



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

Conference 2006

**September 29 to October 1 at Nga Tawa
Wellington Diocesan School for Girls, Marton**

NEXT YEAR'S CONFERENCE WILL BE HELD AT Nga Tawa, The Wellington Diocesan School for Girls in Marton from **29 September to 1 October**. Marton is between Palmerston North and Wanganui in the Rangitikei, just off Highway 1.

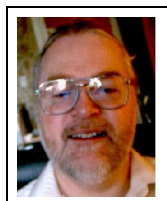
Both of your committees are working to ensure an excellent time. The Steering Committee is busy determining a theme for the programme, and the Arrangements Committee is working with Nga Tawa on facilities.



This is a brief resume of the facilities you can expect. The school and rooms are modern, while the school hall, chapel and general façade give it a traditional feel. There are 250 beds, mostly single in large rooms, over forty of which are grouped in cottages. The school specialises in music, arts, and recreation, so the campus and buildings are ample and pleasant. There is a world-class equestrian facility, and as the girls take their mounts with them for school break, let me know if you require stabling for yours. I'll see what I can do.

Excursions to local sites have proved popular with conference attendees in previous years. Marton is near interesting gardens and natural features. Once the theme is decided, I'll advise on some of the related cultural sites close by. Those who come by car may wish to visit locally before or after, and the arrangements committee will do what it can to let you know what is available. As mentioned in Christchurch, our pricing is dependent on a minimum number of attendees, so I hope you will make use of the accommodation and catering for what is sure to be an exciting programme and a chance to catch up with friends and others in attendance. See you at Conference!

Larry Haist
Arrangements Committee Chairperson 2006



Newsletter 64

November 2005

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THE GODS HAVE TO GO

John Patrick of Warkworth asks, and answers, “why is God coming back?”

CARL ROGERS (he of the non-directive counselling school) worked on the dictum “The more personal, the more general.” I am aware that, in writing as I do, I may be straying from the generally accepted norms of academia ... Even more is this true when trying to enlarge on what God belief could possibly mean in the contemporary world where the most danger to the survival of the human species is presently posed by the fundamentalist fringes of religion.

The current answers given to the oft repeated dogma “there must be something” seem mostly fatuous, and indicate that we have learned nothing in the past 300 years. Indeed, media coverage of religious issues is characterised by a total lack of knowledge about the subject in general, and the particular question being addressed!

In the 1970’s, one of the most interesting studies (in the midst of a plethora of “Death of God”-type material, John Robinson, Lloyd Geering et al) was a volume called *Why Believe in God?* a series of essays by John Hick, philosopher, and Michael Goulder, theologian and Anglican priest. I, in my naivete thought that the matter had been settled. Goulder had won the contest. He left the Church, and belief in a superior, perfect Being living somewhere outside the cosmos had finally been put to rest. I imagined the tombstone: YHWH...RIP.

I resigned from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand soon after, and breathed several deep sighs of relief.

To my consternation, the last twenty years have seen the resurgence of authoritarian, fundamentalist type God-belief. Indeed, the world’s attitudes to many things are now predicated on American conservative religion and its political hench-people. The latter word is to leave space for Condaleeza Rice! I cringed when George Dubya announced his “crusade against terrorism”. I knew precisely what meaning fundamentalist Islam would take from those words. **Conservative fundamentalist Christians are hoping and praying for a holocaust in the Middle East, to satisfy their desire for the fulfillment of so-called prophecy, and to see “believers” rising to heaven while everybody else dies horribly in a God-organised war.**

The immorality of this “God-action” totally escapes the devotees. Indeed it seems to have always been true that slaughter carried out by the God of the Judeo/Christian faith is okay, as is slaughter carried out by his followers. However, slaughter carried out by someone else’s deity is evil and to be deplored. The

logic of this position totally defeats me and its acceptance seems like something out of the Middle Ages.

In Israel/Palestine, fundamentalist opinion on the Jewish side asserts the absolute right (God given) to the whole of ancient Israel, and the solution of the Palestine problem to be removing all Palestinians to Jordan or some other Middle East Muslim state, so that Israelis can live in peace and prosperity in the land given to them by YHWH. In some ways the most radical of Zionist belief and behaviour is not far removed from the Nazi programmes called the “final solution” ... what an irony!

Fundamental Islamic militancy sees the destruction of the “great Satan” of Western society led by the United States as being a real obligation, and an opportunity for glory in heaven as martyrs. Seventy virgins is the prize. No-one has said what prize awaits Moslem women responsible for bombings and killings!

So, what, I keep asking myself, is the reason for this resurgence of ancient religious superstition at the beginning of the 21st century?

Why has a god who seems nothing more than an enlarged (and often totally immoral) human being suddenly taken centre stage within the conservative wing of the Christian Church worldwide, and also in New Zealand? I think there are four reasons:

1. Fear: We [have recently discovered that we] are ... living on an overpopulated and rapidly decomposing piece of rock in a universe in which we have found no other life... and we have to accept responsibility for the great issues of whether this planet, and our grandchildren will have a future.

We have dirtied the environment ... we have to clean it up. We have started horrible wars and it seems there is no peace.

We are “filling the earth and subduing it” and we cannot find the wit or the will to share its resources. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

We don’t trust our leaders ... the fundamentalists wishing they were more aggressive, and the liberal believers trying to rein in the aggression.

So, enter God. The great One. He will fix everything, punish the naughty ones, reward the goodies, and, anyway, even if it all turns to custard, the chosen will fly into heaven and reign forever, sing forever, and learn to play the harp and, perchance, there will be some virgins even for the non-Muslim!

continued ...

2. Anxiety: large questions like “Who am I?”, “What does it all mean?” are characteristic of people in city/suburbia/country. And if I can’t find meaning and purpose in the life I have, I will search for someone/something else to invest me with that meaning ... sex, drugs and rock and roll filled the vacuum for many in the 60’s, but didn’t, in the end, satisfy. (Look how many Haight/Asbury people are now earning big in the corporate world).

For many people the challenge to seek and find their own meaning and purpose is too great ... marriage and family is fraught with difficulty, and, often, doesn’t satisfy that human need to see and know value in my particular piece of life. God, however, can fill that gap. He/She values me, loves me, will bring me to fulfillment, so I’ll go along with him/her and so, even when everything else fails, I will have the consolation of knowing that I am worth something, and that my life is not confined to the short years I spend on planet Earth. **For the first time in human history the “average Joe” is required to build a framework within which to understand his/her own life. This is a hazardous business and one from which many resile.**

3. Need for an Authority. Just when all seems lost in the search for personal meaning (note *not* community meaning), along comes someone with a wonderful answer. There is a book (Bible, Torah, Koran) which contains the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth ... and, wonderful news, there is someone who knows how to interpret it with authority as well! So I will go along with the interpreter and with the Book.

This is, of course, very strange. Fairy stories from the Bible are literalised, fantasy literature is literalised: indeed everything is literalised, and the believer is swept along on a wave of certainty. Personal future secured, infallibly guaranteed by the Book and its interpreter. Moral decisions are now easy, personal life-styles are straightforward; attend the meetings, give obeisance to the deity, send money, and believe “six impossible things before breakfast”.

The deity will certainly cure you from cancer (if he chooses) and will not cure you (if he chooses) because, you see, in the irrational world of the fundamentalist, God can never lose. If he/she appears to, it must be something I have done or not done. Many years ago, a man called Sargeant wrote a seminal book called *Battle for the Mind* in which he analysed the performances of great “persuaders” like Hitler, some evangelists, politicians etc. The techniques were always the same, and, indeed, the battle goes on. (Try watching the televangelists from the States, or New Zealand’s own Brian Tamaki.)

4. The need for a Destination. Many seem dissatisfied if human life doesn’t “go somewhere”. Like John Mitchell they feel that life must conclude with the arrival at the end of the journey.... like a train trip, birth is the boarding station, and the destination is where you finish up after you are dead. *Au contraire*, life is a brief

flicker in the vast empty universe, going nowhere, except where it has always gone ... to its inevitable conclusion as the bard knew only too well.. “sans hair, sans teeth, sans everything.” Thus we have to make the best of the journey. Learning what we can, experiencing the good, bad and indifferent, grieving at the wastefulness of it all, laughing at the “fates” and doing the best we can to live by the values we espouse, in company with everyone else who is on the same journey in the same snatch of time as we ourselves.

Life is an experience of the “present”... past is gone; future is not here (and may never be here in our experience.)

The gods, of course, experience none of these anxieties or fears, and that is why we must get rid of them. They encourage us to be perfect when that is beyond us. They promise us heaven when we are of the earth, earthy. And, worst of all, they teach us that we can do nothing useful without them and so we fail to meet the real challenges of making a world and a society fit for our grandchildren!

Recent trends in Christian theology fail to get to the heart of the matter: Lloyd Geering wishes to redefine the word “God” as the sum of the values which humanity has learned by experience are commendable: Spong wishes to continue using the word, and seems to have a vestigial belief in “something” transcendent. Cupitt doubts that the word has any use.

However, it’s not the words that are the problem. **The issue is that the gods have to go.**

This means that the Sons of God also have to go, and so do the “spirits” as well!! I suspect someone will call this “humanism”. It is not. It is simply a recognition that traditional religion has had its day.

It is time to move on, be mature in our attitudes and our values, learn to respect and care for one another in community because that is the best way in which we can survive and have lives that are something more than short and brutish.

In case you think that all this is depressingly pessimistic, let me assure you that I love my life.. the challenges, joys, pains and griefs which arrive. It will end one day and I will embrace the end as I embraced the beginning, and everything in between I want nothing more!

John Patrick

Science Has Its Gods Too

“The secularist is on solid ground only when he says that science *works* — at least in achieving the aims to which it reasonably limits itself — and that it accumulates [knowledge]. The fatal extrapolation to make from this position is that it must, therefore, potentially be omniscient and omniscient.

Scientific fundamentalism is the belief that the world is accessible to and ultimately controllable by human reason. This is a profoundly unscientific idea. It is neither provable nor refutable ... a leap of faith”

Bryan Appleyard *New Scientist* 8 October 2005

Local Groups

The complete list can be found at www.sof.org.nz



Nelson

Last month, Alec Brown spoke to us on Celtic Christianity. When conducting worship, Alec regularly uses liturgies based on Celtic Christianity. He explained that there is both a secular and a Christian Celtic tradition. The latter first came to Ireland from Brittany with St Patrick in the 5th century. Christianity spread to SW England to SW Wales to Iona and to Lindisfarne, where St Aidan and St Cuthbert were prominent.

Celtic Christians didn't condemn the secular, were not confrontational and promoted equality with women. The Celtic people were agrarian, tribal, nomadic and had an oral-based culture. They had a sense of closeness between the natural and supernatural world. St Hilda of Whitby was a revered abbess and in the 5th century Bridget was appointed a Bishop. Romans and Celts met in conference in Whitby in the 6th Century and formed the Council of Whitby. Early Celtic Christians met under the Celtic cross and didn't have buildings of their own. They were non-judgemental and forgiving. They had a balanced view of the Trinity. The celtic knot had no end.

A lively discussion intermingled with Alec's talk made for a very interesting evening.

Contacts:

Lindsay Vaughan (03)548-4778 or Elizabeth Duncan (03)545-2003

Waikato

Fred Marshall has supplied us with this résumé of their September meeting.

“Peter Timmins quoted the famous lines from ‘Dover Beach’ by Matthew Arnold [“but now I only hear / Its its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,”], then spoke under the title **‘SOFN is more properly viewed as part of the withdrawing roar than as a new religion’**.

He examined critically the state of the Sea of Faith in New Zealand. The movement has aided those who were dissatisfied with the church in one form or another to focus their dissatisfaction and break the links with traditional religion; the debate between realism and non-realism has come and gone.

What then is the Sea of Faith to do to maintain a sense of purpose and coherence? He wondered whether we need to espouse a cause which would

stamp a character on the movement, or whether stronger links could be established between groups and also between groups and the national Conference.

In the discussion that followed it was pointed out that hitherto the SoF provided a secure forum in which a very diverse range of views could be presented and discussed sympathetically; it was this secure environment of debate that helped people sort out their ideas. To move from this unconstrained freedom to the limitations of a cause and the possible dogma which that would bring seemed to some a retrograde step. It was noted that the same lethargy and the diminishing of interest and purpose which came in its train was also evident on the SoFNet — the Sea of Faith Internet discussion network — which has always been distinct from the local and international membership. The question is an important one for the future of the movement.

It was left for the future to resolve.

In the course of discussion the view was put forward that Local Groups might tap the talents and intuitions of members, but that it would be more appropriate to draw on talent outside the membership for the general meetings.

Contact:

Fred Marshall frch0060@waikato.ac.nz

Faith in Cyberspace

Religion in the Media



For those interested in insightful and critical issues regarding religion and its portrayal it can be difficult to sift and winnow through a myriad of material offered on the web.

Jointly sponsored by the New York University Department of Journalism and New York University's Center for Religion and Media, *The Revealer* www.therevealer.org is a well-thought out review of just such matters, and one that will be of great interest to persons with a penchant for the subject.

And The Don Still Flows

Don Cupitt has a website at www.doncupitt.com From it we learn that he is currently writing *The Old Creed and the New*. New books in the pipeline include *The Great Questions of Life* (perhaps 2006), and *Radical Theology*, a collection of essays written at various times.

Semantic, Epistemological, Existential and Metaphysical Problems in Theology, Part 317:

May I call myself 'Religious'?

Noel Cheer

Any dialogue with a Humanist or a Rationalist or a Skeptic will soon reveal that they have what could be taken for a passionate loathing of 'religion'.

Further enquiry will reveal that the main reason is that, for them and for many others, 'religion' is cut only from supernatural cloth, a point of view supported by most current dictionaries.

Is this entirely fair — and is it useful?

BECAUSE I HAVE NO USE FOR THE "GOD HYPOTHESIS" as naming a supra-personal Creator, Judge and Redeemer, I stand with secular Humanists in finding not only no explanatory power in these terms but only confusion and distraction from better ways to address human life and its complexities.

In wordier moments, I identify my faith profile as being made up of 'non-realism', 'expressivism', 'postChristianity' — with a sprinkling of postModernist scepticism.

Until confronted with the dilemma that this article points to, I was accustomed to calling myself a 'religious humanist'. I also took delight in distinguishing the 'secular humanist' from the 'religious humanist'. (Such a distinction is useful, for example in comparing Freud — who saw our religious disposition as an infantile illusion to be grown out of — with Jung — who saw our spirituality as that which makes us human at all.) **But common usage, as recorded in dictionaries, would have it that 'religious humanist' is a contradiction in terms.**

But while I concede that common usage of the term 'religion' assumes a supernatural essence, I would prefer that it did not. There is plenty of precedent for this Canute-like approach to terminology — just look at the hassles caused by the different handling of words such as 'myth', 'belief' and 'faith' as between a secular and a religious/spiritual context.

In his small book *Does Society Need Religion?* (SATRS 1998) Lloyd Geering wrote: "To be religious is primarily to show devotion, to experience a sense of the sacred, to show reverence, to regard something as holy ... One can experience a sense of the sacred in many things other than what is conceived to be supernatural, spiritual or otherworldly."

Similarly, and still without a supernatural requirement, Paul Tillich referred to religion as **"the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary"**.

I think that something like this is the unacknowledged faith-umbrella for the concerns

that Humanists and Rationalists commendably pursue. For example it might be the un-named motivation that makes them, along with most SoF people, repudiate the fundamentalism and medievalism which bedevil the ailing body of conventional Christianity and which visit baleful effects on the world. **So conscientious is their pursuit that it deserves to be called 'religious', at least in the way that we have noted above.**

Why should those of us who want to promote the quest for meaning and fulfillment by drawing selectively on our spiritual heritage and who at the same time prefer to distance ourselves from a supernaturalist metaphysics or a literalist reading of scriptures, have to abandon the use of the word 'religion' on the grounds that it has attracted undesirable connotations? For my part, the distinction merely identifies a confusion between the use of *metaphors* (which I too can employ and enjoy) and *metaphysical affirmations* about reality (which I can't).

I would regret surrendering 'religion/religious' both to religious literalists and to those who show hostility to religion. By retaining the word 'religion' — as naming human faith (in which the use of supernatural terminology is only one option) — we are better able to show the historical continuity of human faith, while acknowledging the enormous diversity of its expressions.

If we must choose another word, what might it be? 'Faith'? 'Spirituality'? Instead of talking of 'religion' and 'a religion' we might adopt Wilfred Cantwell Smith's 'faith' — for the personal disposition, and 'a path of faith' — for its formalised expression.

I have a fondness for the term 'Radical Human-ism'. It names the nearest that I have to a creed in that, if we can successfully 'do' being human, with all its joy at its own loving creativity and its humility in the face of a bewildering universe, then something worthy to be called "God" will very likely emerge.

Noel Cheer

“Thinking *Without* Thinking”

How Words Enable ... and Constrain Thought

Habit Thinking

David Galston of the SnowStar Institute, Canada, wrote this in “Axial” Autumn 2005

“... human beings have mythic imaginations that, if unchecked are dangerous. Why? Because unexamined myths that lie at the back of our minds are a foundation for false securities and illegitimate certainties. Myths silently become our assumptions about life. They become our unquestioned point of view. Heidegger called this phenomenon ‘everydayness’. He meant that our everyday life is the activity of interpreting the world according to the foundational myths of our culture, personal history and language. Buddhism, by using the expression ‘habit thinking’ provides a similar insight. Habit thinking is thinking what we are accustomed to think — ironically it is ‘thinking without thinking’.

Final Vocabulary

Richard Rorty in “The Fontana Postmodernism Reader” pp96-97

"All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person's "final vocabulary".

It is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. These words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only hopeless passivity or a resort to force. A small part of a final vocabulary is made up of thin and ubiquitous terms such as "true", "good", "right", and "beautiful".

The larger part contains thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, "Christ", "England", "professional standards", "decency", "kindness", "the Revolution", "the Church", "progressive", "rigorous", "creative".

The more parochial words do most of the work.

You Can't Drink 'Water'

Don Feist of Dunedin submitted the following:

I've been reading *Revelations — Personal Responses to the Books of the Bible*. Edited by Richard Holloway, published by Canongate 2005.

Thirty-three people have written introductions to twenty-odd books. I had doubts about the concept when

I first heard of it, and, like any anthology some parts appeal to me much more than others.

But I find that these novelists, poets and song-writers are sometimes much more on the wave-length of the biblical writers than many modern academic commentators.

For me, the pick of what I've read so far is this beginning of Richard Holloway's Introduction to the gospel of Luke:

“There is a lot to be said for attaching a health warning to religion. It can be a hazardous business, because it is often based on a seductive deceit. In its most dangerous form it claims to have found words that exactly express one of the great mysteries that obsess the imagination, the possibility of God.

So words about God are treated as though they were equivalent to God, and religious authorities demand our assent to them. Our fidelity or infidelity is tested by our relationship to the official vocabulary that is supposed to express the divine mystery. Since there is no final way of either verifying or falsifying such claims, the opportunity religious language offers us for violence and discord is endless. This is why many of the sanest minds in history have been wary of religion and its explosive, but unsustainable claims.

Apart from the danger religion may pose to our physical health, it can also endanger us spiritually, because it can trap us in language about mysteries rather than open us to the mysteries themselves. One of our problems as humans is that our greatest gift, language, is also our greatest danger. We destroy ourselves by our words. The word ‘water’ is not itself drinkable. Words point to things, but they can never be the things they point to.

This may seem too obvious to waste time on, but it is a truth that is often ignored in religious circles. All theology is

a doomed but necessary attempt to express the inexpressible. God is the elusive mystery we try to capture and convey in language, but how can that ever be done? If the word ‘water’ is not itself drinkable, how can the words we use to express the mystery of God be themselves absolute? They are metaphors, analogies, figures of speech, yet religious people have slaughtered and condemned each other over these experimental uncertainties. Our glory and agony is that we long to find words that will no longer be words, mere signifiers, but the very experience they are trying to signify; and our tragedy is that we can never succeed., This is the anguish that lies at the heart of all religion, because, though our words can describe our thirst for the absolute, they can never satisfy it”.

We destroy ourselves by our words.



The Greening of Christianity

by Lloyd Geering
SATRS 2005, \$12

By Don Feist, Dunedin

I've just recently bought and read this booklet, the latest set of Lloyd Geering's lectures for the St Andrew's Trust (see page 10 - ed). I strongly recommend it.

In chapter 1 — **The Global Crisis** — Lloyd spells out just why not only the human race, but the planet, needs urgent and responsible action by humans. As the human population mushrooms, food, water and air supplies are threatened. But one vocal strand of Christianity actually welcomes this crisis, claiming that it will hasten 'the Rapture' when true believers will be lifted up from the earth and transported to heaven. 'If Christianity is to respond to the challenge issued by the ecological scientists, it must put its own house in order'. 'We must move beyond a spirituality focussed simply on the divine and the human to a spirituality concerned with the survival of the natural world in its full splendour, its fertility and its integral well-being'.

The next chapter — **Beyond "Our Father who art in Heaven"** — covers from the beginnings of monotheism to modern rethinking of the idea of 'God'. Monotheism replaced a sense of unity with the natural world with a dualism of earthly/heavenly, material/spiritual, and led to a concept of stewardship which allowed humans to hold on to an arrogant attitude toward other beings on this planet. In the Christian era, 'the twin doctrines of the Incarnation and the Holy Trinity proved too revolutionary even for most Christians to cope with. ... the human Jesus became lost from view behind the wholly divine Christ and the gulf between heaven and earth reappeared.' Some modern Christian thinkers are pointing a way beyond this. 'But are we really up to that?' This chapter is a crystal-clear summary of how Lloyd believes that Christianity has arrived at the crisis it is now in.

Chapter 3 is titled: **The Ecological Imperative, A New Ethical Dimension**. Lloyd starts from a respected 1937 text-book on Christian Ethics *The Divine Imperative*, which I, like him, had to study as a theological student. But with the disintegration of the old monotheism, such an authoritarian, rooted-in-the-past basis for ethics is no longer either adequate or convincing. For people aware that the human race is in process of coming of age, the fundamental question is no longer 'What has God commanded?' but rather 'What is good for the planet and all its inhabitants?' This is the 'ecological imperative' of the chapter title.

Finally, Lloyd turns to **Greening Rites and Festivals**. 'Perhaps' he says, 'there is no better way to reconnect Christianity with the natural world than to examine the major Christian festivals and trace them back to their origins in nature'. Worship that helps us reconnect with nature won't have to throw out everything traditional. There are surprisingly many such links still present — even though most of them have been overlaid with a stress on personal salvation which ignores the natural world, or on the heavenly half of a natural/supernatural dualism. There is more attention paid in most hymns, for example, to a future life in heaven, than to how to live well, now.

But don't take my outline as a substitute — it is worth reading in full.

By Alan Goss, Napier

These lectures, delivered at St Andrews on the Terrace in May 2005, explore the impact our new understanding of ecology will have on the Christian tradition. To what extent, if any, will that tradition need to change?

Lloyd Geering deals first with the current global crisis. Since 1962, when Rachel Carson's seminal book *Silent Spring* was published, many writers have issued warnings about the threat we humans pose to the environment. These warnings are often dismissed or ignored by an apathetic public or by people whose wealth and business interests depend upon the technology doing the damage. Nor is the position helped by those fundamentalist Christians, notably in the United States, who have a death-wish for the end of the world, followed by the 'rapture'. The earth becomes a means to an end, to be exploited and not valued for its own sake.

Lloyd contends that if Christianity is to respond to the ecological challenges confronting us, it must put its own house in order. It must move towards a spirituality which embraces the whole of the natural world, not simply the divine and human. Monotheism, with its dualistic tendencies, e.g. spirit-matter, must give way to re-imagining God in more down-to-earth ways. This process — we call it secularisation — is the long term result of the doctrine of the incarnation, i.e. the earthing of God. We humans are not passive beings dependant on a higher power "from above", the responsibility for shaping our future and that of the ecosphere has been placed fairly and squarely in our hands. Our actions must reflect the highest values we once attributed to God.

In short, Christians must shift focus from an external divine imperative (God "out there") to an internalised earth-centred imperative (God "down here"). This will mean incorporating all that we have learned about human existence from the various human sciences. Our mission is to hand the earth over to our descendants in the best possible shape — or in traditional terms, to love God and love your neighbour.

The last chapter outlines ways in which congregations can re-create the great Christian festivals and rituals, reconnecting them with the natural world and making them more relevant to life.

Within the brief compass of 54 pages Lloyd Geering has given to the Church and to the nation a charter for the future. Martin Luther offered 95 theses. The connection should not be lightly dismissed.

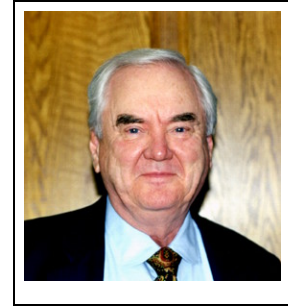
MANY OF THE STUDY BOOKLETS referred to in this Newsletter are available from **The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society** which has a style very similar to that of SoF (NZ).

You can view their book catalogue and read about forthcoming speaking events on their website at www.standrews.org.nz/satrs/



Robert Walter Funk

1926 — 2005

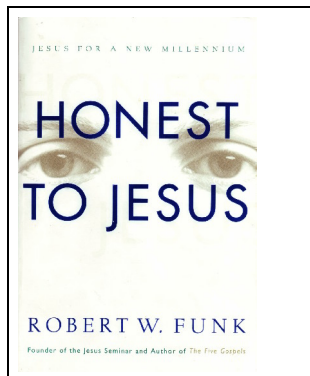
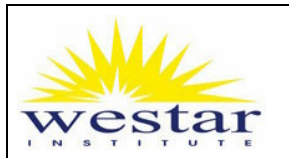


Robert Walter Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar and one of the most influential New Testament scholars of his generation, died on September 3, 2005 at his home in Santa Rosa, California, following a brief illness. The following copy came from the website of the Westar Institute www.westarinstitute.org

A DISTINGUISHED TEACHER, WRITER, TRANSLATOR AND PUBLISHER in the field of religious studies, Robert Funk retired from the University of Montana in 1986 to found the Westar Institute, a non-profit research and educational institute dedicated to the advancement of religious literacy.

Westar's first project, the Jesus Seminar, renewed the quest for the historical Jesus begun by David Friedrich Strauss in the nineteenth century and later taken up by Albert Schweitzer at the beginning of the twentieth. At the opening session of the Jesus Seminar in 1985, Funk defined its mission as follows: "We are going to inquire simply, rigorously after the voice of Jesus, after what he really said." The Jesus of Nazareth discovered by the Jesus Seminar was a wisdom teacher whose parables proclaimed the arrival of God's kingdom. He was not, in the judgment of the Seminar, the messiah of the end-times. These and other findings of the Seminar drew widespread attention throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Funk further influenced the course of biblical scholarship by insisting that Fellows of the Jesus Seminar communicate the results of biblical scholarship directly to the literate public.

A Guggenheim Fellow and Senior Fulbright Scholar, Robert Funk served as Annual Professor of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, as chair of the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University, and as Executive Secretary of the Society of Biblical Literature, the learned society of bible scholars. His many books include *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God* (1966), *Jesus as Precursor* (1975), *Parables and Presence* (1982), *The*

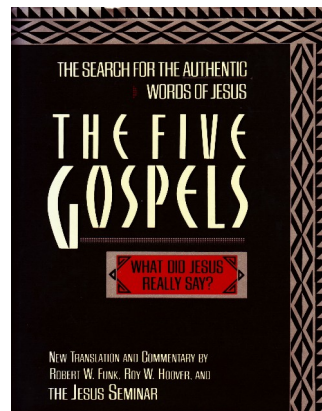


Poetics of Biblical Narrative (1988), *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (1993) and *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds* (1998) (both with the Jesus Seminar), *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (1996), and *A Credible Jesus* (2002), as well as two Greek grammars.

Robert Funk was born July 18, 1926, in Evansville, Indiana, the eldest son of Robert Joseph and Ada Funk. He was educated at Butler University (AB 1947) and its affiliated Christian Theological Seminary (BD 1950; MA 1951) and at Vanderbilt University (PhD 1953). He also pursued special studies at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland (1947), the University of Tübingen, Germany (1965–1966), and the University of Toronto, Canada (1973–1974). Funk served on the faculties of Texas Christian University, Harvard Divinity School, Emory University, Drew University, Vanderbilt Divinity School, University of Montana, where he and colleague Ray Hart founded the Department of Religious Studies. In May 2005, he was honored with a Doctorate in Humane Letters by his alma mater, Butler University.

Robert Funk is survived by his wife Charlene Matejovsky of Santa Rosa, California, daughters Andrea Ray of Eugene, Oregon, and Stephanie McFarland of Portland, Oregon, three grandchildren Alyson, Katie, and Jake McFarland, and a brother Charles Anthony Foster of Tampa, Florida. Another brother John Gilbert Funk died in 2003.

Donations may be sent to the Robert W. Funk Memorial Fund at Westar Institute, P.O. Box 7268, Santa Rosa, California 95407.



In Brief

Our 2006 Steering Committee

Chairperson: Noel Cheer, Titahi Bay,
Secretary: Mary Boekman, Inglewood
Treasurer and Membership Secretary,
Ron Wilson, Auckland

Committee Members:

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Norm Ely, Titahi Bay
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Suzi Thirlwall, Tauranga: *Resource Centre*
Alison Eng, Christchurch: *Archivist*
Yvonne Curtis, Wellington: *Newsletter Distribution*
Noel Cheer, *Newsletter and Website.*

To Think Like A Mountain

We have received a brochure advertising a 4-day residential workshop (27 Jan to 4 Feb 2006) in Tongariro National Park. You will be invited to explore what it means "to think like a mountain", and "what does it mean for this Earth to be Christ's body", and, "where do we encounter the Being of Life in the world?" The seminar will be lead by Elisabeth Alington (drawing on Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy) and Hartmut Borries, formerly a priest with The Christian Community — Movement for Religious Renewal. The all-up cost is about \$400. **Details:** Lis Alington 06-877-2169 or ea@paradise.net.nz

Answers to SoFWord No.4

ACROSS 1:LOVELOCK 6:NUTS 9:GUN 10:ION 11:ALLO 12:UR
13:EN 15:TENSION 18:EAGLE 19:KOBÉ 20:DOMAIN
23:GRAND 24:FEE 26:ELSE 27:BLUR 28:YELLOW 2:BRIAN
33:MOSS
DOWN: 2:OGLE 3:VULNERABLE 4:ENO 5:CONTEMPORARY
6:NOUS 7:UNRIPE 8:STONEHENGE 14:AGOG 16:NISSAN
17:TACK 20:DG 21:MA 22:IDEALS 24:FOP 29:EM 30:LO
31:OS

There wasn't room to include a SoFWord in this issue

New Scientist 8 Oct. 2005 p47



Why Be Moral?

THIS DISCUSSION COMES FROM

The Philosopher at the End of the Universe by Mark Rowlands, Elbury Press 2003/2005. The author uses themes from science fiction movies as a springboard for discussing philosophical issues.

He starts chapter 6 by contrasting our acting **prudentially** (optimising our wellbeing) with acting **morally**. "When we do something because we believe [that] it is the right thing to do, and when we refrain from doing something because we believe [that] it is the wrong thing to do, [then] we are acting from what we can call moral reasons."

We are obviously going to meet conflicts between morality and self-interest, and so " ... Our question, then, becomes this: "why act from moral reasons rather than prudential reasons?"

His first offering is to suggest that, for some people, "God is watching" and will reward or punish us. He dismisses this strategy as not a moral consideration at all because it is just another instance of acting prudentially. To avoid getting thumped, just behave yourself.

He then deals with the implied "social contract" by which we all live and which gives the proper authorities in society the power to hold us to account. The author sees our compliance with the laws and mores of our society as no more a moral strategy than the former, its just that "the retributive role of God has been taken over by society."

It was Kant who said that moral rightness consists in doing our duty by acting consistently. This means that we can "reduce the moral 'ought' *not* to a prudential 'ought' *but* to a logical 'ought'." But even this does not really work — I could recommend that *other* people act consistently while exempting *myself* and getting some advantages from doing so. OK, so I'm no longer consistent, but I'm having a good time!

"The whole point of the question is [to ask] why let moral reasons override reasons of self-interest".

To amplify the point, the author refers to myths of magic rings which confer invisibility so that the wearer to get away with murder, sometimes literally. **If I can get away with it, then why shouldn't I?** So, with invisibility, there's no prudential incentive for us to act inside a social contract or any other constraint. Especially if God isn't watching.

After having reduced all apparent **moral** behaviour to **prudential**, he suggests that what remains to constrain or inspire us is only our own good opinion of our selves: "your image of the sort of person you want to be". But isn't that self-interest also?

Before we ask "why be moral?" we need first to ask "is it logically possible to be moral — since all reasons, by long paths or short, find their way back to prudential self-interest"?

Noel Cheer

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

The **Secretary** is Mary Boekman,
138 Rata St, Inglewood, phone 06-756-7644

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,
P.O. Box 35651, Browns Bay, Auckland.
(Phone 09-478-2490).

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

Further details can be found on our website at www.sof.org.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 \$53 to our Membership Secretary (address above). Renewal rates will be advised from the UK. Note that this is an option, 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

Words, words, words ...

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN WROTE THAT "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language."

Of all the many and diverse areas of human discourse it is surely the lexicon of religion that spooks us most. Even the very word 'religion' confuses us, as I wrote on page 5. The collection of pieces on page 6 extends the theme.

Periodically, some of our members express regret that the equally-elusive word 'faith' is part of our name. Furthermore, the word 'belief' splits the wider community into those who hear 'belief that' (a proposition) and 'belief in' (an affirmation of trust).

We note the difference between 'doing' religion and 'talking about' religion. Linguistic confusion most noticeably takes its toll in the latter. But, while anybody who has analytical and language competence can *discuss* religion, *doing* it requires an orientation that some say lies outside the capacity of words to deal with.

If they are right and if those, like myself, are correct in asserting that 'religion' (or your synonym of choice) names the best that we humans can do, then we are speaking of some sort of transcendence that can only be exercised extra-linguistically.

So Ludwig can rest in peace — our intelligence is not in peril. But perhaps our faith or spirituality is, because religion (by any name) assigns or acknowledges value and then requires commitment to that valuation.

It's all very well worshipping (ascribing 'worth' to God or a god) or subscribing to Tillich's 'ultimate concern', but we need to press the analysis one step further. We might ask whether 'God' actually enhances our human-ness or do we weakly mumble that "we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy table". And, if our reading of God, YHWH or Allah results in race hatred, we've got the words wrong somewhere.

If our 'ultimate concern' results in damaging others or in rendering the earth uninhabitable, then perhaps we *have* been bewitched by religious words.

Noel Cheer, Steering Committee Chairperson, 2005-2006

P.S. Merry Christmas, Hanukah, Diwali, Saturnalia

