

Conference 2004

Twentieth Anniversary of "The Sea of Faith"

THE STEERING COMMITTEE held its annual one-day planning meeting in Wellington on February 14th. One of the major tasks at that meeting was to plan the annual Conference. This year marks the 20th anniversary of Don Cupitt's seminal TV series "The Sea of Faith". Our Network, together with those of the UK and Australia will be asking where is "faith" ("religion"? "spirituality"? we couldn't agree!) going at this time. These are Conference details that we can give you now:

Date: September 24-26, 2004

Venue: St. Peter's School, Cambridge, near Hamilton

Theme: '20 Years On, Faith Evolving'

Keynote Speakers: David Boulton; Lloyd Geering; one other yet to be confirmed.

Later Newsletters will provide updates. Or you can look on the website.



The 2003-2004 Steering Committee

Left to right: George Dodd, Yvonne Curtis, Keith Fuller, Marion Dodd, Noel Cheer, Hugh Gilman, Don Feist, Marjorie Cox, Ian Crumpton, Frank Gaze, Peter Timmins, Lyle Millar, Ron Wilson

Newsletter 55

March 2004

1. Planning the Conference

Your Steering Committee is on the case

2. John Dominic Crossan and the Examination of the Data

Continuing Alan Webster's analysis of radical theologians

4. Two Book Reviews

The invitation was accepted.

5. Ephesus and The Sea of Faith Network

By Ian Harris, and he ought to know!

7. Sailing To Byzantium

Yeats sings "Of what is past, or passing, or to come."

7 Review of DC's "New Religion for a New Age"

... by the equally prolific Alan Goss.

8. Local Groups

What they're talking about.

8. In Brief

Ripples on the Sea of Faith

9. Faith in Cyberspace

The start of a global consciousness?

9. SoFiA's Conference

Their first will be in September, in Perth.

9. A Decade Ago

A snippet from the 1994 Newsletter in which David Boulton first came to our attention.

9. All About Us

The who, why, when, where and the what of us.

10. Last Word from the Chairperson

In which he muses about a "second constituency" for SoF

John Dominic Crossan and The Examination of the Data

PART 3 OF ALAN WEBSTER'S TAXONOMY OF RADICALS

In this issue we continue the serialization of a paper by The Rev Dr Alan Webster who is a Methodist Presbyterian and a former Associate Professor of Human Development and Education at Massey University, Palmerston North, as well as founding Director of the New Zealand Study of Values. This paper was foreshadowed in Newsletter 52 under the heading "Can You Tell Your Boras from your Crossans?" Some material is omitted for reasons of space.

John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reid (2001), *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the stones, behind the texts*. San Francisco: Harper

The most radical question in a search for the 'reality' on which Christianity may be based is "What data do we have to support the Gospel story and how do these data impact on its meaning?"

The question sits at the meeting place of science and theology. Theology Professors Crossan and Reid undertake contextualization of Jesus by archaeological methods and document analysis.

In their 2001 book, Crossan and Reid dig archaeologically for Jesus "amidst the stones to reconstruct his life" and "exegetically amidst the texts to reconstruct his life" (2001, p1). They acknowledge in doing this work that interpretation is necessary for both stones and texts.

Nevertheless, they record the top ten archaeological discoveries and the top ten exegetical discoveries relevant to the book's mission of "excavating Jesus". Here are the bare details.

The archaeological discoveries

1. The Caiaphas Ossuary - a box for the bones of the deceased - found in a tomb in 1990, with the name of Caiaphas on it, indicating that the tomb belonged to the family of the high priest whose role in Jesus' execution is mentioned in Matthew 26 and John 18.

2. The Pilate Inscription. Found in 1962, Caesarea Maratima, centre of Roman power on the east shore of the Mediterranean, the find was an inscription of the name of Pontius Pilate. It confirmed that this man was Prefect of the district whose centre was Tiberias. A prominent New Testament figure is thus physically confirmed.

3. The Apostle Peter's House. This house was identified as that of Simon Peter by excavators. First a house-church was built on the original house in the 4th century, then an octagon church in the 5th century. Its ruins were found in 1908 and as late as 1968 to 1985 were worked by Franciscan archaeologists. Thus the house of the apostle Peter, prominent in the Gospel, was confirmed.

4. The Galilee Boat. In the mid-1980s, as a result of a severe drought with dramatic lowering of the water level of the Sea of Galilee, a 26 by 8 foot wooden boat was found in the mud, exposed only briefly. By examination of pots and lamps within the boat and by carbon-14 dating, the boat was shown to be of the time of Jesus, of the type used for fishing or crossing the lake. As Crossan and Reid note (p3), "It could certainly hold thirteen people".

5. The Crucified Man. In a 1st century rock grave north-east of Jerusalem, an ossuary was found containing the bones of two men and a young child. One of the men had been nailed to a cross with a four and a half inch nail through his

right heel bone. He was tied to the cross by his arms. They had not broken his legs. His name was found: Yehochanan, the Crucified Man.

6. Caesarea Maritima and Jerusalem. The great monuments of the day, built by King Herod, were the temple in honour of Caesar at the great port, and the Temple Mount, Herod's beautiful expansion of the Jewish Temple. These magnificent structures have been excavated for over 20 years, confirming the grandeur amidst which gospel events took place.

7. Sepphoris and Tiberias. Herod Antipas, who ruled over Galilee and Perea rather than the whole Jewish homeland, built the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias. While Tiberias cannot be extensively excavated as it is today a bustling seaside resort, Sepphoris is uninhabited. Several decades of research have disclosed "a Roman-style theater, a massive underground aqueduct, and the Dionysian mosaic." (p4) The authors suggest that Herod Antipas imposed both Greco-Roman architecture and a Kingdom across Galilee. They further point out that semi-pagan Sepphoris was only 4 miles from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up.

8. Masada and Qumran. Masada was a cliff-top fortress-palace built on the Western shore of the Dead Sea. It was the site of a violent Jewish resistance to Roman rule four years after the destruction of the temple in 70AD. Excavation in the 1950s and 1960s concurred with the account of the uprising by Josephus the Jewish historian.

9. Jodfat and Gamla. A further site of Jewish life at the time of Jesus was discovered by Israeli architects in recent times. These two villages to the east of Golan Heights were destroyed in 67AD by the Romans. The discovery concurs with the description of Josephus. But their simple defences and the artefacts of daily life recently revealed provide valuable evidence of the life of the Jewish people of the time.

10. Stone Vessels and Ritual Pools. Evidence for Jewish ritual practices and the religious life well known to but not discussed in detail by the gospel writers, has been found in the form of stone vessels and ritual baths chiselled out of rock.

The importance of these ten items, as Crossan and Reid argue, lies not just in themselves but in what lay nearby, in their comparison with other artefacts, in their dating and in their total context.

The Exegetical Discoveries:

A very different world, as the two authors explain, is entered with the top ten exegetical discoveries. They record the "sobering thought" that despite the enormous enterprise involved in Jewish and Christian libraries containing the first two items in their list, it was Bedouin shepherds and Egyptian peasants who discovered them. Their choice of the remaining eight items is based on their decisive influence

upon "how one excavates the textual remains for the historical Jesus. "Their "conclusions" are not "discoveries" so much as ... explanations of the texts and their interrelations.

1. The Dead Sea Scrolls ... were discovered in eleven caves in the cliffs of Khirbet Qumran. They reveal the religious life of the Essene sect. They range from 200 BC to 70 AD. ... [and] ... reveal a specific lifestyle in the Jewish homeland of the first century ...

2. The Nag Hammadi Codices. Forty-five texts in thirteen papyrus books or codices were found in 1945 at ancient Chenobaskian, now Nag Hammadi, some 370 miles south of Cairo. Their Greek originals go back centuries before they were transcribed into Coptic. Their diverse content emphasises Gnosticism and asceticism in a diverse complex of genres and theologies.

3. Mark, Matthew and Luke. This exegetical discovery concerns the well-known fact of the marked similarity of sequence and content of Matthew, Mark and Luke. The dominant explanation today, after more than 200 years of scholarly investigation, is that Mark came first and was independently copied by Matthew and Luke.

4. Q Gospel. Because Matthew and Luke were found to contain highly similar material not found in Mark, a further significant source was assumed. As the German word *Quelle* ... was used to label the invisible document, its abbreviation Q was adopted in the scholarly community.

5. The Synoptics and John. There is no general agreement whether John's gospel is dependent upon or independent of the three synoptic gospels. The issue is "crucially important", the authors state, and further 'excavation' is essential. They give the example of the passion story, asking "Are all versions dependent on Mark alone or do we have two independent sources in Mark and John?" (p9).

6. The Gospel of Thomas. This is a complete Coptic gospel found in about 1900 at ancient Oxyrhynchus ... Its content is almost entirely aphorisms, parables, or short dialogues but scarcely any narrative. Equally important: there are no birth stories, miracle stories, passion narratives, nor resurrection stories. Dismissing otherworldly hopes, the Thomas gospel demands, as these writers say, "a return to the Edenic past through celibate asceticism. (p9). It is probably independent of the canonical gospels, but there is not universal agreement on this.

7. Common Sayings Tradition. Common data account for about one third of the Q gospel and the gospel of Thomas. From the fact that the order of these common contents diverges completely, and they do not display identical redactive detail, it is evident that they stem from a common tradition. At least 37 units of tradition, they say, are "adopted and adapted by both gospels into their own quite different theological frameworks." (p9) The conclusion is that there was an extensive oral tradition.

8. The Teaching (Didache). This is a body of community rule or church order. It is thus a detailing of the life of one early Christian-Jewish community .. [of about] ... 50-100 AD. Because some of Jesus' more extreme sayings appear, both at the beginning of this document and in Q, the question of dependence vs other common source becomes very important.

9. The Gospel of Peter. This is the second century gospel ... Amidst about 60 Greek verses of this codex were several very small papyrus fragments narrating the trial, death, burial, resurrection and apparition, presumably of Jesus. This content is dependent on the canonical gospels. The major question concerns the larger text of which these are fragments. Is that account complete and independent and if so, what story does it tell?

10. Codices and Abbreviations. The earliest Christian literature was in codex (or book) format, whilst pagan and Jewish literature of the time almost invariably took scroll form. This suggests an inferior, workaday writer ... [and] ... a centralised control of Christian writings. A similar rule applied to the usage for the four initial 'divine words' – Lord, God, Jesus, Christ – eventually to become fifteen. [These] ... words were 'regularly abbreviated and marked with a line across the top of the shortened forms.' (p10). They see the question whether this practice held beyond Egypt as important, presumably for some sort of authentication purposes.

Preliminary Indications for Radical Thought.

There are important implications for radical theology in these excavations and their further ramifications. In discussing the archaeological fact of layering of rocks and documents and their evidence, some provocative observations emerge.

Two tendencies are revealed in the time-ordering and the dependence or independence of accounts and artifacts. One tendency is to decrease the Jewishness of Jesus. The other is to increase his social status ... the later the work, the more Christian it tends to become. Also, the farther removed Jesus is from his first-century Galilean context, the more elite and regal he becomes (p14). He appears then as 'leisurely philosopher', as 'literate interpreter of scrolls' and as 'erudite partner at banquets'. This trend appears particularly in John's gospel.

Similarly, shrines and church architecture became increasingly 'imperial and monumental'. The evidence addresses these dating and layering effects in great detail. The reader of this overview is pointed to the Crossan and Reid text for more on the layering of evidence, the dating and textual analysis of the conception of Jesus, the clash of kingdom types (communal and covenantal); Jewish resistance, the radicalization of the Golden Rule, the glory of the temple, the historicity of the trials of Jesus, the burying place of Jesus, the evidence of the resurrection claim, and finally what these authors call "Ground and Gospel".

In addressing 'ground and gospel', the authors invite the reader to engage in an act of 'counterfactual imagination'. Supposing no Gospels, no church, no Tacitus, no Josephus, and no knowledge of what Roman rule meant, they ask "What would we see? Their answer: a country with many artifacts pointing to a distinctive people; evidence of Roman imperial domination; after imposition of Roman civilization, with intense rebellion, a climactic destruction of everything.

The under-layer of this gross characterization reveals: ethnically related purity codes, based on covenantal law; both individual and social-structural expressions of a rule of justice from which sprang resistance, especially regarding land and debt; a continuity from Jewish Torah to Jewish Jesus; the kingdom of God a direct challenge to the Kingdom of Rome; a vision of the Kingdom of God that was a programme and a lifestyle; an inseparability of religion and politics and politics and economics..

In that context, they observe, only religio-politics and politico-religion was possible. They conclude, "Only the justice of the Kingdom of God could take on the power of the Kingdom of Rome." That kingdom, they point out, is not to be seen as extraordinarily cruel or exceptionally evil. It was the structure of normality. The Kingdom of Rome in its normality "cost Jesus his life". That conclusion alone would make Crossan and Reid a significant source for a radical vision.





Two Book REVIEWS

IN RESPONSE TO THE INVITATION EXTENDED IN NEWSLETTER 54

Vedanta and Jesus

Frank Eaddy of Auckland opens his review of *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta* by Swami Prabhavananda, with a quotation.

"A book on The Sermon on the Mount should be no novelty in a Christian community. But when that book is written by a Hindu swami [teacher], a follower of the Vedanta and the "Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna", a book moreover not only interpreting but also extolling the Sermon as though it were a scripture of its own, that certainly is, to say the least, unusual."

In case one thinks that "Vedanta" is out of the comfort zone of Europeans, [it was embraced by] Aldous Huxley, Emerson, Longfellow, William James and Joseph Campbell. Huxley and Campbell contributed to the introduction to The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.

In *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta* it talks of the "5 moods" in the "Path of Devotion". In respect of the "Path of Knowledge" it talks of discriminating between the real and the unreal. Service characterises the "Path of Work" and there is a discussion of the "Path of Psychic Control". Different mixtures of these Paths account for our different stages of development and maturity.

Frank Eaddy, Auckland

Vedanta

The Vedas (pr. "vaydahs") are the oldest Indian scriptures. They were transmitted in oral form for a long period before being committed to writing. One manifestation of the Axial Period (about 800BCE to 200BCE) is the challenges to the Vedas from Buddhism and Jainism. But the Hindu Vedanta tradition is a sympathetic development of the Vedas and the word literally means 'the end of the Vedas' both in the sense of ending the period of Vedic revelation and of rounding-out its teaching.

Ramakrishna (1836-1886) emphasised personal experience as the touchstone of true religion. He believed that 'all religions are one'.

[From several sources - ed]

The God of the Galapagos

Audrey Stephen of Timaru reviews *Evolution's Workshop, God and Science on the Galapagos Islands* by Edward Larsen Published 2003 by Penguin.

I found this book while browsing among new acquisitions at our local library. Its general theme is of science and religion and I became absorbed in the story that it told. The writer, Edward Larsen, is Professor of History and Law at the University of Georgia, USA. He bases his survey of science and religion mainly on the Galapagos Islands and the people who have been there — scientists and just visitors. Most of them saw it as the handiwork of God, until Darwin's theory of natural selection. Even then most of them still clung to creationists beliefs.

These volcanic islands lie well off the coast of Ecuador, almost on the equator, and have nothing much in the way of soil. The vegetation is sparse and depends on infrequent rain, and small birds have a hard life. The seas around are enriched by nutrient-bearing currents and so reptiles, penguins and sea birds swim and feed well. Some species have developed to a large size. There are no large predators.

The Galapagos were also invaded but there are a number of separate islands and, while some were damaged, others have had their unique life preserved. They are now protected.

Darwin was there for only about three weeks yet his theory of natural selection came to fruition particularly after seeing the finches and their adaptations — specifically to the conditions on different islands. Since then there have been countless scientists who have worked there for years and the islands have had a profound effect on their scientific and religious views.

Here are a few snippets from the sources that Larsen has used:

David Wall, philosopher of science. In the islands "God ... is not the Protestant God of waste-not-want-not. He is also not a loving God who cares about his productions. He is not even the awful God portrayed in the book of Job. The God of the Galapagos is careless ,

wasteful, indifferent, almost diabolical ..."

On the other hand William Paley in 1802 saw beneficence in nature demonstrating the goodness of the Creator.

"It is a happy world ...

On whatever side I turn my eyes, myriads of happy beings crowd upon my view."

(He cannot have seen a cat playing with a mouse, as Darwin said!)

David Lack, an eminent Galapagos researcher who became a Christian in his later years, was "convinced that all phenomena in the living world, particularly adaptations, had to be explained by natural selection."

He also said "science has not accounted for morality, truth, beauty, individual responsibility of self-awareness."

Charles Darwin said of God "I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton. Let each man hope and believe what he can."

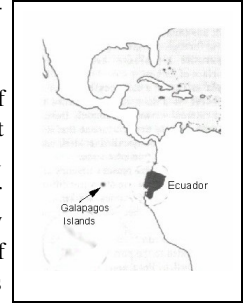
Ernst Mayr, science writer and agnostic, said "virtually all scientists known to me have religion in the best sense of the word."

Edward Larsen, author of this book: "the Galapagos Islands stand at the crossroads of science and religion ... they can be a spiritual place."

Tom Stoppard, British playwright, saw the Galapagos as a harsh and violent terrain — an awful pall was cast over the place — a capital of Milton's hell. Yet he saw it also as a glimpse of Eden.

The final paragraph of the book is:

"The tensions between paradise and purgatory, that all but dumb-founded Stoppard, infuse the archipelago with meaning from many reflective observers who find themselves caught twixt life and death, science and religion."



Audrey Stephen, Timaru



EPHESUS and THE SEA of FAITH NETWORK



Ian Harris, a founder member of both organisations, compares and contrasts.

EVERY SO OFTEN someone in the Sea of Faith Network gets wind of a group called "Ephesus", and wonders what it's all about. Is it the same as the SOF? If so, why not use the name? If not, what are the differences?

Ephesus describes itself as "a group which is exploring new ways of understanding Christian faith in the increasingly secular world of New Zealand in the new millennium". It is "a process – open, questioning, supportive, sharing". And it "welcomes anyone, linked with a church or not, who is prepared to share in its search".

The group predates the SOF Network in New Zealand by three years. Its formation followed my stint as Director of Communication for the Presbyterian Church in the late 1980s, when I became aware of a number of people who had had a lifelong association with the church hanging on by their fingernails, or quietly dropping out.

The intriguing thing was that this was happening not through loss of faith, but out of a profound feeling of dissonance between what rang bells for them in matters of faith and belief and where their church was – a dissonance felt most acutely in services of worship. These people felt there was no space in the church's activities where their doubts and honest questionings could be raised; or if they were to raise them, they knew they would be dumped on, or sidelined, or patronised. However careful they might be, they were bound to upset some people. Not wanting that, they felt it best to back off, and over time they would quietly withdraw.

The church's stock response to the challenge was to talk of renewal and do all the old things more fervently. But that didn't hold out much prospect for the people I was concerned about, for whom the traditional answers presented in the traditional way didn't cut the mustard any more. The questions had changed, and they'd changed because the whole cultural context in which faith has to make sense to us and be lived out today had evolved out of all recognition.

In my communications role, I thought it would be good for the church to make space for people like that to be free to raise their questions and explore issues of faith in an open-ended sort of way, without the sense that sooner or later the discussion would be foreclosed in favour of conclusions which the church had predetermined many centuries ago. I also thought it would be good to open up that exploration to people who had let their church connection go, or perhaps had never had one.

I put those ideas up within the councils of the Presbyterian Church, but after some initial interest, those who counted decided they weren't interested in sanctioning an approach along these lines. So I decided to pursue the concept with others who were more encouraging. After months of mulling it over, early in 1990 we invited a number of likely folk to join in trying this alternative approach out on the fringes of the church, where no one would have the authority to knock it on the head.

That was how Ephesus in Wellington came into existence – a shoot from the stump of the church, complementary to it in drawing from and exploring the Judaeo-Christian tradition we are heir to, but with one big assumption colouring everything we do: it assumes that the last 400 years have happened, and that those 400 years have made a fundamental difference to the context of faith, and therefore to faith itself.

Secularisation

The key to this change is the process of secularisation and the emergence of the secular culture in the West. We take our culture for granted most of the time – it's in and around us and so natural and pervasive that it's almost like the air we breathe. So in the Wellington Ephesus group we take for granted that we are secular people in a secular culture. It follows that if our faith is to be real for us, it must be expressed in terms of that culture.

That idea isn't exactly new. In New Testament times Paul and John took the Jewish understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus, his death and the resurrection experience that followed, and transposed it into a Greek world view. Nowadays we talk about a Maori response to the gospel, or an Indian, or an African. So if our culture is secular, why not a secular response, using secular as a neutral word meaning "of this world", or belonging to the here and now?

That is not, of course, to be confused with "secularist", an ideological stance that makes a dogma out of non-religion.

Ephesus

Since that experimental beginning in 1990, Ephesus in Wellington has met fortnightly between March and early December each year, from 5 to 7 on a Sunday evening. Other people heard about it and set up parallel groups on the Kapiti Coast, in Timaru, and more recently in Eastbourne, Wellington. When the SOF Network was formed in 1993, it met a similar need in other parts of the country.

Each group operates in its own way, but Ephesus in Wellington begins with a shared meal, to which everyone contributes, and that gives people the chance to catch up and talk with one another. Then we sit down in an open circle, usually between 20 and 30 of us, giving a sense of relating and equality around a common space. The group is open and inclusive in intention, though in practice it's self-selecting in that people who find its approach useful stay on and contribute, while others who find it less congenial don't.

Our meetings have covered a wide range of topics and themes. In the first few sessions, when we were very much feeling our way, it was striking how angry a number of people were with their churches, and that came tumbling out. Some of it was from feminists, some from people who were finding out that a whole revolution had been taking place in theology for nearly 200 years and they had never heard a word of it from their ministers – or if they had, it was usually negative. But once they'd got that out of their system, we could get on with more constructive stuff.

I have heard the same about many SOF groups, and a sampling of the kind of programme we have followed will show there's a huge overlap – I'd put it at 80 to 90 per cent:

- In a number of our sessions someone has been asked to introduce the thinking of theologians such as Don Cupitt, Paul Tillich, John Spong, Phyllis Trible, Thomas Merton, Marcus Borg, Karen Armstrong, Gordon Kaufman.
- We've also had excellent sessions arising out of more secular books that raise essentially religious questions, such as *Fugitive Pieces*, *Galileo's Daughter*, *City of God* (E L Doctorow's, not Augustine's) and *Spirit in a Strange Land* (an anthology of New Zealand spiritual verse).
- We've had facilitators as varied as Lloyd Geering, Jim Veitch, Michael McCabe (from the Catholic Bioethics Centre), Bishop John Spong and Don Cupitt themselves, Henryk Skolimowski, a Jewish rabbi (on a Jewish view of Jesus), and Don Brash (on "Are Good Economics Bad for Society?").
- We've had sessions on artists such as Stanley Spencer, Colin McCahon, Jacques Rouault. We've also had art workshops in which we got stuck in ourselves.
- We've tried to tease out what we mean when we use the word "God", the relative merits of "spirituality" as opposed to "religion", faith contrasted with belief, sacred times and sacred places, what we understand by transcendence, what we'd say as a group if we tried to write our own creed – certainly not what other people should be required to believe, but what we ourselves put our faith in when it's all boiled down. (We never completed that one, but the process was worthwhile in itself.)
- We've looked at some of the important contemporary questions such as science and religion, the human genome project, bio-ethics, eco-philosophy, the feminist challenge to settled ways of doing things, biculturalism, sanctity of life versus quality of life, fundamentalism, the nature of consciousness.
- We've dug into biblical passages both from an experiential perspective and with the help of academics. We've had sessions on the Jesus Seminar. We've asked ourselves how we would express our understandings and faith experience in secular liturgies (that is, liturgies that don't depend on any supernatural element) – and we've devised them and done them, especially around Christmas and Easter.
- We've also set aside a weekend each year to go to a house at Otaki Beach where the programme was built around watching and discussing video series – *Sea of Faith*, *The Power of Myth*, *Healing and the Mind* – or to tackle other themes in a more extended way than is possible in a couple of hours on a Sunday evening.
- And from time to time we've gone to a movie or play and joined together afterwards to chew the fat, or done other things together socially. It's been stimulating. It's also been fun.

A positive learning curve

Looking back, it's been a positive learning curve. It came home to us very early that having good content was not enough: the process in a session needed as much attention as the substance.

We discovered an extraordinary range of talent within the group, including knowledge, life experience and creativity, and I've no doubt the same would be true of other groups. The ordained ministers in the group (there've been about eight

over the years) seem to value being able to join with lay people as companions in our explorations, including facilitating a session from time to time, instead of being permanently up front.

Ephesus never set out to be a support group, and we still are not that – except that when there is an illness or bereavement, that's exactly what emerges. We never set out to be a "church", and we haven't become that either, thank goodness. Members have come from the Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, Baptist and Catholic churches and from none, but denominational tags are totally irrelevant to the group.

About half of us retain an active association with a church, others don't; but that doesn't make any difference in practice. I would maintain that we've become a faith community out on the margins, and it's on the margins because that's been the only place where we could make our own way and do our own thing.

Ephesus and the Sea of Faith

From the beginning, Ephesus has had close links with the SOF. When Lloyd Geering took the initiative that led to the Network's formation at the Hamilton conference in 1993, all but two of the first organising committee were members of Ephesus. The overlap is such that there has never been any sense of rivalry between the two, though there are clear points of difference.

One is that Ephesus continues to focus consciously and constructively on the Judaeo-Christian tradition, whereas SOF likes to cast its net much wider. The very name "Ephesus" is a metaphor reaching back into the first century of Christianity. It stems from the tradition that it was at Ephesus that John took the understanding of Jesus in a Jewish context and transposed it into a Greek understanding of the world and of ultimate reality. In New Zealand the name is used to suggest that in today's secular culture a transposition of similar proportions is necessary if the truths at the heart of the Judaeo-Christian tradition are to be known and experienced in the modern world.

Another key difference in Wellington is that we work on ways of expressing faith through occasional liturgies or rituals that we create ourselves. It is obviously easier to do this by tapping into one faith tradition and its symbol system than if the liturgists are trying to juggle ideas and symbols from a range of faiths – or to keep them all at arm's length.

The word "liturgy" seems to induce tremors of disapproval, even hostility, among some SOFers, but the Ephesus liturgies bear little resemblance to traditional church services. In practice, they have proved an invaluable growing edge.

Latterly, when we have come to the end of a cluster of heady discussions and explorations, we have developed a liturgy to reflect on the themes and approach them experientially and in a broader context, happily drawing on the Christian faith tradition which has moulded us. Increasingly, it would seem, it is those experiences that distinguish the Ephesus experience from that of the SOF, which often appears more interested in religion in the abstract.

But it's horses for courses. One size will never fit all.

Ian writes a very popular weekly column under the title "Honest to God" in the Wellington Dominion Post. You can see the Wellington Group website at www.ephesus.dns2go.com/ and contact Maureen Roxburgh of the Kapiti Group on 04-297-2037



Sailing to Byzantium

by W.B. Yeats

I

"That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
Those dying generations-at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded
seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer
long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect.

II

"An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder
sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and
come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

"O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

"Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths
make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come."

The false assumption that somebody, somewhere, knows The Answer. Read the review on this page.



A Review of Don Cupitt's "New Religion for a New Age"

IN ONE OF HIS more recent books, Don Cupitt, the Cambridge philosopher/ theologian asks the question, "how do you do religious thinking without the (institutional) Church and its belief system, without God (as a supernatural personal being) and without the old supernatural world?"

His answer is that we have to make a fresh start — with a clear head! Nothing in religion can be taken for granted any longer, the great religious traditions have a few good things going for them but for the most part they have run out of steam, are out of date and with some exceptions no longer grip the human imagination.

Now we should be thinking about a new religious age — he calls it a Second Axial Age — "a time of revolutionary intellectual change, in philosophy, religion and world view." We have to abandon, for a time anyway, the old institutions, doctrines and vocabularies and try to make a new beginning. For example, the idea that beyond this world there is another more real supernatural world where we seek salvation must now be abandoned. There is no ready-made Real world out there, it is we humans who shape this ever-changing world for good or evil and in so doing we shape ourselves. There is only one world, this one, and its our only home. We find religious happiness in the here and now and commit ourselves entirely and exclusively to our own world and to our fleeting transient lives. The old distinctions between spiritual and material, eternal and temporal, divine and human, heavenly and earthly, are disappearing or are being looked at in a new way.

Nor is there a need to keep ourselves unspotted from the world; we give it "our best shot" and pass away. This transient life on earth is itself our spiritual life, it is the arena in which we discover meaning and purpose for our lives and not in a separate spiritual world above.

For Cupitt the emergence of a new religious age is contingent upon a change to a new world view. In the West, and including Islam, everything

in the world depended upon the all powerful creative will of God.

God was the great Guarantor who backed and endorsed every part of human existence — knowledge, morals, religion. But now we see things differently. All our principles and moral values, our religious faith and ideas about God, are all human constructions and are a product of history. This changeover, from a God guaranteed view of the world to a humanly constructed one is enormous. As Lloyd Geering outlined in his book *Christianity Without God*, it is a process which has been going on for quite some time within Christianity leading to the emergence of the modern secular world.

Many holding traditional Christian views will feel threatened and frightened by what Cupitt and other radicals are saying. To leave God (but not godly values) out of the equation leaves a world "empty", nihilistic, without reality or substance. But that, says Cupitt, is the way things are. There are no permanent fixes, no absolutes, there is no final truth out there that is laid on for us; everything is temporary, transient, in a state of flux. As Katherine Mansfield put it, "everything is flying fast, everything is on the wing". We are a part of the passing show and when the show's over, so are we.

To accept this, to feel that we are a part of the ever moving scene, is our consolation, and even our hope. In life, and in death, we're united with everything.

Cupitt warns that he is not offering a new religious system, rather he shows us a new picture of the world and how we can all get involved. He seeks to democratise religion, without hierarchies, without anchors, without the false assumption that somebody, somewhere, knows The Answer.

It's what one commentator calls a "kind of free-floating, make-it-up-as-you-go-along version of faith". Maybe we've been doing that all along anyway.

Alan Goss, Napier

Local Groups

WHAT THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT

Gisborne

Their last meeting for 2003 was held on November 28, with a good attendance: interest locally in SoF seems to be climbing.

Alan Hall presented an over-view of the key aspects covered in John Spong's address when he visited Gisborne recently and spoke to a large crowd at Holy Trinity Anglican church. Discussion of points raised by Spong was followed by a tea break then Bev Smith reported on the SoF conference which she and several other members attended.

To conclude, Rev. Ken Wall of St Andrews Presbyterian church, gave an outline of a book he wrote during his recent Cambridge sabbatical. It has as its focus his own personal journey as expressed in the title: Identity in Search of an Understanding..

The Gisborne SoF branch is always interested in hearing from other members who may be traveling in the region and we welcome outside speakers so do let us know if you are able to join us at any time.

Contacts: Bev Smith (06)868-8208; Norman Maclean (06)867-3423; Bob & Janet Scott (06)8677617

Dunedin

They plan to launch their year with a presentation on "Religion in China".

The March meeting will invite members to think about what, if anything, has been achieved since 1984, whether the issues facing Christianity and the churches have changed, and where the Sea of Faith movement is going, or should be going. The "Twelve Theses" of John Spong may help them to focus or to ground this discussion. [This document and others can be found on the website in the section labelled "Workshop Resources for Local Groups" - ed]

Contact: Donald Feist Phone (03) 476-3268

Auckland

Also reflecting on this 20th anniversary year, this group devoted a recent evening to the question "Where do we go from here in the Sea of Faith". These were their workshop questions:

1. Given that most SoFers have moved away from the traditional beliefs in the supernatural, and see religion as a human construct, what sort of alternative religious framework (if any) have you constructed for yourself?
2. Do you consider yourself to be on a spiritual journey, and if so, do the SoF meetings facilitate that journey?
3. Would you like the content of our SoF meetings to be more "radical", and if so, what would make it more radical for you?
4. Should we be more focussed on "going somewhere", or should we simply be a forum for discussions on topics of general interest to members?

Contact: Derek Pringle Phone 09-489-3589

In Brief

ripples ON THE SEA OF FAITH

Westar

From March 4-6 The Westar Institute (home of The Jesus Seminar and Polebridge Press) are putting on a seminar in New York with the title "The Future of the Judeo-Christian Tradition in the Second Axial Age".

Among the speakers are some of the usual suspects: John Spong, Lloyd Geering, Don Cupitt, Marcus Borg, Richard Holloway. Prominent too will be two female theologians: Karen Armstrong and Elaine Pagels.

Presentation titles include: An Authentic Contemporary Faith; Religion and the Future of Life on Earth; Wisdom Suitable for the Global Age; The Crisis in the Roman Catholic Church.

We'll let you know how it went.

Milton, Thou Should 'st Be In Canada!

The Snowstar Institute in Canada are mounting a seminar in early March with the title "New Niagara III: Paradise Lost, Now What?"

Two familiar speaker names are John Dominic Crossan and David Boulton.

On Bothering God

The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wisconsin, have prayed without pause for 125 years, according to Minnesota Public Radio News Online. More than 100 nuns at the St. Rose convent pray in half-hour shifts by day, and hour-long shifts at night for people in need, a practice that has been in place since 1878.

source: *SoFiA "Bulletin" September 2003*

More on the Conference Theme

In deciding on the theme for this year's Conference, your Steering Committee took into account that this year is the twentieth anniversary of the TV series that led to the formation of the Sea of Faith Network. Such a realisation predictably caused a rush of analyses of the kind "how are we going?"

We decide against the kind of analysis that the Auckland Group (see this page) undertook because we think that given the inverted hierarchy of SoF (the Steering Committee serves the Local Groups), that exercise is more appropriate to Local Groups who will, in various ways, tell the Steering Committee what they think. Wearing my editor's hat I invite groups to submit summaries of such deliberations for inclusion in the Newsletter.

At the national Conference will look at the direction of which expressions of faith, in general, have moved since 1984 and where we would like to see faith move to.

Noel Cheer, Chairperson Steering Committee

"I think, therefore I am"

Descartes

"I doubt, therefore I might be"

Anon

Faith in Cyber space

A STEP TOWARDS GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS?

Its The Constitution, Stupid!

"The very first act of the new Bush administration was to have a Protestant Evangelist minister officially dedicate the inauguration to Jesus Christ, whom he declared to be 'our savior.' Invoking 'the Father, the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ' and 'the Holy Spirit,' Billy Graham's son, the man selected by President George W. Bush to bless his presidency, excluded the tens of millions of Americans who are Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Shintoists, Unitarians, agnostics, and atheists from his blessing by his particularistic and parochial language.

"The plain message conveyed by the new administration is that George W. Bush's America is a Christian nation and that non-Christians are welcome into the tent so long as they agree to accept their status as a tolerated minority rather than as fully equal citizens. In effect, Bush is saying: 'This is our home, and in our home we pray to Jesus as our savior. If you want to be a guest in our home, you must accept the way we pray.'"

Alan M. Dershowitz,
at <http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/>

Constellation

Our thanks to our Australian colleagues at SoFiA for pointing out the progressive Christian on-line journal which explores the challenging issues confronting Christianity in the 21st century.

Currently exercising them is the question "As a progressive Christian, what do you think about the war in Iraq and its consequences?"

In her essay "Small Wonder", author Barbara Kingsolver offers a modern parable as a way of looking for meaning and hope in the midst of suffering.

"Liberation, Neocons and the Christian Right: Options for Pro-Active Christian Witness in Post 9/11" suggests that Christians need to contribute a stronger, more visible, proactive, public witness in the U.S. political arena, one that is prophetic, protesting and questioning of the present government's imperial designs.

"Anabaptist Faith and Empire Faith" examines the two United States — one that stands for democracy, free speech, economic opportunity and human rights, and one that perpetuates the myth of redemptive violence.

The author, Ted Grimsrud looks at the core values of the Anabaptist tradition to find ways to reject power that oppresses and dominates, especially through the use of force. All this and much more at www.faithfutures.org/constellation.html

Social issues

CASI is the social issues agency of the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches, The Associated Churches of Christ and the Society of Friends (Quakers).

Their website is www.casi.org.nz

Sea of Faith in Australia

www.sof-in-australia.org

THE FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE of SoFiA will be held at Wollaston College in Perth over the weekend of 17-19 September 2004.

Attendees will hear Rachael Kohn, Don Cupitt and David Boulton address the theme, 'Where to Now with Religion?'. Don and David are known to us. Rachael presents "The Spirit of Things" and "The Ark" on ABC Radio National (you can hear/read these programmes on the web at <http://abc.net.au/rn/relig/spirit/>) and is author of *The New Believers: Re-imagining God* (HarperCollins 2003).

A Decade Ago

from Newsletter Number 6, March 1994

Ruth Robinson, widow of John A.T. Robinson of Honest to God fame, was in New Zealand visiting cousins and spent some time with Lloyd Geering.

At a meeting in late January Jane Griffith reported that, to that date, 323 people, counting husbands and wives had paid subscriptions to the Newsletter. Membership in the UK was over 500.

David Boulton, the then editor of the UK magazine and one of our keynote speakers for 2004 was quoted as saying:

"There would be no point in exploring the implications of accepting religious faith as a human creation if we all agreed on what those implications were: implications moral, political, practical, philosophical. We explore together precisely because we recognise how much we have to learn in our diversity.

"And there would be no point in promoting creative, human-centred religion, and affirming religious language and symbolism as expressions of our human values and human spirit, if our feet were all in the same starting-block and our minds in the same mould."

**"The language of fundamentalism
is empty and ranting,
the language of liberal religion is
soothing but empty waffle.
Religious language has collapsed."**

Don Cupitt After All SCM Press 1994

All About Us

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 national Steering Committee publishes a regular Newsletter, maintains a website, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

We have two **Life Members**: Lloyd Geering (since 2001) and Don Cupitt (since 2002).

The current **Chairperson** is Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay, phone 04-236-7533

Membership of the national organisation costs \$15 per household per year (\$22 if outside NZ). Write your cheque to "SoF (NZ)" and mail to **The Membership Secretary**, 133 Orangi Kaupapa Road, Wellington. (Phone 04-934-8054).

Members may borrow tapes, books etc from the SoF **Resource Centre** at 34 Briarley St, Tauranga — Suzi Thirlwall (07)578-2775

Further details on all of the above can be found on our website at

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

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.org.nz

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.

Optional Extras ...

"SoF" is 28 page A4, 6-times-a-year magazine produced by the UK SoF Network. To subscribe for a year, send \$65 to the Membership Secretary (address above). Note that this is additional to membership of Sea of Faith (NZ).

Many of the study booklets referred to in this Newsletter are available from The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society:

www.standrews.org.nz/satrs/

Last Word

From The Chairperson

THE SEA OF FAITH NETWORK CAME ABOUT AS A response to Don Cupitt's TV series of 20 years ago. The autonomous New Zealand Network started in imitation of the UK Network in 1993. From the start it has been a source of support and stimulation for those who, in increasing numbers, are leaving behind them the formal expressions of faith provided by the Christian tradition.

"Anti-Christian"? No. "Post-Christian"? Yes, for some. "Christian-Reform"? Only incidentally. But, if we as SoF continue to locate ourselves only in relation to Christianity then we can look forward to a slow atrophy because our fate will follow that of the churches, a step or two behind.

We think that a response to the question "What *do* you actually believe?" can be given only by individuals and then only on their own behalf because, in the end, faith (or profound trust) is of more importance that a recitation of propositions, such as the Christian creeds became.

The SoF Network has no creed. We can't excommunicate or anathematize anybody. In the early sense that "heresy" meant choosing for yourself rather than obeying dogma, then we are all heretics. We draw "freely upon our spiritual heritage without being bound by it"; and we promote "the quest for meaning and fulfillment as a human activity".

So, dear shopper in the supermarket of faith, don't turn to us, (or anybody else for that matter!), for answers. But we can help you sharpen up the questions and, like Consumers' Institute, give some product evaluations.

I am confident that we are seeing the emergence of what might be called "our second constituency". Increasingly I meet people who have not previously had any specific religious component in their lives. They wouldn't be seen dead near a church. (Quite literally, as secular burials demonstrate!) As they move towards retirement age they ask

"Was that it? Was it all about merely following Darwin's script for propagating the species? Handing on the gene-baton in a species-relay race and paying the mortgage to house the products until they, too, are able to pass on their genes?"

I am increasingly meeting people who ask questions of this kind. The answers which came from traditional Christianity carry too many unacceptable assumptions for such people. They are too intelligent to fall for the Alpha programme or the 'empty and ranting' language of fundamentalists (see page 9).

But, since they are already innately attuned to the value of a religious/spiritual view of life and since many have had a formal education and an informal education which decades of living can bring, they find SoF what they're looking for — without (to quote Don Cupitt who is reviewed on page 7) "the false assumption that somebody, somewhere, knows The Answer".

"Belief [the cognitive stuff] **clings**, Faith [the experiential stuff] **lets go**."

Noel Cheer, Steering Committee Chairperson 2003-2004