



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

Previewing the 1999 Sea of Faith (NZ) Conference November 26-28 in Christchurch

WITH SPRING VERY
much in evidence
in the garden and
with the noticeably
warmer days, one is aware
that it is not too long before
many of us head towards
Christchurch for the Sea of
Faith Network
annual Confer-

ence. Plans are all on schedule for the Conference with both the Arrangements Committee and the Steering Committee beavering away at their respective tasks. Travel arrangements have been finalised for Ursula Goodenough from the USA. People living near Auckland and Wellington will have an additional opportunity to hear her speak when she visits these cities the week after the conference. With Ursula, Jeanette Fitzsimons and Lloyd Geering as Keynote Speakers, we are likely to be provided with a stimulating and thought-provoking introduction to the theme **"Mother Earth v Father God?"**. The line-up of Elective Lecturers and Workshop topics [see page 2] also indicates that this is a Conference worthy of your attendance.

At this time of year the Steering Committee are also starting to think ahead to the 2000

Conference in Hawkes Bay [see page 10]. With a tentative theme which will take us "beyond belief", the Committee would appreciate suggestions for Keynote Speakers. If you have any thoughts please do contact me: by letter to 249 Te Moana

Steering Committee and thus the views of as wide a representation as possible of members of the Network. We appreciate your comments and suggestions on the present system and how the Committee can work even more successfully for you and the Network.

I look forward to seeing many of you at the conference in Christchurch at the end of November.

Jane Griffith
Chairperson

[Note Jane's new phone number - ed]

From The Steering Committee

Road, Waikanae, phone/fax: 04-904-1954 or by email to griffith@globe.co.nz

We are especially keen to receive your suggestions on overseas speakers who have expertise in this field and are known to be good, clear communicators.

All members of this year's Steering Committee have indicated that they are willing to stand for another year if this is the will of the members - several Committee members have just one more year until they complete their term of office according to the Network constitution. We have adapted well to the structure of Steering Committee meetings - two in-person meetings each year and the remainder being teleconferences. This enables Network members from around the country to be elected to the

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Conference Update

Just over two months to go until Conference on 26-28 November, at the Christchurch College of Education, which is a super venue with great facilities. Registrations are rolling in, and there is plenty of room for more, so get your forms into the mail to the convenors, to ensure your place in this event. Accommodation, workshops, and electives will be filled on a first-come basis, so don't delay. **September 25 is the deadline for "early bird" discounted registrations.** The programme is now almost finalised, and details of this, with speakers, elective lectures, and workshops, will be mailed out to those already registered early in September, and others as they come in.

Registration forms were included in the July Newsletter, and sent to all local contact people. If you still need forms, contact the convenor.

Murphy's law has struck again!! A few slight complications have arisen in the way the registration form was designed and has been interpreted by some. The full registration covers all days of the conference (which can alternatively be booked separately for partial attendances), but **not** meals or accommodation, which must be booked separately and the appropriate fees paid. For example, someone participating in the whole of conference will pay a full fee, plus selected meals, plus two nights accommodation. A further complication: if you book accommodation, then breakfast is included, but if you stay elsewhere and want to be in for breakfast, then there is a fee to pay. **Please check your form carefully to ensure your requirements are covered.** We will also check registrations already received, to ensure we get it right.

Enquiries may be directed to me at 76A Puriri St., Christchurch 4, tel/fax 03-348-3479 or email goffinjp@netaccess.co.nz.

See you in Christchurch in November !!

John Goffin, Convenor,
Arrangements Committee.

Elective Lectures

You'll be able to attend **one** from each group:

Friday evening

Bob Eyles, ex geographer and Presbyterian minister, and writer: **"The Bible's Ecological Dimension"** Our concern needs to be rooted in this world.

John Hunt, Presbyterian minister and best selling author: **"Celtic Spirituality"**. As we engage in the natural world's rhythms and seasons, we engage with God and our spirit is nurtured.

Jim Kebbell, moved on from philosophy and theology to organic production: **"Values Underpinning the Environmental Movement"**

Grant Rosoman, Greenpeace worker, forestry professional and campaigner: **"Sense of Place and Conservation"**. A Pacific conservation campaigners' perspective on spirituality, a land ethic, and the environment.

Jane Simpson, ex lecturer in religious studies, researcher, writer: **"Overcoming Impasse in the Dark Night of Broken Symbols"** Jane advocates a central place for mysticism, amongst the confusion of current masculine and feminine symbolisms.

Sunday morning

Andrew Dakers, ecological engineering consultant and lecturer: **"Making Peace With Nature"**

John Peet, senior lecturer in chemical engineering, author: **"A guiding Ethic for the Socio-Economic System."** A more appropriate ethical stance and how it could be applied.

Noreen Penny, developer of womens'spirituality groups: **"The Great Goddess and Her Rituals"**. Contrasts with Yahweh and male dominated religious ideas.

Barbara Vincent, Anglican priest, researcher, writer: **"The Religious Ideology of the NZ Business Round Table"**.



Workshops

Full details are included with your Registration Pack

- Laurie Chisholm, **Gaia and God.**
- John Craighead, **Ecology and Mysticism, an Earthy Business.**
- Ian Crumpton, **Other Worlds: Discoveries and Issues.**
- Francis deHamel, **The Quest for Immortality in Creatures.**
- Bob Eyles, **What Can We Do?**
- Fred Fastier, **Why Be Good?**
- Hugh and Peg Gilman, **A Full Stop at the End of the Sentence?**
- Jill Harris, **Doing Good—Virtue or Instinct?**
- Ian Harris, **Creating God.**
- Jim Kebbell, **Values and Greens.**
- Eric Kirkness, **Eco-ethics.**
- Margaret Lovell-Smith, **Living a Spiritual Life.**
- Jolyon Manning, **Coming to Terms With Our Environment.**
- Ralph Pannett, **Going Back: Coming Closer.**
- Noreen Penny, **Ritual making With Goddess Groups.**
- Len Pierce, **Earthly Spirituality For and Evolving Planet.**
- Bruce Spittle, **Eco-theology: Worshipping at the Temple Within.**
- Rhona and Hugh Thorpe, **Aotearoa-NZ: Re-examining Our Past.**
- Hugh Wilson, **Hinewai Reserve Field Trip** (5 hours)
- Jim Stuart, **The Anatomy of Healing Spaces.**
- Bob Perks, **Towards Eternity: Other Worlds and States of Consciousness.**

Local Groups

Wellington

On the 3rd of September they will discuss "Why Do We Vote The Way We Do?".

The next three monthly meetings will involve the Conference. On October 1 they will discuss Ursula Goodenough's **The Sacred Depths of Nature**; on November 5 they will preview the Workshops (and let off some fireworks!); and on December 3 they will review the Conference and have a Christmas barbecue.

Contact: Merran Kuiper phone 04-478-3720

Irvine Roxburgh

The NZ Sea of Faith Network lost one of its foundation members with the sudden death of Irvine Roxburgh. This occurred in the home of Jim Veitch near the end of an evening when many SOFN members had been meeting John Dominic Crossan during his recent lecture tour to NZ. After making a contribution to the discussion Irvine collapsed and did not recover. The very deep sympathy of all SOFN members goes to Irvine's wife Isabel and their family.

I came to know Irvine only during the last 30 years, even though his elder brother Rymall was a fellow student with me in the Knox College Theological Hall back in 1941. Although these two brothers came from an evangelical Christian home and both became Presbyterian ministers their religious paths diverged greatly. Rymall remained theologically conservative but Irvine became more and more radical in his views.

I did not know Irvine personally during the days of his parish ministry. When he was at Wanaka he developed a great interest in the history of the area and showed his skills in research and writing by publishing a book on it. By the time I met him he was engaged in the organisational work of the National Council for Christian Education along with Margaret Reid.

Irvine devoted the latter part of his career, both before and after retirement, to adult education. He read widely, wrote quite a bit and, above all, did a lot of thinking; he was a good teacher and helped many others to wrestle successfully with religious problems. It was the courage and devotion with which he exercised his ability to think that led him to his radical theological position. He found the Sea of Faith Network very congenial and made contributions to several of the conferences.

Lloyd Geering

Irvine's last contribution to our Newsletter appears on page 9

Dunedin

Their August meeting picked up on the theme of the Conference—ecothology—led by Don and Margaret Feist. They also reviewed some earlier discussions around the subject "What Is God Made Of?"

Contact: Andrew Meek phone 03-471-0698

Hawke's Bay

In place of its normal monthly meeting in July, group members (along with members of the

public) attended a seminar led by the visiting Jesus Seminar scholar, John Dominic Crossan. Fifty people attended, a very gratifying response due in large part to the enthusiasm of the local SoF Group.

In August members heard Richard Spence introduce the topic "Confessions of a Gospel Writer" which asked how are we to receive the four gospels.

Contact: Alan Goss phone 06-835-9594

Auckland Central

In the course of studying Lloyd Geering's *Does Society Need Religion?*, one of their discussion groups asserted God as a "personal spiritual power" but clarified "personal" to express "of a personal nature" and not "a separate person". Similarly they held that God is "objective" but not in the sense of "out there" but rather "real, independent of our thinking and belief".

In their August meeting Dr Kathy Crosier from University of Auckland took them through the technicalities of genetic engineering.

They plan that in September, Prof. Laurie Brown from University of New South Wales will talk about religious experience: forms, events, ceremonies, generic features and the everyday implications of them.

Contact Beverley Smith phone 09-630-7473

Book Reviews

The Meaning of Jesus

The Meaning of Jesus by Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright SPCK, 1999 is reviewed by Lloyd Geering

Tom Wright has recently been engaged in a lecture tour in NZ at the same time as John Dominic Crossan, a member of the fellowship of New Testament scholars known as "The Jesus Seminar". Tom Wright defends a fairly conservative position in New Testament Studies and is quite critical of The Jesus Seminar. Nevertheless he is keen to enter into open and public dialogue with those who differ from him.

This is well illustrated by this book which started from the friendship between Tom Wright (an Anglican) and Marcus Borg (an American Lutheran and member of The Jesus Seminar). The book documents dialogue between the two on the chief areas of difference, as they write alternative chapters. I met Tom Wright a few weeks ago in London and he told me that

The Shakertown Pledge

This pledge is quoted in No More Plastic Jesus: Global Justice and Christian Lifestyle by Adam Daniel Finnerty. It was originally written in 1973.

Recognizing that the Earth and the fullness thereof is a gift from our gracious God*, and that we are called to cherish, nurture, and provide loving stewardship for the Earth's resources, and recognizing that life itself is a gift, and a call to responsibility, joy and celebration, I make the following declarations:

1. I declare myself to be a world citizen.
2. I commit myself to lead an ecologically sound life.
3. I commit myself to lead a life of creative simplicity and to share my wealth with the world's poor.
4. I commit myself to join with others in the reshaping of institutions in order to bring about a more just global society in which all people have full access to the needed resources for their physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth.
5. I commit myself to occupational accountability, and in so doing I will seek to avoid the creation of products which will cause harm to others.
6. I affirm the gift of my body and commit myself to its proper nourishment and physical wellbeing.
7. I commit myself to examine continually my relations with others, and to attempt to relate honestly, morally, and lovingly to those around me.
8. I commit myself to personal renewal through prayer, meditation and study.
9. I commit myself to responsible participation in a community of faith.

* or whatever - ed!



MRS. MACTAVISH. "What's 'Metapheesics,' guidman?"

MR. MACTAVISH. "Well, when the pairty wha listens disna ken what the pairty wha's speakin' means, an' when the pairty wha's speaking disna ken what he's blethering about himsel', thats metapheesics."

submitted by Barry Suckling

earlier this year he and Borg were engaged in a joint lecture tour to promote the book in USA.

The issues covered in the book are: how much do we really know about Jesus, what to make of the story of the virgin birth, why was Jesus crucified, what happened at the first Easter, in what sense was Jesus divine, what is meant by the second coming of Jesus. The book is well worth reading, being a good summary of the chief New Testament issues being currently discussed and setting out very clearly the differences between the liberal and conservative positions. The dialogue is conducted in a good spirit and readers are left to make their own judgments. The book would make a very good basis for a group wishing to discuss these topics.

Wright is a very competent scholar, is far from being a fundamentalist and yet defends fairly traditional views on each issue. It is clear from his writing that where the historical evidence leaves uncertainty, his prior convictions lead him back to the orthodox position. Borg expounds a much more liberal and sceptical position, though to some in the SOFN he may still not appear to be radical enough.

Lloyd Geering



Going To Church

What Goes On In There? Churches in Central Auckland, by Valerie J Grant is reviewed by Andrew Meek

I have to confess that the subject of this book did not really inspire me when I first picked it up. But after reading the Foreword and the three Introductions I was hooked.

Here is a delightful account of the author's visits to 25 Auckland inner-city churches. Each church was visited once at what was assumed to be the main Sunday morning service and each chapter is a summary of what took place, together with a few personal comments.

Given the wide range of styles and theological positions encountered, the writing is interesting and informative and generally without bias. Personal views do come through from time to time however and this is exactly as it should be from someone who says she is committed to seeing the church survive. Many will see echoes within themselves of her experience of 50 years regular church attendance followed by a period of complete non-attendance and now a period of rethinking what church is really about and how to interpret all the various stories, traditions and beliefs.

Introduction One (for those who don't go to church) suggests that there is room for a range of belief from 'a vast and brilliant metaphor to 'other world spirituality' and that

Continued on page 8

Biological Realities of the Non-real God

These excerpts come from a longer paper of the same name by Ted Abraham that can be acquired from the SOFN (NZ) Resource Centre.

[He starts with a quotation from the Oxyrhynchus Sayings of Jesus]

And the kingdom of heaven is within you and who so ever knoweth himself shall find it. And having found if ye shall know yourselves that ye are the sons and heirs of the Father, the Almighty and shall know yourselves that ye are in God and God in you. And ye are the City of God.

This is an extraordinary statement. Is it saying something much more than 'the creation is a pathway to God', than John Donne's *whatsoever hath any being, is by that very being a glasse in which we see God*, but rather that the animal kingdom is a pathway that leads us into our inner most self, where in is the kingdom of heaven, where in we are closest to God?

Is it saying that the super-human and the sub-human come together in the deeper parts of the human psych? Can we say that here they are fused?

We cannot know at what level mind occurred within the biosphere, at what level conscious mind evolved from subconscious mind, nor can we know the nature of the awareness that the glimmerings of primitive consciousness brought. We do know that human mind evolved from animal mind. While consciousness was present before there were people [it] may be a convenient simplification to think of animal mind as the equivalent of our subconscious and to speak of human consciousness, with its super ability to conceptualise, to verbalise, evolving out of animal subconsciousness. (Is this what the myth of the fall, the lifting out from the natural world, through the partaking of the tree of knowledge is about?)

But according to Carl Jung, our religious mythology, indeed all mythology arises from the subconscious as the collective dream of a cultural group. Jung recognised archetypal entities, the archetypes, which were universally present in the subconscious of all people, as indwelling ideal, and which sought expression in the symbols of collective mythologies and in individual dreams. Their universality means that they are genetically inherited and that the genes are ancient. How ancient? Certainly they were present before the dispersal of peoples. It is simplest to say they were inherited from the prehuman. It is simplest to say that the human collective unconscious (that part which is common to all) is inherited from animal mind and is representative of animal mind. *Who then are they that draw us to the kingdom? And the kingdom of heaven is within you.*

Our genes are one thing we do not invent (at least not yet). They invent us. Our archetypes use material from our world, as symbols of themselves, to invent our mythologies and our gods. We do not invent our dreams (St. Augustine thanked God for not holding him responsible for them!), though

perhaps we can dream our myths forward, that the archetypes may be vitalised afresh with new symbols from our changing world.

Our forbears, for most of human existence, and earlier for much longer, lived in tribal groups (or troops). Virtually all social interaction took place amongst close relatives. The tribal group has broken down with the population explosion and the high modern mobility of the individual but the genes that evolved that the tribe, the carrier of the genotype, might survive, are still in place, so that, despite being highly competitive and despite modern pressures and despite the loss of the natural environment in which the genes of our social mores evolved, we do, on an assumption our contacts are tribal, continue to help each other. We are programmed to do so. **The trick of Christianity is to persuade us to extend tribal relationships to all people, indeed some would say to all species.** Confucius was more specific. He argued for the prime importance, for the cohesion of the state, of those with responsibility for others acting as though they were parents.

Young infants do not distinguish clearly between themselves and the rest of world. They are simply part of the wholeness of the universe. Are there levels of animal psyche that are the same?

[He gave an example of a mystical experience].

Similar to and overlapping with mystical experience is the sense of the numinous. The numinous may also be of nature, including the major events of our life cycle, birth, sexuality, death, events we share with a thousand million years of life on earth. Awe and wonder, the mystical, the numinous are hardly human inventions. They happen to us, unexpectedly. An upwelling from the subconscious? But what is the subconscious subconsciously conscious of? A genetical programming for such experiences? Why? For their survival value?

If a predisposition to experience the religions is genetical then we are looking at the chemistry of a DNA molecule. We are looking at the chemical sequence that moves through the body to affect the fine structure of the brain and its chemistry. We are looking simply at the body's physicality. **One of the most profound mysteries of the biosphere is the appearance and evolution of awareness.** We have learnt a good deal of neurophysiology. We know something of the transmission of a nervous impulse along a nerve fibre with the change in electrical potential as sodium ions collapse in across the external membrane to be actively pumped out again, of the transmission across the synaptic gap to a neighbouring neuronal cell by a flash release of a chemical transmitter, mainly acetyl choline. We know something of the cybernetics of the brain. But the brain remains brain and the mind, especially conscious mind, seems something else. But is it?

Ted Abraham

The Coming Radical Reformation: Twenty-One Theses

Theology

—1—

The God of the metaphysical age is dead. There is not a personal god out there external to human beings and the material world. We must reckon with a deep crisis in god talk and replace it with talk about whether the universe has meaning and whether human life has purpose

—2—

The doctrine of special creation of the species died with the advent of Darwinism and the new understanding of the age of the earth and magnitude of the physical universe. Special creation goes together with the notion that the earth and human beings are at the center of the galaxy (the galaxy is anthropocentric). The demise of a geocentric universe took the doctrine of special creation with it.

—3—

The deliteralization of the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis brought an end to the dogma of original sin as something inherited from the first human being. Death is not punishment for sin, but is entirely natural. And sin is not transmitted from generation to generation by means of male sperm, as suggested by Augustine.

—4—

The notion that God interferes with the order of nature from time to time in order to aid or punish is no longer credible, in spite of the fact that most people still believe it. Miracles are an affront to the justice and integrity of God, however understood. Miracles are conceivable only as the inexplicable; otherwise they contradict the regularity of the order of the physical universe.

—5—

Prayer is meaningless when understood as requests addressed to an external God for favor or forgiveness and meaningless if God does not interfere with the laws of nature. Prayer as praise is a remnant of the age of kingship in the ancient Near East and is beneath the dignity of deity. Prayer should be understood principally as meditation—as listening rather than talking—and as attention to the needs of neighbor.

Christology

—6—

We should give Jesus a demotion. It is no longer credible to think of Jesus as divine. Jesus' divinity goes together with the old theistic way of thinking about God.

—7—

The plot early Christians invented for a divine redeemer figure is as archaic as the mythology in which it is framed. A Jesus who drops down out of heaven, performs some magical act that frees human beings from the power of sin, rises from the dead, and returns to heaven is simply no longer credible. The notion that he will return at the end of time and sit in cosmic judgment is equally incredible. We must find a new plot for a more credible Jesus.

—8—

The virgin birth of Jesus is an insult to modern intelligence and should be abandoned. In addition, it is a pernicious doctrine that denigrates women.

—9—

The doctrine of the atonement—the claim that God killed his own son in order to satisfy his thirst for satisfaction—is subrational and subethical. This monstrous doctrine is the stepchild of a primitive sacrificial system in which the gods had to be appeased by offering them some special gift, such as a child or an animal.

—10—

The resurrection of Jesus did not involve the resuscitation of a corpse. Jesus did not rise from the dead, except perhaps in some metaphorical sense. The meaning of the resurrection is that a few of his followers—probably no more than two or three—finally came to understand what he was all about. When the significance of his words and deeds dawned on them, they knew of no other terms in which to express their amazement than to claim that they had seen him alive.

—11—

The expectation that Jesus will return and sit in cosmic judgment is part and parcel of the mythological worldview that is now defunct. Furthermore, it undergirds human lust for the punishment of enemies and evildoers and the corresponding hope for rewards for the pious and righteous. All apocalyptic elements should be expunged from the Christian agenda.

Robert W. Funk, The Jesus Seminar

God's Domain according to Jesus

—12—

Jesus advocates and practices a trust ethic. The kingdom of God, for Jesus, is characterized by trust in the order of creation and the essential goodness of neighbor.

—13—

Jesus urges his followers to celebrate life as though they had just discovered a cache of coins in a field or been invited to a state banquet.

—14—

For Jesus, God's domain is a realm without social boundaries. In that realm there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, homosexual nor heterosexual, friend nor enemy.

—15—

For Jesus, God's domain has no brokers, no mediators between human beings and divinity. The church has insisted on the necessity of mediators in order to protect its brokerage system.

—16—

For Jesus, the kingdom does not require cultic rituals to mark the rites of passage from outsider to insider, from sinner to righteous, from child to adult, from client to broker.

—17—

In the kingdom, forgiveness is reciprocal: individuals can have it only if they sponsor it.

—18—

The kingdom is a journey without end: one arrives only by departing. It is therefore a perpetual odyssey. Exile and exodus are the true conditions of authentic existence.

The Canon

—19—

The New Testament is a highly uneven and biased record of orthodox attempts to invent Christianity. The canon of scripture adopted by traditional Christianity should be contracted and expanded simultaneously to reflect respect for the old tradition and openness to the new. Only the works of strong poets—those who

startle us, amaze us with a glimpse of what lies beyond the rim of present sight—should be considered for inclusion. The canon should be a collection of scriptures without a fixed text and without either inside or outside limits, like the myth of King Arthur and the knights of the roundtable or the myth of the American West.

—20—

The Bible does not contain fixed, objective standards of behavior that should govern human behavior for all time. This includes the ten commandments as well as the admonitions of Jesus.

The Language of Faith

—21—

In rearticulating the vision of Jesus, we should take care to express ourselves in the same register as he employed in his parables and aphorisms—paradox, hyperbole, exaggeration, and metaphor. Further, our reconstructions of his vision should be provisional, always subject to modification and correction.

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The Author

Robert Funk is Director of the Westar Institute in Santa Rosa, California, and founder of the Jesus Seminar. He is a distinguished teacher, writer, translator and publisher in the field of religion. A Guggenheim Fellow and Senior Fulbright Scholar, he has served as Annual Professor of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem and as chair of the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University.

Robert Funk is a recognized pioneer in modern biblical scholarship, having led the Society of Biblical Literature as its Executive Secretary from 1968–1973. His many books include *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (1993) and *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds* (1998) (both with the Jesus Seminar) and *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (1996).

Robert Funk will be a featured speaker at Westar Institute's Once & Future Jesus Conference in October, 1999.

The Diversification of Christianity

The following is part of a larger presentation given by Irvine Roxburgh to the Mana Sea of Faith Group. It discusses the role of Paul in "inventing Christianity" as well as the major non-Jewish streams that flowed into developing Christianity.

In the second half of the first century, the focus of the development of Christianity shifts from Jerusalem to Rome. Rome was still heart of the mightiest empire that the world had seen. A citizen could choose between 79 temples, and at least as many gods. In addition, there were many 'permitted' alternative religions and philosophies. The most popular philosophy was Neo-Platonism, followed by Stoicism.

We can sum up Paul's basic myth in the words: **"The descent of the divine saviour."** Paul, it seems, spent three years working it all out. But, where did he get it from?

1. **Platonism.** The implication is that the world is not our real home. [for example, see Phil 1:21-25]

2. **Gnosticism**, which reached Rome in 67 BCE. It can be traced back to reformed dualistic and metaphysical Zoroastrianism whose influence on subsequent metaphysical religions such as Christianity is hard to overestimate. Gnosticism sees a high God beyond the skies, sending down an emissary to impart secret knowledge so that privileged souls can escape from the thralldom in the world. But Paul had a problem. How could he show that his new religion was a superior version of Judaism when gnosticism rejected the idea of atonement?

3. **Mystery religions** with their concepts of disobedience; sin; eternal loss; a young god victim of violent death; atonement; resurrection; immortality. Another thing that suited Paul was the emphasis on the fate of each individual. The religion of Mithra provided a kind of blueprint for Paul. In its dualism, esotericism, metaphysics and eschatology, it was clearly gnostic. It was also a mystery religion—it celebrated sacramental meals and practised baptism. Mithraism reached Rome in 67 BCE and was later adopted as the religion of the Roman army.

Paul pinned his myth in history—creating it around a person who had lived—Jesus. When Paul began to propagate his new religion it was not immediately popular. It seemed to fall between two stools. It lacked both the venerable antiquity of Judaism and the attractive rituals of classical religion. Moreover, since they rejected all already available gods, Christians were dubbed atheists. Christianity demanded far more than any philosophy or any classical religion.

Later, in places where Hellenism had flourished, Christianity grew rapidly. It seemed able to match a growing centredness on the individual. Unlike Mithraism, Christianity did not exclude women. It also ran foodbanks.

A variety of other brands of Christianity also grew. Leaders included Julius of Caesarea

(100-165) who had been a Stoic until he converted to Platonism. Marcion took a similar line. Montanism in about 70 CE, was an extreme gnostic sect and Tertullian (160-220), was a convert to Christianity from Montanism. Martyrdom was seen as only sure way to heaven: as Tertullian wrote, "the blood of the martyrs is seed."

Mani (217-277) led a most attractive non-violent religion, claiming that his religion reflected the teachings of Zoroaster, the Buddha and Jesus.

The neo-Platonist **Alexandrian School** of Clement and Origen had great influence. In furthering Platonism and turning Jesus into God, their influence has lasted until the present day.

Arius (250-336), held that God must be unique in immortality—that no-one must share it.

There were no official dogmas till the 4th century, until in 325 the all-powerful, vacillating, superstitious emperor (Constantine) demanded "only one way up".

Mithraism was banned in 378 and it too, was driven into the catacombs. Of many inscriptions and the three million graves in the catacombs, many are of Mithraites. As god of light, Mithra was associated with the Greek sun god, Helios, and the Roman Sol Invictus. The birthday of Sol Invictus, December 25th, was handed over to the baby Christ.

All this religious diversity did not end in the 4th century, but with the arrival of dogma, the ability to choose in safety did: the punishment for heresy was ex-communication. Death became the order of the day

All of this was a far cry from the parables and sayings and the religious practice of the Ebionites, the only original followers of Jesus.

We should be grateful for the work of The Jesus Seminar in burrowing through the overlay in the gospels and bringing to the surface many helpful gems indicating what Jesus was really on about.

Here is a paraphrase of Lk. 11:20. "If we realise that God's work is being done when we help each other to say 'yes' to life, then God's rule is in action here and now".

We should hold on to that, because the Christian religion has bequeathed us some negatives. After three centuries, the church that Paul invented became part of the state. The alliance, born in a whim [of Constantine], tolerated no diversity and perpetuated intellectual submission. Furthermore, it blamed Jewish people for Jesus' death and it bred anti-semitism. In many respects it made the lot of women worse.

It perpetuated the dualism that the body and sex are evil and the other dualism that the world is not our real home. This, linked with the idea that humans have dominion over the earth, (Gen 1:26) has led to the earth and seas being exploited to death.

I think that Paul's religion has a lot to answer.

Irvine Roxburgh

The Diversification of Christianity

The following is part of a larger presentation given by Irvine Roxburgh to the Mana Sea of Faith Group. It discusses the role of Paul in "inventing Christianity" as well as the major non-jewish streams that flowed into developing Christianity.

In the second half of the first century, the focus of the development of Christianity shifts from Jerusalem to Rome. Rome was still heart of the mightiest empire that the world had seen. A citizen could choose between 79 temples, and at least as many gods. In addition, there were many 'permitted' alternative religions and philosophies. The most popular philosophy was Neo-Platonism, followed by Stoicism.

We can sum up Paul's basic myth in the words: **"The descent of the divine saviour."** Paul, it seems, spent three years working it all out. But, where did he get it from?

1. **Platonism.** The implication is that the world is not our real home. [for example, see Phil 1:21-25]

2. **Gnosticism**, which reached Rome in 67 BCE. It can be traced back to reformed dualistic and metaphysical Zoroastrianism whose influence on subsequent metaphysical religions such as Christianity is hard to overestimate. Gnosticism sees a high God beyond the skies, sending down an emissary to impart secret knowledge so that privileged souls can escape from the thralldom in the world. But Paul had a problem. How could he show that his new religion was a superior version of Judaism when gnosticism rejected the idea of atonement?

3. **Mystery religions** with their concepts of disobedience; sin; eternal loss; a young god victim of violent death; atonement; resurrection; immortality. Another thing that suited Paul was the emphasis on the fate of each individual. The religion of Mithra provided a kind of blueprint for Paul. In its dualism, esotericism, metaphysics and eschatology, it was clearly gnostic. It was also a mystery religion—it celebrated sacramental meals and practised baptism. Mithraism reached Rome in 67 BCE and was later adopted as the religion of the Roman army.

Paul pinned his myth in history—creating it around a person who had lived—Jesus. When Paul began to propagate his new religion it was not immediately popular. It seemed to fall between two stools. It lacked both the venerable antiquity of Judaism and the attractive rituals of classical religion. Moreover, since they rejected all already available gods, Christians were dubbed atheists. Christianity demanded far more than any philosophy or any classical religion.

Later, in places where Hellenism had flourished, Christianity grew rapidly. It seemed able to match a growing centredness on the individual. Unlike Mithraism, Christianity did not exclude women. It also ran foodbanks.

A variety of other brands of Christianity also grew. Leaders included Julius of Caesarea

(100-165) who had been a Stoic until he converted to Platonism. Marcion took a similar line. Montanism in about 70 CE, was an extreme gnostic sect and Tertullian (160-220), was a convert to Christianity from Montanism. Martyrdom was seen as only sure way to heaven: as Tertullian wrote, "the blood of the martyrs is seed."

Mani (217-277) led a most attractive non-violent religion, claiming that his religion reflected the teachings of Zoroaster, the Buddha and Jesus.

The neo-Platonist **Alexandrian School** of Clement and Origen had great influence. In furthering Platonism and turning Jesus into God, their influence has lasted until the present day.

Arius (250-336), held that God must be unique in immortality—that no-one must share it.

There were no official dogmas till the 4th century, until in 325 the all-powerful, vacillating, superstitious emperor (Constantine) demanded "only one way up".

Mithraism was banned in 378 and it too, was driven into the catacombs. Of many inscriptions and the three million graves in the catacombs, many are of Mithraites. As god of light, Mithra was associated with the Greek sun god, Helios, and the Roman Sol Invictus. The birthday of Sol Invictus, December 25th, was handed over to the baby Christ.

All this religious diversity did not end in the 4th century, but with the arrival of dogma, the ability to choose in safety did: the punishment for heresy was ex-communication. Death became the order of the day

All of this was a far cry from the parables and sayings and the religious practice of the Ebionites, the only original followers of Jesus.

We should be grateful for the work of The Jesus Seminar in burrowing through the overlay in the gospels and bringing to the surface many helpful gems indicating what Jesus was really on about.

Here is a paraphrase of Lk. 11:20. "If we realise that God's work is being done when we help each other to say 'yes' to life, then God's rule is in action here and now".

We should hold on to that, because the Christian religion has bequeathed us some negatives. After three centuries, the church that Paul invented became part of the state. The alliance, born in a whim [of Constantine], tolerated no diversity and perpetuated intellectual submission. Furthermore, it blamed Jewish people for Jesus' death and it bred anti-semitism. In many respects it made the lot of women worse.

It perpetuated the dualism that the body and sex are evil and the other dualism that the world is not our real home. This, linked with the idea that humans have dominion over the earth, (Gen 1:26) has led to the earth and seas being exploited to death.

I think that Paul's religion has a lot to answer.

Irvine Roxburgh

I did not see it as the series does not come on until 10.45 pm, which is rather late for me. However, Ronald Pearse of the UK Sea of Faith tells me it came over quite well.

As a result of that I was subsequently invited to make a bigger contribution to the 20th programme, devoted to the present and future state of Christianity. The whole hour of this programme was devoted to discussion by eleven people, which included Bishop Sykes of Ely, David Jenkins, Jack Spong, Karen Armstrong, Janice Soskice, John Hick, a Greek Orthodox priest, a Seventh Day Adventist, two others and myself. I was much happier with this discussion and thought it to be well balanced. Melvyn Bragg started this programme by reading the well-known verses from Matthew Arnold's "On Dover Beach", though the Sea of Faith Network was not specifically referred to. The series of 20 minute visuals may be shown overseas but it is unlikely that the panel discussion will go out of UK, being regarded as more of local interest.

Lloyd Geering

UK SOFN Conference 1999

Lloyd Geering was there and this is his report.

This year the Conference venue returned to the University Halls of Residence, Leicester, where there is excellent accommodation, and beautiful surroundings—extensive lawns, shrubs and trees. Our NZ Conferences have been unable to compete with this venue and even less with the quality of the meals provided. On the other hand I think our organization is better, concerning the programme, particularly in the handling of workshops and core

groups. The latter met only twice, the second meeting being only half way through the conference. It needed one near the end. There was the usual variety of workshops.

The numbers attending were about the same, though I did not hear a final figure. There were at least two from USA and one or two from Australia. The conference did not get off to a very firm start at the first plenary session. The speaker was allotted (or desired) only 30 minutes. She presented a story she had written (and told in the first person) about a young woman called Miracle, who served in a cafe. In this she discussed many personal issues (some of them, I suspect, partly autobiographical) both with regard to Miracle's problems and those of her clients. Some conference members found this form of presentation quite creative and other were critical. I felt the Conference needed something more solid to set it going.

The second plenary session was devoted to a philosophical critique of realism, anti-realism and non-realism, by an Indian philosopher. It was interesting to have Western thought compared with Indian thought but one detected that many in the conference are now a bit tired of hearing about non-realism.

The third and final plenary address was by Don Cupitt and he was at his best; he addressed the theme of the conference, "What is Religion For?" This was followed by a panel of the three speakers who discussed questions submitted by the conference. Though good, it did not come up to the standard set by Noel Cheer.

It was a good opportunity to meet up with old friends (Ruth

Robinson was there) and make some new ones but since the evening meal did not start until 7pm and often went on until 8.30, the evenings were free except for some optional activities such as lawn dancing. Some like this more leisurely pace, but, as these conferences last only 48 hours, I prefer to have them packed more fully with activities as the NZ ones are.

Lloyd Geering

... and we'll do it again next year!

Arrangements are already in place for next year's Sea of Faith (NZ) Conference 2000 which is to be held at Woodford House, Havelock North, from the 6th to the 8th of October.

The theme of that Conference is "Beyond Belief" and it will provide a platform with plenty of spring to launch us into the 21st century. The facilities at Woodford House, and of course the gorgeous setting, are worth the experience—even apart from the Conference! An historic classroom block is to be demolished this year to make way for a \$2 million earthquake-proof building which will be completed by July next year.

Negotiations are under way to secure an overseas speaker, and the Steering Committee will be exploring some possible new slants to incorporate into the Conference programme.



"Begin today. Carry out a random act of senseless kindness, with no expectation of reward or punishment!"

attributed to Princess Diana, Mother Teresa, and probably many others.

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 Rd, Waikanae, 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.**

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