



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

# NEWSletter

**T**HE NEW STEERING COMMITTEE for 2004-2005 was elected at the Annual General Meeting as part of the Cambridge Conference. These are the members:

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## Our thanks to The 2004 Conference Arrangements Committee

The Conference in Cambridge was reckoned to be a success by all who attended and this was due, not only to our speakers, but also to the Arrangements Committee which was chaired by Peter Timmins.

Others in the Committee were: Fred Marshall (Treasurer); Cathy O'Connell; Rae Brooker; Barry Cope; Jock Crawford; John Denny; Don Duff; Ian MacKenzie.

The responses to the survey were overwhelmingly enthusiastic, positive and congratulatory. The weather, the walking, the sound system and the cold auditorium (remember Heretaunga?) drew some understandably negative comments.

But, all-in-all a good Conference and acknowledged as such.

## 2004 Conference Proceedings Booklet Delay

The Arrangements Committee apologises for the delay in the printing of this booklet. As we announced at the Conference, we want to print the keynote addresses in full and to include all of the elective lectures and the panel discussion in an edited format (at least) and we are still waiting on texts from some contributors. It appears that it will be early 2005 before we will be able to complete the job. At that time we will mail one copy per household to all who attended and to any who were unable to attend but who requested a copy. A limited number of copies may be available for purchase and we will advise details in the first Newsletter of 2005.

*Peter Timmins, Chairperson of 2004 Arrangements Committee*

POST-CONFERENCE ISSUE

## Newsletter 59

### December 2004

#### 1. Committees

The New Steering Committee and last year's Arrangements Committee

#### 2. John Spong & the New Reformation

The final installment of Alan Webster' paper.

#### 4. Archiving SoF

The archives are growing and you might be able to help.

#### 4. SoF Conferences

A new member compares the UK and the NZ Conference.

#### 5. Faith in Cyberspace

The UK and Australia also have websites.

#### 5. Come On In ...

Some churches follow Jesus' example and welcome riff-raff — just like us!

#### 5. A Decade Ago

We were asking "Can I be honest and remain within the Church". What's changed?

#### 6. Book Reviews:

Death of God; secularization of Christianity; a novel about Parihaka; a note on Karen Armstrong and the post-Modernising of Mark. That's the Christmas holidays taken care of!

#### 9. Whither or Wither the Presbyterian Church

Ian Crumpton thinks that it might be in a time warp.

#### 10. Last Word

In which your Chairperson joins in the general lament of nasties in the incoming tide.

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**Diary this: Christchurch  
September 23-25, 2005.**

# John Spong and the New Reformation

## PART 7 OF ALAN WEBSTER'S TAXONOMY OF RADICALS

In this issue we complete 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, as well as founding Director of the New Zealand Study of Values. Earlier excerpts dealt with Don Cupitt, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, Karen Armstrong and Richard Holloway. This article has been slightly reduced for space-fitting reasons. The full paper is available on the website: the URL is given at the end.

John Shelby Spong (2001), *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying & How a New Faith is Being Born*. San Francisco: Harper

In this proclamation of a new Reformation, John Spong has followed a logical sequence: where we are with the Church, where we need to be, and how we'll get there. We'll do it the other way around: start with the what and the how of a newly reformed Church and go back to the why. After all, when Spong started writing this book, he already knew where he would finish up. So it makes sense if we too first see the dream, or vision, or conclusion, or perhaps inevitability, that he proceeded to build up to.

### Introduction

In this brave pursuit, Spong remains a deeply religious man ... Spong and Holloway agree in their final analysis: Spong says "Christianity becomes not something to be believed but a faith which we must live, a vision that stands before us, inviting us to enter." (p244)

His favourite term, almost his mantra, is "the Ground of Being." The expression comes from Paul Tillich, whose existential theology, while having swept liberal theology in mid-20th Century, remains highly pertinent to a quest for an inclusive religious world-view.

Why have he and Holloway taken 30-40 years to spell out their liberation? It may be that there is something about the Anglican context that slows the revolutionary impulse. Perhaps the Anglican communion is too accommodating.

All of this says much to the processes of power and the mythologies of salvation which make up the structure of sacramental liturgy. It cannot escape notice that both Spong and Holloway had to be shocked out of their Anglican habit by the homophobia, the cultured cruelty, the literalism, the anti-world emotions, the other-worldliness, the sexism and the racism of their priestly colleagues. Their struggle before (metaphorically) dropping their vestments was simple slowness in reaching obvious conclusions.

John Spong is still able to claim Jesus as 'Son of God and Lord.' Still a Bishop! Still a Christian! But determined to show that it is nothing to do with supernaturalism.

Spong sets out to show the escape route from "the pseudo-security that traditional Christianity has pretended to provide." (p244) We are made immature, he believes, by the God who rescues us. He wants to realize another vision ... that of Bonhoeffer's time of the 'coming of age of humanity'.

The concept of a brave new world at the time of Spong's writing of this book might suffer some heavy weather today under terrorism. But his book is an invitation to listen, to explore and to see whether a new road lies ahead. It must be noted that Spong does not put forward any superficial note of optimism. He contrasts the false comfort offered by the theistic Church with a deep-rooted anxiety, emerging as hysteria. Of which more below.

The ecclesia of tomorrow will free itself from the domination by theism, the 'external other' of traditional liturgy. Also, the sense of universal evil and of passivity before arbitrary power will be transcended in a human process of gradual change. Worship in a post-theistic future will be that of those who feel 'called out' from their limits, prejudices and self-centeredness into a celebration of who they are, of their human-ness and their ability to be the agents of life – a significant reversal of the client-parishioner role.

The ecclesia at worship will recollect and rehearse our sacred stories – stories that go beyond the standard Abraham,

Moses, Promised Land, Calvary, the Church sequence. The new liturgy will celebrate the long journey of humanity from its single-cell origins to "our modern, fearful, human self-consciousness." (p207) It will honour our gift of self-consciousness. We will worship as those who are committed to putting our tribalisms and our ecological destructiveness behind us.

- We will rehearse all divinity in life as we now do that of Christ.
- We will worship 'to hold before the world the eternal meaning that we have found in the special life of Jesus.' (p211)
- We will celebrate together our moving beyond the self-centred mentality of survival, our becoming channels, as Jesus did, for that which is divine, "that love which expands life and consciousness and being."
- We will exhibit a renewed dedication to the search for truth.
- We will be a centre for caring.
- The Christians of the future will be united "not by their explanations, but by their experiences, which are finally all that we have of the divine." (p216)

### Clearing the Ground

Spong sweeps away the tradition of supernaturalism – either of God or of Jesus. God is not a being, therefore Jesus cannot be the earthly incarnation. Accordingly, Jesus did not have supernatural powers to still storms, walk on water, make 5 loaves feed 5000. He did not literally raise the dead, overcome paralysis, restore sight or hearing. He did not enter this world by a virgin birth, celebrated by stars and angels. He was not physically resuscitated on the third day and then return to God. Nor, Spong goes on, did Jesus found a church.

Humans are not born in sin from which they must be redeemed by a blood sacrifice. Likewise, condemnation of natural preferences, whether sexual or other, along with denigration by skin-colour or gender, and indeed the whole myth that the Bible is exclusive and literally the Word of God – none of these can be held by grown-up people possessed of modern knowledge.

Spong devotes much thought to the powerful prejudices expressed in anti-homosexuality and anti-abortion, and indeed the entire right-wing moral majority enterprise. He puts his finger on theism as the source of the related cruelty and bigotry. In the final analysis, his is the brave task of stripping away – single-handedly it would seem – "every attempt to literalize the interpretative myths and explanatory legends of the past" (p19)

### Why is Theism Dying?

With the Death of God theologians, it was not a matter of 'putting God to death' – obviously an oxymoron. It was a recognition that the traditional construct of a traditional, living God, active and explanatory in all that occurred in people's lives and their world had ceased to exist. What remained was a culture from which that God had departed.

So, for Spong, the same theistic God, defined as "a being, supernatural in power, dwelling outside this world and invading the world periodically to accomplish the divine will" is dying or is already dead. The evidence ... is apparent: the shrinking of the area available for such a God; the absence of God in people's consciousness, but most significantly the failure of today's God to control or allay human anxiety. We have a culture which lives from one anxiety reaction to another: smoking, caffeine addiction, alcohol abuse, the whole stress-treatment industry and finally the epidemic of random violence and terror; all call for an accounting by religion.

The 20th Century invention of the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing show how hysterical anxiety has reached every level, shaping our very methods of ensuring 'civil society'. It can no longer be pretended that religion as we have known it can be made to be a solution.

### The Evolution of Self-Consciousness & Theism

Spong's belief is that theism was itself born historically of the need to deal with the evolution of human self-consciousness. The failure of theism leads to rampant hysteria. The whole traditional Christian culture is in the grip of fear — an existential fear, reflecting loss of meaning. The ancient theistic solution is bankrupt and its purveyors are covering up.

It was this theistic God who, in our Judeo-Christian culture, first controlled our fears. Belief in his existence made dependency on him an effective protection against the unknown. Under the civilizing control of the Western God, with related laws and institutions, including individualistic prowess, civilization advanced. But with increased human powers and knowledge, and human means of coping with needs, that old God, whose necessity was a function of our ignorance and our susceptibility to control by God's priestly agents, disappeared. That God serves now only a symbolic function. Fundamentalist literalism is one form of the general hysterical reaction, but it is "the last gasp of the past."

What is needed is a new way to affirm self-consciousness as an asset. We still look for the 'timeless, eternal, real and true' but we now must find them at the human level as fruits of a new consciousness of humanity.

### A New God, a New Christ and a New Humanity

On the argument given, no less than a new cast of players is demanded. Spong's developed vision will culminate in a new ecclesia. His logic is powerful.

#### 1. The theistic God is no longer a reality in modern society.

"Today's knowledge revolution and an emerging human maturity have conspired to make the theistic pattern of the past unbelievable." (p58) "We can no longer be children dependent on the theistic parent-God." (p59) "We can speak of God only in human words ... yet the anthropomorphic language ... is always distorting." (p63)

The main postulate is that though God is indefinable ... we do experience God. [But] we can only see where God has been.

"The personal qualities attributed to God were ... communal values." (p69) It is no longer "God who is love" but a slow transformation has taken place so that we speak of "the love that is God". That God is the symbol of Being itself, "the source of life, the source of love, the Ground of Being." (p73) "The death of theism calls us into responsibility. It provides us with the opportunity to step boldly into fullness of life." (p74)

#### 2. How, if at all, a Christ-story can be told.

After all, Jesus as the incarnation of a God who isn't resident somewhere else makes no sense. So, as Robert Funk of the Jesus Seminar concludes, Jesus needs a demotion. The theistic claims wrapped around him may now be unraveled.

What we seek, according to Spong, is Jesus as a human being who "makes known the Ground of all Being." (p84) There is no necessity for a virgin birth ... nor ... for a physical resuscitation. Humanity is the arena in which Being was and is manifested. Resurrection is not a thing that occurs outside experience or after death. It happens to the living, perhaps to the dying. Paul's experience of resurrection was his conversion.

Though Paul did not impose supernaturalism on Jesus, he did see Jesus to have entered the realm of the divine. This meant that while Paul was undeniably theistic, he did not enwrap Jesus in the incarnational and trinitarian language of a developed theism. (p90) Yet Paul clearly saw Jesus as having entered into a "God-experience" that allows of the fullest realization of human being becoming part of God-Being. Indeed, are not the two inseparable, so that the Being that is God is not separable from its expression in human and all life? This is the whole point: we no longer speak of God as a separate being who exists independent of our being. To say

less would be to deny the very potential of all self-conscious being. It is that potential that provides the possibility of any 'new reformation'.

Paul and the rest of them only had their theistic language by which to explain Jesus. The 'something' about Jesus that they had to explain was the core experience which predated the construction of a theistic framework around Jesus. That core can remain intact after the theistic construction collapses. (p96)

#### 3. The Theistic Model left Unanswered Problems

It would be tedious to rehearse here Spong's strong argument for the inconsistency and artificiality of the Gospel accounts of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. This in itself is sufficient to make Spong ask "Can Christianity then continue to live as theistically understood?" (p112) Spong sets out to show "what a nontheistic Christianity would look like."

#### 4. Changing the Basic Christian Myth

Without the theistic framework, the traditional understanding of doctrines of incarnation and atonement becomes pointless. The virgin birth is a nonsense to the modern mind. The ascension likewise is impossible in our modern knowledge of the universe. The atonement depends upon an unacceptable notion that human beings are hopelessly lost sinners unless God rescues them, which he is said to do by a purely mythical application of Jesus' blood to the metaphysical debt of sin. The idea of a rescuing saviour becomes unnecessary. Baptism to ensure God will apply the formula to an infant becomes a nonsense. The rationale for the primary liturgical act, the sacrament of the cross, reflects a theistic repetition of a sacrifice to an "other" God. The atonement as a "cure" cannot have meaning if the diagnosis is wrong. A new way of telling the Christ story is the only option.

#### 5. Jesus Painted a New Picture

Jesus traversed the barriers to a full humanity ...[which] ... included prejudice based on natural attributes such as gender, illness, deformity, and sexual preference; social barriers such as gender, sexual preference, poverty, and tribal affiliation; and religious barriers of every kind. In each case, he manifested his intimate knowledge of a different way that he called the Reign of God.

He had a quality of love not seen before, a love that enhanced lives and made them whole. Those who saw this were in awe of him. He was human in a way that made them feel they were in the presence of God.

The life and love of Jesus manifest Being. Thus in Jesus, life, love and being are made present. Those who find God through knowing Jesus as life, love and being enter into a God-endowment — a new and deeper self-hood. All holy persons do this for us. Jesus epitomises full human-ness — a humanity without boundaries. This is what becomes possible to humans "in Christ."

The God-presence that is available to all is an experience of the holy, found by us in Jesus. Jesus becomes for us "our way to God."

Logically, Spong now dismisses the myth of original sin, which has been the most powerful instrument of priestly control. Evil is real in the world and represents the stark danger that confronts those who set forth on the path of their human possibility, their human being. The new way takes evil utterly seriously, by not mystifying it, but rather seeking the healing power of full loving, living and Being — a 'replacement therapy' or rather a wholeness therapy.

### Conclusion, by the Editor

This series was in essence an extended appendix to Alan Webster's discussion paper: 'An Alternative Vision Strategy' The full paper — the 'Vision' and the critiques — can be found on our website. To access the paper directly, go to <http://sof.wellington.net.nz/nzhomepg/altvis.htm>

## Two Sea of Faith National Conferences: Sheffield in England in July and Cambridge in New Zealand in September

Shirley Dixon from Paraparaumu went to both the UK and the NZ Conference.

THIS YEAR I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY and pleasure of attending National Sea of Faith Conferences in both New Zealand and England. As a relatively new member of the SoF Network these provided me with an intensive introduction to the people – both 'ordinary' members and luminary speakers – and to the ideas, literature and culture of liberal and radical religious philosophy. This was especially apposite on this twentieth anniversary of Don Cupitt's seminal Sea of Faith TV series which became the inspiration for the founding of the SoF networks.

The organisation of the New Zealand and English conferences was similar and, despite the differences in the size of population, they were attended by a similar number of people. Both conferences were held at live-in educational facilities. The Sheffield conference was held at one of the University halls of residence, with the living accommodation, hall, small meeting rooms, dining room and pub all under one roof. In contrast in Cambridge the living / meeting / dining rooms were widely scattered over the campus, which would, had the weather been fine, allowed for leisurely strolls in rural Waikato. However, the weather was, to put it kindly, inclement, with the result that we had to constantly don and doff dripping raincoats as we scurried between venues.

The formats of the conferences were also similar – three keynote speakers, workshops, core group discussions, entertainment, periods for quiet reflection, happy hour with its opportunities for meeting and mingling, a slap-up conference dinner in addition to excellent ordinary meals, and lots and lots and lots of talking. And, not only did both conferences end with a plenary session discussion featuring the keynote speakers, but in both Sheffield and Cambridge these were chaired – most ably – by Noel Cheer, the Chair of the New Zealand SoF Network.

At any such conference the quality of the keynote speakers is paramount and while certain speakers and lectures inevitably 'spoke' to me more than others, I was most favourably impressed with the speakers at both conferences. And while my experience of workshops was limited to those I chose rather in the manner of a lucky-dip, I found the best were excellent though the standard of one workshop at each of the conferences left quite a lot to be desired. However, I did admire the positive attitude of a woman at the N.Z. conference who said, "I come to workshops with the lowest possible expectations – so I am never disappointed and often greatly delighted!"

A feature of both conferences was the AGM which, while perhaps not being considered the most exciting of events, is not only essential to the running of organisations but provides a valuable opportunity for members to have their say and to 'eyeball' members of the committees and steering groups. And I must say, from my experience of countless AGMs associated with a range of organisations, the N.Z. SoF meeting was the most efficiently effective – I might almost say entertaining – that I have ever attended!

The greatest difference I found between the English and New Zealand conferences was the different religious backgrounds of the attendees which contributed significant differences of interest and focus. In England religion is a compulsory part of the curriculum at all levels of schooling, and the Sheffield conference was attended by a number of teachers specialising in this subject – a constituency of the SoF there that has no counterpart in N.Z. These teacher attendees also contributed to a more mixed-age group of participants at the conference.

But more significantly, most of the English attendees maintained their affiliation with a church. Expressed rather simplistically, I would typify the English attendees as 'dissatisfied Anglicans' who live in the hope that they can pull the church

up by its bootstraps, turn it on its head and develop within it a faith appropriate for the 21st century. So, at the conference I met ministers and retired ministers from the Anglican Church, and many people active in other churches, including a wonderful young woman who was just off to Cambridge University to study theology prior to becoming a Unitarian minister. Many Quakers attended, and a meeting of Friends was held before the beginning of each day's programme. In contrast, in N.Z. the attendees were typically – as I heard it expressed – 'grumpy Presbyterians' who no longer attend church and who are appalled at the current retrogressive stance of the church. And while there was no Quaker meeting at the N.Z. conference, the organ recital in the school chapel began each day with a melodious interlude for silent reflection.

The experience of attending these conferences has been outstanding. My interest in religious issues is focused on reading, and the opportunity to listen to and mix with such key religious philosophers as Lloyd Geering, Don Cupitt and David Boulton is something to relish and remember, as well as creating a nexus to my continuing investigations into issues of faith and spirituality. But if I were to pick out one highlight from the conferences it would have to be the resounding New Zealand-ness of Noel Cheer's *Tihei Mauriora* that rung out to begin the final plenary session in Sheffield, though, in that increasingly foreign land, his greeting lacked the enthusiastic response of *Kia ora* that so fittingly began the N.Z. conference.

*Shirley Dixon*

### Archiving SoF

Our Archivist, Alison Eng, wrote:

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR EXTRA SPACE TO house those interesting documents you continue to collect? Donate your Sea of Faith documents to our archive collection and you'll be doing yourself a favour, and SOFN too. Each new item will be carefully catalogued, listed in an inventory and deposited in a specially controlled environment in the Macmillan Brown Library at the University of Canterbury. Thereafter, if you have a sudden urge to consult anything that you, or anyone else may have donated to the collection, an email, phone call or letter to the archivist is all that's required. A copy of the item will be supplied promptly.

The main collection of archival material covers the years from the Network's inception to December 1999. It provides much interesting information, and more can be added as it comes to light. The first Supplement to the collection (2000 to 2004) is currently being prepared and should be deposited and listed by the time of next year's Conference. The collection will then continue to grow with 5-yearly supplements. A printed Inventory to the Archives is available on request. Work is in progress to make all archive inventories at the University of Canterbury available online.

The purpose of our archive collection is to document the history and nature of the organization. It is a tool for members seeking information, for the interested citizen or the serious researcher. It will only be as useful as we make it, so members are urged to contribute anything they think may be of value. Please contact me if you wish, or send contributions to: Alison Eng, SoFNZ Archivist, 163 Rangiora-Woodend Road, Woodend, North Canterbury 8255. email: [alison.eng@paradise.net.nz](mailto:alison.eng@paradise.net.nz) Phone: 03 312 7227 or 021 277 4808

## Faith in Cyberspace

A STEP TOWARDS GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS?



### Quakers in New Zealand

They do comment on current issues and have issued a fairly strong statement on the Foreshore issue:

<http://www.quaker.org.nz/index.html>

### Religions for Peace

The World Conference of Religions for Peace is the largest international coalition of representatives from the world's great religions who are dedicated to achieving peace.

[www.wcrp.org/](http://www.wcrp.org/)

### The Internet Encyclopaeda of Philosophy

its at [www.iep.utm.edu/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/)

### Body, Mind & Spirit

Their website is at [www.bodymindspirit.co.nz](http://www.bodymindspirit.co.nz) and they are having a festival on 19 and 20 February 2005 at Nga Hau E Wha National Marae, 250 Pages Road Christchurch.

For further information contact Anna on (03) 386 3294. Body, Mind & Spirit Festivals, PO Box 26-030, North Avon, Christchurch. Email [MAToolan@xtra.co.nz](mailto:MAToolan@xtra.co.nz).

### Check out our cousins

The SoF Networks in:

- Australia: [www.sof-in-australia.org](http://www.sof-in-australia.org)
- The UK: [www.sofn.org.uk](http://www.sofn.org.uk)

## Local Groups

### Central Otago

Bruce McMillan wants to get a Group started. If you know of people in the area who could be interested then get them to contact Bruce 24 Miners Tce., Bannockburn, RD2 Cromwell. Phone (03) 445 4124.

### Warkworth

Ann Todd wrote this just before the Conference:

"Warkworth Sea of Faith group have had a varied and interesting year so far. In March each member contributed a brief personal credo, selecting one or more principles that they believed in and which they sought to live by.

In April we watched the video filmed at the 2002 Timaru Conference and found it an excellent résumé of the idea behind the SoF movement.

In May we considered two sermons entitled 'Whatever Happened to Sin?' ... sin is an essential part of the language of Christianity — a primary myth that needs to be changed.

In June Professor Raymond Bradley told us why, after being brought up as a Fundamentalist Christian, he had, in his early life begun the thinking process that has turned him into a confirmed atheist.

July saw us considering and debating Lloyd Geering's two talks (given at St Luke's Auckland one-day Conference) on 'Christianity at the Crossroads' and 'The Diverse Futures of Christianity'.

At our August meeting we listened to the Rev. Don Glenny speak of his admiration for the writings of the Systematic Theologian Ruth Page, with a special reference to her latest book *God and the Web of Creation*. However, as the four ways of re-thinking the idea of creation presupposed there being 'a God Out There', lively discussion was provoked ... and enjoyed!

Next month we are to hear a member of the Islamic faith, and are looking forward to learning more about this religion."

Contact: Anne Todd 09-425-9746

## Come on in .....

Those of us who are concerned at the direction that the Presbyterian Church is taking may draw some comfort, however ironical, from the following.

This notice was displayed at an Anglican chapel at the time Canon Jeffrey John was prevented from becoming Bishop of Reading. It was composed by Revd Paul Jenkins of St Columba's, Woking, and by Simon Bryden-Brook, Chairman of "Renew", the Newsletter of Catholics for a Changing Church. It appeared in the September 2003 edition of that publication.

### BEWARE!

**Here we practise the inclusive Gospel  
of Jesus Christ**

**This means you may be mixing with tax-collectors, sinners, adulterers, hypocrites, Greeks, Jews, women as well as men, homosexuals, lesbians, the disabled, dying thieves and other recidivists; black people, Asians and other ethnic minorities, Muslims, Bishops, bigots, peoples of other faiths, strangers from Rome and Nigeria, heretics, etc, etc — even you, dear guests are most welcome.**

**In fact anyone, who Jesus mixed with  
So beware, this is not a private club  
WELCOME TO ALL**

## A Decade Ago

from Newsletter 9, November 1994

At the Sunday morning celebration [at the second annual Conference, Hamilton, September 2-4] the workshop convener spoke some thoughts gathered from the two groups, emphasizing that honesty in the church is in the search for truth rather than in proclaiming truth in absolute terms. The thoughts ended with the question "Can I be honest and remain within the Church?" The questions must be asked repeatedly and can only be answered personally and individually.



# Book Reviews

## No Return To Universal Meaning

*The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*

by Julian Young, Routledge ISBN 0415-30790-2 2003  
Paperback

Reviewed by Don Duff.

Part One of the book presents an account of the philosophers from Plato to Hegel and Marx who believed in some kind of meaning of life, either in another world or in the future of this world. Part Two examines what results when the traditional structures that gave meaning to life cease to be believed in. The ensuing vacuum leads to the appearance that life is meaningless.

The subject of this book will be of interest to SOF readers, trying to make sense of life in the post-modern, post-religious, scientific world.

Philosophers of the past (before the death of God) and of the more recent (after the death of God) have mused on this theme. Julian Young, an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Auckland University, has distilled the voluminous information of often abstruse ideas and made them accessible to the reader.

Young describes Plato's true world which underpins Christian theology. Both pointed to universal meaning - the immortal, immaterial soul and the natural / supernatural dichotomy. These views remained supreme from the fourth to the eighteenth centuries. The meaning of life was certain. There was the happiness of the 'true world' (Nietzsche's ironic term) to look forward to.

The advent of experimental science excluded the Christian heaven from the equation. Kant rescues traditional belief by emphasizing the distinction between appearance and reality. Schopenhauer maintains the distinction, but argues that suffering in our world precludes a loving God and points to 'nothingness'. Nietzsche's Buddhism is congruent with this. The enduring true world persists in Hegel and Marx, who relocate it in the future of this world. Young finally demonstrates that no version of the 'true world' demonstrates the meaning of life.

Part Two examines the responses of philosophers to nihilism through the work of the later Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Foucault, Derrida and Heidegger. Most distinguish between universal and personal meaning and suggest the absence of the former does not mean the absence of the latter.

The exception is Camus who suggests that life can not have any meaning. In contrast to the other post-death of God philosophers, Heidegger thinks there is meaning to life, being 'guardians' of our world. Nature is our only remaining source of awe (not coterminous with the God of Christian theology and not signalling a return to universal meaning).

*Don Duff, Cambridge*

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**'All power tends to co-opt  
and absolute power co-opts absolutely.'**

*Alisdair McIntyre After Virtue*

## Towards a Secular Christianity

*Is Christianity Going Anywhere?* By Lloyd Geering (St. Andrew's Trust) \$12

Reviewed by Alan Goss

Lloyd Geering's short answer to this question in his May 2004 lectures in St. Andrew's, Wellington, is, Yes. But the Judaeo-Christian path of faith will in future be a secular one, leaving behind orthodox Christianity which has ground to a halt with no place to go and no prospect of recovery.

Geering, in four succinct chapters, expounds how Christianity has come to a crossroads and stands at a critical point in its long and complex history. He also shows how the emerging secular and humanistic world, rather than being treated as Satan and an enemy to be defeated, is not anti-Christian but is an offspring and product of the Christian West. It evolves, and continues to evolve, out of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and is driven by the hopes, visions and values of the Christian past.

The first sign of cracks in institutional Christianity was the Protestant Reformation which shattered the unity of the Church. Subsequently confidence in the Bible was shaken, it was recognized as being of human origin calling into question the divinity of Jesus Christ. The reality of belief in a personal supernatural being became more and more unconvincing. Three knowledge revolutions - the Copernican, the Darwinian and the modern knowledge explosion - have together led to a critical examination of orthodox Christian beliefs. Geering emphasises that "it is in the context of the evolution of human culture that we must seek to understand the current crisis in the Christian path of faith."

Two major changes that occurred during this long cultural evolution, known as the First and Second Axial Ages, are outlined. The Second Axial Age refers to the huge knowledge explosion which has erupted over the past 500 years and out of which has grown the modern secular world. It is now circling the globe, compelling us to re-think religion and make a fresh start. A majority of people, both Christian and non-Christian, see little or no connection between the modern secular world and its Christian origins; which is why Christianity is at the crossroads and why groups like the Sea of Faith Network have been formed.

Two chapters focus on attempts by scholars, past and present, to recover the original Jesus of Nazareth, also his teaching. Both help us to understand where Christianity is heading. The claim that Jesus was divine, e.g. in the Nicene Creed, is challenged. The layers of belief that have smothered the historical Jesus have slowly been excavated to reveal a different picture of the man of Galilee. The strong influence of Paul, who never met Jesus, must also be removed. We are left only with footprints and voiceprints of a Jesus far removed from those of an other-worldly miracle-worker who claimed to be Messiah and Son of God. Scholars of the Jesus Seminar, U.S.A., have concluded that Jesus was primarily a teacher of wisdom, a sage, fully human to

concluded that Jesus was primarily a teacher of wisdom, a sage, fully human to whom modern secular people can relate more readily than the traditional other-worldly Christ.

Geering's view is that although the institution of the church as a power structure deserves to die the legacy of Jesus' teaching will continue along other different paths. All the major religious traditions are evolutionary, they tend to diversify. There is no Christian "essence", for Christianity is too big - and too complex - to classify. Traditional Christians who regard the modern secular world as a demon are whistling in the wind. In spite of its failings it has given people the freedom to think for themselves rather than submit blindly to an other-worldly divine authority.

Three basic Christian themes, faith, hope and love are explored showing how they can take us into the Christian future. That path, Geering concludes, is a secular one and is a legitimate continuation of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Lloyd Geering's ability to see the whole picture and compress it into a brief and readable form is legion. The position he takes will be hotly contested and even ignored by traditional orthodoxy and that is understandable. The real tragedy will be if the issues he raises are not debated at all.

*Alan Goss, Napier*

## **Parihaka, A novel by John Hinchcliff**

Published by Steele Roberts, Wellington, 2004, reviewed by Frank Gaze

The first thing you want to know from a reviewer is whether this book is worth reading. The answer is yes.

If you want a clear, factual, easily read account of the Parihaka incident of 1881 then this book you must read.

John Hinchcliff, who is the Vice-chancellor of the Auckland University of Technology, has put together a well-researched account of this part of our history, in an interesting way, by adding several fictional characters who witness the whole episode and are involved in it.

If you have read *Ask that Mountain*, *Days of Darkness* and *The Fox Boy*, and you want a clear chronological summary of the whole sequence, this should sort it out for you.

If you want to encourage your children or grandchildren to learn about Parihaka, then the action and the love interest of the fictional characters should interest them.

I have some quibbles about John Hinchcliff's account nevertheless. There are a few anachronisms: the head of government is called the Prime Minister when that title was not introduced until New Zealand became a Dominion in the early 20th Century; in 1868 John Hinchcliff has one of his fictional characters singing "Who is on the Lord's Side?", a hymn that was not written until 1877; and so on. But they are mere quibbles, and don't detract from the general impression.

If your idea of a historical novel is *A Tale of Two Cities*, or *War and Peace*, or even one of Patrick O'Brian's books like *Master and Commander*, then you need to know that this is a modern historical novel, more like a docu-drama. The Parihaka incident is the main story, the main focus of the book, and the fictional parts are mere sub-plots, whereas in those traditional historical novels, the story and characters are fictional against a background of real historical events and people.

In this book we meet Tohu and Te Whiti, the leaders of the Parihaka movement, along with Bryce, Hursthouse, Atkinson, Rolleston, Parris, Major Brown and Titokowaru, all apparently historically accurate.

And I have one lingering worry about the appropriateness of the climax of the fictional sub-plot, but I can't discuss that without giving away the ending, so you'll have to read it for yourself to see.

*Frank Gaze, New Plymouth*

### *For our overseas readers:*

"[In 1881 government troops invaded the village of Parihaka near the coast on the western side of Mount Taranaki/Egmont. This] action was sparked by non-violent Maori resistance to European occupation of confiscated lands near Parihaka. This village had attracted more than 2000 inhabitants who were disillusioned by the outcome of the Taranaki wars and who sought cultural and spiritual replenishment from the teachings of Te Whiti and Tohu. Both prophets encouraged further passive resistance to Pakeha settlement, such as pulling out survey pegs and removing fences on the land about to be occupied on the Waimate Plains.

Despite Parihaka's pacifist ethos, many Europeans in Taranaki and elsewhere feared that the resistance campaign was a prelude to armed conflict. Native Minister John Bryce used this fear as an excuse to lead 644 troops and nearly 1000 settler volunteers into Parihaka on 5 November 1881. Instead of violence, they were met by singing children offering them food. The pa was destroyed, none the less, and Te Whiti and Tohu and other leaders arrested - but not tried - for sedition. They then endured two years of enforced exile in Otago." *A Penguin History of New Zealand*, Michael King, pp219-220

## **Steps on The Spiral Staircase**

Don Feist from Dunedin wrote: I've just finished reading "The Spiral Staircase", Karen Armstrong's second version of the second volume of her autobiography. There are several passages in it which might be of sufficiently wide interest, and which can sufficiently well stand alone.

The first is quoted, on page 289, from the twelfth century Muslim mystic and philosopher Ibn al-Arabi: "Do not attach yourself to any particular creed exclusively, so that you may disbelieve all the rest; otherwise you will lose much good, nay, you will fail to recognize the real truth of the matter. God, the omnipresent and omnipotent, is not confined to any one creed, for, he says, 'Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of Allah'. Everyone praises what he believes; his god is his own creature, and in praising it he praises himself. Consequently he blames the beliefs of others, which he would not do if he were just, but his dislike is based on ignorance."

In the second (pp210-292), in regard to her research for writing *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong wrote "To my very great surprise, I was discovering that some of the most eminent Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians and mystics insisted that God was not an objective fact, was not another being, and was not an unseen reality like the atom, whose existence could be empirically demonstrated. Some went to so far as to say that God did not exist, because our notion of existence was too limited to apply to God.

Many of them preferred to say that God was Nothing, because this was not the kind of reality that we normally encountered. [see insert - ed].

## Tillich and the Existence of God

'The proposition 'God exists' ... is held by [Paul] Tillich to be self-contradictory ... because (a) God is ... 'being-itself', where 'being-itself' is emphatically not a being 'alongside' ... other beings, and because (b) 'existence' can only be predicated of 'beings'.

Paul Tillich, Alistair Macleod,  
in the series 'Contemporary Religious Thinkers', George  
Allen & Unwin 1973

It was even misleading to call God the Supreme Being, because that simply suggested a being like us, but bigger and better, with likes and dislikes similar to our own. .... All traditions went out of their way to emphasize that any idea we had of God bore no absolute relationship to the reality itself, which went beyond it. Our notion of a personal God is one symbolic way of speaking about the divine, but it cannot contain the far more elusive reality."

The last, from p295, is: "I have discovered that the religious quest is not about discovering 'the truth' or 'the meaning of life' but about living as intensely as possible here and now. The idea is not to latch on to some superhuman personality or to 'get to heaven' but to discover how to be fully human, hence the images of the perfect or enlightened man, or the deified human being. Archetypal figures such as Muhammad, the Buddha, and Jesus become icons of fulfilled humanity. God or Nirvana is not an optional extra, tacked on to our human nature. Men and women have a potential for the divine, and are not complete unless they realize it within themselves. A passing Brahmin priest once asked the Buddha whether he was a god, a spirit, or an angel. None of these, the Buddha replied; 'I am awake!'"

## Post-Modernising Mark

A review, by Noel Cheer, of Mark of a Non-Realist: A Contemporary Reading of the Second Gospel by Ian J. Cairns, published 2004 by Fraser Books, Chamberlain Rd, Masterton RD8, New Zealand \$NZ39.99 incl p&p.

**BORN IN 1930 IN ASHBURTON**, the Very Rev Ian Joseph Cairns was ordained in 1959. He was a scholar and teacher in classics, biblical and Islamic studies. With his wife, Mae, Ian spent 20 years in Indonesia, both as a teacher and as a chaplain. As well as being a parish minister, Dr. Cairns was, in 1984, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand where he was an advocate for gay and lesbian people during the homosexual law reform debates of that time.

Ian and Mae were foundation members of the Dunedin Branch of the Sea of Faith Network. In this book, Ian records "a major milestone" when, in 1993, he attended a day-seminar conducted by Don Cupitt. This helped to persuade Ian that "following Jesus" did not entail "copying Jesus". It also persuaded Ian that Jesus, like each of us, was a "child of his time" and that Jesus would have held attitudes and beliefs that we no longer do. The use of "non-realist" in the book title is justified by Ian when he writes, "Jesus was in all probability a realist ... [and that] ... requires me to translate the which he shared with

his generation, into the non-realism which I share with mine." The gospel writer, Mark, also would have been a realist but nevertheless, what he wrote is still of value. Incidentally, referring to this gospel as "the second" is out of step with modern liberal and radical scholarship which refers to the 'priority of Mark', it being drawn on by the authors of 'Matthew' and 'Luke'. However, the gospel in question is placed second in traditional New Testament collections.

Ian had finished this book by the time of his death in 2000 but had not had the opportunity to revise it. Nevertheless it reads fluently and shows a wealth of scholarship.

Obvious comparisons could be made with the work of The Jesus Seminar (which he cites appreciately on several occasions) and the New Testament translations done by Jim Veitch, both a decade or so ago. These are attempts to "get the record right", while Ian Cairns is trying to use postModernist principles of de-construction in order to re-construct the essence of Jesus' teaching to fit the knowledge and the vocabulary of today: making the record address today's world and its needs. We may see something similar in present-day attempts to so analyse myths as to 'break' (Tillich's term) them or, following Richard Holloway, to 'break them open' (think of an egg), extract the valuable interiors and then serve them up in more appropriate dishes.

Ian does this with his frequent translations of the biblical idiom into the non-realist idiom. So, we see on page 8 'repentance' (and the Greek 'metanoia') rendered as 'leaving an old mind-set behind, and re-ordering one's priorities from a new perspective, a new way of looking at things'. On page 16 the support that Jesus received from 'an angel from heaven' is understood as 'Jesus' inner resources'. On page 19 the 'torn heavens' of Mk 1:10 and Rev 6:14-16 are seen as 'symbolic of direct, unmediated apprehension of reality". The testing in the wilderness (page 25) becomes 'priority-setting time' and meditative prayer (page 23) is 'community-oriented-solitude ... communing, not with "Abba" but with life's totality.' With that promotion of 'life', one expects that Ian would have welcomed Don Cupitt's "Life, Life" published in 2003.

The two major themes of resurrection and Kingdom are reconstructed non-realistically.

## non-realism?

Anthony Freeman (author of *God In Us*) wrote: "Full-blown non-realism ... holds that things-in-themselves simply do not exist. There is nothing "out there", no physical material world and no Platonic world of forms. The only world is the world in our minds, things ... exist [only] in so far as we perceive them."

A modified version, in line with Kant, says that things-in-themselves do exist, although by definition we can know nothing of them due to the limiting effects of our sense organs and our use of language.

The non-realist approach to a definition of God is something like this: "God" is the name that we give to the collection of values by which we salute our existence and all that makes it meaningful, creative, vital and just. Some like to quote William Blake: "mercy, pity, peace and love."



The two major themes of resurrection and Kingdom are reconstructed non-realistically.

A non-realist reading of the resurrection of Jesus becomes (p129) the persistence into our time of the record of his life and the example that has inspired millions. Death didn't get the last word.

The 'Kingdom' (recently given a drubbing at the NZ Sea of Faith Conference by David Boulton who insists on a 'Republic') is called variously 'Commonwealth' and 'Kin-dom', both more-or-less successful attempts to remove notions of hierarchy. But whether Kingdom, Commonwealth, Kin-dom or Republic, all non-realists would agree that what is of concern is not a place but rather a mode of living, as recommended and exemplified by Jesus.

Some readers may be offended by the freedom of interpretation that Ian assumes. He notes (p92) that Mark's writing shows evidence of 'theologising' and he asserts that the same freedom that Mark had, we have too, and to better effect: "Our reconstructed version may in fact be closer to the actual happenings than is Mark's". And what of Jesus? On page 20 Ian refers to "Jesus' attunedness to life [surely in Cupitt's sense of 'Life, Life'?), his being at peace with himself, with his fellow human beings, and with his total environment ... [which] ... is not in principle unattainable by human beings. What Jesus was, every human being may in principle become." Mentor, exemplar ... but not the saviour of substitutionary atonement.

This book, then, is a bridge between the biblical world and the secular world that has replaced it. If there are gems from that world which may be recovered and brought into our world, it will be through the works of people like Ian Cairns.

*Noel Cheer*

## Whither or Wither The Presbyterian Church?

*Ian Crumpton* is a Steering Committee Member from Christchurch. He is also a retiring Presbyterian Minister. He recently wrote the following to his SoF Local Group.

I have just attended my final Presbyterian General Assembly. In 1968 I attended my first. From those days of dark suited, clerical collared commissioners and robed officials ("Moderator, Fathers and Brethren" was the standard form of address) the diversity today is astonishing: fifty Polynesian churches, twenty Asian congregations, charismatic influence, feminist influence, environmental influence, aging and shrinking congregations, and some churches exploding with youthful and fundamentalist zeal. The church has set a course to add a modern subordinate standard to its ancient Westminster Confession, and to rewrite its Book of Order. I doubt that either task will ever be completed. The church has become far too diverse to get any kind of consensus on such basics.

The deep social changes of the 1960s are now transforming the historic churches rapidly. A major contribution to this change is the retirement of my age group. Over the next few years, more than a hundred ministers will retire, most of a liberal or moderate theological disposition. People who entered ministerial training subsequent to my generation were fewer in number, often influenced by the charismatic movement, embracing a more conservative theology. Asian and Pacific ministers come from cultures and churches whose theology and style is about that of the Billy Graham years. Thus three trends are accelerating rapidly: an aging, shrinking church, a more diverse church, and a church growing more conservative in theology.

The falloff in support for the institutional church is part of a wider social trend. There is a falling off of support for most institutions: service clubs, lodges, sports clubs, political parties, youth organisations, as well as churches. All these groups are finding it hard to get people to take on leadership roles. Many people feel their lives are over-regulated already. They want freedom to choose, not commitment for life.

Our consumer culture turns people into religious consumers too – taking from what is on offer here and there for a smorgasbord of religious consumption. Many groups including some churches are responding by providing niche services – music and movement groups for pre-schoolers, groups for the elderly, youth groups, after-school programmes, counselling services, and the like. If well planned and run, these services fulfil a perceived need and do well. They are usually part of the all-pervasive market economy.

Globalisation is bringing exposure to a wider range of religious insights too. Muslims and Buddhists, Hindus and Jews are now among us in increasing numbers. Global and local issues draw the concern of many energetic and sincere young people. They join action groups like Amnesty and Greenpeace rather than churches, often networking through the internet to form global interest groups with a freedom hitherto undreamt of. This complements the freedoms they have discovered through automobile and cell-phone technologies (the latter replacing barbie dolls as every girl's essential); and the libertine attitudes portrayed on television soaps and sitcoms. What more do you need if you're young and with it?

Against this background, the Presbyterian church is currently moving to ban "practising" gays and lesbians from being trained and ordained as elders or ministers, along with those in de facto relationships. By so doing it is condemning itself to a backwater of religious conservatism along with Destiny and the other televangelists that blight our television in the early morning hours.

For sure there has always been Christian distrust of progress. In the past many liberating trends were solidly opposed by the pious: freeing of slaves, use of musical instruments in worship, modern Biblical studies, women in leadership, to name but a few. Reactionary religious groups still repudiate a number of these developments. But the main stream of Reformed Christianity has been able to move slowly to a more Christ-like and accepting view in these matters. If the church is unable to move to a more accepting view on the current issue – as I suspect is the case – then it will indeed find itself in a time warp. Far from being a haven for disgruntled Presbyterians (and others who have fallen off the edge of Christian denominations), the Sea of Faith Network is one place where a spirituality relevant to the world in which we now live can be explored. The religious impulse is a vital aspect of our humanity, hard-won through the long evolutionary process. As the institutional church declines more rapidly, the importance of such groups cannot be over-estimated.

May the faith be with you!

Ian Crumpton

## 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 SoF 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 start your subscription, send \$65 to the Membership Secretary (address above). Renewal rates will be advised from the UK. *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/](http://www.standrews.org.nz/satrs/)

## Last Word

From The Chairperson

### Flotsam on the Returning Tide

In various ways, Sea of Faith groups and networks in many countries have been celebrating this year as the twentieth anniversary of Don Cupitt's TV series "The Sea of Faith". It became the catalyst for the formation of this loose association of people intent on finding better ways to 'promote the quest for meaning and fulfillment as a human activity'.

At this year's Sheffield Conference in July, Don Cupitt said: **"Thirty years ago 'the secularization thesis' was still in the saddle, and people supposed that as knowledge grew and technology advanced the whole culture must become more secular, so that organized religion would fade away and generally cease to be a problem."**

If "The Sea of Faith" was premised on an outgoing tide, it is obviously time to note that the tide has turned. Don continued: **"But today religion is back with a vengeance, transformed into new and very militant political ideologies such as Sionism, Islamism, and BJP-Hinduism. No religion, not even Buddhism, is exempt from this extreme form of politicization: in Sri Lanka the national mythology of the Sinhala people assures them that the Buddha gave Ceylon to them, to be occupied by them alone, and — amazingly — Buddhist monks have endorsed their government's war against the Tamils. There can be little doubt that in this new form religion will cause quite as much mayhem in the twenty-first century as the secular political ideologies of fascism and communism caused in the twentieth century."**

So accustomed are we to associating 'religion' with niceness (overlooking the gentle Jesus meek and mild who said that he was bringing 'not peace but a sword') we are alarmed at what the tide is bringing in.

At a speech in Dunedin in August which referred to a one-thousand-year-old attitude, David Lange said: **"I can't help but use the word crusade when I think about the American invasion of Iraq. I mean by that to say that the invasion was made possible by a popular belief in the justice of the American cause which goes beyond reason and cannot be understood by those who do not share it, let alone by those who have been the victims of it. The new crusaders carry, not a cross, but a ballot box. Democracy is the name they give to their faith, and their battle cry is freedom. Opponents of the invasion who questioned the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq were brushed off with the argument that the regime was evil and should be replaced by a democratic government. Now that the weapons are known not to exist, the replacement of the regime, and the establishment of democracy in Iraq, have been claimed as justification for the whole adventure."**

While humans exist, religion will persist. While it is not the mission of the Sea of Faith Network to create new institutions, we have a strong interest in the dialogue that keep aberrant forms out of contention.

*Noel Cheer, Steering Committee Chairperson, 2004-2005*

P.S: Merry Christmas, Hanukah, Deewalli — whatever!