



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

# NEWSletter

## FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

**"We are products of the Reformation. The crucial point is that it has been shown that religion can be criticised and reformed; and, if that is so, then anything else can be criticised and reformed. For us, the individual may be right *contra mundum*, against the world. Nothing is sacrosanct. Tradition is dead. As Marx commented, the criticism of religion is the basis for all criticism; once the legitimacy of critical thinking had been demonstrated, the project of modernity was launched".**

**S**o wrote Don Cupitt in *The Guardian* last October<sup>(1)</sup>. Thanks to Luther and Calvin and Henry VIII and a host of others, the principle was re-established that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath". We, as "sons of man", are Lords of the Sabbath. We break the religious laws, and the heavens do not fall. If only some of our friends in the Middle East could learn this lesson!

Some of us have had the pleasure and benefit of listening to, or reading, Lloyd Geering's series on "Who Owns the Holy Land?"<sup>(2)</sup> He gave me, at least, the impression that things would deteriorate there, and his prophecy has been proved true.

The Sea of Faith email discussion list has been buzzing recently with a lively debate about the rights and wrongs of the Network, as an organisation, taking positions on a range of current issues, from Church-State relations to the stance of the Blair Government. Our

Treasurer, Hugh Gilman, will be leading a workshop at Conference on just this subject; get in early if you want to take part.

Surely one important thing we can do is to repeat the idea expressed so clearly by Don Cupitt in the paragraph at the top of the page: religious ideas and practices are not above criticism; no-one has a corner on the truth.

And if you want to hear Don Cupitt expand on these ideas, book early for Timaru. See you there!

*Frank Gaze, Chairperson 2001-2002*

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(1) See page 8

(2) a SATRS publication, see p10,

## IN BRIEF

### Geering Lectures 2002

**"Nothing New Under the Sun: Ancient Tensions Erupting in a Post-Modern World".**

These will be held at lunchtimes at St Andrews on The Terrace, Wellington on June 18, 20, 25 & 27

This is the biennial lecture series of The St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society.

The guest lecturer this year is **Dr Phyllis Tribble**, an internationally known biblical scholar and rhetorical critic, and a professor of biblical studies at Wake Forest University Divinity School, USA.

Dr Tribble will demonstrate that many of the conflicts of the contemporary world embody ancient enmities about race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, and land which live on in stories that are passed from generation to generation, across centuries and cultures. These stories shape, challenge and disturb efforts to understand and redeem the times in which we live.

For more information: phone 04-472-9211 or refer to <http://satrs.wellington.net.nz>

### Be Unreasonable!

*"There's just something off to me about any religion that offers street-corner salvation and door-to-door deliverance, something unconvincing."*

*What does it say about your mysteries if they fit on an index card, if they can be put in words at all? I mean, come on, stand up straight there, don't mumble like that, take yourself seriously for once. Do you believe in something beyond human reason or not? You do? Then stop trying to reason with me!"*

*James Grimmelmann is a programmer and writer. He lives in Boston, where he maintains the Laboratorium at [www.laboratorium.net](http://www.laboratorium.net)*

## Faith In Cyberspace

To help you answer requests for "what does SoF deal with?" you might look at the first item on our New Zealand website which is at <http://sof.wellington.net.nz>

It is a "Quick Tour" and is a structured way into articles in Newsletters and book reviews and papers.

The Divine Mediators website deals with late OT and early Christianity. Its at

[http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~www\\_sd/mediators.html](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~www_sd/mediators.html)

With one of our Conference Keynote speakers coming from a Buddhist perspective, you might like the easy introduction to Buddhism found at

<http://www.ncf.carleton.ca/dharma/introduction/buddhism.html>

or the more detailed version at

<http://www.uncwil.edu/iabs/vl/dharma.html>

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### Re: God v. Darwin, March Newsletter

Dear Sir,

To say that Nature is Beneficent is religious sentimentality or religiosity, perhaps.

But I don't see why religious sentiment cannot simply say "Nature is God" — without being blind to death, pain, blood etc. Religion requires a little rigour after all, not rosy lenses.  
yours

Joanna Paul  
Wanganui

### futurechurch



connecting and celebrating  
new forms of spiritual community

In the wake of a declining mainstream Church there are a myriad of individuals and communities carrying on a spiritual quest celebrating a spirituality which is life-giving, just and connected to the earth many are building on the Christian story, but are not limited by past traditions they are futurechurch - exploring the new possibilities on the edge

futurechurch is a project of the Anglican based Women's Resource Centre in Auckland, with funding from Methodist Future's Group. The project began in late 2001 and has funding for five years. Although they receive funding from the Anglican and Methodist Church futurechurch is ecumenical and non-denominational.

Rosemary Neave is the futurechurch networker (part time) working out of her home in Waipu, North of Auckland, New Zealand [rosemary@futurechurch.org.nz](mailto:rosemary@futurechurch.org.nz) Massey Rd RD 2 Waipu 0254 phones 09 4321234 and 025 2890383



## PREVIEWING THE CONFERENCE

### A Conference Workshop? *Moi?*

**Workshops are the interactive "heart" of a Conference.** New ideas and new ways of looking at old ideas zap around the room. You get your chance to have your say, to parade **your** ideas in the company of like-minded (but often argumentative!) people. When you get your Registration Package later in the year you should make firm plans as to which workshops you will attend.

But — have you considered **leading** a Workshop? Why not? We are looking for people to lead workshops at this year's Conference in Timaru. If you, or anyone you know, are interested in leading a workshop, then please ask contact the Conference Workshop Coordinator, Marjorie Cox, with ideas and commitment. Her address is below.

Marjorie is interested also in **ideas** for possible workshops they would like to attend, so that she can then try to find someone who would be willing to present such a topic.

This year we are looking at two types of workshop:

**1. "Presentations": this is generally in the form of a stimulating (some say "provocative") lecture where the most of the "work" of the workshop is done by the presenter. There is time left at the end for discussion.**

**2. "Workshops": where the work will be done collectively by all members of the group, with the leader acting as a facilitator — raising questions, suggesting directions for the discussion, perhaps introducing the topic for ten minutes or so, and then letting the group travel where it will under minimum guidance from the leader.**

A couple of early ideas include a session on Tai Chi and a discussion on whether the SoFN should send out "position statements" to the media on current issues of public concern. What about something like "How to Make Faith Work"? or "What Might Jesus and The Buddha Talk About Over A Couple of Beers"? "Does SoFN show too much 'head' and not enough 'heart' — too much 'yang' and not enough 'yin'?"

Please publicise this opportunity among your fellow-members and encourage them to offer their services. And, don't forget your own passions and talents! It's not very hard, particularly

if you make the group do all the work!

We are not expecting polished performances but rather a desire to facilitate participation and exploration of your particular subject/topic/issue.

### Contact, ASAP:

**Marjorie Cox, Workshop Programme Coordinator, SOFN Steering Committee, 165 Church St, Devonport, Auckland. Phone 09-445-1240, email: Marjorie.Cox@whl.co.nz**

### Accommodating You in Timaru

Alec Rainbow and Betty Manning, from the Arrangements Committee have sent some advance information.

The Conference will be held in Timaru, from 20-22 September at **Craighead Diocesan School**, set in attractive, compact grounds in view of the Southern Alps.

Craighead has centrally heated accommodation for about 100 people in single, double, three- and four-bed rooms. Additional accommodation is available a few kilometres away in double rooms at Timaru Girls High School Hostel. Nevertheless, this is the South Island and we recommend warm nightwear. Timaru has numerous motels, the closer ones to Craighead being the Wai-iti Court and White Star. Those in Evans Street or on The Bay Hill are all within 3-4km.

Timaru is a delightful city situated on the east coast between Christchurch (163km) and Dunedin (200km) and is the gateway not only to the impressive McKenzie Basin, Mt Aoraki (Cook) and onwards down to Queenstown, Wanaka and the Southern Lakes but also to Dunedin, the Catlins and Southland. For those of you who have rarely or never been to the South Island, why not take this opportunity and precede or follow the Conference with a tour to see some of the wonderful sights it has to offer.

**If you would like more local information Alec Rainbow [phone (03) 686 2512; email arainbow@xtra.co.nz] or Betty Manning [fax (03) 686 1493] will be pleased to help.**

### Cheaper Fares

It is important to keep reminding ourselves that if we want to get to the Timaru Conference cheaply by air from the north, it will be necessary to book **before July** to take advantage of the cheaper advance booking prices.



# BOOKS

## Anybody Home?

A review of Richard Holloway's *Doubts and Loves: What is Left of Christianity* (Canongate, London 2001) by Nicholas Rundle of Adelaide, a member of Sea of Faith in Australia and an Anglican priest. This review was first published in the *Bulletin* of SoFIA.

Richard Holloway once encouraged his fellow Bishops to hurl their mitres in the river Thames as a symbol of their rejection of prelatical pomposity. He has himself jumped ship from the leadership of the Scottish Episcopal Church after the last Lambeth Conference and its ugly debate on gay and lesbian people. In the preface to his new book, Holloway describes the conference as akin to "stumbling on a lynching organised by your own brothers" (p x). If Richard Holloway were to follow his mitre and jump in the river Thames he would surely metaphorically sizzle and steam, for this is a passionate man. Some might call him a God-tortured man.

*Doubts and Loves* should be a controversial book. It must have taken great courage to be so open about one's doubts and loves. However, this is a man who has given the greater part of his life to a whole-hearted living out of the Gospel and helping others to do the same. He does not want the church to become "post modern retro-chic" (14), but to discover "new ways of using the Christian tradition that will deepen our humanity, our care for the earth and for one another" (16).

This aim will appeal to many members of the Sea of Faith, although some will find him too hopeful for the future and others will disagree with his radical theism. He claims that

**the needle on my own dial trembles midway between non-realism (God is a human invention) and critical realism (there is a mystery out there, but we are inextricably involved in its interpretation and can never get it with complete purity). (29)**

Holloway is haunted by the sacred, the other, the sheer strangeness of existence which invites us to wonder. He finds in Don Cupitt's *Solar Ethics* a metaphor for life: "Rather than living frightened and cautious lives, we should burn out extravagantly, giving warmth and joy to others". (31)

Holloway draws on poetry, literature, movies and philosophy to explore his new vision of Christianity.

His title is drawn from a poem by the late Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai:

**[T]he place where we are right is hard and trampled like a yard, But doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, a plough...**

Holloway passionately wants to play his part in digging up the world. He invokes atheists — Marx, Nietzsche, Richard Dawkins, Richard Rorty — and a variety of modern films to prove his case. He argues for the acceptance of gay and lesbian people in a homophobic Church and welcomes feminism. However, he quotes from remarkably few women writers and I see this as a weakness. The other criticism I have is that this book originated as a series of lectures for Gresham College in London.

The chapters still read as discrete lectures and I would have preferred a greater 'flow' of ideas and arguments through the book.

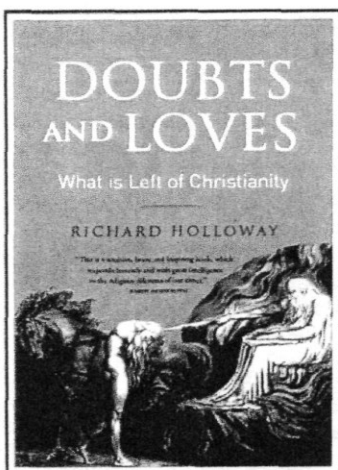
Part one of the book is entitled 'The Shaking of the Foundations', a title drawn from the American theologian, Paul Tillich. In this first part Holloway reviews the sad state of Christianity in much of the world, torn as it is between the strident voices of conservative Christianity and the abandonment of religious practice by many others.

He views religion as a human construct and sees in Thomas Kuhn's idea of a paradigm shift a move to the provisional, living with uncertainty and welcoming change. This

is an idea which Holloway has developed before, when he used the metaphor of playing jazz to construct an idea of ethics and theology in perpetual evolution. Holloway commends the way of action and that Christianity is not about belief but about following Jesus.

In the second part, entitled 'Rebuilding the Ruins', Richard Holloway explores what it means to follow Jesus. He speaks of good religion where "we ourselves are never cured of ourselves" (78), and where we live intentionally. The author discusses the holocaust through the powerful novel, *The Last of the Just* by Andre Schwarz-Bart to explore the Christian understanding of hell, where hope dies. He goes on to explore the concept of redemption, drawing on Tillich's notion of acceptance and the movie *American Beauty*.

*continued .....*



### Doubts and Loves ...

In the third part of *Doubts and Loves* Holloway asks the question, 'What is left of Christianity?'. Some critics would reply "very little". The author explores the meaning of Jesus as someone who loved rather than condemned, who sought to understand and include the other and who rightly mistrusts power and violence. What is left of Christianity, he asserts,

**should be the practice of the kind of love that subverts the selfishness of power, whether it is the subtle political power of spiritual, or the brutal power of political institutions. (197)**

The book concludes with a chapter entitled 'For Love of the World'. He rightly accuses the Church of an unwarranted and unhealthy rejection of the world, and invokes the radical monk Thomas Merton and the missionary Albert Schweitzer to present a hopeful, affirming attitude to life. He invites us to the age-old practice of paying attention to the world and to the practice of repentance leading to the remaking of the world. The Kingdom of Jesus is concerned with present, not future. He quotes John Dominic Crossan in saying that Kingdom living "is a style of life for now rather than a hope for the future". (249)

What should we make of this book? It has received mixed reviews. Some have accused Holloway of overstating his case and misrepresenting traditional theology. Others will no doubt be mightily offended by Holloway's description of Luther's constipation and St. Paul's neurosis. Some will answer the author's question, 'can I still call myself a Christian?' (54), with a resounding, "no!".

The author is certainly setting out to be provocative. But he seeks to offer a useable path for those who still want to practice the Christian faith, albeit a slimline but focused living-the-radical-gospel version. I would argue that although Holloway has become a marginal figure within the Church, he retains his passion for God, that left wing Anglo-Catholic incarnational love of life and anti-establishment love of social justice. I like his philosophical pragmatism that describes belief as a habit of action, rather than a matter of believing or disbelieving propositions. (54).

I am challenged by Holloway's invitation to use Christian teachings as a kind of poetry to discover wisdom, although perhaps this involves a kind of double-minded reading of liturgical, biblical and ecclesiastical texts that he doesn't explore.

At a season when I am experiencing my own midlife journey through doubts and loves, I found Richard Holloway's book like a strong

Anglo-Catholic gin and tonic. The flavour of the writing is exquisite, the mixture of sources from which he draws is strong, and the whole experience is intoxicating and leaves one with a jaunty sense of euphoria. Pour me another Bishop!

Nicholas Rundle



## Emptiness and Brightness

by Don Cupitt, 2001, published by Polebridge Press, Box 6144, Santa Rosa, California, 95406, US\$16. Reviewed by Lloyd Geering

I have just read this book for the second time. It needs to be read carefully and slowly for it is quite closely packed with thoughts which should be pondered for some time. Personally, I have found it the most satisfying of Don Cupitt's many books since his *Taking Leave of God* (1981), but that does not mean that it is an easy read. As would be expected, this book is a good deal more radical than the earlier one, for during the intervening period Don has moved on quite significantly. For these reasons, warmly disposed as I am towards this book, I suggest that before reading it one should first become familiar with the kind of material to be found in his earlier books or in others like them.

I found myself to be on familiar ground because of what I have written, first, in *Faith's New Age* (which incidentally has just been printed by Polebridge Press in a slightly revised form as *Christian Faith at the Crossroads*) and second, in *Tomorrow's God*. But much of what I had arrived at in those years, and only after a slow and struggling pilgrimage, is here expressed very succinctly by Cupitt in the opening chapters. There he speaks of the New Axial Age and the New World View in which we at last realise that traditional religious thinking has come to an end and we have to engage in a radically new form of religious thinking. Don concedes that this is likely to be both difficult and stressful.

Among other things, we have to shed the last remnants of Platonism, which assumes there is an eternal system of truth out there waiting for us to discover it. In other words we have to empty ourselves of the 'absolute truths' which appeared to give our forbears such confidence in the past.

continued .....





### **Emptiness and Brightness ...**

We do not find it easy to do this; indeed, it rather daunts. One is reminded (though Cupitt does not mention it) of the Christian doctrine of kenosis, which (following Philippians 2: 7) described how Christ Jesus emptied himself of his divine form (which presumably possessed absolute knowledge of all things) and took on human form (which implied ignorance and uncertainty).

This process of emptying oneself has become necessary because of our new awareness that the past apparent 'certainties', and even our understanding of the world, are themselves human creations. They are made possible through humanly-created language. There is nothing final about them and they are always subject to change. The emptying process, however, does not leave one in the despair of nihilism that one may have expected. We find that we no longer carry unnecessary baggage. We feel free. There is a lightness in our experience and we are able to enjoy what Don calls the brightness of the world.

The longest chapter expounds in turn 'Universal Contingency', 'Empty Radical Humanism', 'Attention to Be-ing', 'Solar Living', and 'Humanitarian Social Ethics'. Although these titles, some of which Don has coined earlier, may not sound very attractive, Don uses them to summarise his exposition of the new religious thinking. Even then the title, *Emptiness and Brightness*, though correctly pointing to the chief themes of the book, is likely to be found puzzling and even meaningless until the book is read.

As the book is mostly in 18 short chapters, Sea of Faith Groups would find it very profitable material both to discuss and to challenge, section by section.

Lloyd Geering

## **Reforming Christianity**

by Don Cupitt, Published by Polebridge Press. The following review is by Alan Goss of Napier. This book was also reviewed by Lloyd Geering in Newsletter 42.

In this book Don Cupitt contends that the christian churches are peacefully melting away and that the era of church (or ecclesiastical christianity) is over. Christendom, the consensus of belief that held Europe together, no longer exists, and christianity is moving out of the church to develop in the larger world outside.

It is the Kingdom religion of Jesus which offers a new way, God being internalized "within you". God, says Cupitt, is so close he disappears.

The book outlines how Jesus promised a new world order called the Kingdom of God. Because of his death the Kingdom was delayed and the church became a holding operation to "keep the troops in order" until he (Jesus) and his Kingdom returned.

This never happened and the church, now permanently established, developed a complex disciplinary system of creeds, confessions, and dogmas to maintain discipline. It became oppressive and overblown.

Churchly power reached its zenith during the Middle Ages with religion being mediated to the masses through the powerful apparatus of the clergy. That once powerful institution is now melting down and in Cupitt's view has become redundant. It has done its job to make way for the presence of kingdom religion in a global or secular world.

In contrast to ecclesiastical religion the kingdom religion of Jesus (e.g. Sermon on the Mount) is immediate, it is focussed on the here and now. It is lived rather than believed. It gives people hope, generating dreams of a better way of life (e.g. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech). Its ethics are humanitarian, its message is like Jesus' message — this-worldly. Like Jesus, life is lived with urgency, every day could be your last. Kingdom religion is a fulfilment of the christian hope, it is a secular realization of the Kingdom of God. The outlawing of slavery, human rights, the improved status of women, the welfare state, the recognition of racial and sexual minorities are signs that kingdom religion is being absorbed into secular society and largely outside the church. Cupitt maintains that the world is becoming more truly christian than is the church itself. Rather than giving their emotional support to a now redundant institution, christians will celebrate life in small groups and channel their energies into those causes which are working to make a better world. That's a truer face for religion which for most people now means going to church, listening to sermons, living by a strict moral code.

The author acknowledges that the church provides a platform or backdrop for the switch from ecclesiastical to kingdom religion. A major obstacle for testing new initiatives are pessimistic conservatives who see the secular world as a threat and as ungodly and anti-christian. The secular world is neutral, and a secularized religious outlook is now evolving to become the successor to a wilting church religion.

Cupitt's book encourages us to rediscover what religion is all about and to learn a different way of thinking. For reasons mainly of power, reform from within the church is unlikely. But that's the purpose of religion, to give us hope!

Alan Goss - Easter Day 2002

## **Philosophy's Own Religion**

by Don Cupitt (SCM Press) reviewed by Alan Goss

In this book Don Cupitt attempts to describe a philosophy and religion of the future. Cupitt writes like an artist, splashing paint all over the canvas at random, a sort of theological Mike Moore.



### *Philosophy's Own Religion ...*

It's not always easy reading but when teased out (as this review will try to do) his approach is simple and prophetic. He charts a way — not the only way — for us to go.

Cupitt contends that our traditional way of looking at God and the world has broken down. We can no longer conceive God as an objective heavenly ruler, a sort of general manager or C.E.O. of the world. We can no longer hold that there are two realms, a world above and a world below, one of them sacred and the other profane. We can no longer assume that our lives must be caged by a fixed body of truth taught by the church and contained in the bible. We no longer hear one Voice in the bible, we hear lots of voices. And we can no longer accept that we have been placed in a ready-made world all packaged up and tied up with string. We make the world and the world makes us.

Cupitt's philosophy, his way of looking at the world and trying to make sense of it, is ordinary and democratic. The old, systematic dream and the old dogmatic theology with its Confessions and Creeds as tests of faith, its subtle and sometimes not so subtle displays of power, is crumbling away. The world above and the world below (dualism) have become fused, there is only one world and it is the one we live in. The sacred, the religious, is now scattered like the good seed all over the world so that all of life is religious. Whereas in the past there were Popes and priests and hierarchies to mediate religion, — and how oppressive it was — everything is now immediate, it happens before our very eyes. Which is surely what Jesus taught and lived.

In this book, as in his other writings, Cupitt is therefore advocating a one-world

religious outlook. It is democratic in that it moves away from a God-governed world to a new man-made world. All our ideas, laws, interpretational doctrines, moralities etc. are humanly conceived, including our conceptions of God. The world is like a giant computer, everything is interconnected and all our meanings and values are created by the humming human exchange taking place around us. Cupitt describes the world as a series of language formed events, everything that happens is coded into language, (e.g. the terrorist attack in New York) so that language is crucial to how we should build our lives. This is the concern of religion Translated, commitment to God means saying Yes to life.

For Cupitt, the new emerging global religion will be non-authoritarian, that kind of church will no longer be required.

It's place should be taken by informal religious associations like the Society of Friends. Likewise preaching will be non-dogmatic, with preachers more like artists asking their congregations to "look at things from this angle", to "try looking at it from this way". Some parish ministers are already doing this, encouraging people to tell their own stories that explain our present religious situation.

Alan Goss

### **Confused?**



... at all the books with similar-sounding titles?

This list might help you, provided that you've kept backnumber Newsletters, or you can access the website. The number refers to the Newsletter in which the book was reviewed or noted:

- *Here I Stand*  
Spong, 37
- *Doubts and Loves*,  
Holloway, 46
- *A Churchless Faith*  
Jamieson, 42
- *The Changing Faces of Jesus*  
Vermes, 40
- *Creating God, Re-Creating Christ*  
Harris, 40
- *A New Christianity for a New World*,  
Spong, 44 (noted)
- *Christian Faith at The Crossroads; Tomorrow's God; The World To Come*, (a trilogy)  
Geering, 44
- *Reforming Christianity*,  
Cupitt, 42 and 46
- *Paradise on Earth*,  
Geering, 42 and 43
- *Philosophy's Own Religion*,  
Cupitt, 46
- *Emptiness and Brightness*,  
Cupitt, 46

**Here Now! ..... John Spong's**

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## COMPARATIVE RELIGIONS

Don Cupitt, *Guardian*, October 27, 2001

### Here is a pretty little heresy.

On a tomb-chest in the parish church at Lowick, Northamptonshire, Sir Ralph Greene and his lady lie side by side in Derbyshire alabaster. The contract of 1415 specified that they were to be depicted holding hands, and so they are, with open eyes.

This is technically heretical, for orthodox doctrine declares that marriage ends at death. Thereafter, the couple go to judgment separately, and so are normally depicted separately. The Greenes' break with tradition is one of those small, and very English, late-medieval gestures of defiance that affirms the value of the lay, secular sphere of life. They want to say that ordinary human love is, in the end, all we have to show for ourselves.

There has been much discussion lately about why Islam and our own north-European version of Latin Christianity are so profoundly at odds. How can this be? The two faiths are so intimately related that, for the first century or two, they scarcely saw each other as different religions at all. How have they grown so far apart?

One reason is given by Sir Ralph and Lady Greene: our Christianity reeks of humanism, whereas Islam is totally without it. In Islam, they do not commemorate the dead or permit any human image in a place of worship. A man may kiss and hold the hand of another man in public, but husband and wife walk separately. She is veiled. Our humanitarian ethic is entirely religious in its inspiration; Islam lacks any such tradition.

Another factor, equally important, is that we are products of the Reformation. The crucial point is that it has been shown that religion can be criticised and reformed; and, if that is so, then anything else can be criticised and reformed. For us, the individual may be right *contra mundum*, against the world. Nothing is sacrosanct. Tradition is dead. As Marx commented, the criticism of religion is the basis for all criticism; once the legitimacy of critical thinking had been demonstrated, the project of modernity was launched. In the west, that is. Not in Islam.

Before about AD1550, Christianity had been, for more than a millennium, a

whole civilisation. "Christendom" was a great, objective and compulsory cultural fact. In the Muslim heartlands, Islam is still seen as an entity of that kind, whereas after the Reformation in the west, Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, had become something quite different - a personal faith, a kind of internal guidance system by which an individual could shape a religious life in an increasingly secular world.

Islam has never undergone such a change. It has never reconciled itself to critical thinking, or to the idea that the individual thinker may be right against the world. It cannot accept the idea that religion needs continual self-criticism and reform in order to develop aright. It does not accept the idea of an autonomous, secular sphere of life that can and should function independently of religious control.

Inside Islam, attempts at modernisation began in the early 19th century, and have continued with figures like Atatürk and Nasser. But they have all failed because they did not tackle the underlying question: how can something analogous to the Protestant Reformation come about within Islam?

Perhaps it cannot. Even in the west, doctrine remains unreformed and religious thinking is not yet free. Protestantism has largely decayed into fundamentalism. If we are still not able fully to accept our own principles, we can scarcely expect Islam to embrace them. Perhaps none of us yet understands the magnitude of the religious and cultural revolution the world now needs.

Don Cupitt is a fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. His new book, *Emptiness And Brightness*, is reviewed on page 5.





## Faith... and... Religion

The following recently appeared as part of an email on the SoFN's international discussion list. The sender is not the author — she received it some years ago and liked it so much that she kept it and offered it recently in response to a request for a succinct definition of "faith". We think that you will like it too — ed.

This is a difficult word to define since it is so often employed in the form: "to have faith in" which means, "to trust" and "to put one's trust in something (or someone)". But, unfortunately, the word "faith" is seldom used to indicate inner experience, a condition of the spirit, a peace of heart in conjunction with a sense that "All is well, and shall be very well" (Julian of Norwich). Faith does not have to be in anything (or anyone).

Faith has naught to do with philosophy or with those propositions for belief that are propagandized by the religions. Certainly, without this pre-existent faith, no proposition can be a receptacle for trust.

### **Faith comes before the propositions, and is not justified by them!**

Since faith cannot be obtained from any propositions, it cannot be awarded by the religions and their spokesmen; and any command to have faith is a useless one. We can only be commanded to act as if we had faith, by act of will. Only this can be commanded and obedience intended.

But how can a man act as if he had faith if he does not know for himself, and within himself, what this is? And the same is true of "love".

Whence comes this "faith"? No authentic answer can be given. It belongs to the secret inner person, "itself unknown, it knows itself".

Like the capacity to see beauty or to create it; to be able to hear music or to make it; to be able to hear poetry or to wrest words into artful forms, faith is a talent inherent in the faithful, and remains a mystery even to them. To those who find no faith within themselves, the mystery, and the nature of the mystery, is impenetrable. This cannot be strange to us: no one who is unmusical can imagine the mind of the person who has "perfect pitch" or the ecstasies of those who comprehend music in its very form!

*Author Unknown*

- *Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned — Paul Tillich*
- *Life is doubt, and faith without doubt is nothing but death — Miguel de Unamuno*

**Dr David Galston**, President (and one of the three founding members) of the SnowStar Institute of Religion<sup>(1)</sup> in Canada, was asked what it means to say that **"religion is a human creation"**. This is part of his reply.

The expression itself comes ... out of the Sea of Faith environment, and is especially derived from Don Cupitt's work on religion and language. Cupitt's *Creation Out of Nothing* is a good book from which to get the sense of this phrase in more sophisticated detail than I can offer here.

In one form or another humanity has always questioned the nature of the gods and whether they represent some sort of reality. Even great conservative philosophies like neo-Platonism considered the gods little more than metaphors. But the idea that religion is a human creation, at least for contemporary religious thought, is probably best related to Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872).

For Feuerbach, religion is the essence of human nature projected on a horizon called God.

Feuerbach speaks of the "essence" of human nature, not the reality of human nature, because what is projected is ideal human qualities, not actual qualities of individuals or societies.

To understand this, imagine yourself an artist before a blank canvas. The paint that you place on the canvas can be thought of as your ideals. The image you paint may be a complex one or very simple, but the colours are always bold and rich. To Feuerbach, God is something like your painting. Human beings have certain ideals unique to their cultures and histories, but human nature contradicts itself by never being able to fulfil them. Wisdom, for example, is a human ideal, but human knowledge is partial and human acts often reflect our ignorance.

So, the ideal of perfect wisdom is painted onto the horizon as an absolute quality that is only partially available to human experience. To Feuerbach, all the qualities of the ancient gods or of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God derive from human ideals projected onto the horizon. We are artists who paint God in our own image, albeit in a negative way, since God's image expresses absolute ideals not achieved by humans.

The Sea of Faith takes Feuerbach's idea in a more modern form (I think traceable to Nietzsche) where the "paint" of the human artist is language.

Religion and, generally, human knowledge, is a creation of human language. Language acts as a kind of frame that shapes or forms various relationships that can exist between humans and the natural world.

**Continued ...**

(1) See Newsletter 41, p6

## 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 (there is a 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.cher@attglobal.net](mailto:noel.cher@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 \$NZ65 for a year's subscription.

To subscribe for a year, send \$65 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://satsr.wellington.net.nz>

For example modern physics is not a real "thing" but a relationship (or metaphor) that can be used in relation to the world.

Physics is a human creation capable of many forms. True, people say, "Yes, but physics works, so it must be real." The answer is, of course it works! But that does not make it any less a human creation. Isaac Newton's system and Albert Einstein's system are very different but both work quite well. Neither system is fairly called "true" or "false." Rather both are like types of human poetry or art by which a relationship with the natural world can be carried out.

To affirm religion as a human creation is to say that religions are like that. They are systems of dialogue with life that employ rich traditions of metaphor, poetry, and human psychology. But they are not really true or false things; indeed, they are not "things" at all. Religions are creations of linguistic traditions and modes of thought: artistic conceptions of life and its meaning.

Space restricts my comments, but when one affirms that religion is a human creation, it is worth noting that ethical questions become supreme. Einstein's system, for example, is highly creative and metaphorical with its curved universe and paradoxes of time, but it also gives us nuclear weapons.

In other words, the way in which a dialogue is created with the universe is never neutral. To use the artist example again, there are many choices involved when it comes to the colour of paint or the content of an image, but the product can be dangerous. So, even though affirming religion as a human creation can sound very liberating, this does not take responsibility away from humanity.

Quite the opposite: the artist must be all the more wary of the creation.

David Galston

## LOCAL GROUPS

### South Auckland

They meet each second Sunday of the month at Friendship House in Manakau and welcome anyone who is interested. At present they are studying a tape by Jim Veitch which deals with religion and terrorism. Later they intend to deal with "the birth of Humanism", the crisis in the Middle East, God and the New Physics and a talk by a rabbi. **Contact: Elsie Montgomery 09-278-5517**

### Auckland Central

Their March meeting heard three members tell their story on the theme "Why I Like Swimming in the Sea of Faith".

The Group will hold a one-day Seminar on May 11 on the theme "Christianity in Transition — from Supernaturalism to Humanism". Speakers are Lloyd Geering and Darryl Milner. You can get details by phoning **09-630-2933**.

### Dunedin

In a new take on this year's Conference theme ("Creative Uncertainty"), Mike Riddell dealt with **Uncreative Certainty**. Similarly, their April meeting discussed "Fundamentalism: Christian and Islamic; The Clash of Warring Certainties".

**Contact Marjorie Spittle 03-481-1418**

### Here's Your Chance

Spokespeople from Local Groups should send information to the editor for inclusion in the Newsletter.

### On The Web

Our website now contains a detailed list of Local Group Contacts

**Next Newsletter: July  
Copy Deadline: June 15  
Start Writing Now!**