



# Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

## NEWSletter

### **Beyond Belief**

**Putting Faith Into Practice**

#### ***From The Chairperson***

**We are now well into the year 2000 which I hope is proving an interesting and successful year for you.**

Maybe it is America's Cup fever that has stimulated you, the varying fortunes of the Black Caps or the opportunity over the summer holiday to delve into some interesting literature. If it is literature and you have found some real gem which might interest others in the Network do send a synopsis of the book to Noel for inclusion in the next Newsletter.

On February 26th the Steering Committee met in Wellington for our annual in-person meeting. Since members of the Steering Committee live in Auckland, Tauranga, Napier, Masterton, Wellington and Dunedin, we meet several other times in the year in cyberspace: that is by telephone conference call.

The meetings are occasions when we deal with the business of the Network and we spent the major part of that Saturday in planning this year's Conference.

As you will be aware Conference this year will be in **Havelock North from 6-8 October**—dates which you might like to mark in your diary. Now. Hopefully the earlier conference date will suit far more people and the venue in Havelock North will tempt both regular Conference-goers and first-timers to a Sea of Faith Conference.

Planning for a conference is both an exciting task and also one of great responsibility as we attempt to cater for the needs of many different personalities and viewpoints. We were greatly helped this year by considered comments from a number of people who regularly attend Sea of Faith Conferences — thank you for your help.

As previously announced, the theme of the 2000 conference is "**Beyond Belief**" and to assist you as you think of this theme let me tell you briefly how the Steering Committee envisage this theme being developed.

This title is being used in terms of helping people find real meaning and value for their own life. In other words: *putting faith into practice*.

This theme will be developed in two strands—*social responsibility* and *culture*—and in both we will seek understanding of how people's lives are underpinned by their own faith. The Steering Committee have selected these two strands specifically to be able to draw on the unique character and resources of the location of the Conference as well as by recognising the considerable skills which many of our Network members have in these fields.

As always the Steering Committee welcome your suggestions of people to invite to present lectures, electives or workshops on this theme. Please do send me your ideas by letter, e-mail ([griffith@globe.co.nz](mailto:griffith@globe.co.nz)) or phone/fax (04) 904-1954.

*Jane Griffith, Sea of Faith Network (NZ)  
Chairperson 1999-2000*

#### **Number 35: March 2000**

From the Chairperson	1
Accounts	2
Faith in Cyberspace, Editorial	2
The Methodist Church	2
Obituaries	3
The "I Am" Experience	4
Local Groups	5
Book Reviews	6
Workshops & Elective Lectures	8
Skolimowski in New Zealand	8
In Brief	9
Comparative Religion for Dummies	10



## Faith in Cyberspace

### More Eco-Theology?

Have a look at:

[www.resurgence.org/](http://www.resurgence.org/)

Its a magazine sponsoring an international forum for ecological and spiritual thinking.

### Philosophy

The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy is at

[www.utm.edu/research/iep](http://www.utm.edu/research/iep)

classic texts; definitions

### Tolerance

Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance

[www.religioustolerance.org/](http://www.religioustolerance.org/)

### Our Own Web Site

We're planning to soon substantially increase the amount of archival material on our website.

[www.futuresgroup.org.nz/sof.html](http://www.futuresgroup.org.nz/sof.html)

### SATRS Books

You can order books directly from The St. Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, mercifully abbreviated to SATRS:

[www.futuresgroup.org.nz/satrs.html](http://www.futuresgroup.org.nz/satrs.html)

## Editorial

Critics of the Sea of Faith Network (and the most vocal are loyal members) often raise the issue of being too "head" oriented and not sufficiently "heart". Nearly 20 centuries ago Paul pointed out the tension between "faith" and "works" and all religious traditions acknowledge the need for a practical aspect: see "Comparative Religion for Dummies" on page 10.

So, this Newsletter marks the transition from last year's Conference theme of ecotheology to this year's of putting faith into practice. Get yourself oriented and grounded by reading the "The 'I Am' Experience" on page 4, think about the issues raised by the review of "Why Be Good?" on page 9 and await further news on the Conference

Noel Cheer, Editor

Next Newsletter May 2000,  
copy deadline April 15th.

## SoF(NZ) Audited Annual Accounts for 1998/9

At the AGM in November a draft version of the annual accounts was presented, and an undertaking was given that members would be advised when they had been audited.

I am pleased to report that the audited version was presented at the recent meeting of the Steering Committee and that there are no material differences between it and the draft presented at conference.

Roy Griffith, Treasurer

## The Methodist Church

*Professor Jane Kelsey, one of the 1999 Conference Keynote Speakers, addressed the Methodist Conference on November 9, 1999. Her address was very similar to the one she gave to the SoF Conference but ended with a broad overview of what she took to be the status of the Methodist Church in New Zealand:*

Let me conclude with some observations as an outsider. The Methodist church has done some good work into the social costs of the past 15 years, through the public issues committee, the Methodist Mission and elsewhere. So why is it not being heard effectively and why does the church remain peripheral to the emerging debate about alternatives? Let me float some options:

- falling numbers has focused attention inwards on institutional survival, which takes priority over philosophical or theological principles;
- these new priorities, and pressure on resources, have led the church to downgrade its commitment and capacity to provide leadership on social justice and Treaty issues; as with so many other places, managerialism has hit the institutional church, separating its corporate, parish and 'social justice' dimensions in ways that leave it without a coherent vision and integrated commitment;
- the hostile national environment on the Treaty, in contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, has made Treaty activism less trendy and more risky, making it simplest to drop off the agenda;

- the commitment to biculturalism within the church, and the prominence of Maori division, have declined accordingly;
- the church has been unable/unwilling to develop new political strategies and strategic alliances to offset its declining influence in New Zealand life;
- people at all levels of the church have become complacent or prepared to leave the fight to someone else—meaning fewer people struggling to maintain a public critique and contest of ideas.

Having said that I would like to pay tribute to the role of the Auckland Methodist Mission in the recent campaign against APEC. They were not opposing some distant regional economic group that was part of 'globalisation'. It was about the lives of the poor and homeless whom the mission feeds every day. The people-first values of the mission set against the profit-first agenda which APEC serves; the common fight against poverty of those who use the mission in Aotearoa and the hundreds of millions who suffer poverty under structural adjustment and foreign control in the Asian region; the growing power of the corporate and political élites who are sheltered from the eyesore of the homeless who spoil the sanitized image; the exclusion of ordinary people from decision-making, at APEC or by their home governments. The mission offered what it could—a magnificent location, logistical support, and a commitment to making sure the critical voice was heard.

Others brought different strengths—written resources, media contacts, organisational skills. The meeting in the church was overflowing—more than 400 people on an international trade issue! Until East Timor and then Clinton created diversions for the government, the critics were largely setting the agenda. It created strong foundations on which to build...For the Methodist church, you need to reinstate your priorities and start playing a leadership role once more in the pursuit of social justice and the Treaty.

## Obituary

### Rev. Wilf Ford

19 January 1920—12 October 1999

Wilf has been widely remembered within the Methodist Church as a broad minded and energetic leader.

Within the Sea of Faith, Wilf was a founding member of the Hamilton group and also the national network. He was a regular attender at all the local meetings as well as all the Conferences. As a deeply committed member of the Church he had a strong concern to understand and give support to those who expressed the need to move beyond the bounds of tradition.

His steadfast support and clear thinking were greatly appreciated, and he was genuinely missed when he and Mary left Hamilton for Auckland.

He is remembered with affection and appreciation for his sharing with us.

*G. Turere*

## Obituary

### Eric Kirkness J.P. Matamata

Following the 1999 Christchurch Conference, Eric Kirkness was diagnosed as having leukaemia and died peacefully on 20 January, 2000. Eric was a foundation/organising member of the Matamata Sea of Faith Group, a regular attender at the monthly Hamilton meetings, and attended 6 of the 7 Annual Conferences of the Network.

As one of the youngest men to be ordained as an Elder of the Presbyterian Church, he served in this capacity for over 60 years. (Always on the edge of heresy, he claimed.) He was a lover of literature, music and nature. His knowledge of history, both local and national, was extraordinary. A farmer for 35 years, he was also an accomplished carver of wood and sculptor of stone. Examples of his work can be seen at many sites around the Matamata district and are a fitting tribute to him. He spent some time helping with Church activities in Vanuatu, and became a world traveller with some family residing in Canada.

His contributions to Sea of Faith discussions and debate, will be sadly missed at local, regional and national level.

*Ian MacKenzie.*

*(A report of the Workshop on Eco-Ethics lead by Eric appeared on Page 4 of Newsletter 34.)*

## The 'I Am' Experience

For those who find the concept of 'being' (as conceptualised by Heidegger and taken up by Don Cupitt in his recent books) rather hard to get hold of, here is an account of what Rollo May (a psychiatrist influenced by Heidegger) describes as the 'I am' experience. It comes from a letter written by a former patient and was quoted by Rollo May in *A Question of Being*. It was submitted for the Newsletter by Laurie Chisholm.

I remember walking that day under the elevated tracks in a slum area, feeling the thought, "I am an illegitimate child." I recall the sweat pouring forth in my anguish in trying to accept that fact. Then I understood what it must feel like to accept, "I am a Negro in the midst of privileged whites," or "I am blind in the midst of people who see." Later on that night I woke up and it came to me this way, "I accept the fact that I am an illegitimate child." But "I am not a child any more." So it is, "I am illegitimate." That is not so either: "I was born illegitimate." Then what is left? What is left is this, "I am." This act of contact and acceptance with "I am" once gotten hold of, gave me (what I think was for me the first time) the experience "Since I am, I have the right to be."

What is this experience like? It is a primary feeling—it feels like receiving the deed to my house. It is the experience of my own aliveness not caring whether it turns out to be an ion or just a wave. It is like when a very young child I once reached the core of a peach and cracked the pit, not knowing what I would find and then feeling the wonder of finding the inner seed, good to eat in its bitter sweetness ... It is like a sailboat in the harbour being given an anchor so that, being made out of earthly things, it can by means of its anchor get in touch again with the earth, the ground from which its wood grew; it can lift its anchor to sail but always at times it can cast its anchor to weather the storm or rest a little... It is my saying to Descartes, "I Am, *therefore* I think, I feel, I do."

### "I Am, *therefore* I think, I feel, I do."

It is like an axiom in geometry—never experiencing it would be like going through a geometry course not knowing the first axiom. It is like going into my very own Garden of Eden where I am beyond good and evil and all other human concepts. It is like the experience of the poets of the intuitive world, the mystics, except that instead of the pure feeling of an union with God it is the finding of and the union with my own being. It is like owning Cinderella's shoe and looking all over the world for the foot it will fit and realizing all of a sudden that one's own foot is the only one it will fit. It is a "Matter of Fact" in the etymological sense of the expression. It is like a globe before the mountains and oceans and continents have been drawn on it. It is like a child in grammar finding the *subject* of the verb in a sentences—in this case the subject being one's own life span. It is ceasing to feel like a theory towards one's self.

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If you want to chase this thread, read Cupitt's *The Religion of Being* and *The Revelation of Being*.

Henryk Skolimowski in his *The Participatory Mind* says that we should go beyond "Being" to "Becoming", explicitly criticising Heidegger.

But Cupitt, in the valuable glossary at the end of *The Revelation of Being* (p97), writes: "I conflate the two together to make the portmanteau word be(com)ing. Getting rid of Plato [and his contrast between 'timeless self-subsistent Being' and 'the temporal flux of becoming'] means getting rid of the split between Being and becoming." - ed

# Local Groups



## **Dunedin**

After an able chairmanship for the last 5 years, **Andrew Meek** has stepped aside for **Bruce McMillan** to take over. Bruce will also replace Andrew on the national Steering Committee. Among the subjects that they are thinking of looking at this year are: revisiting church history; Lloyd Geering's The World To Come; Michael King's Being Pakeha Now; Celtic Spirituality; the theology of hymns; prayer.

Contact: **Marjorie Spittle**, (03) 476-4322

## **Tauranga**

Last year, **Val Watkins** ran a series of three programmes on a range of concerns raised by members:

- Individual concepts of "God"
- Facing old age
- Coping with death, and ideas about funerals

They also studied some of Lloyd Geering's God and The New Physics

Contact: **Marion Bennett**, (07) 578-8382

## **South Auckland**

They meet each 2nd Sunday of the month at 3pm in Friendship House, Manakau: meetings are advertised in the Manakau Courier. During 1999 they discussed Physics; A Woman's Perspective of the Modern Church, the Theses of Spong and Funk, Maori Spirituality, Creation Spirituality and the Biological Realities of the Non-Real God (see Newsletter 33).

Contact **Elsie Montgomery** (09) 278-5517.

## **Auckland**

Carrying on from a theme introduced by Jane Kelsey at last year's Conference, the Auckland group heard from Tim Hazeldine in February discussing the connections (if any!) between economics and morality.

In March they plan to host Henryk Skolimowski.

Contact **Beverley Smith** (09) 630-7473



## **Bay of Islands**

On Saturday March 25th they will be addressed (in Kerikeri) by Frank Andrews from the Wellington Carter Observatory on "The Hubble Telescope". Some readers heard Frank at the 1998 Conference in Heretaunga.

Contact **Lindsay Johnson** (09) 401-0412

## **Ideas for Local Groups**

One of the reasons for publishing details about what our Local Groups get up to is to offer suggestions for activities to other Groups. These are some activities that UK Local Groups have recently been involved in.

**Cardiff**: "Non-realism in the Hindu Tradition"; a discussion of A.N. Wilson's God's Funeral

**Gloucester**: a discussion of Don Cupitt's A New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech.

**Kent**: attending and later discussing a public lecture by John Polkinghorne on "The Scientist and God Today".

**Birmingham**: An introduction to the philosophy of the American postmodernist, Richard Rorty.

**Sheffield**: Experiences of being on a retreat in India.

**North West**: a discussion of Salman Rushdie's letter to the world's six billionth person, Imagine No Heaven.

**Yorkshire**: a discussion of Richard Holloway's Godless Morality.

**Wessex**: how are we to interpret the word "Resurrection"?





# Book Reviews



## **"Godness, as seen in Jesus"**

**Creating God, Re-Creating Christ: Re-imagining the Christian way in a secular world** by Ian Harris, published by St Andrews Trust. \$12.95.

*This review is by John Bluck, Dean of Cathedral, and is reproduced, with permission, from the December 1999 issue of Crosslink.*

This is an audacious book.

In a mere 100 pages, journalist Ian Harris tackles the question that academic theologians fill volumes to address: "What does an authentic experience of God comprise?"

With great clarity, he argues that we create God, rather than vice versa, but he's equally determined that it must be a living God we create, not a mere symbol. You can't attach the old labels of agnostic, let alone atheist, to this writer, though some will try. Nor is he despairing of the church, even though he believes it to be in terminal decline.

The Ephesus group he's pioneered seems determined to produce another, more coherent model of Christian community. His most telling argument with our present structures is they are distracted from their function of projecting the quality of 'Godness, as seen in Jesus'.

We need, he says, to start all over again. And he does.

Quite what that radical new beginning might look like wasn't developed enough to tempt me into giving up on what we've got. And there were times in the text when I felt the author skimmed too fast and lightly over too much history and theology in one breath. After all, the centuries when God is relegated to simply 'belonging in heaven' managed to produce some very down to earth divine experiences.

The most refreshing and rewarding feature of this book is the

personal passion that drives it. Rarely do you find a post Christian, post modern, post church theologian offering a personal creed with an intensity of conviction to match any evangelical testimony.

The theology of this book you can argue with. That it comes from a man of faith is radiantly clear.

[In a subsequent Letter to the Editor of *Crosslink*, Ian wrote: "I do not regard myself as either post-Christian or post-church: I just want both to live more pointedly in the present. The book explores one way that might happen." You can obtain a copy of SATRS publications by contacting St Andrews on The Terrace at P.O. Box 5203 Wellington, Phone (04) 472-9211, Fax (04) 472-9336, email [standrews.ontheterrace@xtra.co.nz](mailto:standrews.ontheterrace@xtra.co.nz)

Remember, there is a discount for study-sets of 6 or more copies.]

## **Pagan Jesus?**

**The Jesus Mysteries: was the original Jesus a Pagan God?** by Timothy Freke & Peter Gandy (*Thorsons* 1999) is reviewed by Jenny Chisolm of Wellington.

This is one of those books that develops its thesis by finding again and again that every fact unearthed by the authors supports its original argument. This makes it difficult for the non-scholarly reader to make an unbiased assessment of it.

I have accepted for some time that the Pauline development of the Jesus story had given it a framework of the earlier Mystery religions in order to make it credible in the Graeco-Roman world: hence the confused additions by the evangelists of the birth, passion and resurrection narratives and the miracles. The authors' very detailed comparison of the Osiris-Dionysis stories with the gospel myths gives credence to this.

Paul's apparent ignorance or lack

of interest in almost all the teachings of Jesus was another problem that is emphasised here, as well as the ignorance on the part of the evangelists. Two examples: Jesus is reported as going through Sidon on his way from Tyre to the Sea of Galilee (Mark 7:31). Not only is Sidon in the opposite direction, but there was in fact no road from Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the first century CE... (I. Wilson). Likewise Jesus is reported as quoting from the mistranslated Greek version of the Old Testament, when the original Hebrew would not have been relevant to his argument. [see end-note - ed/].

All this I found both fascinating and convincing, along with the evidence of constant editing, re-writing, selection and de-selection, purging and censoring of founding documents—I learned that every book now in the NT canon had at some early stage been regarded as not genuine.

An interesting anomaly came to light when the stages of perfection in the Mysteries were discussed. The Literalists of the established church seem to correspond to the people who had reached only the outer mysteries, while presumably those who read the bible as myths and have gone beyond the literal readings have progressed to a deeper level of understanding. But where do the charismatics fit in? Literalists all, but given to ecstatic states and glossolalia, their experiences seem to have something in common with what was experienced by the initiates into the deepest mysteries.

When it comes to the authors' triumphant conclusion, however, that the historical Jesus himself is part of the myth — Osiris-Dionysis grafted on to the Messiah figure because the Jews would accept only an historical Jesus—my reservations came to the surface. This is in spite

of the fact that Josephus is discredited as the only contemporary writer with unequivocal confirmation of the Jesus story, apparently added later by a different hand.

Maybe this is because after a lifetime in the Christian church I want a "real" Jesus. But oddly enough, it is the work of the Jesus Seminar, accused by some critics of destroying Jesus by their methods, that has left me with the impression of a dim and distant but nevertheless live preacher, from whom some offbeat sayings and unorthodox parables have come down, along with a faith and philosophy that, if universally followed, would indeed bring a "kingdom of God" on earth.

I question the authors' account of a thoroughly hellenised culture in first-century Galilee. Crossan's development of Lenski and others, and Malina & Rohrbaugh's **Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels**, give a picture of a small, wealthy and educated upper class in a handful of cities, and a countryside populated by peasants and, below them, several levels of the dispossessed, speaking Aramaean, observing the Jewish customs, paying attention to their traditional Jewish teachers, though with little interest in the temple set-up in distant Jerusalem.

The book was a slow read, because the frequent end-notes were much too interesting to skip or leave till later. I am left, too, with a reading-list culled from the bibliography that will take me a while to work through.

Jenny Chisholm



[**Endnote:** In a followup email Jenny amplified this point: "I consulted David Simmers ... and received a lengthy commentary on the passage referred to in my review. The short answer is that in Mark 7:6-7 Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13. Readers with theological qualifications will be aware of the passage and may take sides on the questions of whether Jesus actually spoke Greek as well as Hebrew and Aramaic. In any case, if you want translations, we can offer you for Mark 'in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the traditions of men', and from Isaiah 'their fear of me is a commandment of men, learned by rote.'"]

### Finding Meaning

**Where Do We Find Our Meaning?** by marg gilling, is reviewed by Sherri Weinberg of Tawa. It is published by The Futures Group of the Methodist Church of New Zealand, Development Division. 1999. Printed by The Dunmore Printing Company, Palmerston North.

Marg Gilling fulfilled her brief from the Futures Group of the Methodist Church, to map and identify small faith groups and communities in New Zealand, in a unique fashion. She drew the information she had gleaned from a great variety of sources together through the medium of letters. Each letter is written in a chatty, informal style, and individually, tells the story of each of the communities researched. While such a study could well have evolved as a clinical research project, Gilling has invested a great deal of time and energy into capturing the 'essence' of each group. By identifying and interacting with the spirituality undergirding each community Gilling has brought a delightful freshness to a thought provoking study in a concise 95 pages!

The study maps the journeying of a great variety of small faith groups and communities, how and why many of them came to be established; what rules and regulations they operate out of; the nature of the groups and the reasons for their existence. Along

with the wealth of information about the groups, a variety of graphs assist the reader to understand the journeying of the groups and communities under research.

The research has focussed primarily upon Anglo-Saxon women's groups and communities. In Gilling's words, the letters tell only a fragment of what is happening and that is apparent by the lack of research in the areas of both youth and men's groups, although Gilling does say that she found it difficult to identify specific men's group in order to include them in the research. The lack of research in these areas, coupled with the lack of analysis of the research tends to leave the research somewhat in limbo, although it is not clear if the brief called for specific analysis.

The biggest surprise of the research lies, not in the number of small faith communities and groups which are dotted throughout Aotearoa New Zealand nor in the amount of antipathy toward the mainline churches, but in the very broad theological spectrum the various communities represent. Any assumption that alternative faith communities are specific to one theological understanding has been dispelled by the research. It is now very evident that the groups researched represent the full range of theological interpretation.

**Where Do We Find Our Meaning?** is aptly titled and is a pertinent question for today's faith communities, groups and churches. It presents a challenge to the traditional understanding of spirituality and gives Aotearoa New Zealand an in-depth and valuable insight into 'this land's people' and successfully removes the pseudo interpretation borrowed from the Northern hemisphere by way of explanation.

Sherri J Wienberg

[To obtain a copy send a cheque for \$19.95 made out to "Methodist Church of Aotearoa NZ" to The Futures Group, P.O. Box 6133, Te Aro, Wellington.]

# Workshops and Elective Lectures

*The following are more reviews of Workshops and Elective Lectures from the 1999 Conference in Christchurch.*

## **The Quest for Immortality in Creatures by Francis de Hamel**

Francis de Hamel is a retired doctor, author and academic from Dunedin. The concepts that he discussed were:

**Differences** between people and animals, and did animals have souls? It was pointed out that the Christian churches assumed that animals had no souls or access to heaven. The basis of this assumption was difficult to trace but Thomas Aquinas, St Augustine seem to contribute. It was agreed that some animals can reason and that plants can react, though not reason.

**Animal Longevity:** Why do living things go on struggling to live even if the odds are stacked against them? One church view was that longevity gave a person more time for forgiveness. Some animals have the ability to die when they want to

and some give up the struggle to live when there is no hope of a better life, such as in old age or with terminal disease.

General discussion followed about a variety of topics.

*John Louw*

## **Living a Spiritual Life by Margaret Lovell-Smith**

Margaret opened the session by sharing some of her faith journey and her desire that her children had the opportunity to be part of a group which reflected the values of a conventional church. On the whiteboard as a list of "Churchy" words and some questions. The group discussed these words and began to replace them with more secular words which, we felt, conveyed important attitudes for positive living in the community.

I felt, at times, that the discussion

was a little stilted as though we were afraid to really share ourselves.

Thank you, Margaret, for an interesting and worthwhile workshop.

*Jean Hobwell*

## **Other Worlds: Discoveries and Issues by Ian Crumpton**

The issues covered included: life beyond the planet earth; motives for space exploration; do we need to know our origins?; should we search space aggressively or peacefully?

These and other questions were enthusiastically discussed, debated and speculated upon by the group. Ian's final thought-provoking comment was: "Earth is like a bird's nest—when we get too big or foul it the when have out move out—or move **them** out!"

*Steve Newman (abridged)*

## Skolimowski in New Zealand

**"We venerate old spiritualities. Yet we need to dwell in a spirituality for our times . . . a spirituality which is part of the living substance of our times, a spirituality which responds to our problems, which sheds a light on our inner lives, which is a practical guide in daily action, and which helps to heal."** *Henryk Skolimowski, A Sacred Place to Dwell*

The St. Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society has engaged Henryk Skolimowski (Professor of Ecological Philosophy at the University of Lodz, Poland) to present the Geering Lecture series for the year 2000 under the general title of **The Evolutionary Journey of God**.

Professor Skolimowski is well known for his books **The Participatory Mind** and **A Sacred Place to Dwell**. He will undertake speaking engagements in addition to those planned for SATRS:

- Auckland - 8, 9 March (Old Govt.House Lecture Theatre 7pm and St Lukes Remuera Road 7.30pm)
- Hamilton - 10 March (St Andrew's Cnr Te Aroha & River Rds, 7.30pm)
- Napier - 11 March (St Stephens, 119 Morris Spence Ave 1.30pm)
- Wellington - **The Geering Lecture Series** on 14, 16, 21, 23 March (St Andrew's on The Terrace 12.15pm)
- Lower Hutt - 22 March (Laings Road Methodist 7.30pm)
- Nelson - 15 March (St John's 320 Hardy Street 5pm)
- Christchurch- 25 March (Knox Church Centre Bealey Avenue 9.30am).

For further information and interview times please contact: Liz Robinson, Wellington (04) 568-2794, Fax: (04) 568-7294, email: robinson.howard@xtra.co.nz or Leo Hobbs for Auckland, phone (09) 478-7809 or 025-299-5916

[Apologies in advance to those who received the Newsletter after the event. The timing of the Steering Committee meeting determined the timing of the Newsletter - ed]

**"Most who share the concerns of the Sea of Faith Network will find [Skolimowski's] writing not only congenial but very much to the point."**

*Lloyd Geering*



**Why Be Good? by Fred Fastier**

There were only four participants at Dr. Fred Fastier's afternoon session, which soon became more of a conversation than a workshop. Dr. Fastier led the discussions and generously shared his wisdom and expertise. He also asked questions which encouraged us to contribute from our own fields of experience and knowledge.

His introductory statement had been distributed in advance and was the starting-point for our discussions which ranged over a number of issues. [For example]: how can values and standards be taught to young people who have been raised in a moral vacuum?; how specifically can this be accomplished in secondary schools—by formal classes in ethics, or by indirect methods involving a charter of values subscribed to by all the staff?

Dr Fastier also asked: does fear of litigation inhibit decisions in medical procedures?; how should a board of ethics be established in a hospital?; who should make life-and-death decisions for the very young and the very old?; how might the legalisation of marijuana be implement?; how might stricter laws against drunkenness be enforced?

The discussion of these and related topics made this agreeably informal session very interesting and worthwhile.

*Joan de Hamel*

**Gaia and God by Laurie Chisolm**

As an alternative to the conventional view of the earth as an inanimate world, the group was encouraged to consider the Gaia theory ["hypothesis" is better -ed], as expounded by James Lovelock.

This postulates that the earth is alive and that it regulates and maintains the climate and the atmospheric composition at levels optimum to itself. Certain implications follow. Humanity has no special place and can have no mastery or ultimate control. At best we can seek to live in harmony with this complex

ecosystem.

We also touched on the notion of Father God and Mother Earth.

All in all this time together provided a tantalizingly brief glimpse of a radically different model of Earth! The leader, Laurie Chisolm, brought his scientific and theological insights to bear with quiet conviction.

*Wendy Paris*

**The Great Goddess an Elective Lecture by Noreen Penny**

In an enthusiastic and thoughtful way, Noreen Penny shared with us part of her own journey: from disillusion and separation from the conventional church, through much reading, travel and research to a celebration of our Earthly life encompassing its changes.

We joined her voyage of discovery of the Goddess Zoe from the nomadic people of central- and Mediterranean-Europe who carried her image on their travels. We shared photographs and discovered also the understanding that these were not idol worshippers as the later monotheistic religions believed because Zoe represented the Principle of Life itself which was all about them. They celebrated their participation in the Great Goddess.

This was a most interesting and well-presented lecture, stimulating many questions and enjoyed by us all.

*Reviewer Unknown*

**Overcoming Impasse in the Dark Night of Broken Symbols, an Elective Lecture by Dr. Jane Simpson**

What options are [available to us so that we might] ... move on from the impasse created by andocentrism, the male dominated trinity and the dualism of traditional religious ethic?

Substituting a female goddess figure in reaction has limitations; Gaia has no moral conscience and offers only destruction as a final solution. Shakti embodies great cruelty. For many [with a] personal history such as a problematic mother relationship, the female symbol may be as unsatisfactory as the "Father God"

image.

As in a national economic and political impasse, cynicism can block logical planning and the search for new paths. So it is with spirituality. A possible response, Jane suggests, is the creativity sourced from mysticism. In the past, mystics were respected for their creative thought processes and ideas. Jane herself is engaged in research touching on creativity relating to bipolar and similar illness in new Zealand, and may have thoughts to offer in the future.

Her talk was interspersed with quotes from her own poetry, which drew a positive response from her audience.

*Suzi Thirwall*

**In Brief**

**UK Conference 2000**

This will be held in Leicester from July 25 to 27. Your editor plans to attend and has details.

**Sea of Faith Magazine**

This is published by the UK Network and NZ members are able (indeed, invited) to subscribe. It costs £16 per year. Send your sub to Ronald Pearse, 15 Burton Street, Loughborough LE11 2DT, UK. The Winter 1999 issue contained articles on "Doing Without Mr Fixit" (aka the realist "God"); "a truly liberated non-supernatural Christianity"; "Where does spirit live -- inside or out?" (it starts: "Having taken leave of God, I meet God everywhere!"); wisdom literature ("Sophia, so good"); a review of the Dalai Lama's "Ancient Wisdom, Modern World: Ethics for a New Millennium"; and a debate about Richard Holloway's "Godless Morality". This was all the more surprising given that the author is head of the Anglican Church in Scotland. The debate continued in the Internet discussion group which you, as a *bona fide* member can join: send an email to

**noel.cheer@attglobal.net**  
for details.

## Comparative Religion for \*Dummies

### What They Have In Common

Thomas Keating, in a description of the work of the *Monastic Interfaith Dialogue*, lists eight points common to the world's religions:

1. The world religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality to which they give various names: Brahman, Allah, Absolute, God, Great Spirit. Ultimate Reality cannot be limited by any name or concept.
2. Ultimate Reality is the ground of infinite potentiality and actualization.
3. Faith is opening, accepting and responding to Ultimate Reality. Faith in this sense precedes every belief system.
4. The potential for human wholeness - or, in other frames of reference, enlightenment, salvation, transformation, blessedness, nirvana - is present in every human person.
5. Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices but also through nature, art, human relationships and service of others.
6. As long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering.
7. Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life; yet spiritual attainment is not the result of one's own efforts, but the result of the experience of oneness with Ultimate Reality.

On the last point, Thomas Keating lists ten practices common to most major religions:

- compassion;
- service to others;
- practising moral precepts and virtues;
- training in meditation techniques and regularity of practice;
- attention to diet and exercise;
- fasting and abstinence;
- use of music,
- chanting and sacred symbols;
- practice in awareness (recollection, mindfulness) and living in the present moment; pilgrimage;
- study of scriptural texts and scriptures.

Other practices used in some traditions only are:

- relationship with a qualified teacher;
- repetition of sacred words (mantra, japa);
- observing periods of silence and solitude;
- movement and dance;
- formative community.



Other points of agreement include:

- extension of formal practice of awareness into all aspects of life;
- the need for humility, gratitude and a sense of humour;
- prayer as communion with the Ultimate Reality, whether seen as personal, impersonal or beyond them both.

Source: *Encyclopedia of World Problems & Human Potential*  
<http://www.uia.org/uiaorgpubs/pubency.htm>



### Anything Goes?

"Just because all religion is human-made, we don't have to fall into the trap of supposing that there is nothing to choose between one religious view and another.

"Political faith is a human creation, but that doesn't stop us making value-choices: democracy good, dictatorship bad.

"In a process of continual discussion and negotiation, drawing on experience, reason and imagination, we have to sift the best from the good and the bad from the worse. And that surely goes for religion as well as politics."

"Seafarer": columnist in the UK  
*SoF Magazine Spring 1999*



\* no reflection on the intellect of SoF members, its based on the title of a series of books - ed

### 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. Its home page is at [www.futuresgroup.org.nz/sof.html](http://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. Members may obtain tapes, books etc from the Resource Centre managed by Suzi Thirlwall, 34 Briarley St, Tauranga, phone 07-578-2775. *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.chear@attglobal.net](mailto:noel.chear@attglobal.net)