



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

From the Arrangements Committee

CONFERENCE REGISTRATIONS ARE APPROACHING THE 180 mark and we may well reach 200 by September 24th. This is excellent as the number attending the UK national Conference was about 180. We shall be able to meet virtually all the accommodation and meal requirements in full, but we could not place everyone who requested it in the boarding house closest to the Conference area. However, we are confident that this shouldn't be too much of a problem as there are sealed roads linking all parts of the campus and the parking facilities are generous.

A consequence of the high registration level is that one or two workshops have been oversubscribed and so we have had to go to second choices in these cases. Elective lectures and presentations have not been affected and we will have no problem accommodating 200+ in the auditorium as it seats 700.

If you are flying to the Conference we will be meeting all Friday flights into Hamilton up until 1.30pm. After that time you will have to use the airport taxi or shuttle bus service. St Peter's is about 10 kilometres from the airport so the costs are reasonable.

If you are driving, the school has two access roads directly off State Highway 1 about 2 km north of Cambridge. One is for the traffic approaching from the south (a left turn), and the other for traffic from the north (a turn-right lane with an arrow is in the middle of the road). Large SoF signs will be located at each of these points. These roads meet and shortly after they do so, you will see another SoF sign directing you left to the Registration Point in the two-storied Student Centre building.

If anyone wishes to invite a guest to the Saturday evening Conference dinner, they will need to advise us before 21st September, as that is our catering deadline. We will be able to manage some last minute and casual extras at other meals. In both cases the meal costs will be as set out in the registration form.

As far as possible, we will endeavour to arrange airport transfers for those needing them on the Sunday afternoon. A process for this will be advertised at the conference.

I've come to the end of my handy practical hints which is what I've tried to focus on in this article, so all that remains is for me to wish you all a safe journey to the Conference and ask you to bring the fine weather with you from wherever you find it lurking. The programme will be excellent, wet or fine, but we would like you to be able to enjoy the St Peter's lovely rural campus.

Peter Timmins, Chair of the 2004 Arrangements Committee

PRE-CONFERENCE ISSUE

Newsletter 58 September 2004

- 1. From the Arrangements Committee.**
Last-minute tips and hints.
- 2. Richard Holloway and the DeMythologization of Christianity.**
Part 6 of Alan Webster's monumental survey
- 5. Faith in Cyberspace.**
Its all out there.
- 5. In Brief.**
Information that you can use.
- 5. A Decade Ago**
John Spong appears on the scene.
- 6. Civil Union and Marriage**
In which your Editor adds his tuppence worth.
- 6. How Do You See Yourself?**
Sea of Faith 'types'.
- 7. What's Going To Happen To The Children ... ?"**
Values Education: five suggested strands
- 8. Local Groups.**
What they're talking about.
- 8. "Ain't It Awful?"**
Its a game for losers.
- 8. God and The Universe.**
A dialogue involving theism, cosmology and a pinch of Paley.
- 9. Christianity Meets The PostModern**
A review of Marcus Borg's *The Heart of Christianity*.
- 10. All About Us.**
Who, why, when, where ... and so on.
- 10. Last Word.**
Your editor paid his way to the UK Conference ... and had a ball.

Richard Holloway and the Demythologization of Christianity

PART 6 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 Presbyter 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 Borgs from your Crossans?" Earlier excerpts dealt with Don Cupitt, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk and Karen Armstrong. By far the largest item in Alan's original paper, this one on Richard Holloway has been severely reduced to fit in this Newsletter. The full paper is available on the website.

Richard Holloway (2001), *Doubts and Loves: What is Left of Christianity*. Edinburgh: Canongate

Richard Holloway, retired Bishop and former leader of the Church of Scotland, sets out to find what is left of Christianity. He could be seen to be driven by three motives: pity, which he sees as the central ethic of a true Christian spirit; shame, which he confesses as he looks out at the dereliction of love and truth right within holy places and sacred conferences; and anger, as he considers the insulting impact of an exclusive spirit upon human, natural diversity.

But Holloway does more than lament the sins of the Church; he propounds in a gracious, scholarly and literate manner, a Christianity built upon the very principles and ethic which, as they appeared in radical form in Jesus, represent the only hope of a credible Church. [the following are my summaries of Webster's summaries of Holloway - ed]

The end of credal Christianity: As he states: "... it is more important to follow the way of Jesus than to believe or disbelieve the traditional Christian claims about him."

Worth of lives matters eternally The aim of the Christian ... is "to release the revolutionary power of pity into the world"

How we do theology is of critical importance. There is "no fixed truth out there", he claims, recognising that this statement, or discovery, arouses extreme anxiety in many. He points out that, contrary to this fixed view of truth, science itself is, after all, a social process. Not only so, but in everyday life, we depend not on these fixed concepts but on pragmatism for our problem-solving.

So far, so good. But we are Christian. Doesn't that impose some restraints on what we can say and not say? Or do? Are there not "Christian absolutes?" For many today, the struggle is that of how to remain Christian and still retain moral and intellectual integrity.

His answer seems to be that what Christianity offers, indeed comprises, is not a competing set of intellectual propositions but a radical ethic.

Truth is not a fixed point of reference. There is no "absolute objective 'truth' about the universe out there waiting for us to happen upon" (p47). Holloway puts forward the more modest claim that truth is "a way of talking about attitudes that work for you" (p48). It is not a refusal to reach conclusions, but they are working conclusions — a faith that it's OK to live in the unsettled state of provisional belief. It becomes clear why Holloway states that "radical theism is close to atheism" (p56). It is because we easily fall into the trap of treating our symbols as equivalent to the thing symbolised.

The critical need, he says, is to break open the old myth, to find the ultimate within it, to re-interpret the religious narratives, to reach constantly for the meaning and mystery of life.

The alternative for Christianity is its customary fixation within its outworn paradigms and becoming a marginal sect.

The search for the collective human consciousness. If literalism is absurd it is because the human religious reality transcends words. At the root of the "great religious narratives", Holloway says, there is the collective human consciousness. It is that consciousness which gives rise to universal human-religious themes.

He sketches several great themes from the Hebrew scriptures which could be used for "personal and social exploration." In particular, three complex and enduring human experiences surrounding the Exodus have this power: the captivity, the liberation, and the discovery of the promised land. These themes, he says, elicit the narratives of human experience, both individual and communal.

Where did it all start? Holloway is profoundly concerned about the effect of the traditional Christian view of human nature and those church practices which reflect such views. Most significant is the concept of humanity having inherited guilt in the eyes of God and the necessity for this impediment to be removed in God's sight by a priestly ritual performed over an infant.

Today, Holloway observes, language of a Fall is not necessary to the scientific narrative. The language is that of struggle and ascent. It is that struggle that calls for deeper understanding. There was never an Eden or a perfect human. This does not make the job easier. We are what we are and there is no magical escape hatch.

What is our problem today? Given that except in some fundamental quarters, the threat of hellfire no longer dominates the pulpit, people still expect that a righteous God will exert justice and will vindicate the victims. But if we are beyond theism, where God could be called upon to strike for righteousness and intervene for his people, where do we find any sense of the nature of our malaise?

Holloway puts his finger on the lack of self-awareness, especially in the male culture of the West. No longer deterred by the fear of hell, the male culture does not admit shame or guilt. The problem is actually that of liberal individualism: we are taught to think in terms of individual acts of evil, springing from "the free decision of the conscious personality." He cites Tillich's argument that the liberal individual approach assumes the possibility of inducing the great majority of individuals to follow the demands of an integrated personal and social life by education, persuasion and adequate institutions.

The depths of our own psyches as analyzed by Freud, Adler and Jung ought to tell us that evil is deeper than immediate free choice. From Tillich he borrows the concept of

the demonic, made up of the vast hidden content within our own nature that we call the unconscious, and the herd instinct, the collective dimension of humanity that can take over or possess our individuality. He refers to "systems of evil" over which we have no control.

Get out of jail free. This is Holloway's own title for a chapter on what he sees as one of the most fascinating doctrines in the Christian code — justification by faith. He treats this as a deeply psychological matter, drawing on the cases of Paul, Luther, and Paul Tillich. He unapologetically asserts that not only is theology a social process, but there are no purely theological factors. Theology, especially this highly individual crisis of justification by faith, is "really another aspect of psychology."

Noting that the genius of Buddhism is in its being a "Middle Way" between the extremes of worthless self-indulgence and an equally worthless life of self-torture, he distinguishes between Buddhism as a practice and Christianity as a set of doctrines to be believed. The trouble is, he says, that Christians see the doctrines themselves as "saving and life-changing." The tragedy is that whereas Saul of Tarsus had a "liberating psychological experience" it was later "hardened into a formula." That formula, legalistic and mechanistic as it was, "contradicted his original insight and the experience that prompted it."

Holloway reserves one of his most vitriolic comments for his view of ... ecclesiastical manipulation: "What was given freely is expropriated by religious monopolists and doled out to their adherents. It's a confidence trick. Air cannot be privatised, nor can grace. And, in our hearts, we all know that."

How do religious beliefs work? We understand beliefs which have some logical evidence to support them. But religious beliefs? Where's the evidence? What difference do they make?

Many believe in miracles, but that won't do in a modern environment. Despite the pride many have in professing to have had a 'miracle' happen to them, there is no virtue in having such beliefs. It doesn't make them better people. The only test is the difference the belief makes. We can accept that the resurrection physically happened without it changing our lives.

The story behind the stories. It will be obvious from the present review that literalism is not seen as a reasonable position to take in face of the complexity of language, structure and historical context of the bible and surrounding documents. That is a different question, however, from what to make of the scriptures if they don't have 'simple, obvious meaning'.

Holloway uses the concept of midrash which he explains as the custom in religious traditions of creating "a literature of imaginative responses to their sacred writings" (p143) to open up elusive narratives. Much midrash is to be found in the New Testament. It accounts for a lot of theological development. Considerable evolution took place in the interpretation of Jesus from Mark to John. To some, the whole of John is midrash. Obviously there can have been no eyewitnesses of eternity, or of the spirit energizing the creation and eventually becoming human in Jesus. The long monologues cannot be seen as verbatim recordings. Midrash was a customary way of filling out an incomplete story. It did not matter that it was not factual; it had to make sense to a particular community.

The essential issue is that Christianity was separated from its roots in the life of Jesus and made to proclaim itself "as the

fulfilment or replacement of Judaism". Holloway refers to this claim as effrontery, questions whether the idea of Christianity superseding Judaism has any point for us today, and observes that not only has this myth "poisoned relations between Judaism and the Church for centuries" but it has been the fertile soil of anti-semitism.

As Holloway argues, the sheer unlikeliness of [such] claims makes it sensible to switch our emphasis from orthodoxy to orthopraxis. [correct belief ... correct action - ed]. This would entail three difficult elements: a resolution to love, rather than condemn sinners; an active pity for the wretched of the earth that would work to change their lot; a mistrust of power and violence both personal and institutional and an active opposition to them.

It was as a result of this programme of orthopraxis that Jesus was crucified. "Following it today won't make us popular, but it would be a more creative response to the confusions of the human condition than the endless disputes over doctrine that have so disfigured Christian history."

Making space. Holloway insists on making room for a gracious God. He sees church as meaning "plurality and inclusiveness". The sectarian spirit has survived in Christianity because the social economy of biblical times was based on domination. The dominated class projected their hopes of vindication in the language of apocalyptic. Those comforted by apocalyptic saw themselves as specially elected for glory at the time of just retribution. Because 'getting it right' is vital to the elect, they feared being found in error, and lived in fear of being lost at the end time. Consequently, not only high anxiety but extreme cruelty and dismissiveness, what today we see as judgmentalism, was and remains characteristic of the sectarian spirit.

In response to the sectarian impulse, inclusivity is the church's quest for truth. Jesus founded no church, did not appoint people with powers of inclusion or exclusion, did not establish a set of official teachings. Yet, as Cupitt points out, the church leadership set to work, once it became apparent that Jesus and his kingdom were not re-appearing soon, to set up an organization and belief system that could ensure their own continuity. And yet again, as Holloway so acutely explains, the very fact of institutional organization, especially in the event of the institution of Christendom under Constantine and through all the glorious centuries of its triumph, contradicted the very spirit by which Jesus stood on the side of the weak and oppressed. Inclusivity became exclusivity. It created outsiders, the worldless.

It is this "worldlessness or identification with the powerless" that Holloway sees as "the key to the mystery of Jesus". Institutional power creates "expendable people, who may be sacrificed for the sake of the larger group." This is the way the world works, but Jesus refused to see the expendable as worthless, rather seeing them as "individuals with particular histories and uniqueness." So today, the paradox re-emerges: ...as the political and theological structures of Christendom crash down before our eyes, we can see once again, through the rubble and dust of the centuries, a clearer picture of the prophet of Nazareth. (p172)

Toward a programme for action

Holloway moves from the reveille for the Jesus of history to his distinctive programme of action: it is that of theological pragmatism rather than theological positivism.

As Holloway puts it, theological positivism is the claim that final and saving revelation of truth about the divine realm has been given to true believers.

The nub of the argument is that literalism insists on an unbroken myth. Holloway is willing to let people have their belief in private, but when literalist proponents of the unbroken myth "say theirs is the only true way to hold it" and that the consequence of not holding it is to lose its saving power and to be damned, then Holloway resists.

So he comes to his plea for "space in Christianity for another way of using the traditional language". A truly creative piece of biblical theologising appears in his own insight of "the hidden God and the unknown Christ." He draws attention to the large number of encounters with the unknown Christ — several resurrection stories where he was not recognised, but more movingly for this writer, the great parable of judgement in Matthew 25. Here, even greater than the surprise of the paid-up believers who found they were excluded was that of those who were accepted.

[Holloway] propounds his new myth of incarnation: "God is now to be found in the human, especially among the worldless, the disregarded ones, such as the Holy Family and the poor who welcomed them." The point is driven home: "To claim to believe in the incarnation is to commit ourselves to a radical commitment to the meaning of God, not in verbal propositions, but in human lives, their joys and sorrows." (pp178-179)

That means walking in the footsteps of Jesus, not just talking about him.

What's Left of Christianity?

Holloway's concluding discussion should be predictable, but it has some real surprises. He 'rewinds the past' and finds forgiveness to be the truest radicalism. And he previews the future with a call for an ethical Kingdom and a celebration of life.

Forgiveness as the truest radicalism

Forgiveness is, in Holloway's view, "the most distinctive of (Jesus') teachings." A significant part of forgiveness as Jesus embodied it lies in the ability to see the roots of human development. While not dismissing free will, Holloway points out that we know that "other people's choices have influenced and helped to form us, so our freedom is a qualified thing at best and some people have been dealt a hand that hardly offers them any choices at all." Our experience and accumulating case-evidence show that forgiveness can bring out a new desire for honesty and goodness in offenders.

His theological conclusion on this issue is that "the centrality of forgiveness in the teaching of Jesus, and the new beginning it constantly affords us is his most liberating gift to humanity." Those who would follow Jesus have to "learn to look at people differently, to practise imaginative compassion, to see the world as it might be and not simply as it is." After all, Jesus saw it that way round and from that came renewal that is still the hope of the world.

The theologies of anxiety and of celebration

Holloway portrays the Church's false theological system as having brought about a profound departure from Jesus. The great need, he argues, if the Church is to be life-affirming

rather than life-denying, is ... to develop "a new set of theological symbols." As against the denigration of life and our preoccupation with the after-life, we ought to emphasise living, love and our interconnection with the web of life, our kinship with the world. This is to conceive of a theology of life — a counter-tradition now gaining strength.

The image of Christ's blood becoming a 'blood-bargain with God' is an implicit condemnation of humanity. In that theology, God is seen as "judge and executioner". Equally harmfully, the Church is seen as what Holloway calls the "criminal investigation division" committed to destroy evil more than "to promote good."

The concept of a theology of life has been called, in contrast with "original sin" language, the theology of "original blessing". In terms of Holloway's radical ethic within a theology of pragmatism, this theology calls for action against what spoils life; to spirited action for the sacredness of creation; for a "politics of justice" that restores the creation to all of its children. In other words, "to build the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven."

In searching out a positive theology of life, Holloway urges three elements to be defining:

First, we should pay attention to the earth and its creatures. Second, there is the duty of repentance. We cannot escape the truth embedded in the theology of death. It is that we do terrible damage to each other and to the earth. The Holocaust, the Killing Fields, the famines of Africa, are the shocking memorials to our stewardship. Third, and necessarily, lest repentance be the final word, there is "the remaking of the earth." Holloway quotes John Dominic Crossan urging "the sapiential Kingdom," a Kingdom of the present, which is entered by human gifts and actions, which is a style of life for now, not hereafter. This is the ethical Kingdom, whose ethics could, in Crossan's view and equally that of Holloway, "challenge contemporary morality to its depths".

So what is left of Christianity?

Little that we can claim great credit for, but much that with imagination we can begin to do. It might be argued, though hopefully not too self-congratulatorily, that Methodists have had a sort of awareness of this shape of things for some time. It is like seeing again something we already knew. For me as reviewer/summariser, it reverberates with all that began my

own theological reformation when I went back to intense theological and social science study in the 1960s. In the midst of the social and political revolutions of the time, that theologising was tumultuous and life-changing. And yet it

was part of and continuous with my own being. That's why I agree with Holloway in referring to Don Cupitt's concept of "contemplation" as 'attention to the forthcoming of Be-ing', which Cupitt suggested we could do by watching the movement of a cloud for ten minutes, or through the rapturous attention of the poets. An ethical kingdom must, it would seem, be peopled by folk whose being is as authentic as their action is pragmatic.

I think we have a lot of cloud-watching and poetic contemplating to do if we are to advance the ethical Kingdom as those who know both the depths of pity and the heights of new aspiration.

AW

That means walking in the footsteps of Jesus, not just talking about him.

Richard Holloway will be a keynote speaker at the 2005 SoF (UK) Conference 26-28 July at Leicester

Faith in Cyberspace

A STEP TOWARDS GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS?

Euthanasia — Ethical Intervention or Death with Dignity?

This 12-page, A4 publication from the Inter-Church Bioethics Council can be downloaded (its a PDF file) from www.casi.org.nz or can be ordered from CASI, P.O. Box 9049 Wellington for \$3 including P&P.

Philosophy of Religion

An attractive set of class notes can be found at: http://www2.sunysuffolk.edu/pecorip/SCCCWEB/ETEXTS/PHIL_of_RELIGION_TEXT/TABLE_of_CONTENTS.htm

In Brief

Answering 'Yes'

"I don't know Who — or what — put the question, I just don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer 'yes' to Someone — or Something — and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal."

Dag Hammarskjöld "Markings"

The End of the Golden Age?

"... the leading liberal philosopher Richard Rorty has said regretfully that he fears that the golden age of bourgeois liberal democracy is now coming to an end. It lasted two hundred years, and it was good while it lasted, but we cannot afford it any longer. People are nowadays being easily persuaded to surrender their freedoms in the interests of 'homeland security'. Thoroughgoing, magnificently 'easy', American-style liberal democracy is no longer practicable in the new age of suicide bombers, economic vulnerability, and the looming spectre of the breakdown of the state. The model for the future will be the limited and centrally 'guided' democracy of Putin's Russian Federation, and of countries like, perhaps, China and Singapore. Real democratic freedom we can't afford any more: it's too vulnerable to attack."

*Don Cupitt "The Return of the Great Questions"
SoF (UK) Conference 2004*

Jesus Is Watching You

The burglar eased himself through the window, knew where the heirlooms were stored and commenced to help himself.

"Jesus is watching you!" A shrill voice. The burglar froze. Silence.

Another minute. Still silence. The burglar breathed again, it must have been his imagination. He continued his work.

"Jesus is watching you!" The burglar stopped. This could not be his imagination. He swung his torchlight around and picked up a parrot on a stand. "That's a funny name for a parrot", he said.

"My name is Polly" said the parrot. "Jesus is the Rottweiler by the door."

Humanist Society Seminar

Dr Bob Brockie will give a talk on two colourful Germans who among other things founded their own religions. Ernst Haeckel was a prodigious biologist and artist. Rudolf Steiner wrote 50 books full of mysticism and farming advice. They have both left long shadows round the world, New Zealand included. Dr Bob Brockie writes and illustrates the Monday's Science Column for the Dominion Post. He is a member of the New Zealand Skeptics.

Venue: Senior Citizens Lounge, Central Public Library, Wellington

Date: Sunday, 19 September 2004 at 1pm for Registration and 1:30pm for the Speaker

Refer also: www.humanist.org.nz/seminar.html

Stephen and Martine Batchelor

Those who attended the 2003 Conference in Timaru will remember how impressed they were with Stephen Batchelor's advocacy of a modernised "Buddhism Without Beliefs".

Stephen, and his wife Martine, will be conducting a residential retreat ("Deep Agnosticism") at Riverslea Lodge in Otaki from Friday 3 Dec 7:30pm until Tue 7 Dec at 4pm. There will probably be a public lecture in Wellington on the evening of December 2.

For more information contact the Wellington Insight Meditation Group. Their contact person is Ramsey Margolis phone (04) 970 3531 email insight@dharm.org.nz. Their website is at <http://dharm.org.nz> and their address is PO Box 6626 Wellington.

A Decade Ago

from Newsletter Number 8 August, 1994

Bishop Spong spent a very busy ten days in N.Z. lecturing to crowded auditoriums in Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. His own Anglican communion appears to have supported his visit in some centres and been quite critical of it in others.

There is no doubt that three of the themes expounded by Bishop Spong are debatable. They are: (i) that the disciple Judas was not an historical figure but a fictional creation of the early church, who personifies the then emerging spirit of anti-Semitism, (ii) that Jesus was a married man, his wife being Mary Magdalene, and that this fact became gradually suppressed in the evolving tradition, and (iii) that the Easter narrative was shaped in part by the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. Spong consistently emphasized that these theories were unproven; but he impressed his hearers by the number of clues to be found in the biblical text, which make them very plausible.

Civil Union and Marriage

This is part of a contribution that I made to National Radio's "Sunday Supplement" a few days before the first reading of Civil Union Bill. It is important that it be read as a contribution to the Newsletter and not as a statement of the SoF "position". The SoF has no "position".

To understand the depth of the present injustice, we might look at three approaches to marriage ... one of which is essential and two of which are for the most part, optional. Let me call them "covenantal", "legal" and "sacramental".

The essence of marriage is the covenantal. It is far deeper than any legal contract could ever take you. Although it rejoices in the recognition given by friends, family, church and state, it doesn't really depend on them because its nature is the bonding of two free and willing people. Whether or not they are of the same sex is relatively unimportant ... it is the depth of their commitment to each other that is of the essence. And sexual activity no more dominates a single-sex relationship than it does in the more conventional version. Marriage ... in essence ... is about the melding of two lives.

The legal approach to marriage lies in the state provision of oversight in an attempt to protect children, property and partners who risk exploitation. Some marriages are made in hell.

The sacramental approach is what has ... up till now ... been seen as the most important manifestation. Some religious bodies regard a marriage as divinely blessed and, for that reason, indissoluble.

A tragic example of marriage misconstrued ... and one in which both church and state knowingly connived ... was that of Charles and Diana. Yes, it was sacramental ... resplendent in all the pageantry of the twilight of both the Church of England and the monarchy. It was legal ... under the scrutiny of constitutional experts. But misgivings before, and revelations since, have shown that it was a tragic sham bringing shame on the monarchy and embarrassment on the church. For us today it is an invitation to relegate both the sacramental and the legal understandings of marriage and to promote the covenantal.

Having made that re-prioritisation we salute the essence of marriage ... that of two people making one life. Helped by the law ... certainly. Blessed by the church ... by all means. But unless you get that commitment you don't have marriage. And that's all that it takes. And the commitment is no different if the couple are of the same, or of different, sexes.

Those who, like myself, support the Civil Union Bill stand with those who define "justice" as "love in action". Love ... in the sense that Christians use it ... even those who oppose the Bill ... is an attitude. Justice is its delivery.

Noel Cheer

How Do You See Yourself?

At the recent Plymouth roadshow, Patti Whaley, Chair of SoF UK, offered a brief description of four Sea of Faith "types":

The non-religious humanist is abandoning religion and religious terminology for a focus on life itself. "You took leave of God 20 years ago", they say, "Get over it." Sea of Faith has liberated them from religion and they see no reason to go back. They seek to live life as an art form in itself, the church is welcome to continue its decline into fundamentalism and irrelevancy — the sooner the better! They are likely to be more interested in questions of social justice, and are frustrated by the Sea of Faith's reluctance to become a campaigning body. They are fondest of Don's later books, the Everyday Speech trilogy and the more recent Life, Life.

The non-realist post-modernist Christians believe that the impact of non-realism is to break down the barriers between the real and the not real — God is no more and no less real than any of the rest of our culture. They don't much care for attempts to get at 'the historical Jesus' — indeed there is no such creature, there are only the different Christs of the Christian tradition. To immerse ourselves in this tradition, to retell our myths and celebrate our rituals, is to express our true selves, and to re-align ourselves with our identity and culture, in which we live and move and have our being. This group argues that non-realism is actually classical orthodoxy: [and that] it is fundamentalism, with its misunderstanding of religious language, which has distorted true Christian faith. They suspect that many bishops already are nonrealists, or at least much more liberal than they admit in public; and they want the church to come clean.

The Christian humanists believe that Jesus remains the person who exemplifies for His church both the nature of the religious demand and the ideal response to that demand. If the way of life that Jesus showed us is the right one, the one that redeems us and gives us new life, then it stands on its own merits, without the need for metaphysical backup; and we follow it for its own sake, not for the sake of some reward or punishment in the next life. They dislike the creeds, which skip from Jesus' miraculous birth to his crucifixion and resurrection with no reference to the life and teachings; they prefer the Jesus Seminar approach to the gospels, which attempts to clean away the heavy editorial hand of the early church and restore the wandering stoic sage. The Christian humanist's motto is "Jesus came to bring the kingdom, and what we got was the church". They are not anti-church, but the function of the church should be to help us realise the kingdom of God that Jesus showed — but in this life, please, not the next.

The agnostics don't yet know where they stand, but they come to the Sea of Faith because they like the arguments, they like the freedom, they like being in charge of their own religious lives, they like 'fossicking about', as the New Zealanders say, looking for new ideas. They may never adopt a clear religious position, and they don't feel they need to. Questions are more important to them than answers, and they resist nothing so much as being told what to think or how to think it. Ulysses is their hero, the ultimate wanderer who, Tennyson tells us, had barely arrived home before he set off again.

Patti Whaley

“What’s Going to Happen to the Children When There Aren’t Any More Grown-Ups”

(Title of a song by Noel Coward)

The following is a condensation of an article on ‘The Five Strand Approach in Religious and Values Education’ from an organisation called ‘Dialogue Australasia’ who have a website at www.dialogueaustralasia.org

“Many young people, as they go through adolescence and enter adulthood, feel uncertain and rudderless in a culture which seems to offer little more than a concern for self and a headlong pursuit of pleasure.... as they grow up they realise that the world contains challenges and complexities they could not have possibly imagined There are therefore cultural and philosophical issues that need to be taken seriously”

This articulates what many feel as participation in traditional religious dwindle.

“In the last fifteen years, Religious and Values education in Britain has been transformed. R.E. is now a compulsory part of the curriculum from years 1 to 11 in the state sector. The number of children choosing to take GCSE in R.E. at 16 and 'A' level at 18 is showing a significant increase. Teachers qualified in Theology or Theology and Philosophy are now common with an increasing number choosing to study for Masters degrees in these subjects. This transformation has resulted in an increase in curriculum time; greatly improved resources and innovative teaching methods.”

“It is suggested that the time has come for schools in Australasia to re-examine their Religious and Values Education programmes.”

The 'Five Strands' approach puts forward five themes to form a curriculum base:

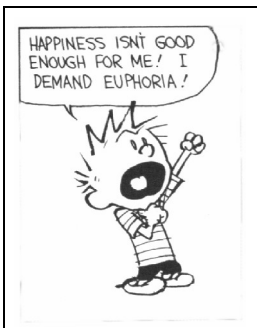
1. Theoretical & Applied Ethics

Values education within a broad religious framework. The term 'values education' in many schools is broadly interpreted to include issues such as bullying, discrimination, tolerance and social justice - yet this needs extending. Pupils need intellectual space to explore different approaches as a means of evaluating ethical issues.

2. The Biblical Strand

An appreciation of the Bible and Christian tradition (including the tradition of the individual school.) Biblical Studies has been neglected in schools yet the Hebrew and Christian scriptures underlie much great literature. Without an understanding of these scriptures, it may be difficult

to fully appreciate Shakespeare, Dante and much European literature and history as well as a great deal of art and classical music. If Biblical stories are to have any relevance to young people their complexity must be explained and evaluated. These stories are complex and sophisticated so it is essential that students appreciate the 'depth grammar' involved and



that 'truth' may be communicated through story without all stories necessarily being literally true. Metaphor, analogy, symbol and art are important in appreciating recent Biblical scholarship hence the need for a spiral approach in the curriculum returning to the stories at different stages in the educational process.

3. Philosophy of Religion Strand.

To introduce young people to central areas in Philosophy of Religion. This includes arguments for and against the existence of God; an understanding of God's omnipotence and omniscience; what it means to talk of 'Eternal Life'; the philosophic problems raised by the idea of survival of death and the problem of evil and innocent suffering.

4. World Religions Strand

To help young people to become familiar with the main World Religions. A real appreciation and understanding of alternative faith perspectives is vital as this may be a necessary pre-cursor to tolerance and acceptance of the position of others. The cultural heritage that accompanies these religious movements also needs study.

5. Stillness & Silence — The Affective Strand

To provide children with an appreciation of the value of stillness. The Affective approach seeks to redress the imbalance when education solely stresses the cognitive. In the 1970s, some Philosophers of Education stressed the idea of 'Rational Autonomy' as an educational aim, but emphasis on this alone can develop the rational side of human nature at the expense of the emotional and affective, closing people off to religious possibilities. Religious education touches on issues of life and death, God and evil, sexuality and relationships, marriage and divorce in a way unmatched by other disciplines.

Copy Deadlines

These are the dates by which I will need copy for the Newsletter for the remainder of this year:

Issue	Deadline
December	15 November

It is easiest for me if you can send the copy either as part of an email or as a Word document attached to an email. The next easiest is the copy is typed so that I can scan it. But, even if you need to handwrite it I can still use it — provided that I can read it!

Noel Cheer, Editor (addresses on Page 10)

Local Groups

WHAT THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT

Just Entertainment?

Jenny Chisholm of Wellington submitted this review

Several years ago, our group tracked down a copy of the Genesis conversations, with Bill Moyers, familiar from the Joseph Campbell interviews, convening a series of conversations on the book of Genesis. We spent a couple of evenings watching *The Creation and Temptation*. The video was frequently interrupted as we picked up ideas from the speakers and teased them out further.

So we were eager to carry on with the series when SoFN acquired a set of the tapes. [Available on loan from the Resource Centre — details on page 10- ed]. We were not totally undivided on the subject. Some were enthusiastic, others suggested that the discussions were contrived or superficial.

In fact, we have now spent a lively evening with Cain and Abel: *The First Murder*. Not so much theology as an intersection of mythology with psychology, this session is orchestrated by six novelists of varying backgrounds and one rabbi. Everyone joined in when the tape was paused, and again opinions were divided. I heard both 'The bald chap with the beard has some good ideas' and 'I wasn't impressed by the bald chap with the beard'.

We wondered at the end whether an old tale had ended up being over-analysed. But it was certainly an entertaining evening, and there are familiar people involved — Walter Brueggeman, Elaine Pagels and Faye Kellerman each contribute to one of the first three sessions, with Karen Armstrong in the fourth, when we will be considering *The Flood*.

Maybe you could call it serious entertainment.

Jenny Chisholm

Christchurch

Meetings are held at St. Ninian's Presbyterian Church lounge, Puriri St, on the first and third Sundays of the month at 4pm unless otherwise indicated. Through September and into October they will be looking at:

- Building Community In the Christian Era, this was a church function. How is it facilitated outside the church today? A C.C.C. facilitator will be invited to share.
- Margaret Lovell-Smith: "Encouraging women to reach their potential." Margaret outlines the life of Helen Connon and leads discussion on subsequent progress.
- Conference Report: Report by those who attend the National Conference in Cambridge, 24th – 26th September.

Contact: Ian Crumpton (03)342-5375

Auckland

They dealt with Euthanasia [see also "Faith In Cyberspace" on page 5] at their July meeting. Their August Newsletter set out the cases for taking life for compassionate reasons, helpfully subdividing the process into these categories: suicide; euthanasia; passive assisted suicide; active assisted suicide; active euthanasia. The article also recognised the conflicts between a legal viewpoint and a moral viewpoint.

Contact: Derek Pringle (09) 489-3589

"Ain't it Awful"

Steering Committee Member Ian Crumpton from Christchurch tells us why bad news isn't the good news its sometimes seems to be.

Eric Berne, in his seminal book *Games People Play* included the classic game "Ain't it awful". Two neighbours, leaning over their back fence, going on about the government, the war, crime, taxes, teenagers, and so forth, each getting some kind of negative gratification from bigoted consideration of the evils of ... well, most things! The media are pretty good at the game: they know what turns us on, makes us watch, buy, or listen. Bad news is good news.

It's a trap. It distorts our view of reality, pushes our panic buttons, makes us fearful, compliant, ready to leave management to "those who know best".

There are other trends, groups, and initiatives that might seem small and irrelevant, or even a darn nuisance, to those in power. But a number of them are of far more significance than is often realised. It's been good to touch base with some of these groups of late: The Bahai Faith is one. The Unitarians. The Society of Friends. Ephesus Groups. And the newcomer: the Interfaith group. Added to these are the ecology and conservation groups, aid and development agencies willing to challenge the causes of war and poverty, and a host of people from the idealistic young to the cunning old, ready and willing to promote justice, equality, faith and hope among peoples.

These smaller more liberal groups may be over the horizon of many both within and without the mainstream churches. But evangelical Christianity's own salvation may depend on the likes of them. In spite of loud protestations to the contrary, it's actually all over for 'The Faith' as we know it. A total paradigm shift has taken place in the global culture that is already having dire consequences for religious faith and practice.

The decline of institutional Christianity, begun with the Enlightenment, became a rapid collapse by the sixties. Inevitably the trend will spread to other faiths, notwithstanding the growth of fundamentalism, where many seek security in their own little time warp.

I believe a radical response is the only appropriate one for the survival of faith, and places the Sea of Faith and such groups as those listed above in a critical position to give our culture the forward looking spiritual dimension without which it cannot thrive.

Ian Crumpton

God and the Universe

The following is an exchange of views in a debate taking place in the Dunedin Group:

Arthur Templeton wrote:

Arising out of a long held interest in, and a modest knowledge of, astronomy -- these and other questions haunt me! What Kind of Creator/God can we believe in, in view of:

a. Is Yahweh/God the Deity/Creator just of our solar system - or is He/She/It, Creator/Deity also of millions of stars/suns in our Milky Way, and of the millions of galaxies whose light has taken thousands of years to reach us?

b. Is the 'maker' of new planets coming into being in Orion aware of the day-to-day concerns of each of the millions of inhabitants of this petty planet?

c. If God created our Milky Way millions and millions of years ago, why, why, has He/She waited so long for the creation/advent/evolution of human beings?

d. Seeing we no longer believe God is a 'person' [in the sense that we are persons] living in 'heaven' - how do we conceive of Him/Her/It who became incarnate, and would our conception be correct?

e. Why, O why - of all the millions and millions of people of human history, i.e. Chinese, Indian, Polynesian etc., is 'God' revealed just to Abraham's descendants - or are they also 'from' him?

f. Is there any similarity between our conception/ attributes of God, and what in reality/truth He/She really is? - granted that there is THE GOD?

Arthur Templeton

Fred Fastier responded:

I suggest that the problems you mention ... go back to the notion of God expressed in such traditional definitions of Christianity as the Nicene Creed. I shall take the central doctrines to be well summed up by :

There is a god who is a person without a body (i.e. a spirit). present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, a free agent, able to do everything (i.e. omnipotent), knowing all things, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship.

Such a definition introduces incompatible notions. For instance, it raises the problem of evil. Why should evil exist if God is good as well as omnipotent and omniscient?

In my opinion the basic error made by the Council of Nicaea was to conflate two quite distinct issues, namely (i) How can we explain what goes on in the world? and (ii) What are our ethical duties?

One of my basic beliefs as a scientist is that the universe is a cosmos, in other words, that it is subject to laws. There could be no point in performing experiments if I believed that chaos reigned. Now, according to such theologians as Paley, the laws of nature owe their existence to a lawmaker. However, this cosmological argument for the existence of God is not conclusive, it is merely persuasive. I have come round to accepting Spinoza's concept of Deus sive nature, partly because through identifying God and nature, I am not strongly tempted to gain an anthropomorphic concept of the lawmaker, eg. as God the Father.

I therefore avoid petitionary prayer as being not merely futile but also impious - if you take the same meaning as I do from the words: 'thy kingdom come; thy will be done'. That is not to decry meditation. One reason for my still going to church is that this plays such an important part in reminding me of other people's problems. However, the situation is quite different to asking God to rectify the situation; the duty is clearly mine.

I avoid the 'problem of evil' by not regarding the Holy Spirit as part of the Triune God. For me it is akin from an ontological point of view to esprit de corps. In other words, it is an attribute of a group of humans, one that leads to acts of loving kindness towards one's fellow. It is the concept of 'goodness' that gives ethics its basis. This quality was exemplified so strongly by Jesus that it has led (wrongly, in my opinion), to the introduction within orthodox Christian opinion of such notions as the incarnation, resurrection and divinity of Jesus.

Fred Fastier

Christianity meets the Post-Modern

The Heart of Christianity, by Marcus J. Borg (Harper San Francisco.) A review by Alan Goss

MARCUS BORG, WELL KNOWN AMERICAN THEOLOGIAN, in his latest book outlines how we may become more passionate about being christian. The earlier ways are no longer meaningful, they are turning people away from longheld traditional beliefs to search for more satisfying alternatives. Borg proposes a way out of the dilemma by describing a rejuvenated emerging christianity, a new model or paradigm which has been developing for some considerable time. This new model is a product of christianity's encounter with the post-modern world.

Borg identifies what for him is the heart of Christianity, what is central to a vibrant and authentic Christian life. He draws upon the traditional Christian vocabulary, words and terms like faith, the bible, God, Jesus, Kingdom of God, born again, and shows how properly interpreted they can help to re-vitalize Christian faith and practice.

For Borg, God is more than a human idea or construction. While God is not a personlike being our relationship to God is personal. Borg rejects supernatural theism (a being "out there") and favours a pantheistic way of thinking about God. This way emphasises both the transcendence and the immediate presence of God. God is "the more", "the real", "the sacred", and the heart of Christianity is to have a deep and transforming personal relationship with God. Jesus is both metaphor and sacrament of God.

Borg holds that as we grow up this very process, especially during adolescence, means that we become more self-conscious and therefore more culturally conditioned by worldly ways. We therefore need to forsake our old identity and take on a new identity, i.e. we need to be born again.

Borg is strong on issues of justice and challenges economic and other systems which favour the rich at the expense of the poor. "The bible is political as well as personal." He has a useful chapter on other religions - there are more Buddhists in the USA than Presbyterians or Episcopalians and he rejects the idea that Christianity is the only true religion. "For us, as Christians, Jesus is the way but not the only expression of the way."

Borg's theological position seems to lie somewhere between the liberals and the radicals and there is certainly much to commend in this book. It is the product of encounters with many Christian groups in the USA. Others will feel that Borg does not go far enough. As Lloyd Geering is constantly reminding us, our modern, secular, humanistic world is a continuation of the flowing and every-changing Christian stream.

Our relationship to God is now being expressed more in terms of our love for one another and for the environment, often in homely, down-to-earth ways. Our focus is on life and on the living of life in this world.

We need new artists, new words, new music, new rituals, to reinforce and reinvent those rich and abiding Christian hopes and values which are part of our religious heritage.

Alan Goss, July 2004.

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

Sheffield 2004

In July I had the pleasure of attending the Conference of the UK Sea of Faith Network. Similar to our Conference, it was held at a seat of learning (Sheffield University) during vacation time. Even the number of attendees (about 180) is similar to the numbers that attend our Conferences. But this year we will top 200 — see page 1.

As we will be doing in September, they too recognised that this year marks the 20th anniversary of the seminal TV series "Sea of Faith" and Don Cupitt was on hand to discuss the current state of his religious/philosophical journey which started even before his *Taking Leave of God*. Don currently has at least four more books in the pipeline. (Sadly he cannot be at our Conference as he will be touring China at that time).

Someone who has tried to keep up with Don's output was another keynote speaker, Nigel Leaves from Australia. Nigel is Dean of Studies of Wollaston College in Perth (Australia) and is also the Chair of the Perth branch of SoF in Australia. Much in evidence was his newly-published book *Odyssey on the Sea of Faith: The Life and writings of Don Cupitt*. Nigel drew on it in his speech to show how Don is now much less optimistic than he once was about a viable future for the church. But, such is the strong presence in the UK SoFN of members (however dissident) of the Church of England, in order to discuss any other denomination one has to make it clear that one is *not* referring to C of E! Nigel's book is a little gem — it helps us see the evolution of Don's thoughts and why Don has declined to write an autobiography because his books *are* his unfolding autobiography.

Don's keynote address dealt with "**The Return of The Great Questions**" — such as why are we here? what is the meaning of life? does it matter? is death the end? are we, or do we have, souls? how did life begin? who are we? who made us? He dealt with them under three 'slogans':

- "The decline of dogmatic belief leads to the return of the Great Questions."
- "In our age the religious life very often takes the form of a lifelong preoccupation with the Great Questions; and many of us are best able to become ourselves and find ourselves by working out our own personal 'take' on the Great Questions."
- "Solar living is the best religion."

The third keynote speaker was Keith Ward who was Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford from 1991 to 2003. His most recent book is *The Case for Religion* (2004). Keith took up an attitude of courteous sparring with Don. Not sharing Don's despair at the fate of the church (or Church) — but not entirely hostile to Don's criticisms either.

The Conference was extended with a half-day marketplace of radical religious groups who set up their stalls and distributed pamphlets. A formal aspect of this was a "dialogue" between Peter Selby (Bishop of Worcestershire) and Robert Forman (a US sociologist and author of *Grassroots Spirituality*) which asked whether one's spirituality needs religion. I had the privilege of chairing this session too. But alas, due to an excess of politeness on the part of the speakers, no strong polarity of views was heard!

Noel Cheer, Steering Committee Chairperson, 2003-2004