to what it all means to us—glad there was no time for this.
- Finally there was some discussion as to how it might work in a congregational setting—would need all day.

For me, the methodology could not overcome the tedium that comes from material that for regular church goers is surely done to death. Perhaps, after all, the substance of a sermon does count for as much as the method of delivery.

John Trainor

Inventing Reality—a Multi-Dimensional Universe, led by Hugh Gilman

Summary: Are there more than three physical dimensions (length, width and height) plus time [that make up] our reality? How might we know? What might keep us from knowing?

At the beginning of the workshop we were each given a ping-pong ball and a glass of water in which to immerse it. This gave a good demonstration of what is seen in the two dimensional flat surface of the water when a sphere is introduced. The answer was obviously a series of circles as the sphere was introduced further introduced further into the water.

At the end of the workshop we each received a 61-page copy of Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions by Edwin A. Abbott which described the problems which two-dimensional existence

has in appreciating three-dimensional existence. As they overcome these problems so they gained facility in overcoming the problems of four, five or even six dimensions.

Hugh encouraged the workshop participants to search their minds for clues as to what may be further dimensions to their individual universes, beyond the commonly accepted four. There was much head-scratching done and creative imagination stirred as we responded to his suggestive encouragement.

I think that we were dabbling in spiritual dimensions when we spoke of near-death experiences, ghosts, God, dreams, spirits, telepathy between twins, the uncertainty principle, human feelings and emotions, what happens after death, chaos theory, lateral thinking (Edward de Bono) and black holes.

In conclusion I could say that we were all made to feel pregnant with multi-dimensional possibilities but that no actual births were cataclysmically witnessed.

Graham Shearer

Beethoven and Inventing Reality, led by Hans Kuiper

This workshop was attended by 15 people whose musical knowledge extended from minimal to deep and intense. Hans Kuiper, in his introduction, noted the humanity and directness that speaks to us in Beethoven's music. Hans said that listening to Beethoven's music makes him feel more intensely alive.

The French Revolution impacted on Beethoven's writing, with its emphasis on liberty, equality and fraternity. Other factors were his deafness and his eccentric domestic life.

The group explored themes such as:

- creativity and art (does art need to be technically difficult in order to be art?)
- music arising from cultural traditions (e.g. Hungarian gypsies)

Editorial

My first face-to-face encounter with the UK Sea of Faith Network (or rather the five local groups of the London region) is reported below. It left me with the impression of strong similarities between NZ and the UK and some striking differences.

The vocabulary is the same, many of the issues are similar but there is a whiff of smouldering Anglicanism about them in place of New Zealand's low rumble of Presbyterians who are prepared to break fences and explore new pastures.

I detected in the UK a feeling that if the Church (of England that is) were to pull up its socks then many SOFTies would return to it. But in New Zealand, I suspect that many feel that the socks will stay down and we just have to work out things for ourselves. I drew a smile from Don Cupitt when I characterised SOFN as "religion for grownups".

Also in this Newsletter, one of our frequent contributors, Fred Marshall of Waikato, has a theory that Jesus was like he was because of the way in which he responded to the stigma attached to his ex-nuptial conception.

Fred argues a strong case for it.

Reviews of Conference Workshops have trickled in and those so far received are printed. The idea of assigning a "theme" to the Conference seems to be working well—even one as wide as "Inventing Reality".

Noel Cheer, Editor

Letter to the Editor

Having attended five SOF annual conferences, I have obviously found their contents and other attenders interesting, thought-provoking and satisfying to a large degree.

While it is good to engage in serious "spiritual" and "humanist" subjects to a considerable depth, I feel there is a strong tendency for some of the principal lecturers to become too academic. This is accentuated when addresses are heavily laced with phrases and words with specific or specialised relation to the lecturer's field of interest. This results in considerable difficulty in following them and absorbing all of the contents. Fortunately copies of the main lectures are supplied later to enable us to retrace the subject with more meaning.

I have also heard other SOFers express the same concern. Consequently this matter seems to be detracting from the desired effectiveness of lectures. If the subjects are not being communicated to us satisfactorily the listeners will be very disappointed.

Winston Churchill was a great advocate of good communication by avoiding, where possible, very unusual or specialised words and phrases. In the British SOF Magazine No. 32 it states "... in response to conference feedback the steering committee has chosen as the theme of next year's conference 'What on Earth is Spirituality?' ... a chance to get beyond words-words-words and the intellectualised logic chopping ..." [It was the 1998 Conference theme: refer to Newsletter 28 pp9-10 ed]

Robert Funk in "Honest to Jesus" says "The worst enemy of all for scholars of the Bible — indeed for all scholars — is elitism. In the academic world penalties are severe for the author who writes a book that sells well, or for sponsors of the lucid sentence, or for teachers who can teach but fail to publish. Promotion and tenure committees look askance at such successes; after all if a work is well written and elicits a broad readership, if a sentence is understandable, if students actually learn, that scholarship cannot be very profound. The inevitable result is that academics deliberately write in convoluted jargon merely to please their elitist colleagues."

Possibly some of our lecturers succumb to these pressures, therefore it would appear advisable to acquaint future lecturers with the need to keep their vocabulary as clear as possible.

Bob Scott, Gisborne

Next "Letters to the Editor" closes on
February 1. See page 10

- art which shows the struggle and beauty of existence
- personal and national suffering as reflected in music
- why great music endures beyond the time in which it was written (will Elvis endure?)
- is there beauty only in the art which triumphs over suffering?
- the intensity of the experience derived from music which lifts us above our humdrum daily life
- the importance of music in our lives
- art is communication: unless it communicates it is dead



There was, as noted earlier, a wide range of knowledge and experience that members of the group had had with Beethoven. Hans was obviously passionate about the composer. Had there been time, it would have been valuable to listen to extracts from some of the works discussed.

David R. Patchett

Reality in Education, led by Annette Goldsmith

We noted extra pressures on teachers from changes in curricula, and assessment methods, and pastoral needs of students of an increasing range of ability, and schools competing for students, and media publicity given to pass rates, and teacher shortages.

We expressed concern at the failure of the education system to track students who drop out, and the failure of some schools to control bullying.

We commented on the failure of some students' homes to back up the efforts of the schools, often resulting from deficiencies in the

education and resources of the parent(s).

The role of the Ministry in prescribing changes, backing up the teachers' efforts, and ensuring access to quality facilities for poor families as well as rich families, appears not to adequately performed at present.

Barbara Calvert

Panel Discussion

This is part of a review, by Graham Shearer of Auckland Central, which first appeared in their October Newsletter. It covers Graham's impressions of the Panel Discussion held at the end of the Conference in which the three keynote speakers were "on stage" together. It should be read in conjunction with the abbreviated versions of their presentations which were published in Newsletter 28.

The final panel discussion was ably led by Noel Cheer where he most admirably obtained from the speakers their own reality concepts, and to my surprise showed that these had much in common. I can give only the briefest condensation of the ideas that Noel brought out. John [Bishop] agreed it was not necessary to consider that existence was real, and Thakshan [Fernando] said that dreams could be real to the dreamer and unreal to others, despite their involvement. Patti [Whaley] said that music is an invented reality.

When asked "why invent reality?", John said that our minds have the capacity to create, and this creation can be close to the truth. In response to the question, "were we better off without reality?", Thakshan said that our minds were not the end—he preferred the verb to the noun—and spoke of consciousness and *maya*—nothing is as it seems: all is illusion. When asked "is linguistic construction created out of nothing?" John said "Nothing is created out of nothing, linguistics are symbolic, reality is concrete." The mythological use of language does not describe independent reality, but Don Cupitt's theological language does try to describe independent reality.

Thakshan said that he did not describe himself as a true Buddhist but indicated that Buddha teaching shows **spiritual** truth—not **literal** truth, e.g. the master sees most clearly with his eyes closed [see Newsletter 28, p.6—ed.]. John said that language is most important for articulation, and experience is most important for determining reality—particularly experience in relationships. Patti Whaley agreed that before language there was dance and music which even enabled identification of people.

Noel Cheer asked "is there a mystical way?" John said that he was suspicious of people who say that they can experience ultimate reality. He preferred to experience and be sensitive to relationality, such as described by Martin Buber. When asked if you could talk of mystery in a spiritual sense, John said, you not only could but you ought: there are many spiritual mysteries which are not yet fully understood. Thakshan said that the mind is conditioned to reject mysteries, and told of the mother who would not believe the doctor when told that her child was dead. To help her she was told to find a house where there was no death. As she searched the truth dawned, her child was dead. She needed experience, words were not powerful enough.

Noel then came out with his curliest of questions. "What is meant by God?" John said not the **omniGod**. [see Newsletter 28, p.3—ed.] This was just a name, Thakshan said "I don't know" (he was a Buddhist) and Patti said that we need to express something about ourselves, not an entity—when you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him. John said that to say God is the total of human loving relationships is good, but a more powerful God is required—but not a supernatural God—but by pooling our total knowledge we may reach a higher level of human understanding. God is not just a bag full of nice things—this does nothing about the problem of evil—and God is not a supernatural being who is in control of the universe—this is Aquinas'

Jesus The Bastard Reinventing The Human Reality

This item, by Fred Marshall retired Professor of French (Waikato) and SOFN member, is based on an address that he gave to the Hamilton Baptist Church on "This man Jesus" some twenty years ago. To acquire the full article on paper, request Paper number P19 from the Resource Centre (see "In Brief") and send \$2; or for an email version send an email to noel.cheer@ibm.net

Robert Funk, in a recent seminar in Hamilton said "Jesus was born in Nazareth not Bethlehem" and went on to dismiss the stories surrounding his birth and the events following the resurrection as fictions. I think he is wrong. So let us pursue the question of Jesus' birth as a constructive critique of this approach to the Jesus stories.

Jesus was illegitimate. The Bible tells us so. (Matt 1, 18-19) "When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child". Did the title of the paper shock you? The fact caused a similar embarrassment to those who loved and followed Jesus. Mark and John make no allusion to his birth, Matthew ascribes his conception to the Holy Spirit and Luke surrounds the fact with the pretty fairy story we all know. It is confirmed again by the cruel test put to Jesus by his enemies over the woman caught in adultery (Jn 7,53). Will he condemn her or call for mercy? If he says 'spare her', they will say it is because of his mother, if he condemns her, he condemns his mother as well. Jesus resolves the test without having to do either: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her".

Illegitimacy was harshly dealt with in Jewish law. "No bastard shall enter the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the Lord." (Deut. 23,2). So was adultery. "If there is a betrothed virgin (Mary's case), and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and stone them to death with stones." If Joseph had not been "unwilling to put her to shame" (Matt.1,19) Mary would have been killed and her baby with her. The fact that stoning was still practised at that time is confirmed by the adultery incident

noted above. The fact that no man was cited with her suggests either that she was too ignorant or innocent to know what had been done to her; or that she was the victim of a cruel hoax; or that it was the Holy Spirit who was responsible. You can take your pick! The fact that matters is that Jesus was not sired by Joseph. Jesus himself knew it and so did his contemporaries, friend and foe alike.

How valid are our own experiences in interpreting the events of the beginning of this era? Individual behaviour is as unpredictable now as then. But given similar conditions, we can surely assume similar collective behaviour, at least as a hypothesis.

Mary and Joseph would have a very good reason to be out of Nazareth at the end of the pregnancy and to stay away until the child's age indicated less precisely the approximate date of birth. A legal obligation to register in the city of origin would provide a fine excuse to be away at the time of the birth, and a stay in the Gaza Strip (Egypt) "until Herod died" would seem prudent. On the other hand Luke marks the return as only a few weeks after the circumcision and purification, which would reduce the efficacy of the manoeuvre. Either way the social stigma of illegitimacy makes it highly likely that Jesus was not born in Nazareth, and if elsewhere, why not Bethlehem? For the newly wedded pair the prime motivation was to be somewhere else when the baby was born. If there were prophecies which later seemed significant that featured Bethlehem, or incidents like a "slaughter of the innocents" which might have threatened the family and which they avoided, by what in retrospect, could be taken as divine guidance, ("being advised in a dream"), then these were simply coincidental. Or the stories may have sprung from a fertile imagination which embroidered the narrative. It doesn't really matter. What does signify is the fact that two accounts put Jesus away from Nazareth at the time of his birth and we have suggested a good reason why that should be.

To this point we have relied on information from the bible to support the framework of

reconstruction. But there is no information about Jesus' youth. Here we must resort to reasoned speculation. In a town the size of Nazareth would the stratagem of absence have put an end to gossip? Our modern experience suggests that that is very unlikely. The tongues would wag even though Joseph's humanity made social retribution against Mary impossible. Children are cruel when, in a pack, they make common cause against a loner, an outcast from their group (Cf. Deut. 23,2). As the young Jesus grew and mixed with his contemporaries, would he not experience their jibes, fed by the gossip of their parents: "Who's your father? Who's your father?" What would Jesus do, but take the question back to Mary and Joseph and receive the reply, "Why God is your father; God is a father to us all"? It may even be that Mary believed it to be literally true, since no male was associated with her pregnancy in the bible story.

"He was despised and rejected" (Isaiah 53, 3) but the Man of Sorrows grows out of the Child of Sorrows. **Our thesis is that it was in a childhood scarred by the scorn of children and adults alike that the attitudes of that extraordinary man, Jesus, were formed. It was not the cross and the crown of thorns that made Jesus the paradigm of our humanity, but the experience of a lifetime of rejection because of his birth, of which cross and crown were the ultimate consequence and expression.**

In that crucible a coherent series of attitudes were formed which we recognise as characteristic of Jesus.

- an attitude to his mother.
- an attitude to the law.
- an attitude to the self-righteous and their moral judgements.
- an attitude to social outcasts (publicans and sinners)

All these attitudes are bound up in a lifetime quest, from early childhood to the "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacchthani" of the cross, to understand what his parents had told the brilliant, sensitive, unhappy child — "God is your father" and his mental query, **"How is God my father?"**

Fred Marshall

outdated 12th century idea. The best description of God is from the gospel of John. When the disciples ask "Show us the Father?" Jesus replies "If you have seen me you have seen the Father." Patti said that her spiritual journey had always been in music, she had never been let down, music was her spiritual bedrock. She had faith in music and can "Let go" and accept what she hears and knows all will be good.

For children John said they need to be involved in and feel part of what is going on—allow them to take communion. Patti said that some types of popular music are affirmative and express social symptoms rather than causes.

Concerning guilt, Thakshan said [that we should] avoid it, it is a torment. Shame is not quite so bad, at least you can progress from shame.

Graham Shearer

Is Nothing Sacred?

These are the observations that I made at a conference of that name organised by the five London groups of the SOFN in the UK. The conference was held in Kings College, Strand, in the heart of London on November 7, 1998. There were three speakers.

David Hart

David was also the chairperson for the day. He observed that SOFN is perhaps the only means of engagement between traditional Christianity and humanists/atheists. He said that we must challenge neo-orthodoxy, especially in its fundamentalist forms. Appeals to tradition are always illegitimate—we must avoid a temptation to return to the past.

He quoted Altizer who, perhaps jokingly, had accused SOFN of being "conservative". He said that orthodox Christianity was the absolute reversal of what Jesus was promoting. We must, said David, create our own religion which might develop along lines suggested by Don Cupitt: Christian in form and Buddhist in content.

David is, by SOFN NZ standards, quite conservative and conciliatory

towards traditional Christianity. I don't think he handled well questions from the floor regarding reciting a creed that you do not subscribe to literally.

Karen Armstrong.

For me, this was the jewel in the conference. Karen speaks lucidly and passionately. She also appeared to identify quite strongly with the SOFN as an organisation.

Karen Armstrong explained that, in the centuries of Christian history, the word "dogma" has inverted its meaning. It started off by referring to religious matters that could not be **spoken about**, but which could only be **experienced**. Karen explained that earlier in her life she had become "worn out" by religion but had become refreshed by her studies of Judaism, Islam, and Orthodox Christianity. She spoke a lot about the inconsistent and sometimes disagreeable characterisations of God in the Old Testament.

God, she said, can be experienced only in a human setting; religion should be seen as an art form and each of us must cultivate a sense of the sacred as we cultivate our aesthetic senses. She joins many other authors when she said that committed atheism is to be preferred to a lukewarm religiosity—and she reminded us that early Christians were thrown to the lions, not for a rival view of God, but for "atheism".

Western Christendom was accused of "presiding over the demise of God". The Buddha was noted with approval when he said that, after achieving enlightenment, one should come down from the mountain and mingle in the marketplace. Judaism was applauded because "the debate never finished"—there is ongoing midrash.

This was a very stimulating lecture and it may have been that stimulation which inspired David Hart to call for a minute's silence at the end, to let in soak in, as it were.

Don Cupitt

I understand that Don is not as robustly healthy as he has been in earlier years and that may have

Why Do I Need Religion?

"It may be argued that it is perfectly possible to lead a happy and successful life without a religion; but the question 'why do I need religion?' is countered by another question 'what is life, existence, for?'. It is this question which sets a seed of doubt into complacency and takes life to a level where everything else is meaningless except the search for a meaning, the ordinary mode of being is broken through; and it is here that religion becomes a necessity.

Often it requires a serious event — coming face-to-face with death, for example, or the death of someone much loved — which makes the questioning arise.

This questioning is specific for each individual. But as questioning continues, the underlying unity of all things in reality — to see the world in a grain of sand" — demonstrates the unreality of separation; in reality subject and object are indissolubly part of the greater unity."

*found on the Web,
author unknown*

contributed to a rather downbeat performance. He covered the ground but he sounded weary. (He did better in the panel discussion, though.) Don talked about (yet another!) book that he has in preparation which will deal with the way in which the word "life" is handled in contexts that are not usually assumed to be religious. From an analysis of these usages, Don hopes to build up what may come to be called "The New Theology of Life In Everyday Language".

He takes the view that, in recent decades, the word "life" has become more religiously charged and that theologians should listen to these new uses.

Don echoed a theme that has become central to SOFN discussions: that the meaning of life is life itself.

Panel Discussion

The last session saw the three speakers "on stage" together and responding to questions from the audience. The NZ setup works better I believe, with the chairperson working from written questions which have been submitted earlier and, at least to some extent, consolidated and organised.

David Hart expressed a hope that the SOFN might have an improving effect on traditional churches, but Don Cupitt thought that they are getting even more conservative. Don also painted a picture of looming eco-disasters and said that armies should be re-configured to become rapid reaction forces.

Karen Armstrong said that the virtue of tolerance is fairly recent for those brought up as traditional Christians and Don reminded us that many latter-day Christian virtues (of which tolerance would be one) come to us from Enlightenment (as distinct from religious) thinkers. Karen said that religious people today should be much more concerned about people sleeping in the streets than about Clinton's love-life.

The old religious system, said Don, is breaking down and the Sea of Faith Network is part of the

resulting "free-for-all".

My Assessment

None of the speakers specifically addressed the theme of sacredness, although it appeared incidentally from time-to-time. I gather that, this being an "open" (to the public) conference, it was probably intended as a sort of showcase of SOFN ideas. To that extent it appears to have succeeded.

Reported by Noel Cheer

Book Reviews

The Demon Haunted World

The Demon Haunted World / Science as a Candle in the Dark. Carl Sagan 1996. 408 pages.

This was the internationally famous scientist Carl Sagan's 29th book, and—tragically for us—it was one of his last. He died relatively young when Professor of Astronomy at Cornell University. The book itself helped to earn Sagan the recognition of NASA for exceptional scientific achievement and, for the second time, awards for distinguished public service.

Not only is it easy to read, the book carries a clear message which is summed up in the two titles. Carl Sagan considered that we who are about to enter the 21st century C.E. are fortunate in that we will reap a harvest of rapid technological progress. At the same time, Sagan almost despairs of a world where people, in their millions, seem increasingly inclined to give themselves over to various pseudo-sciences and superstitions.

In chapters with titles such as 'Aliens'; 'Spoofing and Secrecy'; 'Hallucinations', the author paints a dark picture. (p256) "There is a strangely waxing academic opinion", he warns, "that holds all views to be equally arbitrary, and [maintains] 'true' or 'false' to be a delusion". [For comparison read "So You Want To Be A Postmodernist" in Newsletter 28—ed.] Furthermore, the author is concerned by the fact that so many folk, while realizing they have been taken-in by some new (or old) pseudo-science, still tend to reject the

scientific evidence that reinforces their enlightenment. (p.230).

He mentions that when two blokes in UK—with a board, a rope and a taste for whimsy—confessed to making crop circles, believers were unimpressed, holding that there were too many circles all to be hoaxes. Then others confessed and the believers said, 'Well maybe those in Britain are hoaxes but, how do you explain those in Hungary?'. Then the copycat Hungarian teenagers confessed. And to test the credulity of the psychiatrist who believed in alien abduction, a woman posed as an abductee. The therapist enthused over the fantasies she spun. But when the patient announced that it was all a fake, the therapist failed to reexamine his methods. First he suggested: 1: 'Even if she isn't aware of it, she was in fact abducted.' Next he offered: 2: 'She's crazy. After all, she did come to a psychiatrist didn't she?' Lastly, 3: 'He was on top of the hoax from the start, he just gave her enough rope to hang herself.'

In face of the human tendency to reject strong evidence rather than admit we've been wrong, Carl Sagan goes as far as to say, "The method of science, as stodgy and grumpy as it may seem, is far more important than [even] the findings of science". (p26)

A parallel message is: the promotion of science and democracy go hand in hand. With a worldwide decline in democracy, many governments—while still cashing-in on technology—have scaled-down the encouragement and subsidizing of scientific research.

The author contrasts the attitudes of two presidents of the USA. (p355)

In 1790 George Washington addressed Congress in these words, "There is nothing that can better serve our patronage than the promotion of science and literature".

By contrast, in a campaign speech in 1980, Ronald Reagan took a stance against science. "Why should we subsidize

intellectual curiosity?", he said.

Carl Sagan, still hopeful that governments will realize the dangers and the untenable nature of the present situation, **offers science as a candle in the dark.**

He reminds us of what Albert Einstein (1879—1955) said. **"All science, measured against reality, is primitive and childlike, yet it is the most precious thing we have."**

On page 197, Sagan encourages everyone to employ the tools of baloney detection:

1. Ask for independent confirmation of the facts.
2. Encourage debate
3. Discount arguments based simply on authority.
4. Spin more than one hypothesis.
5. Try not get overly attached even to your pet hypothesis.
6. Quantify: measure it if you can.
7. If there is a chain of argument make sure every link is sound.
8. When faced with two hypotheses that seem to explain the data, choose the simpler.
9. Ask if the hypothesis in question can [at least in principle] be falsified.

Sagan applauds the readiness of adults to express scepticism and to ask questions. By contrast, he used to find adolescents sometimes afraid to ask a question, in case their peers saw it as dumb. **"But",** says Sagan, **"there's no such thing as a dumb question".**

Carl Sagan goes on to say, "One of the reasons for the success of science is because science has built-in error correcting machinery at its heart. (p 30) And he underlines what the philosopher, Bertrand Russell, said sixty years ago, "Insight untested and unsupported, is an insufficient guarantee of truth"

This book bears out Sagan's twin philosophies: **"Science is never finished",** and **"we make our world significant by the courage of our questions and the depth of our answers".**

Irvine Roxburgh

Long White and Cloudy

Long White and Cloudy: In Search of a Kiwi Spirituality by John Bluck,

(Hazard Press, Christchurch) 1998, RRP \$24.95, is reviewed by John Goffin.

This handy little book, by the Dean of Christchurch Cathedral, is written in a light journalistic style, and aimed at those without a church background. Don't look here for a scholarly or deep treatment of the subject, but you will find a series of short attractive chapters which paint pictures of what a Kiwi Spirituality might be made of. As John Bluck says, the subject is "about as slippery an eel as you can find, now you have it, now it's gone".

There is some analysis of the Kiwi tentativeness and awkwardness about the subject, and insights into what we Kiwis are. Spirituality, he says, is made up of sense of history, time and place, and the trusting sharing of life, all of which we are still finding our way with.

John Bluck has made an honest and fairly effective attempt to bridge the gap and meet with those who have never thought of themselves as "spiritual", however the question arises whether those on the other

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see "Stages of Faith"

side of the gap will respond. It is clear that spirituality is to be found in the ordinary and mundane things, in surprising ways, and this is an important message. He encourages readers to look for these things and develop a sensitivity for them., such as ANZAC memories, cultural diversities, "green" things, rites of passage, family and community stories, familiar places, the engagement and chaos of urban life. Spirituality in this book is grounded and all pervasive in the here and now.

This book would fit nicely into a holiday suitcase, and without being demanding, would stimulate a good feeling for living more alive and "spirited".

(Dean John Bluck spoke and introduced his book to a good crowd at the Christchurch Sea of Faith Group in November)

John Goffin

Stages of Faith

Jenny Chisholm writes: "I found this while browsing in a book display at Conference. A glance through the book revealed nothing else that interested me at the time, so I sat down and made a very quick precis—maybe one day I'll go back and read it more thoroughly."

The history of the Judeo-Christian peoples seen in terms of Fowler's **Stages of Faith** [see below], from *Setting the Gospel Free* by Brian C Taylor.

1 Genesis/Exodus is about a young community of people and the stories they told, perhaps for hundreds of years—stories common to other primitive cultures from Mesopotamia to Canaan, that taught the mysteries of God, nature and humanity. They are full of magic and mystery, like the world of pre-schoolers. Some pentecostals and charismatics are stuck in this world of magic and opposing powers.

2 The 'older childhood' of the Judean peoples is marked by the beginning of the Law. Legislation defines what is right and wrong. Like children, they needed to know the allowable limits. What is required of us? In contemporary terms this is shown in the legalism that tells us that such things as gambling, dancing, divorce are wrong. You must go to church, accept Jesus in a prescribed way, obey your husband. Sins are hunted out—the war between light and darkness continues. These legalists are still children addicted to an immature and imaginary security.

3 The tribal stage is typical of the teenager. The Jewish people were a tribe separate and different from the neighbouring tribes. Today people recognise a lifegiving world view in their enclosed church system, and take on the system's rules. The worst aspect of this is that life outside may be forgotten or

deliberately ignored, resulting in tunnel vision and smug exclusivism.

4 Young adults develop a social awareness outside the tribe. The prophets demanded justice for outsiders and peacemaking between nations. Spiritual maturity begins when a person has journeyed past magic, legalism and tribalism and found a God of mercy and justice.

5 The Wisdom tradition developed after the crises in the nation's history. Their cry was 'God, where are you?' Humility and breadth of thought followed.

6 Jesus lived in wonder and shared his vision of the unity of the world's people and their oneness with God.

Jenny Chisholm

Fowler

To amplify the above, Jenny provided the following:

James W Fowler, in Stages of Faith (1981) and Faith Development and Pastoral Care (1987), describes the development of religious faith as a process which goes by stages, reaching the full form worth striving for in seven steps, of which Taylor appears to have combined two of the earliest.

While Fowler is familiar to theological professionals, I first encountered his description in Reinhold Bernhardt's Christianity without Absolutes, which I read at a time when it helped me to clarify what was happening to my own understanding, and from which I quote:

"What is decisive for our theme is the transition from the pre-critical to the critical phase which begins at the fifth stage. Elements of faith which were previously accepted tacitly are questioned, demythologised and reformulated. The I detaches itself from outside guidance and strives for self-authorisation... This transition from the fourth to the fifth stage is experienced as a crisis of faith. If it can be assimilated, then the I can also grow beyond the fifth stage. At the sixth stage, rival perspectives can be accepted without danger to the substance of one's

own faith. For the believer has become aware that the divine reality does not lie in the religious traditions but is merely communicated by them.

"Fowler's line of development culminates in the seventh stage, the 'universalising faith' in which the self empties itself in God, where it encounters the other, the stranger, as brother and sister."

From my recollection, Fowler gave Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa as examples of people who, to his mind, demonstrated the characteristics of the seventh stage.

The Revelation of Being

The following are brief extracts from The Revelation of Being by Don Cupitt, SCM Press London 1998.

"Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer ... all eventually produce and identify themselves with systems, and each of them thinks of his own system as final. Each talks as if he thinks he is really finishing philosophy, even while Kant's critical thinking, Hegel's historicism, and Schopenhauer's atheism and pessimism, all foreshadow the end of the dream of an attainable objective systematic Truth of things." (pp3-4)

"We see now why Nietzsche surmises that every great system of philosophy is a spiritual autobiography." (p12)

"The world you see is the world we made. Humans are after all the only beings whose communication-system, and therefore whose consciousness, is sufficiently evolved for them to have a complete world. Think of it:

*"the end of the
dream of an
attainable objective
systematic
Truth of things."*

nobody but us has a world at all." (p21)

"From this it appears that our prime religious concern henceforth is not with anything numinous and dreadful that crops up within the human world—there is no such thing—but simply with Being. ... We ought to be able to say a whole-hearted Yes to life." (p25)

"Philosophy ... may begin with Being, with Man, or with Language; but whichever it begins with, it will work its way toward the other two." (p31)

"Consider the way the Trinity presents three different possible foci of religious attention. One may focus on God as transcendent unifying Centre and source of all authority and legitimation, or as the object of abstract contemplation; one may, by concentrating on the Son, see the divine in human, social and ethical terms; and one may, by foregrounding the Spirit, attend to the utopian, charismatic and even disruptive face of religion." (p52)

"In us the Universe is suddenly illuminated; it has turned around and begun to theorize itself and explore itself." (p74)

"... I have suggested elsewhere [in Mysticism After Modernity, Oxford: Blackwell 1998] that much of what is nowadays called the 'mystical' tradition represents a tradition of thinly-veiled lay religious protest against the higher clergy's claim to have divine authority to set up roadblocks and collect fees all along the Way to salvation." (p92)

Reported by Noel Cheer

Local Groups

Dunedin

At their October meeting, Barbara Nicholas spoke to them on the ethics of artificial conception. Barbara had previously spoken on the ethics of euthanasia.

Contact is Andrew Meek, phone 471-0698

Auckland Central

Leo Hobbs told their November meeting of his experiences at the SOFN UK Conference which he

attended in July. One conference speaker, Diamuid O'Murchu, is a Roman Catholic priest and social psychologist. He urged those present to reclaim their almost forgotten spirituality which he sees as grounded in creation and predating all religion.

They plan their end-of-year function for December 13 and have already decided that their first meeting for 1999 will be held on February 21.

Contact is Graham Shearer, phone 524-9941

SOFN in Australia

On her way home from addressing the New Zealand SOFN Conference, Patti Whaley of the UK SOFN met some "startup" groups in Australia.

In Australia, I first met John Maindonald in Canberra and spoke to a group called "The Meeting Place". This is a discussion group of 25 or 30 people who meet in a Catholic convent. Their interests and topics of discussion are similar to SoF and they were clearly sympathetic to SoF issues, questions, and favourite authors — so sympathetic, in fact, that a "rival" SoF group might be difficult to establish or simply unnecessary. I left them sample copies of our [UK] magazine, and some of them may join us on the e-mail discussion group.

In Brisbane, Greg Spearitt and Alison Cotes had organized a SoF picnic in New Farm Park; about eight of us met and talked away the afternoon. Although the interest in radical theology appears to be lower than in New Zealand or the UK, there are some sympathetic groups with whom SoF could establish contact. We seemed to end up with a consensus that SoF should try some evening or one-day events before launching a major conference; that the events should focus on exploring radical theology rather than promoting SoF as an organization; and that a good possible topic might be "where do people go when they leave church?"

Patti Whaley

In Brief

"Does Society Need Religion?"

This is the title of Lloyd Geering's recent lunchtime lecture series at St Andrew's on The Terrace, Wellington. In it he explores the relationships, sometimes helpful, sometimes destructive, between religion and society under the headings:

- "Religion as Social Super Glue"
- "Religion as Social Dynamite"
- "Society Without Religion"
- "New Religion for a New Society?"

Tapes are available immediately. The book is planned to be available by Christmas. Contact Constance Dreaver on 04-472-9211 (fax 04-472-9336) or refer to www.futuresgroup.org.nz/satrs.html

Change of Address

Jane and Roy Griffith have moved to 249 Te Moana Road, Waikanae. Their phone/fax number is now 04-293-1954. The "04" must be dialed by Wellington callers. Email is still griffith@globe.net.nz

New Brochure

You should find three new brochures with this Newsletter. Keep one and give the others to prospective members. **Discard** any old ones because several names and addresses have changed.

Resource Centre

The Sea of Faith Resource Centre is managed by Suzi Thirlwall. Her postal address is 34 Briarley St, Tauranga and her phone (and fax) number is 07-578-2775. You can order order papers, books and tapes from Suzi. An updated catalogue will be sent out with the March Newsletter.

UK Conference 1999

The SOFN UK Conference for 1999 will be held in Leicester from 27—29 July.

1999 Holyland Tour

Many SoF members have already been on tours to the Middle East led by Lloyd Geering. Unfortunately the 1998 Tour had to be cancelled as several people had to pull out at the last minute for a variety of reasons. The 1999 Tour is now filling up but there still 6-7 places free for any who are interested. This will

definitely be the last which Lloyd will be leading there. It leaves New Zealand on April 28 and after one day in London, spends 22 days in Lebanon, Syria, Israel and Jordan, before returning to London. One can choose to return to New Zealand by May 26 or stay for a period in Europe and return later. For details and a full brochure, contact: **Global Encounters, 28 Forest Road, Raumati South. Fax: 04-299-5205. Telephone: 04-299-5900 or E-mail: ken@global.kp.planet.gen.nz**

Next Newsletter

If you want to submit copy (including Letters to the Editor) then please send it to me (address below) by February 1.

I can accept these input methods: email (noel.cheer@ibm.net), floppy disk (IBM compatible, Lotus WordPro, Microsoft Word 6 or ASCII), typed (I have a scanner) or handwritten (provided that its legible!)

Noel Cheer

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/sof.html

For membership details and for the address of your nearest local group, contact the Membership Secretary, Roy Griffith, 249 Te Moana Road, Phone 04-293-1954.

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, email: noel.cheer@ibm.net