



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

# NEWSletter

## Conference Theme 2001

**"You Make The Community Makes You: Identity and Belonging"**

### Editorial from The Chairperson

It is with regret that the Steering Committee has accepted the resignation of Barrie Allom, both as Chairperson and as a Steering Committee member, because of his ongoing poor health. I'm sure that all members of SoFN wish Barrie a speedy return to good health.

At the Steering Committee meeting on February 10, I was formally elected as the new Chairperson. The SoFN Constitution requires that I step down from the Steering Committee at the end of the next AGM after having completed four years' service. So, I'll do my best to be an effective Chairperson for the next 7 months!

We voted Frank Gaze of New Plymouth on to the Steering Committee to make up the numbers.

The Steering Committee has members in Auckland, Tauranga, New Plymouth, Napier, Wellington and Dunedin — we're a truly *national* committee — and we "meet" mostly by telephone conference calls. Twice each year we meet face-to-face: at the end of the Annual Conference and in mid-February. This is when we plan to Annual Conference.

As I result of deliberations at the February 10 meeting we have come up with the theme for the 2001 Conference: **"You Make The Community Makes You"**: a title of dubious grammar but which points to the interaction and interdependence between the individual and the community.

You should look for a small but significant shift in balance towards the non-cerebral and the ritual at this year's Conference. Expect also what you have come to expect: an excellent line-up of Keynote and Elective lecturers; workshops, Focus groups, Core Groups — all of which contribute to what the Sea of Faith Network is good at: "exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented viewpoint."

Noel Cheer  
Chairperson and Editor

### Lloyd Geering Honoured

The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) is proud to announce that our "guide, philosopher and friend", Lloyd Geering, was awarded one of New Zealand's highest civilian honours in the 2001 New Year's Honours, for his services to religious studies.

Lloyd, already a C.B.E., was given the title **Principal Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit**.

Lloyd's honour (PCNZM) is equivalent to the designation "Knight Grand Companion" in the NZ honours system prior to its revision in April of 2000.

Congratulations, Lloyd, from all your friends in the Sea of Faith Network in New Zealand and overseas.

## Number 40: March 2001

Editorial from the Chairperson	1
Lloyd Geering Honoured	1
Mother Drives Us Mad	2
Book Reviews	3
Once and Future Faith	6
Subscribing to "SoF" Magazine	6
Letter to Jesus	7
Local Groups	8
There is no Depth, says Cupitt	8
What Do We Mean by Spirituality?	9
In Brief	10
Faith in Cyberspace	10

Look for our website at <http://sof.wellington.net.nz>

# MOTHER DRIVES US MAD

*This is an excerpt from Richard Tamas' **The Passion of The Western Mind**, Pimlico 1991/1998 pp419-420.*

**I would like to point out here the striking resemblance between this state of affairs and the condition that Gregory Bateson famously described as the "double bind": the impossibly problematic situation in which mutually contradictory demands eventually lead a person to become schizophrenic.**

In Bateson's formulation, there were four basic premises necessary to constitute a double bind situation between a child and a "schizophrenogenic" mother:

- (1) The child's relationship to the mother is one of vital dependency, thereby making it critical for the child to assess communications from the mother accurately.
- (2) The child receives contradictory or incompatible information from the mother at different levels, whereby, for example, her explicit verbal communication is fundamentally denied by the "metacommunication," the nonverbal context in which the explicit message is conveyed (thus the mother who says to her child with hostile eyes and a rigid body, "Darling, you know I love you so much"). The two sets of signals cannot be understood as coherent.
- (3) The child is not given any opportunity to ask questions of the mother that would clarify the communication or resolve the contradiction. And
- (4) the child cannot leave the field, i.e., the relationship.

In such circumstances, Bateson found, the child is forced to distort his or her perception of both outer and inner realities, with serious psychopathological consequences.



Now if we substitute in these four premises "world" for "mother", and "human being" for "child", we have the modern double bind in a nutshell:

- (1) The human being's relationship to the world is one of vital dependency, thereby making it critical for the human being to assess the nature of that world accurately.
- (2) The human mind receives contradictory or incompatible information about its situation with respect to the world, whereby its inner psychological and spiritual sense of things is incoherent with the scientific metacommunication.
- (3) Epistemologically, the human mind cannot achieve direct communication with the world.

- (4) Existentially the human being cannot leave the field.



The differences between Bateson's psychiatric double bind and the modern existential condition are more in degree than in kind: the modern condition is an extraordinarily encompassing and fundamental double bind, made less immediately conspicuous simply because it is so universal.

- We have the **post-Copernican dilemma** of being a peripheral and insignificant inhabitant of a vast cosmos,
- and the **post-Cartesian dilemma** of being a conscious, purposeful, and personal subject confronting an unconscious, purposeless, and impersonal universe, with these
- compounded by the **post-Kantian dilemma** of there being no possible means by which the human subject can know the universe in its essence. We are evolved from, embedded in, and defined by a reality that is radically alien to our own, and moreover cannot ever be directly contacted in cognition.



This double bind of modern consciousness has been recognized in one form or another since at least Pascal: "I am terrified by the eternal silence of these infinite spaces." Our psychological and spiritual predispositions are absurdly at variance with the world revealed by our scientific method. **We seem to receive two messages from our existential situation: on the one hand, strive, give oneself to the quest for meaning and spiritual fulfillment; but on the other hand, know that the universe, of whose substance we are derived, is entirely indifferent to that quest, soulless in character, and nullifying in its effects.** We are at once aroused and crushed. For inexplicably, absurdly, the cosmos is inhuman, yet we are not. The situation is profoundly unintelligible.

[Now turn to "In Brief" p10 - ed]





## Book Reviews

### Travelling Lighter

***Faith is a Journey: Travelling Lighter into the Twenty-First Century*** by Aline Pengelly 103 pp.

Many people in the Sea of Faith Network will find that Aline's journey of faith is very similar to their own and will take much comfort and inspiration from finding it expressed for them so honestly and fearlessly. It was only after Aline had been probed by radio interviews, first by Neville Glasgow in 1992 and then by Jim Veitch in 1998, that she began to write down where she found herself going on her faith journey.

This is not an autobiography. It reads like jottings in a diary, as she writes down her thoughts on realising how far she has travelled during her lifetime. It reflects her early upbringing in the church, which led her to train for full-time work in the church. She looks back on this with gratitude even though her thinking has changed so radically from that in which she was first grounded.

Then came various challenges, which she resisted at first. She honestly confesses how she coped with them and worked her way through them to a faith she now finds both liberating and satisfying. The reading of this book could well prompt others to write down their own journey, even if it is only for their own benefit and the clarification of just where they are.

Lloyd Geering

You can obtain a copy by sending \$19.95 (p&p included) to: **faithjourney, P.O. Box 5152 Palmerston North or from Bruce McKenzie Booksellers, 51 George St, Palmerston North.**

### Facing Up To The Jewish Jesus

***The Changing Faces of Jesus*** by Geza Vermes, published by Allen Lane The Penguin Press 2000.

#### The Author

Most of the data in this section first appeared in the *Jerusalem Report* August 17, 1998

Vermes, the first Professor of Jewish studies at Oxford, (and now Emeritus Professor) grew up a Jew in prewar Hungary but knowing nothing of Judaism. His family converted to Christianity in 1930, when he was 6.

At the age of 18 he became a Roman Catholic priest, left the Church when he fell in love and finally returned to Judaism.

After the war, Vermes found himself strangely drawn to the Hebrew Bible and Jewish subjects. He taught himself to read Hebrew, and became obsessed with the newly discovered Dead Sea Scrolls (his book on the subject, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* has sold some 300,000 copies.

In Paris in the 50s, Vermes was one of a small group of Catholic scholars from Jewish backgrounds who became convinced that the entire Christian concept of Judaism was wrong. "The religious

textbooks were hateful and superior, totally horrible and distorted."

It was not theology, though, but love that caused Vermes to leave the Church. In 1957, when he was 33, he took a "leap of faith" to be with an English woman, Pam Hobson. They were married for 35 years, until her death in 1993.

In 1970, he joined the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London.

#### The Book

Anyone familiar with Jim Veitch's work on the New Testament or Jim Stuart's *The Many Faces of Christ* (see Newsletter 27) will find Vermes presenting us with familiar ideas.

#### Of Paul

- 71. "Without any doubt, Paul was the most imaginative and creative writer among the authors of the New Testament, even though his ingenuity often resulted in twisting and sometimes undoing the genuine message of Jesus."

- 83. "The Pauline myths ... do not depend on what Jesus taught or even on what he did, but on the consequences, assumed to be providential, of what happened to him. ... Paul's perception is unique and is clearly distinguished from that of the Synoptic evangelists and John."

#### Of the Synoptics:

- p157. "The main topic of Jesus' teaching was the Kingdom of God, or Kingdom of heaven and its moral requirements."

- p158. Jesus' authority arose from the healings and exorcisms which accompanied his teaching.

- p174. "... looked at from an existential stance, the genuine Easter miracle can be seen in the metamorphoses of the apostles."

• p187. "There is not a single instance in Mark, Matthew or Luke in which Jesus as 'Lord' is associated with anything to do with divinity.

**Of Acts:**

• p135. "The expectation of God's Kingdom, essential to the religion of Jesus and the theology of Paul, but almost totally ignored in John, still occupies a central position in the early Christianity of the Acts of the Apostles."

• p144. The theology of Acts is closer to Jesus than is Paul or John.

**Of John**

• 10, 25. John and the Synoptics are irreconcilable

• 41. "In the Fourth Gospel the life-giving Redeemer is a heavenly traveller in temporary exile on earth who is longing to return to his real home."

**Paint Stripping**

Like the furniture restorer, Vermes strips off the top layer of interpretive overlay ("John's Gospel) first. Then (anachronistically but perhaps justified on the grounds of the amount of paint he used), Paul's contribution is stripped off. Then Acts goes and lastly, being closest to the historical Jesus, the Synoptic Gospels.

This reverse-order revelation is a novelty as is the total non-reference to The Jesus Seminar which has dug over the same ground with broadly similar

findings.

An account of a dream experienced by the author makes up a short but largely irrelevant epilogue.

The Chronology and Bibliography are useful but an Index would have been even more so.

Noel Cheer

**Not Only But Also?**

**The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith: Need There Be a Conflict?**

*Ian Harris responds to Noel Cheer's critique of the second part of his book "Creating God, Re-Creating Christ", which appeared in the December Newsletter.*

I am grateful for Noel Cheer's critique of my attempt to rethink the Christian faith heritage and tease out its positive potential for the world as we know it today. This is a task which seems to me to lie within the parameters of the Sea of Faith Network, in so far as it is intent on exploring the possibilities of faith for the new century.

Obviously enough, rethinking the Christian heritage does not mean jettisoning everything that has been of value in the past. If we can get to the core of the tradition that has been instrumental in shaping the modern world view, and can find new ways of experiencing it, perhaps we shall find to our surprise that there is much that can be carried forward not only with integrity, but even with excitement. That may or may not involve certain sections of the institutional church. It will certainly mean people gathering and exploring a way forward in local faith communities. And it will involve more than endless talk: it will mean action, including the

creation of new liturgies reflecting our own world view and faith experience — but that is another topic, and not one for now.

I agree with much of what Noel wrote in the December 2000 issue of this Newsletter. But I would question whether the stark choice he offers between the Jesus of the Jesus Seminar and the Christ of Faith which I begin in the book to explore is the only option the Judaeo-Christian tradition offers. The Jesus Seminar is adding a great deal to our understanding of the historical Jesus; but according to my approach, that is only creating a more certain foundation on which to re-create the Christ of faith. Half a loaf (the Jesus Seminar) is better than no bread — but why set out with a bias that says the whole loaf is not worth baking?

While it is important, as Noel says, to register the contrast between what Jesus proclaimed and the expanding interpretations of his person and work by the early church, it is also worth reflecting on the fact that it was not the historical Jesus but the creative expansion of his life and ministry in the Christ figure that has touched people's imaginations and emotions ever since. From that standpoint the agenda of the Jesus Seminar is scholarly reductionism. Could there be a more creative possibility? I think so. At the very least, I want to keep open the possibility.

By way of illustration, take the story of Christmas. The Jesus Seminar gives the "red" treatment (indicating that the scholars are pretty confident that the events recorded in Matthew and Luke actually happened) to only five details: Jesus was a descendant of Abraham; Joseph was

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*see the next article*

Mary's husband; Mary was Jesus' mother; Jesus was born; they gave him the name Jesus. Wowee! Try writing the *Mesiah* around that!

In our Ephesus group in Wellington we have felt our way in our Christmas liturgies into some of the poetic elaborations of the story — the census, the wise men, the star, the angels.

We looked at them closely, concluded we could no longer regard them as actually true, but when we came at them as poetic elaborations, we did not wish to discard them. By trying to experience something of what led to the inclusion of these stories in the gospels, we found there was still a place for them, when viewed from the new perspective.

These, presumably, are among the "shadows" which Noel says the Jesus Seminar is intent to remove. I would suggest that if they enrich and enhance our experience of life in its wholeness — and the imagination is a crucial faculty for that — then they can still serve a positive religious purpose.

In my book I suggest that the continuity of religion lies in the realm of experience (which I locate wholly within human experience, without recourse to any supernatural dimension, because that is the framework within which we experience reality today); and that from within that secular world view we are as free to express (or re-express) the core Christian tradition as were Matthew, Mark and Luke for the Jewish setting, and Paul and John for the Greek. Noel says, quite correctly, that I "would have us learn from and then copy the gospel writers

(and Paul)". However, I would want to clarify that I am talking about following their *process*, not copying their *conclusions*. The process requires us to engage with the core tradition from the standpoint and in the full integrity of our modern secular culture.

For we are secular people. We have a world view which has developed over the past 400 years and which is quite different from the world view of the Jews in Jesus' time or of the Greeks in the first few centuries of the church, or of the

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Middle Ages, or of the Protestant Reformation. There is no longer any authority or institution or confessional system capable of imposing a religious template on society. But still the search for meaning goes on and with it, for many, a yearning for experiences of wholeness, acceptance, worth and purpose which were once (and for some people still are) the province of worship.

I am intrigued by Noel's discussion of myth. I agree that identifying a myth as such robs it of some of its authority. But that is not to say it robs it of its truth (that is, the truth *in* the story, as opposed to the truth

of the story). Any insight that throws light on the human condition and the possibilities of Godness in life and life in Godness seems worth having, whatever its garb. If a myth illuminates our daily living, that is enough to value it. I don't see any need to go on to "submit" to a myth.

As for a group sitting down and "inventing, in committee as it were, a myth", I confess that that had never occurred to me. Nor had the prospect of coercion to impose it on other people. This is one of a number of comments where Noel seems to have resorted to the old debating trick of dragging in things which are not part of my thinking and then proceeding to shoot them down as if they were.

The real problem with the Christ myth is that people bring to it so many preconceptions, many of them taught explicitly or taken for granted by the church, that it takes a considerable effort to approach it with an open mind, looking for what it could convey in the modern, non-supernatural secular world. But that is precisely the challenge. Exploring it in its many dimensions should be what Christian churches are all about. On pages 90-91 I suggest only the starting flickers: the rest is to be teased out, experimented with, added to, subtracted from, experienced liturgically over time by those who think the task worthwhile.

I certainly do. And since this fundamental faith (that is, fundamental to the Christian tradition) seems too fraught for the churches to handle, it will have to be done on their margins or beyond them.

This is actually not a novel

idea. People's understanding of Christ has taken a variety of forms and emphases over the centuries, as James Stuart sketched in his book *The Many Faces Christ* (St Andrew's Trust, \$10). They evolved in their own time and place and in their own way, often with a formidable authority structure undergirding them. There is, thankfully, no civil or ecclesiastical authority capable of imposing anything parallel in New Zealand today. The question now is whether it is possible to open up a new way of relating to the Christ — which is not the same thing as relating to the historical Jesus — that enables people of the 21st century to experience in our way, and in the world as we understand it to be, what people of earlier ages experienced in their way, and in a world whose fundamental nature they understood so differently.

Of course, as Noel implies, it is possible to dispense with the old myths that inform the Judaeo-Christian tradition. To those who want to go down that track, good luck. But it does not seem to me necessary to send the Judaeo-Christian vehicle to the scrapheap just because we don't like a lot of the baggage that has been piled on top of it. My preference for working out of the depth of that tradition is not because it is "uniquely able to provide us with a revisable

substrate on which to write", but because it is the one which has shaped the culture of the West and me with it, which has provided the crucible for the modern world to emerge, and which has proved highly adaptable over centuries. From a purely practical point of view, starting from somewhere familiar must have some advantages. Even the Sea of Faith Network says in its statement that it "draws freely upon our spiritual heritage without being bound by it".

I am pleased that towards the end of his critique Noel cites the need to go beyond certain traditional images of God. That, in part, is what the first half of the book (*Creating God*) is all about. Nor do I have any problem with his suggestion that the Christ image — or should be — inclusive. For me the invitation is to dig deep and follow the process, and not feel bound by other people's preconceptions about what "the rather nebulous entity called 'Christianity'" has to be. That includes even Noel's preconceptions, not to mention those of the Jesus Seminar.

One last point. Noel implies from time to time that I see the Christian path to Godness in life and life in Godness to be superior to any other, despite my disavowal of that in the book. What I do believe is that if Christian faith and experience can be radically re-imagined

along the lines sketched in mybook, it can be both a valid path and, especially for westerners, a culturally congenial one.

Ian Harris

**Creating God, Re-Creating Christ** is available from St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, Box 5203, Wellington, for \$12.95 plus \$2 postage and packaging.

## Subscribing to "SoF" Magazine

"SoF" is 28 page A4, six-times-a-year magazine produced by the UK Sea of Faith Network. They offer it to New Zealand Sea Faith members at \$NZ59 for a year's subscription.

To reduce the cost (not to mention the hassle) of subscribing, your Steering Committee has come to an arrangement with UK SoF to act as a subscription agent.

To subscribe for a year, send \$59 to "The Membership Secretary, SoF, 133 Orangi Kaupapa Road, Wellington". Write your cheque to "SoF (NZ)".

In addition, if you want to become an overseas member of the UK Sea of Faith Network (there's no connection — except friendship — between our Network and their's) send \$NZ95 to the same address. That membership includes the "SoF" magazine.

## **Once & Future Faith: An Agenda for a Radical Reformation**

This is the title of the Westar Institute (home of The Jesus Seminar) Spring Meeting from February 28 to March 3, 2001 in California. The Westar Institute writes:

"Scientific knowledge has stripped Christianity of the mythical matrix in which the creeds were conceived. The historical study of the Bible and the quest of the historical Jesus have raised the future of the faith to crisis level. "Westar Institute has convened The Once & Future Faith conference to sort through the issues and attempt to form an agenda for the reinvention of Christianity. It appears that nothing less than a radical reformation will do. Four world class thinkers — Don Cupitt, Karen Armstrong, Lloyd Geering and John Spong along with Robert Funk, will speak."



## Letter to Jesus

**This item was written by Lloyd Geering and broadcast by him on  
Radio New Zealand on the day before Christmas 2000**

*Dear Jesus,* You could have heard those words millions of times in the last two thousand years – if you had been within hearing distance. Those who addressed you certainly believed you were.

But it's my belief you didn't hear them. You died on a cross and never learned anything of what happened after you breathed your last. So I write to tell you, but where to begin? 'The world could not contain all the books that could be written about you'. Well they said that seventy years after you died – what about two millennia later!

You have become the most widely known person in the world. And this in spite of the fact that, as my six-year old granddaughter said a few years ago, 'You don't hear much about Jesus these days!'

You may well be shocked to learn that within thirty years of your death you were being worshipped as divine. They began to speak of you as the Christ – the only Son of God – and just refused to believe any more that you were wholly human like ourselves.

Well, some in the ancient world tried not to forget you were a human being, but they got themselves into awful verbal tangles. Finally they said you had two natures – human and divine – and these were to be 'acknowledged inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably'. In view of the way you criticised the Pharisees and lawyers of your own day for their hair-splitting debates I suspect you would have been cuttingly derisive if you had been there to see it. They were philosophically analysing your nature and they excommunicated any who disagreed with them.

After that, your humanity got lost sight of altogether. You were pictured on a heavenly throne as a stern judge, ready to pounce on all who stepped out of line. And the line was determined by the prejudices of those in power, and not by your teaching. That was largely forgotten and replaced by later doctrines.

Actually it's your sheer humanity that many have been rediscovering – and we find it very encouraging. Of course the way we see the world today has changed drastically from what it was in your time. We seem to live in a universe almost infinite, both in space and in time.

In this sort of world we haven't much use for gods or supernatural forces. We are more interested in learning what it means to be human. That's where you come in. Our biblical scholars have been discovering what sort of person you really were – before the ancients hid you from sight behind the divine being they created out of you.

It's a pity there was no Boswell among your disciples. That would have helped us no end. We would so like to know in more detail just what you actually said and did. And of course you never wrote anything yourself – except in the sand.

We have to rely on what people wrote many years later, when even all your close friends were dead. However, we think we've recovered some of your genuine voiceprints – especially in your witty one-liners. I suspect our one-time Prime Minister David Lange learned something from you.

Then there are those stories you told. They must have shaken your hearers out of their complacency. So often they had an unexpected twist at the end. That is why people remembered them.

The trouble is that people began to put their own thoughts into your mouth. Then, after you were turned into a god, people took everything you said, or were supposed to have said, with such deadly seriousness that they often missed the point you were originally making.

We've discovered you were quite a humorist, just like some of your fellow-Jews today. I think you would get on well with Woody Allen. He has a serious side to his humour, just as you did.

You will be sorry to hear that some very cruel things have been done in your name – and by the very people who were most keen to honour you. They tortured the heretics, burned the so-called witches, and even today they reject the homosexuals. That is what comes of losing sight of your humanity. They forget how you hob-nobbed with the outcasts, the prostitutes and the ostracised tax-collectors.

We are still a bit puzzled as to how you got on the wrong side of the Romans. Did you ever really find that out yourself? Of course, those were pretty rough times you lived in, and thousands of people met the same fate as you.

But what a remarkable impression you left on those around you. You had only a few short years and yet you continue to inspire millions.

We still celebrate your birthday, in spite of not knowing when it was. Xmas is the most popular season of the year. It's become quite a family occasion. I think you would like that. You taught us a lot about personal relationships. We still have trouble learning how to be neighbourly, however, to say nothing of trying to love our enemies.

But you deserve the credit for all the peace and goodwill which prevails at Xmas. It's really true – as many say – your spirit keeps on coming alive in us.

Actually it's you who, indirectly, brought the modern world into being. It isn't perfect by a long chalk. But it's the nearest we have yet got to the kind of Kingdom you talked about. We care for the sick. We have freed the slaves. We draw attention to human rights. And lot's more.

So I write this on behalf of your innumerable fans around the world. We thank you for what you achieved in those few short years. May your influence live forever!

*Lloyd Geering*

## Local Groups

### **Gisborne**

The seven Gisborne members who attended the Conference at Havelock North held a tea meeting on the 18th of November. The main purpose was to pass on to other interested people, the substance of the subjects presented at the Conference.

After the convenor, Bob Scott, welcomed the twenty four people who attended this initial Gisborne meeting he gave an outline of the aims and objectives of the SoF Network and the great need for a revision of our ways of gaining a greater spiritual satisfaction. Then Janet Scott, Allan Hall and Norman MacLean continued with the main purpose of the meeting by presenting resumes of the topics presented by the Keynote Speakers.

The group expressed a wish to meet for further discussions in 2001. From this interest we hope there will be a by-product of a new members for SoF and prospective attendees at the next Conference.

*Bob Scott (slightly abridged)*

### **North Shore**

Kelvin Grant informs us, with regret, that the North Shore Group has ceased to exist. The remaining members have transferred to the Auckland Central Group.

### **Auckland Central**

At their first meeting for 2001 (18 Feb, 7:30pm), Leo Hobbs will repeat his Conference presentation: "Faith, Social Responsibility and Transcendence".

**Contact: Beverley Smith 09-630-7473**

### **Palmerston North**

A Local Group has formed there under the guidance of Larry Haist. His phone number is 06-354-2626. We wish them well and offer them support.

### **Books for Study**

Remember that the **The St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society** will give a good discount to SoF groups for purchases of their booklets. The booklets are texts of addresses given by Lloyd Geering and others and are excellent for study group purposes. See the catalogue at <http://satrs.wellington.net.nz>

## There Is No Depth Says Cupitt

There is no purchase on the spinning disk  
of Cupitt's world. Its white-hot light  
will never fracture into colour. It casts no  
shadow in his noon of now and nullity.  
The music of its passage has no echoes or  
harmonics to tell us of the notes' true north.

There is no depth says Cupitt, but words  
line up to rap imperiously for his attention:  
source soul cyberspace the subconscious.  
These will not yield the thickness of their past  
to his thin bid, their sounds have served  
too long the deeps and shallows the hidden  
and the manifest of what we know.

The springs at Pupu go straight down so clear  
you cannot tell the surface from the depths  
the fringing reeds from weeds which sway  
a dozen metres down as blue water journeys  
upward to lay its cheek against blue air.

And distant tilted planes of colour overlapping  
etched with indigo retreating to the edge which  
isn't, reject the eye's demand for finitude  
delight the mind's experience of infinitude.

There is no dimension Cupitt says  
and yet adrift from memory and dream  
untethered from the history of ourselves  
we are a rock face we cannot climb  
we are the surface without defining depth  
we are a gleaming disk which spins away  
from earth we are new beings  
on a new flat planet without horizon.

*Jill Harris  
11 January 2001*



## What Do We Mean by Spirituality?

Spirituality is a very fashionable word, but those who use the term seldom try to define it. I will set down a few thoughts here ... which I hope will stimulate exploration of our ideas, and perhaps of our personal spiritual or mystical experiences.

The root of the word is 'spirit' defined in my dictionary as 'animating or vital principle of person or animal; intelligent or immaterial part of person; soul; person's mental or moral nature'. The Latin is 'spiritus', or 'breath', which clearly evokes images of God breathing vitality or life into his creation.

The dictionary goes on to define 'spirituality' as 'spiritual quality; what belongs or is due to the church or ecclesiastic as such (the spiritualities of his office)'. I think these latter definitions may be partly responsible for obscuring the deeper significance of the word; a few centuries ago the word could simply mean 'the clergy'!

More recently spirituality has been taken to refer to a specific religious style, or a set of religious or cultural beliefs, practices and attitudes that some individual or group has evolved and lives by. So we can have Christian, Buddhist, Maori, New Age, etc spiritualities, and within any main category we can find many variations. Skolimowski has made many observations about spirituality in this sense, such as 'what is a religion, any religion for that matter, if not an articulation of spiritual potencies which are contained in the human soul and thus in the human condition? Each major religion weaves a specific pattern out of our spiritual propensities. Each major religion represents and perpetuates a specific form of spirituality'. It is fairly straightforward in principle to describe such categories, but I am really asking us to identify, if we can, what spirituality means as a quality of the human mind or psyche. What is it in us that gives rise to expressions of spirituality, such as the concern for a higher, and for some, religious dimension of human existence? What is this potency Skolimowski refers to?

At the UK Sea of Faith Network Conference I attended in 1998 with the theme, 'What on Earth is Spirituality?', the three main speakers each took different approaches. Don Cupitt spoke mainly in terms of religious beliefs and attitudes to life. Robert Ashby, Director of the British Humanist Association, claimed not to have a religious bone in his body, but went on to describe a range of personal spiritual experiences, mainly spontaneous, sensual, peak experiences which had occurred when listening to music, looking at art, in the countryside, or on a beach at night. He then defined spirituality as 'Moments of being, composed of emotion, imagination and

memory - which somehow link up to take us beyond everyday awareness to an enhanced sense of reality'. Here Ashby is clearly equating spirituality with a category of experience. The third speaker, Diarmuid O'Murchu identified spirituality with awareness of the numinous (Note 1), the immanent and the transcendent. This acknowledgement of the mysterious was evidenced in prehistoric art and the paraphernalia of ancient burials, which suggested a sensitivity to a universal life force in concepts such as the Earth Mother, and a feeling of connectedness with the whole planet. O'Murchu considered spirituality to be an innate condition, grounded in creation and far outdating religion.

William James said about a century ago something like 'all religions have as their fount the mystical experiences of an individual; all the rest is superposed'. Seers, prophets, shamans, medicine-men and saints have usually had mystical, often life changing experiences which inspired them to lead their peoples as the wise ones and healers. In modern times many people testify to mystical experience, often when in altered states of consciousness. And ordinary folk, while perhaps not experiencing the mystical, nevertheless do know deeply moving, ecstatic, even transcendent moments. Could not such moments belong in the same category as the mystical, although differing in degree?

Awareness of the mystical, the mysterious, the transcendent, fits a general definition of spirituality as our sensitivity to the non-material.

Spirituality is a quality of mind, of our being, which, like all mental experiences, lies in a non-material domain while being dependent on the material body. It is instructive to trace the path which leads from a primary stimulus to a mental experience. For example, we might do this for the sense of physical touch, for the auditory stimulus leading to music, or for our olfactory senses. Consider the scent of a rose, something I find particularly moving. Scientific research enables the various steps in the sensory process to be traced in some detail, from the release by the rose of a particular kind of molecule through its falling on an olfactory organ and so on, right up to the presence of activity in particular region(s) of the brain; these are described as material processes. But nobody yet understands the next step to the exquisite mental experience, evoking so much more than just smelling an

odour. The rose scent may evoke in addition to the beauty of the rose, a host of other emotions, memories and imagery of people and places. It is in the whole range of such experiences involving our sensitivity to the non-material that we find meaning, in-spiration, and motivation for living. Here it seems to me, is where our spirituality lies.

It is close to the concept of spirit as the animating or vital principle. If we do not acknowledge and find inspiration in the non-material we will lose our vitality and perish. To quote Skolimowski again, 'spirituality is not accidental but essential to the human condition, is one of the defining characteristics of the human condition. Without it the human condition can not be truly human'.

We must not ignore the dark side of spirituality. A narrowly focused or bounded expression of spirituality can give rise to self-centeredness and excessive emphasis on the interests of a restricted group, as sometimes seen, for example, in gangs, institutionalism, tribalism, nationalism, racism and religious or ideological fundamentalism. These are all characterised by failure to acknowledge our wider connectedness. We are in relationship with all people, indeed with the whole of creation. Negative spiritualities will damage both the individual psyche and the wider culture, and are ultimately destructive. 'By their fruits you shall know them'.

After all this I wonder if we can go further than acknowledging that spirituality, the quality itself, is an innate and mysterious feature of our being. We also need to draw distinctions between spirituality in this sense of the word, our experience of it, and the expression of our spirituality. Should we expect to get deeper than this when we can't understand mind itself? Mind in all its various aspects seems to be something which, like the rest of reality, we know only by our experience of it.

What do you think?

Leo Hobbs  
Auckland

*Note 1.* Numinous is defined as 'spiritual, indicating presence of a deity; awe inspiring'. I suppose the word noumenal is connected here, meaning 'concerned with object (noumenon) of intellectual intuition devoid of all phenomenal attributes'. Apparently Kant considered noumenon to be the antithesis of phenomenon.

## In Brief

### **A Minimal Creed?**

"I believe we have only our own resources to live for good or ill. Our great religions, our aesthetic imagination, our humanistic understanding and traditions all offer rich possibilities for making something of life here and now. The contribution of Christianity (though it is not alone in this) is that life lived for others is more fulfilling for everyone than life lived entirely for ourselves, that the cold, unfeeling cosmos is better withstood than whined at. But there are no guarantees."

*Ian Stubbs, UK SoFN, (in an Internet dialogue)*

### **Whitman's Animals**

Jenny Chisholm wrote: "... I have come back again and again to Whitman's 'I think I could turn and live with animals':

**They do not lie awake in the dark and weep  
for their sins,  
They do not make me sick discussing their  
duty to God...  
Not one kneels to another, or to his kind  
that lived thousands of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the  
whole earth.**

### **From Martin Prozesky**

Our guest Keynote Speaker from South Africa at last year's Conference, Professor Martin Prozesky wrote to us. Here is an excerpt:

"Liz and I look back with great pleasure and appreciation on our experiences in New Zealand, which came to a climax at the Conference. Many thanks to you all for the invitation, the stimulating discussions and the wonderfully friendly reception we had, which included such delightful hospitality. We think everybody should visit New Zealand!"

### **UK SoF Conference 2001**

Its on the theme "2001 -- A Faith Odyssey" and will be held in Leicester from August 3 to August 5. Your Editor can supply you with details.

### **Stories to Wonder At**

Odd comments floating past your Editor suggest that stories written by Philip Pullman, especially in his trilogy **His Dark Materials**, are appropriate to children and any adults who don't scorn the powers of the human imagination. Perhaps we may get some reviews?

## Faith in Cyberspace

### **Philosophy: Accessible but not Dumbed-Down**

can be found at The Philosopher's Magazine:  
<http://www.philosophers.co.uk>

### **Westar Study Materials**

Greg Jenks, Associate Director of the Westar Institute [home of The Jesus Seminar], advises that some study material, including a collection of sayings from the Common Sayings Tradition and some collections of items from the Jesus Seminar database are now available to non-members of the Westar Institute. The files may be found at  
[www.egroups.com/files/jsed/](http://www.egroups.com/files/jsed/)

*Sea of Faith in Australia "Bulletin"  
December 2000*

### **UBI: You'll Either Love It Or Hate It**

Under **Universal Basic Income** everybody would get a payment from the state which is enough to live on. It would be funded out of a higher tax rate: read about it at  
<http://www.geocities.com/ubinz/>

## 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 web site is at <http://sof.wellington.net.nz>

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

Members may obtain tapes, books etc from the SoF Resource Centre at 34 Briarley St, Tauranga.

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: 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)

*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.*