



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

Conference 2002: "Creative Uncertainty"

From the Chairperson

The Buddha's teachings are confrontational; they're about truth-telling, not about painting some pretty picture of life elsewhere. They're saying: "Look, existence is painful." This is what is distinctive about the Buddhist attitude: it starts not from the promise of salvation, but from valuing that sense of existential anguish we tend either to ignore, deny or avoid through distractions."

So said Stephen Batchelor in the course of an address at the Rochester Zen Centre in the United States in 1996.

The theme of this year's Timaru Conference is "Creative Uncertainty", a phrase which puts a slightly more positive slant on the same idea. **Stephen Batchelor** is one of our Keynote Speakers. He has been a monk in institutions in Korea and India, and more recently has headed a Buddhist teaching institution in Britain.

Another Keynote Speaker will be **Richard Randerson**, from the staff of Holy Trinity Cathedral in Auckland. His specially relevant contribution to "Creative Uncertainty" arises from his experience last year as a member of the Government committee on Genetic Modification.

Our third Keynote Speaker needs no introduction: **Don Cupitt**, whose TV series was the original inspiration for the founding of the networks of Sea of Faith in the UK, New Zealand and Australia.

Planning for all aspects of the Conference is well under way: details of the programme are being firmed up by the Steering Committee, and the Arrangements Committee is well into its task of sorting out accommodation and meals.

Now is the time for you to do two things: start putting your change into a specially labelled piggy bank, and book your flight to Christchurch

to take advantage of early cheaper fares. Book a flight to arrive in Christchurch before 1 pm on Friday 20 September, and the Arrangements Committee will arrange transport from there to Timaru. For the return journey on Sunday 22 September, you will be at Christchurch Airport by 4 pm. Alternatively, you might plan to spend a few days sightseeing either side of the Conference.

Whatever you decide, now is the time to start planning to go to Timaru. If you want to talk to someone about it, contact a member of the Steering Committee: details are on the website and my address is on page 10 of this Newsletter.

Now is also the time to start thinking about workshops. If you would like to offer a workshop, or would like someone else to offer one on a particular subject, then please contact Marjorie Cox, Phone 09 4451240.

Frank Gaze, Chairperson 2001-2002

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In Brief

Pragmatic Religion

Despite its other-worldliness, religion is highly pragmatic... [I]t is far more important for a particular idea of God to work than for it to be logically or scientifically sound. As soon as it ceases to be effective it will be changed – sometimes for something radically different. This did not disturb most monotheists before our own day because they were quite clear that their ideas about God were not sacrosanct but could only be provisional. They were entirely man-made – they could be nothing else – and quite separate from the indescribable Reality they symbolized.

From A History of God by Karen Armstrong (Mandarin Paperbacks, 1994, p.5)

Religion? ... You Want Religion?

In the *London Review of Books*, February 7, 2002 WG Runciman reviewed **Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors** by Pascal Boyer. He made this observation:

"Any argument about religion, whether conducted in the seminar room or the saloon bar, is likely to hit the buffers not just because people hold different religious beliefs but because they disagree about what should or should not be counted as an instance of religion in the first place.

Nobody will query the inclusion of what goes on at High Mass in Notre Dame or on the prayer mats of the Islamic faithful or in a Hindu temple or at a Merina death ritual in Madagascar.

But what about initiation ceremonies, hero cults (including Elvisworship), charter myths, civil weddings, national anthems, silences in memory of the dead, charms, talismans and amulets, taboos on bodily fluids, spiritualism, oneiromancy, rain dances, Christmas presents, oaths and curses, apotropaic rituals in the face of physical danger, Wordsworthian natureworship (or presentday environmentalism), Confucian respect for authority, Neoplatonist metaphysics, Pythagorean reverence for number and harmony, Wittgensteinian mysticism, Freudian psychoanalysis, autonomist political theory, Kipling's as well as Socrates' references to a personal 'demon', and the mild fascination with the occult shared by Pliny the Elder, John Buchan, and generations of ghoststory enthusiasts and horrormovie buffs?"

The Frustrations of Reason

Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.

Immanuel Kant
Preface to *Critique of Pure Reason*

A Poem

Stroppy Jesus, real and wild
Look upon this senior child.
Suffer me
To Radically
Walk your path
Steadily
Humanly

*Anon (but your editor
has a fair idea!)*

Faith in Cyberspace

Killing the Buddha www.killingthebuddha.com is an online religion magazine "for people made anxious by churches, people embarrassed to be caught in the 'spirituality' section of a bookstore, people both hostile and drawn to talk of God

Fourteen **New Zealand peace groups** can be found at www.peace.org.nz

And don't forget **our own website** at <http://sof.wellington.net.nz>

God v. Darwin, All Over Again?

Just when you thought you could have both "God" (however construed) and "Evolution" (after Darwin), Michael Ventimiglia, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, USA puts another "spin" on the Religion v. Darwin debate.

"The religious sentiment, as best I can tell, expresses a fundamental hope that reality, at its most basic level, is beneficent. I'm not sure what could be more essential to the idea of the Western God, in fact, than the feeling that deep down reality is somehow on our side. This sentiment is simple and vague. It is not universal, to be sure, but it is considerably less local, considerably less idiosyncratic, than a particular hermeneutics or a developed theological metaphysics. The contradictions that appear at this level cannot be easily dismissed as the perils of doctrinal commitments.

The problem, at this more general level, is that a natural world that evolves through the process of natural selec-

"Nature ... is in contradiction not with a specific theology, but with the religious sentiment."

tion seems to be about as strong ... an argument against a Beneficent Reality as one could ask for. As Darwin himself wrote, "from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows." Nature evolves and progresses through an outright blood-letting. This is in contradiction not with a specific theology, but with the religious sentiment. This is not a new problem. It was recognized as a problem by Darwin himself. But it is, I would suggest, a fundamental problem. One needs no traditionally religious faith at all to find the contradiction between the religious sentiment and natural selection to be more than trivial."

After The Liturgy

Mould a new sign in the metal
Keep the silver of the burning bush
Keep the chalice at the cathedral door
Keep the cross on the altar
On the minaret the crescent, and the
trident on the temple
Keep over all a golden dome;
Let it show

The steel form of a tall building
And the aluminium shadow of a plane.
Keep the aluminium from touching the
steel
Corrosion will destroy them both
We will forget our future
No longer free to dream of our past.

Chisel a new sign in the wood
Not a hero of exploration
Or a warrior from the battle
Holding up his mere in victory
Even a sage *koumatua* openmouthed
Cannot find the *korero* for this
occasion.

Carve them all
Silent, still, amazed.
History is dumb to show us a parallel.
Did you feel the foundations move,
The lurch of the stricken world
Taking the breath from our lungs?

Weave a new sign in the flax
Set it up on the walls of the house
Between the posts burnt black
And below the smoke-singed backbone.

Let it stand
In the heart of our ancestor
Bearing witness to the conflict
Between the patriarch and the young
woman,
Between the high fortress and the open
plain,
Between the Word and the music of
love.
The map has not been drawn that can
point the way.

Frank Gaze



Books

Who Owns The Holy Land?

by Lloyd Geering (St Andrews Trust)

For ordering details, see page 10

Lloyd Geering, in typical trademark fashion, compresses much into very little space.

This booklet comprises lectures delivered to large audiences at St Andrews-on-the-Terrace in October 2001, and very topical they proved to be. The events of September 11 in New York gave them an ever sharper edge than originally envisaged.

The four chapters cover both the Jewish and Palestinian claims to the Holy Land, the British responsibility, and the critical question, "Who resolves the conflict?" The author avoids giving the reader soft answers, the background to the nightmarish scenes seen regularly on our television screens is scrupulously analysed and blame apportioned where it seems due. Not all have felt comfortable with the position the author takes though they may want to explore the issues further and deepen their understanding of the complexities involved.

In his assessment of the Jewish and Palestinian claims to the Holy Land no-one can accuse Prof. Geering of bias. He shows clearly how both sides have strong claims to the same piece of territory, each producing ace cards such as the promises of God and long-standing ancestral ties. This is a no-win situation and no solution seems to be in sight. Prof. Geering identifies the long and complex train of events which occurred during the time of British rule in Palestine 1918-1948, e.g. the emergence of Zionism, the League of Nations mandate, the impetus for Jewish immigration to the Holy Land resulting from Nazi persecution and the U.N. plans for partitioning Palestine. The reader is given an excellent summary of the twists and turns which racked Palestine during this 30-year period and which sowed the seed of conflict between Israeli and Palestinian and the growing confrontation between the Islamic and western worlds. Prof. Geering does proffer a prospect for peace in the Holy Land but only when both factions "become incorporated into one, religiously neutral, state"

Jerusalem, he says, remains to this day a powerful symbol for the world and of the international tensions within it. The conflict and the violence in that land is not yet over, it may well explode into all-out war. What the western world has to learn is that neither daisy-cutter bombs nor crusade-type rhetoric, while they may provide a facade for order, do not bring peace. As Prof. Geering concludes, "When we have found a way of establishing peace in the Holy Land we shall have some chance of creating a stable, global peace." This little booklet is definitely a tract for our times.

Alan M. Goss

The Faith of the Managers

by Stephen Pattison

Published by Cassel, London. 1997

Many SoFers will be familiar with the idea that new right economics is a kind of religion with its own dogmas that are believed with a devout fervour. This book proposes that we look at management in a similar way. My own experience has often led me to see parallels between what goes on in religion and in business, for example when managers try to motivate their staff and communicate a company vision. This book helped me to see the parallels more clearly and set them in a wider context.

The author was born to a father who was a manager. He studied theology, worked as a hospital chaplain, and taught theology at a university, before becoming a health administrator, then a lecturer at the School of Health and Social Welfare at the Open University in the UK. This career path has provided an excellent background for the book.

Theologians, as he says, are trained to recognise and analyse systems of belief. Management often tries to present itself as a solid, scientifically-based activity, with its feet firmly on the ground and focussed on such worldly matters as the net profit at the end of the financial year. Pattison puts the case for seeing it as "a kind of implicit religion with particular doctrines, rituals, practices and ethics that form a real faith system."

Management surrounds itself with a certain mystique. Techniques such as Total Quality Management show idealising, perfectionist tendencies. Its spokespeople have many similarities with religious leaders.

For example, Tom Peters' message in *Thriving on Chaos* boils down to this: the old order is passing away. If you turn from your old ways and listen to me, then there is some chance that you will survive (be saved). Do it now, or it will be too late in this chaotic and rapidly changing world. If you do it, a great future will open up for you.

I found the book of value not only because it pointed out in detail how management operates with unprovable basic assumptions that are very like faith convictions. It also gave a good overview of what management actually is and sketched its recent development. I also appreciated reading about the unacknowledged downside of popular management practices such as the annual appraisal and management by objectives: generally we hear only the upside from highly paid consultants. Although the book describes developments in the UK, NZ readers will find many illuminating parallels to the reforms of our health system and WINZ talking about its clients as "customers". A final chapter issues some cautions to those who would import management ideas uncritically into ecclesiastical institutions.

Laurie Chisholm

Editorial

I spent the months of December and January in China. It was an eye-opening and mind-blowing experience. The size strikes you: you can fit three New Zealands into Beijing and even then you have only **one percent** of China accounted for!

The Chinese government has greeted their country's joining of the World Trade Organisation with unbridled joy. Some may see this as the logical development of the course that Deng Xiaoping set them on a decade ago — and as a repudiation of the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist view that prevailed from the 1949 Revolution.

I did the tourist trail of temples: Confucian, Taoist, Lama (Tibetan) Buddhism, a mosque ("Do Not Enter Unless You Are A Muslim") Christianity is not referred to as such in official literature — its "Catholicism" and "Protestantism" — perhaps a legacy of earlier turf wars.

In a Buddhist temple I had no difficulty kneeling before a statue of the Buddha. My main motive was to say Merry Christmas to my daughter in the UK who has started the process to become a Buddhist nun.

Noel Cheer, Editor

Letter to The Editor

At the opening of the latest Conference in Auckland, we stood in silence to remember those killed in the terrorist attacks against New York and Washington. At the time, I thought it entirely appropriate to do that, but I now must ask:

"Who stands in silence for those people of Cambodia, Lebanon, Sudan, Somalia and now Columbia and the Palestinians, killed and being killed during actions carried out or sponsored by, the United States of America. And the people of Afghanistan. Their country pulverised by war, they wait in the worst areas for spring which will bring grass they can make a rough soup out of. Meanwhile, they sell daughters to ward off starvation and the United States casts about for a new enemy to crush."

And,

"Do we as Sea of Faith Members have any obligation to acknowledge these hapless and unseen victims. Or to do anything about these dispensable people."

I am trouble by a memory from my upbringing --- something quaint, perhaps irrelevant now, about being my brother's keeper.

Lyle Millar

[Deadline for the next Newsletter is April 15th — ed.]

Talking It Over

This is the third of Don Cupitt's columns which we re-publish, with permission, from the UK SoF "Portholes" newsheet. The intention of "Talking it Over" is to introduce possible discussion themes for local groups.

What do we make of worship today?

The London Group's one-day conference on the topic of 'Human Rites' raised the question of worship — traditionally the Christian soul's highest and most fulfilling activity, and nowadays perhaps its greatest embarrassment. What do we make of worship today? Should it still have a place in our lives?

Jack Spong writes to me to say that nowadays he functions as an itinerant lecturer — and most people in his audiences seem to be members of the Church Alumni Association. They have graduated out of the Church. In the Church, we feel ourselves drawn back into a childhood world in which absolute patriarchal monarchy is assumed to be the natural form of government. God is Sky Father and King of the Universe, and much of Christian worship (especially Catholic worship, in fact) is historically based on the cult of the Roman Emperors. High Mass is Emperor-worship; and did you know that the halo originally belonged to the secular ruler?

If you have been to Trier in Germany, you may have visited the basilica there, one of Europe's oldest churches. It was actually built as a royal audience hall for Constantine the Great, and was very easily adapted to become a church because Christians still do model God and Christ on the Emperor. That's very odd, and it is particularly strange when one goes to church in the USA. Americans are very keen republicans, so why do they think it does them good to picture the Universe as being governed by an absolute Monarch who is the universal lawgiver and final judge of us all?

Some things can be said in favour of worship. Eastern Orthodox worship can be very beautiful and calming, and may help to make life bearable. The sublime in nature may move one to awe and wonder and may draw one's heart out, in a way that resembles worship. And sometimes we may feel like worshipping the noblest Christian values - impartial justice, for example, and compassionate love for the afflicted fellow-human.

These examples suggest that a non-realist form of worship might be acceptable to us and spiritually beneficial. But we should object to the realist notion of worship which recommends prostrating oneself before absolute Power.

In which case, we may be able to imagine a critique of worship. We should stop using hymns and psalms that address a cosmic absolute Monarch. But we may continue to use the many hymns that are addressed simply to Love, Immortal Love, Love Divine, all loves excelling.

Might it be possible to persuade Christians to reform worship along these lines?

Anyone introducing a discussion of worship might like to get hold of a hymnbook and pick out examples of acceptable and unacceptable hymns. And consider, too, the ways in which God is addressed in the Book of Common Prayer: is he not overwhelmingly the Almighty and Everlasting King, Lord, and Judge? Are there any materials which are less relentlessly power-obsessed?

A quick search suggests that the Collects for Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter present a rather kindlier image of God than the rest. But on the whole the Book of Common Prayer is much too harsh for today's people.

And a last question. Since about 1660 our thought has turned much more towards the things of this world, and the love we may feel for all manner of finite and transient things such as plants and animals. Might this love for finite beings one day become the starting point for a new form of worship?

Don Cupitt

"The comic represents the imprisonment of the human spirit in the world" (Peter Berger)
 "Laughter is a commentary on finitude—a response to the ambiguity of human 'thrownness' in the world" (Martin Heidegger)

Sacred Laughter

These are the edited contents of workshop (at the September 2001 Sea of Faith (NZ) Conference), on "Humour As A Catalyst In Religious Experience" presented by Tony Sutton. This paper was further edited for reasons of space: Tony's version, including the Alan Bennet sketch, can be found on the website <http://sof.wellington.net.nz>

Normally it is not acceptable to use humour to ridicule the divine or the mysterious,

to use humour to "take flight", to express hostility or if it demeans peoples or issues or tries to wield power over people unfairly. Humour can then be treated then with some suspicion. Often humour does not fit the religious mould.

Traditionally religious awareness is predominantly in the mind, cerebral, in our rational left side of the brain. Humour using the right side of the brain like music and other art forms has a creative role to enrich our experience of the divine and human relationships. One of the best examples of humour in a religious setting is that of a clown or jester. In history they are much more than a circus act. The first recognizable one was an Egyptian one, a dancing dwarf, and after that a Chinese one about 650 BCE. These are his significant recorded words: "I am a jester, my words cannot give offence". Prior to the twentieth century the clown in Europe was a divine interruptor, not disruptor who would frequently intervene in public worship to raise the consciousness of the congregation of the importance of the liturgy. Clowns then were not performers, but people there to create an environment in which "the circus of life can happen".

In our day this sort of clowning is alive and flourishing. About fifteen years ago I was at a conference of people from Union and Cooperating local churches. A clown presided at the Holy Communion: namely the Rev Dianne Miller-Keeley, now co-vicar of the Howick Anglican parish. For me that service was fascinating and transforming. The total silence and the effective body language of the clown gave a new perspective to the predictable structure of the service. Her role was

truly that of a catalyst. Dianne writes: "A clown's task is to release the knowledge already known in the minds and hearts of those at worship by exaggerating it — so the truth being highlighted becomes unmistakable."

The task of the clown is not to perform but to highlight — not to focus attention on the clown as a person but on "the discovery", not a solo act but to facilitate more awareness of the corporate bonds of Christian community. So the clown is reacting against individualism, against being pompous against joyless worship, against "solo acts" by the worship leader or the worshipper, and against the "expert syndrome".

The stage and screen have made us familiar with the image of Jesus as a clown. Twenty-five years ago there was the musical *Godspell*, which presented Jesus as a clown. St Francis of Assisi can be seen acting as a clown when he is accused before the town council of a debt he owes his father. Some months ago the newspaper syndicates featured a long interview with Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It was mainly about the cancer treatment he was having and what he expected in his after life. The Archbishop was cracking jokes about both without restraint.

He really was clowning but doing this as a man of extraordinary joy and faith.

An American religious clown, Ken Feit, writes that the key word for him is paradox — the reconciliation of such apparent contradictions as life/death, male/female, old/young, order/chaos.

So a life-giving meal consists of dead beings, personal solitude is necessary for community, silence is the most potent language, confusion can be the basis for creativity and possessions tend to own the possessor. "A fool's foolish freedom is won at considerable cost".

This humour is creative, encourages lateral thinking and exposes self importance and can be a great leveller. It can help a person to initiate dialogue on sensitive issues such as power, death, sex and the mysterious. It can help people recognize the ambiguities implicit in religious belief, language and traditions according to Feit.

Humour as a catalyst helps to prevent the religious professional reverting to being a sort of medieval intermediary between God and man. Humour can "put down the mighty from their seat and exalt the humble and meek". We may recognize the ghosts of the worst sort of scribes and pharisees and the humour that dethrones them in a masterly send-up of sermons, "Take a Pew" written by Alan Bennett. Garrett comments that this imaginary pretentious preacher should be challenged because he reduces God's otherness far too easily to the cramped dimensions of all too human language, thought and feeling. It is the double theological problem, the deification of the human and the degradation of God.

The comedian knows that our human language is of earth not of heaven. Laughter points the way towards a symbolic use of language where human words become transparent to a truth beyond the merely empirical horizon, Garrett writes.

So humour can make a unique contribution in spiritual awareness and is worth taking seriously. It uses the right side of the brain — it challenges "ham-fisted" talk of the divine and the numinous and enables us to handle creatively the paradoxes that are entwined in our human existence.



CONFERENCE 2002 "CREATIVE UNCERTAINTY"

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Some disjointed, but not unconnected, thoughts on creating community
for people who don't want to 'belong'

Creating Community

Edited contents of workshop at September 2001 Sea of Faith (NZ) Conference presented by Rosemary Neave. This paper was further edited for reasons of space: The full paper can be found on the website <http://sof.wellington.net.nz>

Inclusive? Is this a good thing?

'Inclusive' is a buzz word these days — for language about God (God our Mother and Father), to describe people (brothers and sisters), for communities (an inclusive community, welcoming people of all races, sexual orientations), the Church (all are welcome). I must admit to getting tired of it, trying to get it all right, trying to not leave anyone out. Very un-PC of me, I know.

I think I first smelled a rat about this language when a former principal at St John's Theological College suggested that those people who were campaigning for inclusive language should be inclusive of those who don't want inclusive language by backing off a bit.

Terry Veling (author of *Living in the Margins*) suggests that marginal communities should neither be 'exclusive' or 'inclusive'. He said that both words were derived from the Latin (claudere) meaning 'to shut'. So the opposite of exclusive, meaning to shut out, is inclusive, which means to shut in. Suddenly the penny dropped for me; I realised the source of my discomfort, not only in the word, but in some of the practice of 'inclusivity'.

Terry argued that in the inclusive model, the door is open to all comers, but the price to be paid is conformity to the status quo, to what is already going on.

So what could a new community look like if it was neither going to include or exclude? Ken Goodlet says, "It would be a place where everyone is recognised, where heterogeneity is promoted, where cultural differences are upheld, and where the spread of so-called universal values are kept in check because they tend to ignore, gloss over or assimilate difference or otherness." Now I suspect there are people hearing this who think 'our inclusive church community is like that'.

And it might be, but I suspect the real test is in whether that is what it feels like to those who have entered the door quite recently, or whether there are some who have been there a long time but are moving out now because they have changed and moved but the community has not.

Setting up a space not a church?

Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild in their book *Guard the Chaos* describe the setting up of their group Womenspace (still going in England eleven years later). They called it Womenspace because they did not want it to sound as organised as 'womenchurch'. When people asked if they could join the group, the response was 'just come along'. The group was whoever was whoever was there that night.

They reflected that this lack of asked for ongoing commitment seemed to be important to the many women who came. Somebody of course has to keep the space 'open' — booked, organised, food provided, etc, and that was the commitment Hannah and Jennifer made — to create the space and leave it open for anyone to come in. They comment that one of the richest characteristics of the group on any one evening is its diversity.

I no longer belong to one 'main' group, nor do I want to!

In the late 70s and early 80s I lived and worked at St Pauls, Symonds St. They were life-changing times for many of us baby boomers in the Church — anti-nuclear protests, the Springbok Tour, confronting racism at home, coming out as lesbian or gay... I lived in community — we lived and worked and played together. It was inclusive, intense, it was all-embracing, it was full of love and struggle and pain.

I no longer belong to one inclusive all embracing community like that. Though many of us look back with longing and some grief to the loss of that community, I don't want to go back. Life is no longer like that. There are a number of overlapping communities I am a now a part of; there is no longer just the one.

'Can all these people be our friends?' I hear someone say. I say a loud 'yes' — they are people with whom we have shared our lives, there are stories and events that have bound us together, even if briefly. They are part of the colour of our diverse and complex postmodern lives. And we are starting to realise that momentary liaisons are not necessarily of less significance than those with a longer history, to recognise a connection when it happens and value it for what it is.

What is right with a one night stand?

To what extent is longevity a necessary sign of healthy productive communities or relationships? I know of many examples of groups of people who formed and met for some gathering only once — a one night stand, so to speak. For example, at a funeral, or after a workplace accident, at a dinner party. In my experience these encounters can be as life changing and profound as those in groups which last a month, a year, ten years or a lifetime and which may have a more intentional commitment to each other.

I am passionate about nurturing a spirituality that helps us connect every part of our life and our relationships — in our families, work places, community groups, our neighbourhoods, and our various friendship networks. Occasional gatherings for ritual or symbolic action or parties in these places are just as important and significant as gatherings in more intentional 'spiritual' communities. Let's get away from the traditional separation of our 'spirituality' from the rest of our life. Forming lots of groups that continue to perpetuate this separation does nothing to nurture a society that is healthier and more just.

Those who know me well will notice that I make a similar point about friendship and sexual relationships — the issue for me is nurturing a respect for all relationships of mutuality, either in the interactions of life companions or the chance encounter along the road (and anywhere in between). Longevity in either case is not necessarily an indication of a quality encounter, and a one night stand is not necessarily a meaningless encounter. Here is a challenge for us to celebrate and honour what is of value wherever we encounter it.

Rosemary Neave

Conference Notes 2001

Workshop Reports

Christianity — Dying or Changing?

Janet Scott from Gisborne wrote:

"At first we somewhat skirted around the subject but most found reasons to support the notion that Christianity would or should survive in a different form from what it is today. We looked back on its history and noted the changes which have taken place over the nearly 2000 years of its existence. The feeling was that, those of us still actively involved in a (liberal) church could not bear to see its demise though we agreed that radical changes needed to be made. It was pointed out that the man Jesus and his message would last along with the stories of the great men and women of other cultures.

After due consideration, The Jesus Seminar regarded only 18% of what Jesus was supposed to have said actually was said by Jesus. So we really haven't got a lot to go on. The divinity of Jesus and most of the hymns would be early casualties."

Alan Hall wrote:

"We started by grappling with the stories rather than looking at doctrine. The stories we spoke of were stories of Jesus — but one contributor says that there will be other stories (of other people) too.

We talked about The Jesus Seminar — Jesus, a person with humour and a wise man.

We heard that in some countries the Christian Church brings traditional cultural attitudes into their faith ideas. We welcomed that.

Ritual is important — as we turned our attention to the group — and we recognised that though many cultures have traditional rituals for stages on life (e.g. puberty) our own NZ pakeha culture does not.

The stories of Jesus must be kept alive, we thought, even if the institutional Church falls away — perhaps as people are excited by the stories we [may] find [that] there will be a new Resurrection.

We need to be humanists, said one. We agreed. Change is with us: we are undergoing change."

Global Capitalism is a Myth Promoted by the Rich Man's Club

Frankie Mills wrote:

"A very stimulating and diverse discussion took place, ranging from discouraging the rapid growth in globalisation (especially with the sophistication of modern equipment) to the benefits of subsistence farming in villages. A German concept of capitalism was outlined in which profits are used firstly as return to shareholders, [then as] donations to the community (for example, funding schools and

leisure facilities) and [finally for] building the business itself.

A movement for a social consciousness in management noted that in NZ the trades unions are suspicious of Dick Hubbard's management methods.

Is social conscience in business simply an hyperbole, a liberal platitude?

Leonie Klien's book *No Logo* outlined the problem of the culture of the logo and the use of advertising to meet a perceived need.

The use of professional sport in this way was considered exploitation. But the reality was seen in the expression "the wallet is the tenderest nerve in the human body".

Examples of the power of the people were given. The vulnerability of the producers to the whim of the market was explored.

Trade Aid was seen as worthwhile to support, as is the 'green dollar' in areas where the rate of unemployment is high. The impossibility of taxing Internet trade was also discussed.

Finally it was agreed that a 'Catch-22' situation existed. In this Axial Period following the destruction of the World Trade buildings, the group felt that there would be many difficulties and extremes as the market (as we presently know it) is not considered sustainable. The alternative is inconceivable."

Graham Nicholson's Bioethics Workshop

Rinny Westra wrote:

"Gordon did not so much tell us what to do as rather to give us practice at 'Playing God'. For him, 'Godless morality' is not a derogatory description but one that highlights the need for us (and the medical profession) to make the decisions. We do this by taking into account as many factors as we can — although we seldom get all the information that we need. Nevertheless, the decisions have to be made.

What is the value that we place on a healthy life in relation to an unhealthy life? As resources are finite, where should we use them? Does fear of litigation play a role? Where in the reproductive process does the sanctity of life principle become important? etc, etc ...

The Workshop was divided into three groups and, most of the time, was taken up with discussing specific cases. We then discussed those cases in plenary. This is an area of great complexity, but decisions have to be made.

A very worthwhile and challenging workshop."

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. We draw our members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions.

Our home page is at

<http://sof.wellington.net.nz>

Our Steering Committee publishes a regular Newsletter, assists in setting up of local discussion groups, and organises an annual Conference.

The current **Chairperson** is Frank Gaze, 2 Telford Tce, Oakura (New Plymouth) 4650, Phone 06-752-7447

Members may obtain tapes, books etc from the **SoF Resource Centre** at 34 Briarley St, Tauranga (catalogue on the website).

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.cheer@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.

In addition

"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 of Faith members currently at \$NZ59 for a year's subscription.

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

Many of the study booklets referred to throughout this Newsletter are available from The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society:
<http://satrs.wellington.net.nz>

Conference Notes 2001

Focus Group Reports

Genetic Engineering - Risk

Reported by Philip Poore

"It was realised that Genetic Engineering had come to stay and was moving down the road, quite unstoppable, like the tide. It would enable an increase in world food supply and in its quality.

The possibility of unexpected secondary effects should be treated with great caution. Some felt that there was a danger in the land being fouled up and eventually becoming unprofitable. The fear of G.E. solving one problem while creating a worse was a worry.

"Terminator" seeds sold to poor nations was not considered a problem as they [the people] normally collect their own seeds.

Finding medical cures for conditions such as multiple sclerosis was a great plus, provided that there were no minuses. Careful guidelines were needed, but there seems to be a lack of knowledge to work out what these guidelines should be.

Cloning special people was something that a few rich people would get done some how, but would not be a general practice.

Some people were in favour of NZ being GE free and to watch the rest of the world. Should there be no problems, then we could join the rest of the world.

It was felt that as so little was known it would be a great help to have a scientist address the SoF. The website of the Royal Commission is www.gmcommission.govt.nz

Pakeha Culture

Stuart Manins wrote:

"This group had the task of considering many topics that had already been addressed by Michael King in the previous Conference at Havelock North. Most of the group had either attended his session or had read his paper so that there was a platform of informed awareness to build on.

Discussion centred around the following views: that we all have a culture whether or not we recognize this or its characteristics; that it is only fair to recognize and respect the different cultures in our communities; that these things are important in the establishment of identity and essential for self esteem.

Individual questions arising from recent immigrants to New Zealand/Aotearoa, and from the tension that sometimes emerges between perceived politically correct answers and views we really hold but keep to ourselves, provided practical focus to the ideas under discussion.

NEXT NEWSLETTER: MAY

COPY DEADLINE: APRIL 15

**SEND TO: THE EDITOR AT ANY OF HIS ADDRESSES
ON THE PANEL TO THE LEFT.**