



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

From The Chairperson

SEA OF FAITH MEMBERS are as likely as anyone else to be caught up in the community's headlong scamper into the so called 'silly season'. At this time of the year our lives become choreographed to the chant 'So many shopping days to Christmas'. Yet we are a network of people who have chosen to stand outside the customary frame of religious thought and practice, at least in part; to reflect on its meaning and forms of expression apart from the centuries of credal and social pressure which have set it all going.

But it is not easy to stand outside completely. We belong to this community. It has given us our identity. We have contributed to the community's shape. Like it or not, we live inside the religious and social effervescence of Christmas along with our families and friends and associates. There is much that we can still identify with and rejoice in, but sometimes it pinches, like a garment which no longer fits. It's an experience of paradox, maybe of unease. Maybe that is par for the course for Sea of Faith members.

In the midst of the effervescence we can raise our insistent questions about the theological underpinning and the assumptions behind the social customs and commercial hype. We can encourage others to think outside the social and religious frame, yet do it gently so as not to destroy the very community of which we are part. The gentle and insistent questioning of the frame will have its effect — gradually it will give way, change, open up for the community to explore other meanings and dimensions. In time, they'll probably create new frames of dogma and enculturation. But that will be a challenge for the next generation of 'Sea of Faithers' (or whatever has replaced us).

Keep in mind next year's conference in Auckland: 21-23 September. What I've written above has arisen from preliminary thinking about a conference theme, the interplay between community and individual identities who make up the community.

With every best wish for the festive season and the coming year 2001.

Barrie Allom, Chairperson

Editorial

THE CONFERENCE dominated the last Newsletter and Book Reviews dominate this one. But wait... as they keep saying on TV ... there's more.

An item lifted from the Bulletin of our trans-Tasman colleagues (wittily called "SOFIA" which expands to the more pedestrian "Sea of Faith in Australia") positions Charles Darwin as a proto-SoFie; Lloyd Geering defines the "Axial Periods"; and Jack Miles (*God: A Biography*) points to the tricky status of the word "existence".

Those Local Groups who have kept your Editor informed tell us what they're doing and **Faith in Cyberspace** offers us a portal into process philosophy, process religion and Meister Eckhart.

Its lonely being an Editor—they told me I'd get lots of provocative letters and contributed articles in addition to those (which we all appreciate) from Lloyd Geering and Alan Goss. But alas

Deadline for submitted copy for the next Newsletter is February 1st, 2001.

Especially for the purists who regard 2001 as the real start of the purely arbitrary next millennium ... but also to the rest of us ... **Happy New Year!**

Noel Cheer, Editor

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Why Darwin Was Important

The following are excerpts from the concluding section of a much longer paper printed in the August 2000 edition of the *Bulletin of the Sea of Faith in Australia*. The author is Alison Cotes.

Darwin's work was important in a number of ways.

(1) **His theories helped to destroy an age-old Western theory known as the Great Chain of Being.** In this theory, God had created everything in strict hierarchical order, starting with the angels and going down to the lowest little slug, where everything had its place. It was a chain, because everything was linked, but you couldn't move from one level to another: your place was fixed.

This was part of everyday theology. Class divisions were very rigid in England at that time - the upper classes believed they were put in their social position by divine will, and had as little as possible to do with people 'in trade', for example - Jane Austen's novels are a prime example of this belief. However, the class structure was changing, and Darwin's theories helped to strengthen the new idea that people's social positions were not fixed.

(2) By emphasising that species changed over time, **Darwin called into question the literal truth of the Bible.** This was a very radical thing to do at a time when Bishop Usher of

Dublin could sit down and use the ages of Old Testament characters to authoritatively determine that God created the universe on 16 October, 4004 BC.

(3) **Darwin was the first person to put human beings into this idea of evolutionary change.** The idea was not so contentious in relation to geology, but putting human beings into this frame and this time-scale was as radical as Copernicus' theory back in the early Renaissance that the earth was not the centre of the universe. To a religious world-view that saw the salvation of the individual soul as paramount, Darwin's ideas were distressing.

(4) Though Lyell and Tennyson, among others, had prepared the ground for evolution, **Darwin added the controversial component of 'natural selection', the idea that species survive through random, not through planned variations.** If there is no particular plan or pattern, but merely random selection, then the position of God, at the very least, seems to be downgraded. That really got up the noses of those in the religious establishment.

Darwin lost his own religious beliefs very gradually: there was no sudden epiphany telling him that Christianity had it all wrong. Just as he had muddled his way into evolutionary theory, he also muddled his way into agnosticism. He managed to hide his religious doubts from his wife for a long time, and he never actually went public about them, staying in the closet all his life. But when he did go to Church he used to get headaches and nausea and he couldn't stay in church for more than an hour.

After Darwin, Christianity could never be the same again. He and his ideas were ridiculed, and many attempts were made to refute them, but they were the beginnings of a radical new way of seeking the truth which, as the John gospeller tells us, shall set us free.

So let's hear it for Charles Darwin, and Charles Lyell, and even Alfred, Lord Tennyson - great thinkers who prepared the ground for people like us in the Sea of Faith, and made it possible for us to meet here in freedom today.

Alison Cotes, (abridged)

Faith in Cyberspace

Australasian Association for Process Thought. A newish online newsletter with articles on process philosophy and religion. Martin Prozesky contributed. www.alfred.north.whitehead.com/

The Eckhart Society promotes understanding of the 13thC and 14thC German Christian mystic Meister Eckhart. www.op.org/eckhart/default.htm

The Tablet (UK) on June 10, 2000 reports the speculation of a Spanish priest that the Vatican might appropriately appoint St Isidore of Sevilla as **patron saint of the Internet**. Other suggestions include the Archangel Gabriel and St Rita of Cascia (d. 1457) - patron of impossible causes.

Although no such appointments have been made, the Pope recently appointed Thomas More as patron saint of politicians. More died because of his objection to Henry VIII's DIY approach to divorce. He was canonized in 1935. But, more appropriate to politicians, his most famous publication was **Utopia**.

Look for our website at <http://www.futuresgroup.org.nz/sof.html>



Book Reviews

The Philosophy and Religion of The Future Philosophy's Own Religion *by Don Cupitt, SCM Press, 2000* *Reviewed by Lloyd Geering*

As with all of Don Cupitt's books this is not one for popular consumption. This is partly because he is forging a new path and, to appreciate it fully, one needs to have a critical understanding of the path by which we have reached the present. But neither is the book difficult to read. He avoids the traditional philosophical and theological jargon (in which too many people still feel at home) and invites us to think critically along with him as he analyses where we are and pioneers an uncharted path.

Don sets out to describe the philosophy and religion of the future. He begins by making some very timely and interesting observations about the philosophy of religion hitherto. It is now changing rapidly because the way the world appears to us has been changing. This means that the days of dogmatic theology are over; it began to reach its end at the beginning of the nineteenth century, even though it lingered on in this century with people like Karl Barth and Tom Torrance.

This fact, along with the phenomenon of the globalization of all cultures, has freed up the philosophical enterprise to carry on with its proper function which is to pursue such questions as 'How are we to live, and what can we hope for?'

In Part Two, 'We and the World', Don discusses just where the philosophy of religion is in the radical-humanist world of today. There is much to learn here of how we are to understand the human 'self'. 'To be somebody you have to have a life-history, you have to be in language and you must be part of a We'.

In Part Three Don discusses the beliefless religion of the future. It may still owe much to historic Christianity but it will no longer manifest itself in exclusive claims or distinctive labels. As he says, 'Global religion is at last truly catholic or universal'. We shall no longer have or look for any great scheme of doctrine, for it will take the form of a universal religious humanism.

Neither will there be any authoritative church; the latter's role will be replaced by informal religious associations like that of the Society of Friends and even the Sea of Faith Network (as Don noted at our recent Conference). Don sketches a religion of life in which we learn to say yes to transience, to practice expressive living (or what Don has previously called 'solar' living), follow humanitarian ethics.

This is not an easy book to summarize for though it is written to the above plan, its value is chiefly to be found in the many insights and observations that the author offers along the way. It lends itself to very profitable group discussion.

Lloyd Geering

Cupitt Trilogy III Kingdom Come in Every- day Speech by Don Cupitt (SCM Press).

This review, by Alan Goss of Napier, completes a trilogy. The first two books were reviewed in Newsletters 31 and 36.

This is the third ... in a series of books in which the Cambridge theologian looks behind ordinary everyday language and idioms to discover that religion is still alive and well, though not in ways espoused by mainline churches.

Cupitt's case is based around the contrast between "ecclesiastical" religion and "kingdom" religion, the latter growing out of the former. In ecclesiastical religion God is the sole producer and sustainer of reality. What God said went. Ecclesiastical religion subordinates this world to a better world beyond; it is mediated by authoritative scriptures, creeds, rituals and clergy; there is emphasis on rank, hierarchy, moral laws, rituals and discipline; and great importance is attached to mystery, to the supernatural, to things beyond our ken. Ecclesiastical religion is "heavy", and is largely concerned with power and control, keeping the masses in their place. The church was the Church Militant. You either slotted your self into this militant framework with its God-made cosmic order, its disciplinary structures, hierarchies and distinctions (e.g. the inequality between men and

women) ... or you risked rejection and even your life. It really was oppressive.

But the old order is passing away. Now we're out of uniform, we've been demobbed, and ordinary language shows us that Christianity has moved into a post-ecclesiastical stage of development.

Kingdom religion, which has its roots in the teaching of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets, is a vastly different animal. The idea of God as an objective, supernatural, transcendent being "out there" is exploding, falling apart, with God being dispersed into our increasingly secular world. In kingdom religion there is no heavenly Beyond—this world is all we have and we'd better make the best of it. The kingdom world is global and humanitarian where people are liberated from poverty, toil and oppression, a hope clearly and strongly expressed by the Hebrew prophets. Whereas ecclesiastical religion is heavy and self-denying [*viz. requires that we deny our self - ed*], kingdom religion is easy and light. People are encouraged to express themselves, to question to (language again!) "do your own thing", or as Frank Sinatra so aptly sang it, "I did it my way". People now perceive the world, and their role in it, in a less inhibited and more outgoing way. To quote an advertising slogan, your mobile phone gives you "the world in your pocket". All things are yours, said Paul, the world is your oyster.

This changeover, from a heavy, solid, God-made created order where you "fit-in" (or else), to a very much lighter, continuously changing

man-made order is, for Cupitt, a stupendous and marvellous change. Heaven has come down to earth, not all at once and as a permanent fixture, but as something that has to be continuously worked at and re-enacted, for example in liturgy. It is, Cupitt says, "a marvellous change, the single most important thing that every modern human person needs to grasp — and the hardest to grasp".

Cupitt acknowledges that there is a place for the church, even though it has slipped too far downmarket and is no longer of the first importance to religion. (Perhaps, like the monarchy, its had its use-by-date in its present form though we continue to hanker after the ceremonial, the trappings etc.)

In any case, the church was

... it's time the church forsook its exhausting, divisive, trivial pursuits and gave itself over to a wholehearted commitment to this world. Warts and all.

always a holding operation and having now completed its task it no longer commands the authority it once enjoyed.

Cupitt understandably attracts fire from many quarters, but he answers that, what his opponents see as religious decline, others see as religious fulfilment.

Whatever our response, many agree that it's time the church forsook its exhausting, divisive, trivial pursuits and gave itself over to a

wholehearted commitment to this world. Warts and all. As one ancient writer put it, to create "a new heaven and a new earth".

Alan Goss

[Don covered a lot of this ground in his after-dinner speech at this year's Conference. You can read excerpts on the last page of Newsletter 38 and the full text on our website or from the Resource Centre (see page 10) - ed]

The Christ of Faith v. The Historical Jesus

Creating God, Re-Creating Christ, Ian Harris, St Andrew's Trust \$12.95

A review, by John Bluck appeared in Newsletter 35. The following is an excerpt from a longer review by your Editor. This excerpt deals in some detail with the second section.

Although the book divides at page 56 between Part I ("Creating God") and Part II ("Re-Creating Christ"), thematically the divide occurs at about page 44 where Jesus/Christ is introduced as a possible (and for Ian, preferred) window through which "Godness" can be viewed. We are immediately in deep and troubled waters from which there is no easy rescue, either now or ever.

Although Ian does not agree that it should be so, Christianity is traditionally considered to be the propagation of the "message" of Jesus of Nazareth (or, better "Galilee"). If so, then it must be awarded a "Fail" grade. Scholarly work, at least from the time of Albert Schweitzer a century ago and more recently with the publications of The Jesus Seminar, has established beyond reasonable doubt that:

- there are words in the Gospel record put into the mouth of Jesus that he would not have

said ("I am the Way, The Truth and The Life")

- the New Testament record reflects agendas plainly related to the requirements of the growing Church as well as the Cosmic fantasies of Paul, many of which conflict with Jesus' attitude of inclusiveness and his disavowal of messiahship. Ian more charitably refers to them as "testimonies to the evolving faith of the followers of his way."

- later accretions (for example, worship of the Virgin) which are read back onto the life of the historical Jesus.

As popularised by The Jesus Seminar, it is now a commonplace among SoF readers that Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom, but the Church proclaimed Jesus. As their Bob Funk puts it: "the iconoclast became the icon". Or, in another context, R.H. Fuller wrote: "The proclaimer [of the Kingdom] became the proclaimed." But where is the boundary between the original "proclamation" by Jesus and the later reflections on his teachings and life events? How are we to disentangle the raw data from interpretation? Or, to use a question at least a century old: "can we discover the historical Jesus?"

In his book, Ian bypasses the problem of "The Historical Jesus" by re-directing our attention to the "Christ of Faith". The thesis of Part II is that the historical Jesus is relatively unimportant ("at best an ethic", p81) in comparison with the Christ Myth which has been created and re-created periodically by the then-current body of believers. The defining myth of Christianity is the "Christ of Faith" which arose as the result of the death of the

Jesus of history. From pages 60 to 72 there is a lot of interesting background on the conditions in which Christianity came to birth. We all know, of course, that Jesus was not a Christian. Neither were Peter and Paul who died in the early 60s when the faith system clustered around the memory of Jesus was still called "the Way" and was not formally divorced from Judaism. Paul was the biggest creator of the Christ myth. He seems not to be interested in Jesus' life. To mix a couple of metaphors: for Paul, Jesus comes alive on Calvary as the Christ. Ian takes the view that we should do as Paul did.

Given this realisation, readers will surely split into two camps: a situation not unknown in the history of Christianity.

There are those who, like The Jesus Seminar, wish, in the words of one of their book titles, to remain "Honest to [the historical] Jesus" by identifying in the gospel record those of Jesus' words and actions that

"The defining myth of Christianity is the 'Christ of Faith' which arose as the result of the death of the Jesus of history."

we can rely upon as authentic and then marginalising, even rejecting, those that are not. But, as Ian notes (p79) "That Jesus is at best shadowy and elusive, despite the gospels ... [which are] testimonies to the evolving faith tradition of the followers of his way". In Jesus Seminar terms, this concession is pivotal and the remaining question is "where do we go from here?". The Jesus Seminar recommends removing, as much as possible, the

shadows.

On the other side—on Ian's side—there are those who can concede that the historical Jesus, by his words, life and death, gave us an exemplar of a life lived in Godness and upon which substrate his near-contemporaries (especially Paul and the gospel writers) and later generations right up to our own time, have built metaphors and myths which express their response to that life. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith would have put it, Christianity itself is an historical phenomenon, subject to historical mutation. This is usefully summarised on page 77 where Ian writes of the Jewish strand of Christianity emphasising Jesus' work, and the Greek strand (starting with Paul and outliving the Jewish) his person.

On Ian's invitation, we are to recreate or reconceive Christ using 21st century tools of faith in the way that the earliest followers used Jewish midrash ("the Jewish way of saying that everything to be venerated in the present must somehow be connected with a sacred moment in the past": John Spong). Later exporters of "the Way" (especially Paul and John), turned to Greek metaphysical categories. On page 83, Ian writes: "It helps ... to know what assumptions the various gospel writers shared and what audiences they had in mind, in order to see why they wrote as they did." This is an area in which to see a major difference between Ian's point of view and that of The Jesus Seminar. Ian would have us learn from and then copy the gospel writers (and Paul), while TJS would use such knowledge to discount for the biases of the writers on our

Asking The **Right** Questions

"Religion has always been, among other things, a response to the intellectual inadequacy of the human species; neither individually nor collectively can we know all that we need to know, much less all that we might wonder about.

Recalling that fact and taking full note of the current state of secular dubiety at the highest intellectual levels, a man or woman who decides to practice a religion may do so, not to acknowledge the mystery of religion, but to acknowledge, first, the mystery in response to which religion has come into being and, second, the felt necessity—somewhat mysterious in itself—to live a moral life even when the grounds of morality cannot be known.

In short, to ask "Does God exist, yes or no?" may not be the right question. It might be better to ask "Is the word 'existence' really just another word, yes or no?". When the latter question is in the air (and it increasingly is), an intellectual decision pro or con religious affiliation need not wait on a final verdict about whether God (or anything else) "really exists".

From an article in the New York Times Magazine by Jack Miles, author of God: A Biography and reported in the SoFN (UK) newsletter "Portholes".

way back to the original message of the original Jesus.

Our 21st century process of building a new myth would have us (pp84-85) "asking the right questions" in the context of a secular society and in an open faith community. The last point is important for the SoF people with tendencies to be "loners": "Godness within humanity is a community affair" (p86).

Broken Myths

In our present context, a "myth" is not a "fallacy" as current secular usage would have it. To paraphrase Schweitzer (quoted in full on page 79) a myth is made up of **religious** ideas in a **narrative** format. From page 97 to page 100 the author deals with myth and rightly positions it as a mode of writing in which the literal or historical truth of a story is secondary to its existential truth. He gives the examples of The Fall and The Last Judgement as classic myths. A myth generally has no known author, the Apostle Paul being a notable exception. In general, a myth is usually a communal project and is subject to fine-tuning by subsequent generations.

A distinguishing feature of our times that is not often enough acknowledged is that we live in a time of what Tillich called "broken" myths. We give the name "myth" to stories of The Fall and The Last Judgement and the Virgin Birth and many others. But the mere fact of so identifying them as myth robs them of some of their authority. Yes, we can give intellectual assent to their premises and their conclusions; we can claim that The Fall succinctly describes the dilemma of requiring the **possibility** of moral lapse in order for there to be a moral creature—but its

"truth" for us now lies in its capacity to win our approval according to criteria **that we impose on it**. We have become the masters of the myth, and no longer acquiescent, obedient, believing subscribers.

That is the major point upon which Ian's agendas of "creating God" and "re-creating Christ" may founder. There is no precedent for groups of significant size inventing, in committee as it were, a myth and then submitting to it. There are numerous examples of people inventing a myth (often a secular myth) and then imposing it on others as a means of wholesale coercion—but such inventors stay "outside" the myth, while their victims are herded in. Noam Chomsky has spoken passionately that the view of the world given to us by conspiratorial tabloid media has the "bread and circuses" function of distracting the population at large from weightier matters.

On page 79 Ian values Christianity on the rather slender grounds that "the Christ of faith who, in western culture, became the defining symbol for Godness in life and life in Godness". Christianity has shaped the culture of the West. But the book, as a whole, sees Christianity as uniquely able to provide us with a revisable substrate upon which to write, and re-write, the myth of the "Christ of Faith" and that today's Christians should (p80) "reconceive the Christ myth for today".

But, if we were to proceed with Ian's agenda, then why cannot we improve the myths by revising the scope of what can be admitted?

In respect of "God" there is a crying need to go beyond, even to repudiate, "might, majesty, dominion and power" and to introduce feminine principles of

nurture and inclusiveness. A naughty dash of neo-paganism would remind us that reverence for the earth has more survival value than does the "dominion over it" granted to us by Genesis.

The "Christ" myth might usefully de-emphasise the gory death on Calvary and discard altogether the "sacrificial lamb" motif. If Christ is the pre-eminent window into Godness then a reminder that our "neighbor" could be our ideological opponent might curb the exclusivist tendency of many Christians.

Those readers who line up on the side of The Jesus Seminar may want to hold to account Ian's view that the Christ of Faith can be reconceived in each age and somehow remain true to the rather nebulous entity called "Christianity".

Those who believe that The Jesus Seminar is chasing the historical phantom that Schweitzer said was indiscoverable, will take comfort from Ian's book.

Noel Cheer

Religion v. Ethics?

*The following is a review, by Alan Goss of Napier, of **Godless Morality, Keeping Religion Out of Ethics**, written by Richard Holloway (Canongate Books 1999)*

This small book by the Anglican Bishop of Edinburgh has received both acclaim and condemnation, suggesting (as does its title) that God be left out of the moral debate. This review judges it to be fair, wise, well written, a breath of fresh air in the humid and often torrid arena of moral controversy.

Holloway tries to show that our society is moving from a **rules** morality to a **values**

morality, from a morality of **command** to a morality of **consent**. We now have a far greater understanding of our moral, religious and political systems than our forebears who were largely at the mercy of forces they did not understand. Most human systems were systems of command. People knew their place, they knew the places of those above and below them, and they willingly toed the line. The religious and political systems were governed and protected by Almighty God and were beyond questioning. Although flawed, they guaranteed stability and continuity and in spite of the heavy toll they exacted—especially on women and children—were considered worth the price.

But now the authority of these great and powerful traditions has eroded and disintegrated, mainly because of our new knowledge and unwillingness to accept the pat answers of a bygone age. The big brother mentality, which imposed its authority and expected unwavering obedience, no longer cuts much ice. It's still around in some of our churches, there is a lot of nostalgia for "the good old days", but for those under forty it's a lost cause. The idea of a God who dictates human moral behaviour via a series of fixed biblical texts is questioned and, more often than not, rejected. As Holloway observes: marriage, which is claimed to be of divine origin, is no longer the institution it once was. Admittedly the result is loss as well as gain, but the reality is that there is now a vast range of ways in which people relate to one another, including marriage.

Nor do we all tamely accept Paul's injunctions about the status of women or regard as normative his views on same-sex relations.

These traditions, which we built, no longer work for us, but the chances are that we can construct new ones for the future. They will probably be more makeshift and provisional than in the past, yet much more suitable for our current everyday needs. Their main characteristic will not be obedience to an authoritarian God or state or any other power structure, but rather the consent of our reason, our experience and our emotion. The moral life, says Holloway, is closer to the improvisations of jazz—"God invites us to join in the music, to listen and to adapt to one another, to keep the melody flowing!" If there is a divine mystery, that's not a bad way of picturing its *modus operandi*.

The moral debate (it's as competitive as the Olympics!) tells us how futile it is to reach a final agreed conclusion on most of life's contentious issues. A mature moral system would recognise that good policies can seem to be in opposition to one another. Indeed most human disagreement is between **opposing good** rather than between right and wrong. Far better then, says the author, to leave God out of the debate and find good, sensible, wholesome human reasons for supporting one's case without resorting to deal-clinching divine arguments and proof texts.

Whether Holloway's human-centred approach is prophetic or preposterous will no doubt engage us for some time to come.

Alan Goss

Local Groups

South Auckland

They have recently had speakers on subjects ranging from Physics and God, Alienated by Evolution, Ecotheological Issues, Religious Relativity and Morality in Governance (by their local M.P.) Richard Findlay gave them a report on the recent Conference and they are getting excited at the prospect of next year's national Conference (21-23 September 2001) in Auckland. In early December they will join with the Takapuna and Auckland Central groups in an end-of-year function.

Contact: Elsie Montgomery 09-278-5517

Dunedin

Their November meeting is planned to deal with "'God' and the world we know: a look at hymns".

Contact: Marjorie Spittle 03-481-1418

Auckland Central

Their September meeting discussed Jim Veitch's paper "Mark and the Origins of Easter". Owen Lewis has stepped down as Co-ordinator and the mantle has passed to Jim Feist. They note that their members Jean Holm and Marjorie Cox were elected to the national Steering Committee.

At their November meeting the popular Frank Andrews addressed them on "The Universe and Life".

Contact: Jim Feist 09-579-3225

Christchurch

In October, Jayne Alexander addressed them on "Hey Listen To This! Children's Books with a Message". She described how she integrates a children's story in the church services which she takes. As with many other groups they devoted their October meeting to a Conference retrospective and plan a Pot Luck Tea and Santa Claus Party for December 8th.

Contact: Laurie Chisholm 03-325-21414

Hawkes Bay

This group has been operating on a do-it-yourself basis, members taking responsibility to lead discussions based on articles from the UK "SoF" magazine. The response has been lively, even animated and in August the group tackled the "Ten Hypotheses -- What are We FOR?" from SoF 42, July 2000. [The author, David Boulton, discussed some of the responses that he has received - ed]

A session on "Religion and the Internet" to be lead by a University student, is planned.

Contact: Alan Goss 06-835-9594

Others?

Send a copy of your Newsletter and/or meeting notices to the Editor of this Newsletter ... please!

UK Groups

Here are some of the activities of UK groups:

Scottish (Edinburgh): a discussion of A.N. Wilson's **God's Funeral**

Wessex: a discussion of John Hicks' **The Fifth Dimension**

Gloucester: a discussion of **The Jesus Mysteries** by Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy (reviewed in Newsletter 35)

Birmingham: discussions of **I and Thou** (Buber), **The Self as Agent** and **Persons in Relation** (both by John MacMurray)



In Brief

QPEC : Quality Public Education Coalition

John Thornley, SOF member from Palmerston North, supplied the following information.

QPEC is the major national network to lobby for a critical monitoring of the public education system, and lobbying for policies that will enhance the quality of learning it provides.

Key personnel involved:

- Sir Paul Reeves is Patron.
- John Minto is national chair.
- Emeritus Professor Ivan Snook and Charmaine Pountney are national vice-chairs.

All members receive the regular newsletters. Membership costs:

- institutional \$50,
- individual \$10
- unwage \$5.

Recommended publication:

Values in Schools: the publication launched at the July 2000 national conference on Values held in Palmerston North. Cost is **\$27.50** (incl. p&p), ordered from Kanuka Grove, Massey College of Education, Pvt Bag 11-222, Palmerston North.

Contact details:

- Website www.qpec.org.nz
- Email for subscription: shirley12vineyard@xtra.co.nz
- Write to Shirley Knuckey, National Sec-Treasurer, 12 Scott St., New Plymouth.

Spring in London?

If you plan to be in London on April 28, 2001 then you could do worse than attend the Third London Open Conference of the UK SoFN which bears the title: **Human Rites: Sacred & Secular?**

The brochure asks **"Do we still need public rituals? If we do, what will they look like? Old forms of worship are being abandoned"**

Speakers are to include Don Cupitt and Richard ("Godless Morality": see p17) Holloway. Your editor can supply you with further details.

Don Enjoyed New Zealand

Letters from Don Cupitt to both Jane Griffith and Barrie Allom thank us for our hospitality and his joy at once again catching up with Martin Prozesky. He is pleased at how well SoF in Australia is developing too.

Don commented that "The whole Napier district was lovely".

For Christmas or anytime

"The Once and Future Jesus"

The Future of Jesus. The Church of the Future. The Future of the Faith.

This is a compilation of keynote addresses by Fellows of the Jesus Seminar in October 1999.

Robert Funk, Lloyd Geering, John Shelby Spong, Thomas Sheehan, John Dominic Crossan, Gerd Ludermann, Marcus Borg, Karen King, Walter Wink

"These essays celebrate the scholarship and the results of the Jesus Seminar. More than that, they probe the character and the significance of the Jesus tradition."

From the Introduction by Gregory C. Jenks

Polebridge Press \$44.00 plus \$4 p&p

Also — a few still for Christmas

"Christianity in the 21st Century"

ed. Deborah A. Brown, Crossroad, 2000

Essays include those by

Robert Funk, Keith Ward, Gordon Kaufman, Karen Armstrong, Krister Stendahl, Matthew Fox

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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.

Its WWW home page is at
www.futuresgroup.org.nz/sof.html

It publishes a regular Newsletter, assists in setting up of local discussion groups, and holds an annual Conference.

Members may obtain study tapes, books etc from the SoF Resource Centre at 34 Briarley St, Tauranga. The website displays a catalogue.

For membership details and for the address of your nearest local group, contact the Membership Secretary, 133 Orangi Kaupapa Road, Northland, Wellington.

To offer a comment on any material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact the Editor:

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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.

The Axial Periods

This article by Lloyd Geering was published in the inaugural issue of the Canadian JS magazine and is reproduced here with permission.

It was the philosopher of history, Karl Jaspers, who coined the term 'Axial Period' for the era between 800 BC and 200 BC. He observed that, within that time-span, radical changes took place in human culture of such a kind that it was just as if human consciousness had taken a giant turn on its axis.

Before the Axial Period the many and diverse human cultures which had evolved were basically tribal or ethnic — their identity and cohesion rested on a common pool of blood and genes. They existed to perpetuate their own survival. They were oriented to the forces of nature. They had no nameable religion. For them, religion, 'science' and morals all formed one indivisible whole which we may call their ethnic cultural tradition. They handed this down with meticulous care and regarded all change as abhorrent.

It is all the more surprising, therefore, that, during the Axial period, there arose in some ethnic cultures, quite independently of one another, certain individuals who dared to reflect on their own tradition and hold it up to critical examination. We know them today as the Greek philosophers, the Semitic prophets (who include Jesus and Muhammad), the Iranian Zarathustra, the Indian seers (who include the Buddha and Mahavira), the Chinese thinkers (who include Confucius and Laotzu). From such people there emerged new forms of cultural tradition, such as the Buddhist, Christian and Islamic. These may also be called trans-ethnic for they linked the ethnic cultures into a common umbrella culture. They did this by refocusing human attention on superhuman realities and goals which transcended the boundaries of their tribal cultures.

From the Axial Period onwards the trans-ethnic cultures spread out from their point of origin. They did not obliterate the ethnic cultures but subordinated them to a higher set of values. By the year 1900 the three most successful post-Axial cultures had carved up the world among them into the Christian West (now including the Americas and Africa), the Islamic Middle East and the Buddhist Orient. Incidentally, they made little impact on each other but spread mainly through the tribal cultures.

But already there had emerged in Western Europe a second Axial change. The traditional forms of Christianity had now come under critical examination,

starting with the Protestant Reformation and continuing through the Enlightenment. This change, involving the critique of all things metaphysical, had already begun to influence the non-Christian world more deeply than traditional Christianity was ever able to do. This third phase may be called Global since it is global in its outreach and it is subordinating the traditional post-Axial cultures to values common to the whole of humankind, as exemplified in the modern concern with human rights. It may also be called the Secular phase, in that it fastens attention on this world rather than on other-worldly goals and concepts, as the Transethnic cultures did.

In this Global/Secular Phase of culture we have come to focus attention increasingly on the human species itself and are becoming aware of what all humans have in common irrespective of class, race, religion, gender, or age. We have come to acknowledge the human origin of all languages, moral codes and religious traditions; we find that, far from being absolute and eternal, they are relative to time and place.

The advent of Global/Secular culture does not render valueless the trans-ethnic religious traditions any more than they, in turn, rendered valueless the ethnic cultures they subordinated. But it does mean that they have to experience radical change if they are to continue to play a positive role in the Global Era. The Global phase of human culture presents us with new and awe-inspiring challenges which call for new forms of spiritual leadership.

Just as we have been discovering that all languages, religions and cultures are humanly created, so we now find that we are all part of the complex and ecological evolution of life on this planet. What has taken millennia to evolve, we humans now have the capacity to destroy. We can destroy quite deliberately as we so often do in warfare. We can also destroy through ignorance, by gross interference with the planetary ecology on which our life depends. The notion of salvation has taken on a whole new meaning in the Global era.

In the Christian calendar it was the birth of Jesus which cut history into two. On the global scale of cultural history it is the two Axial Periods which divide human history into three successive phases — the Ethnic, the Trans-ethnic and the Global. The two Axial Periods are proving to be the great turning points in the long cultural evolution of the human species.