



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

From the Arrangements Committee

CONFERENCE 2006 IS MORE THAN the same Conference in a different place. The Steering Committee has worked hard to determine an electrifying theme and has begun to line up speakers. The theme is:

After Religion — What? Is Nothing Sacred Anymore?

In addition, extended general forums will follow keynote speakers in place of the core group sessions.

There are timely flights available to and from Auckland and Christchurch on both Air New Zealand and Origin Pacific. If enough interest is shown, charter flights will be arranged. The Arrangements Committee is working on plans and support, with several activities already underway. Now that the programme format is determined, we feel confident of a successful conference.

Remember that the conference is at **Nga Tawa, the Wellington Diocesan School for Girls in Marton, 29 Sept. to 1 Oct.** The November Newsletter talked of the location, near which some field trips, in parallel with some workshops this year, will be available on the Saturday of Conference. Some of the interesting things to do around Marton for a more extended stay include: Wanganui (25 min.), Ohakea (15 min.), Fielding (20 min. — tour the sales yards in the morning before Conference), and the usual outdoor pursuits from bungy jumping to garden walks and architectural tours.

There are nearly enough modern single rooms at Nga Tawa for all, and some 2- and 4-bed rooms. Some rooms are in the meeting complex, with the others either 75m or 150m away from it.

Parking is available near each of the sleeping quarters.

The programme looks very promising, and the (other) attendees will be superb. It is great chance to catch up with old friends and make new ones.

Larry Haist
Arrangements Committee Chairperson 2006

Number 65

March 2006

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Steering Committee 2005—2006



Rear: Geoff Neilson, Ian Crumpton, Don Feist, Derek Pringle, Larry Haist
Front: Ralph Pannett, Betty Manning, Noel Cheer, Ron Wilson, Mary Boekman

How Christianity (and Capitalism) Led to Science

“A SERIES OF DEVELOPMENTS, in which reason won the day, gave unique shape to Western culture and institutions. And the most important of those victories occurred within Christianity. While the other world religions emphasized mystery and intuition, Christianity alone embraced reason and logic as the primary guides to religious truth. Christian faith in reason was influenced by Greek philosophy. But the more important fact is that Greek philosophy had little impact on Greek religions. Those remained typical mystery cults, in which ambiguity and logical contradictions were taken as hallmarks of sacred origins. Similar assumptions concerning the fundamental inexplicability of the gods and the intellectual superiority of introspection dominated all of the other major world religions.

But, from early days, the church fathers taught that reason was the supreme gift from God and the means to progressively increase understanding of Scripture and revelation. Consequently Christianity was oriented to the future, while the other major religions asserted the superiority of the past. At least in principle, if not always in fact, Christian doctrines could always be modified in the name of progress, as demonstrated by reason. Encouraged by the scholastics and embodied in the great medieval universities founded by the church, faith in the power of reason infused Western culture, stimulating the pursuit of science and the evolution of democratic theory and practice. The rise of capitalism also was a victory for church-inspired reason, since capitalism is, in essence, the systematic and sustained application of reason to commerce — something that first took place within the great monastic estates.”

*Rodney Stark, The Chronicle Review
Vol. 52, Issue 15, Page B11, <http://chronicle.com>*

Ventilation

"Ah, snug lie those that slumber
Beneath Conviction's roof.
Their floors are sturdy lumber
Their windows weatherproof.
But I sleep cold forever
And cold sleep all my kind
For I was born to shiver
in the draft from an open mind."

Phyllis McGinley A Pocket Full of Wry

Of Thought and Religion

HERE ARE TWO EXCERPTS FROM LECTURES by the Canadian academic, novelist and critic Robertson Davies (1913-1995) published in *Happy Alchemy*, Penguin Books 1997

"IN THE MODERN WORLD ...

we are obsessed with the notion that to think is the highest achievement of mankind, but we neglect the fact that thought untouched by feeling is thin, delusive, treacherous stuff."

op cit page 153

"[The word "religious"] comes from a Latin word which means to take care, to pay heed, to give thought to something. That is the word *religere* which is the opposite of *neglegere*, from which our word "neglect" comes — to ignore, to close one's eyes to things, to live on the surface of life. [To be religious] ... is to be attentive, concerned, careful and to look at life through eyes that are as clear as one can make them, and to bring conscientious scruple and a measure of intuition to whatever life presents to one's experiences. Of course the word now means to give heed to godly matters, but I stick with the older meaning [Some people] ... suppose that to be religious is to live under a yoke of codified beliefs which exclude or reject many things they think important. But the truth is very far from anything of that sort. The religious man is the man who tries, in so far as he can, to see everything as clearly as he can, even when what he is observing is shrouded in ambiguities. He understands that he cannot expect to understand everything, but he dare not ignore anything that lies within the scope of his vision, or that rises from the realm of the Unconscious."

op cit pages 349-350

On the criticism of religion

“WE ARE PRODUCTS OF THE REFORMATION. The crucial point is that it has been shown that religion can be criticised and reformed; and, if that is so, then anything else can be criticised and reformed. “For us, the individual may be right *contra mundum*, against the world.

“Nothing is sacrosanct. Tradition is dead.

“As Marx commented, the criticism of religion is the basis for all criticism; once the legitimacy of critical thinking had been demonstrated, the project of modernity was launched”.

Don Cupitt, in The Guardian October 2002

Ralph's Posters

At the 2005 Conference we were treated to a display of posters by Ralph Pannett. They showed short quotations relevant to an aspect of the Conference theme — our dialogues with Art, Science and Religion. Here are some of the posters:

"The Universe is not to be narrowed down to the limits of the Understanding, which has been men's practice up to now, but the Understanding must be stretched and enlarged to take in the image of the Universe as it is discovered."

Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

"What [the artist] has to give is not a mere transcript of the object but a translation of his impression into another scale of sensitiveness which belongs to a different degree of impressibility of the observing eye in which the organ speaks a very different dialect in responding to the impressions of the outer world."

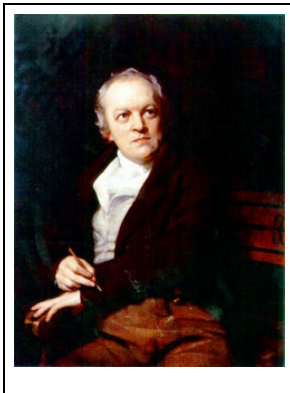
Herman von Helmholtz (1821-94) German, Physiologist, Physicist

"In art we have just passed through a very long period of bewilderment caused by physics, mechanics, chemistry and the study of nature. Artists having lost all their savagery, no longer having instinct, one might even say imagination, have gone wandering into all sorts of paths to find the productive elements which they lack the force to create, and consequently, are no longer active except in disorderly crowds, feeling afraid and lost when they are alone. This is why one must not prescribe solitude to everybody, for stamina is necessary to support it and act alone."

Paul Gauguin, (1848-1903) French, Painter — Letters, 1903

"None could have other than natural or organic thoughts if he had none but organic perceptions. Man's desires are limited by his perceptions; none can desire what he has not perceived. Man, by his reasoning power can only compare and judge what he has already perceived."

William Blake (1757-1827)



The Perils of Modernity

"OUR LIVES INHERIT THE SIGNIFICANCE of the people and things in the world around us. Therefore, our lives each have the capability of being big lives; they are capable of having grandeur bequeathed to them by the greatness and majesty of world in which they exist and of which they are constituted.

"One of the dangers of modernity is that it takes away from this sense of the grandeur. In the absence of identity-constituting attachments to things outside of us, any sense that we share common purpose and also common fate with the world around is in danger of being lost. The meaning or significance of our lives shrinks with the shrinking of the boundaries of the self. Things outside us no longer form part of who and what we are; and we cannot understand our meaning, purpose or value in terms of the meaning, purpose or value of the world. And so we busy ourselves with little things. We work in crappy jobs with little or no significance and even less satisfaction. Then we go home and watch *Pop Idol* — basically as a way of killing time before we go back to the crappy job again. Our lives are a fascination with the facile. We kill time. And then we die.

**"We kill time.
And then we die."**

"In such a life, it seems, there is little that is big. There is little that seems to have meaning or purpose. That is a danger of modernity. Very few things are worth dying for any more. And our lives, accordingly, are the poorer. In fact, their poverty threatens to undermine the very idea of self-fulfilment that lies at the core of modernity. If the choices we make that shape our lives do not correspond to things that have real significance or value, if one choice is no better than another, then the idea of self-fulfilment becomes null and void. In this way, the danger of modernity is also a danger for modernity: a danger that it will erode its own foundations and eventually be swept away in the tide of history."

*Mark Rowlands,
Everything I Know I Learned from TV
Ebury Press 2005 pp61-62*

Five Simple Rules for Happiness

1. Free your heart from hatred.
2. Free your mind from worries.
3. Live simply.
4. Give more.
5. Expect less.

Author unknown

In Brief

Darwin

Many Humanist and Rationalist groups as well as scientific institutions celebrated Darwin Day on 12 February, Darwin's birthday. Darwin is an example of a well respected agnostic.

Sea of Faith In Australia Conference

They've moved the date to 22-24 September, 2006. The line-up of speakers includes **Don Cupitt** (doing a dress-rehearsal for the NZ Conference a week later!); our own **Lloyd Geering**; Australian writer **Stephanie Dowrick** and **Michael Morwood**, Australian Catholic writer.

Our 2007 Conference — early news

Where: King's College, Otahuhu, Auckland
When: September 28-30, 2007
Keynotes: so far, John Spang

Heresy By Any Other Name

There's a background mumble among our members that the name "Sea of Faith" doesn't really describe us. Can you think of a better name? Send your thoughts to the Editor.

Faith in Cyberspace

The Revealer

is a daily review of religion in the news and the news about religion. "We're not so much nonpartisan as polypartisan — interested in all sides, disdainful of dualistic arguments, and enamored of free speech as a first principle."



www.therevealer.org/

SoF in Wikipedia

Rob Wheeler of SoF(UK) has developed a page in the do-it-yourself encyclopaedia Wikipedia. Its at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_of_Faith

Talking of Wikipedia

... it contains a well-thought-out article on the Danish cartoons found offensive by some Muslims. Its at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten_Muhammad_cartoons

Googling The SoF Website

If you are looking for something that you think might just be on a website but don't want to search the entire web, you can exploit the ability

of Google to search a single website by use of the "site:" command. Example:

site:sof.wellington.net.nz theism

This will yield "hits" on **theism** but only on the designated website. [But note: the url given in the example above is the 'real' address of our website and not the the easy-to-remember alias that we advertise: www.sof.org.nz]

Another example:

site:sof.wellington.net.nz "religious humanism"

Putting "religious humanism" in quotes asks Google to treat the term as a single entity and not as "religious" AND "humanism". If you really care about this distinction, read about Boolean Algebra!

Local Groups

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



Peering Dimly Through The Myths

MOST OF THE HIGH-END SCHOLARSHIP these days ... tends to suggest that how we see and understand the world is the consequence of what tools or models we are using to look at it ... the world is a kind of mirror that mimics our regard of it ... the world is a myth.

Before the 18th century the obligation of proof rested on those who said the Bible was myth. ... But since about the middle of the 18th century the onus is really on those who claim the Bible is factual. Generally the Bible is completely myth with only a few 'facts' here and there buried in religious confessions, mythic stories, and national epics.

David Galston,

President Snowstar Institute <http://snowstarinstitute.org>

Copy Deadlines

These are the dates by which I will need copy for the Newsletter for this year.

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Deadline</u>
May	15 April
July	5 June
September	16 August
December	15 November

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

Noel Cheer, Editor (addresses on Page 10)



Bringing God Back To Earth

A Review by Alan Goss of Napier

Bringing God Back To Earth: Confessions of a Christian Publisher, by John Hunt (O Books, Winchester)

JOHN HUNT IS A

PUBLISHER of religious books of a radical and liberal kind. Reading other people's scripts has obviously given him lots of pleasure but also — in some cases — considerable pain.

Bringing God Back to Earth is an earthy, no-holds barred account of our religious legacy and is generous with its insights and scope. The book deals with a number of religious topics — belief in God, good and bad religion, the teaching of Jesus, how that teaching became perverted, where we are now and the way forward. And it is all done in a very readable, even racy, sort of way which sustains interest and leaves you wanting more. Other religious writers like John Spong and Richard Holloway have commended it.

Like an artifact on a pedestal in a museum, the concept of God is fully explored and looked at from every possible angle. At the end of the book he writes, "Maybe He (God) exists out there, maybe He's all in our heads. Maybe it's the same thing. It's all worth believing, but it's not worth a moment's argument, a single wrong action." Elsewhere Hunt rules out our need for God, confirming the view that Christianity without God has been around and quite unobtrusively so for quite some time — as in Lloyd Geering's *Christianity Without God*. God is too big an idea to be pinned down, there are thousands of ways of portraying God, for this author what counts "is the purpose and effort we bring to things. The relationships we develop, the good we do, the art we create, the choices we make, the footprints we leave behind." It's not beliefs about God that matter but how these beliefs make us better people.

Parts of the book are quite disturbing, they jolt the conscience and force the reader to re-examine entrenched views about the Christian faith. Hunt contends that from the

sixteenth century the spread of Christianity has been achieved in large measure through episodes of inhumanity and genocide on a massive scale. He holds that holocaust is not too strong a word to describe aspects of the Christian impact on the world. Christians, he says, have developed a religion that gives its opponents reason to describe it as amongst the worst of its kind, as the powerful fundamentalist 'Armageddon' mindset in the USA suggests. God has conflict on his agenda, even annihilation —

except for the chosen and the saved. This dangerous phenomenon, while not yet as widespread or extreme in this country is nevertheless slowly gaining ground. The mainline churches are becoming more conservative and are slowly being locked into the fundamentalist mindset. In the Presbyterian Church two of its ordained ministers Lloyd Geering and Jim Veitch, while widely acknowledged as prophetic voices by the community at large, are sidelined or totally ignored by the churches. Any prospects of real and meaningful reform are becoming more remote as reactionary voices gather momentum.

If there is so much bad religion, then how can the situation be changed? Maybe, says Hunt, Christians should reject the capital C "Church" as it exists now and invent a new religious language that works for most, form looser networks with smaller numbers, abolish hierarchies, honour all festivals, own no property, encourage diversity and invite all religious traditions to play a part. Ministers of religion should be



"The Ancient of Days" William Blake

just that, ministers of all kinds of religion rather than purveyors of a particular brand.

In our conflicting and changing world both Christianity and the church are clearly in a state of transition. This book arouses us to some of the challenges that inevitably confront us, now and in the future.

Alan M Goss, January 2006

The mainline churches are becoming more conservative and are slowly being locked into the fundamentalist mindset.



Joinings and Partings

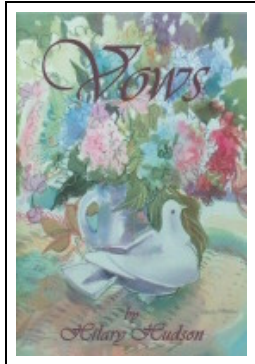
Vows, Hilary Hudson, Priory Press 2001 ISBN 0-958-2289-0-6

Earthly Farewells: A Funeral Planning Guide, Hilary Hudson, 2004 ISBN 0-582-289-1-4

[The review copies are deposited in the Resource Centre]

THIS IS AN APPRECIATION of two books by Hilary Hudson who is a personal friend of the editor. She is a civil celebrant of over 20 years experience and is also a broadcaster and lecturer. Hilary set the context for both books when she wrote: **“Western society has moved from a world where everyone went to church every week — and for all major occasions — to one where this is less common. The aim of this book has been to bridge the gap between a churched and an unchurched world.”**

Vows was published in 2001. It describes the requirements for weddings, ceremonies, renewal of vows and name givings. It draws on material first published in her 1995 book *Civil Rites and Ceremonies*. *Vows* can be bought for \$19.95 from Priory Press, 70 Dixie Street, R.D. Otaki 5560. Send email enquiries to HUDSON@XTRA.CO.NZ



Earthly Farewell was published in 2004 and deals not only with funerals but with wills, Powers of Attorney, and Trusts.

In reading these books I was struck by the number of recital pieces which appeared in both books — I counted these four: Paul’s hymn to love in *I Corinthians 13*; a fragment of the *Desiderata*; and a quote from the *I Ching*. And, given the levity encouraged at funerals and life celebrations nowadays, even *The Owl and The Pussy Cat* is offered as part of an earthly farewell.

Given the demographic statistics of SoF you might suppose that *Vows* might take a back seat, but your editor finds it personally relevant at this time.

Hilary asks and answers, “Why Marry?” and “Who Can Marry?” She also deals with getting a licence and choosing a celebrant. Then on to the nitty-gritty of venue, wedding rings, photographs, music.

A set of sample ceremonies provides templates for one’s own planning.

A collection of readings, prayers and verses ends the section on marriage.

While not dealing with Civil Unions (a possible new edition is under consideration), “Ceremonies of Commitment” cover similar ground.

“Name Giving”, a non-religious alternative to baptism, is dealt with as is the “Renewal of Vows”.

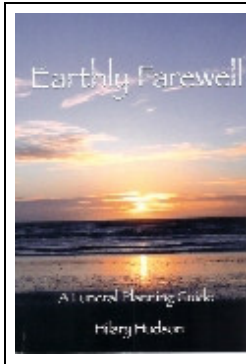
Any couple contemplating any form of marriage or alternative, will find much good practical advice and inspiration.

Earthly Farewells gives specifics of formal religious ceremonies (Roman Catholic, Anglican and Congregationalist). It shows similarities and differences between these and civil funerals. Sample eulogies will prove helpful for those not quite sure what to say and practical advice is given about scattering ashes.

A short section deals with “Ceremonies to Console for the Loss of a Companion Animal.”

A generous collection of readings rounds out an attractive and useful book.

Earthly Farewell is available for \$34.95 rrp from most religious and spiritual bookshops. The ‘Contents’ and ‘Index’ can be viewed at www.earthlyfarewell.co.nz/ Send email enquiries to HUDSON@XTRA.CO.NZ



We live in an age of “Do It Yourself”, where initiative and authority has been

tugged from the hands of the professionals (someone wrote grumpily that “all professions are conspiracies against the laity”) and is exercised by we, the people. But, whether it is plumbing, re-decorating, marrying a friend from decades ago or farewelling a person who has had a profound effect on shaping one’s life, we need practical advice and stimulating examples of the kind found in *Vows* and *Earthly Farewell*. I was attracted to “An American Indian Prayer”

When I am dead cry for me a little,

Think of me sometimes,

But not too much.

Think of me now and again as I was in life,

At some moment it is pleasant to recall,

But not for long.

Leave me in peace, and I shall leave you in peace;

And while you live let your thoughts be with the living.

Noel Cheer



Aspects of Hindu Vedanta

Submitted for Review

Mapping The Cosmos: An Introduction to God

Jael and Sandy Bharat, Published by William Sessions Limited, York, England ISBN 1-85072-341-9 £4.99 with postage to NZ of £2

GIVEN THE TWO BIG WORDS IN THE title, "Cosmos" and "God", it comes as a surprise to open the slim book on only 46 pages. Karen Armstrong's *A History of God* covered 498 pages and Jack Miles' *God, The Biography* 431 pages without taking on the cosmos as well.

We find inside not a tightly argued descriptive introduction, nor a tightly argued anything. It is certainly not academic in its style nor is it devotional, but it lies somewhere in that gently declamatory pastel-coloured middle ground that is typical of the New Age approach to religion. There is a faintly anti-scholarly air as we learn, on page 8, that proof is "what people are asking for when too lazy to find out the truth themselves".

Metaphors abound — it is impossible to talk about religion or practice religion without them — but the inability to distinguish between a demonstration that a claim is true (am I really being lazy?) or is merely being restated and amplified in poetic language occurs again and again.

The story of the development of the cosmos is shown by a series of four Images by which "we hope to establish how creation emerged from the uncreated Great God Beyond ... (page 10). But nothing is "established", it is only asserted. The first Image is a page of only a background of dark blue. In the next, God appears — as a whitish ellipse. Matter shows up in Image III as a multi-coloured something within the God blob and IV shows the Dreamland wherein (page 12) we have an assurance that millions of souls can exist IBL ("In Between Lives") because "like the millions of different wave types ... souls don't take up much space". Without a by-your-leave we are assured (page 13) that "When our bodies die, our souls will not vanish but continue to exist". We wait out our IBL time in Dreamland.

What can one say positively? It is optimistic in outlook (page 27: "There is no 'hell'"); incarnations and IBL lives are evolving us "towards being one again with the great Source

of all" (page 27); and "we have to go our individual ways. Its not possible to book a 'group charter flight to heaven'" (page 39).

But there's some unsatisfactory bits too: on page 26 we learn "that we ourselves ... are responsible for everything; yes, also for tsunami's [a wayward apostrophe intrudes], earthquakes etc.". We are warned that our prayers may get answered by IBL spirit entities who "may not necessarily be much wiser" than we are (page 31).

Who would like this book? Readers who like the 21st century versions of Vedantic Hinduism; those who take re-incarnation to be a fact and those who want a quick skim through a form of cosmic optimism that barely places a foot on the cold and grubby earth on which we live.

You can read more about these ideas at <http://spiritualityfordailylife.com/> where "Spirituality for Daily Life tries to help those with questions in their minds, in their hearts. We use a simple question and answer format with topics loosely gathered together in five inter-connected groups: 1. Practical questions ; 2. Ethical questions; 3. Religious questions; 4. Spiritual questions; 5. Ultimate questions

Noel Cheer

The review copy has been deposited in the Resource Centre. Also new in the Resource Centre is this gift from Frank Eaddy of Auckland for which he provided this description:

Raja Yoga: Conquering the Internal Nature

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA (1863-1902) was witness to, and also most responsible for, the modernization of Hinduism. Vivekananda was the middle-class disciple of the illiterate mystic Ramakrishna, who lived until his death in 1886 at a temple near Calcutta and preached the essential unity of all religions. But Vivekananda moved very far away from his guru's inward-looking spirituality in his attempt to make Hinduism intellectually respectable to both Westerners and Westernized Indians. This small book is prefaced by a quote from Vivekananda:

"Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal."



A Militant Attack on Faith

Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*, New York, WW Norton, 2004

A BOOK ANNOUNCING THE END OF FAITH should be of immediate interest to Sea of Faith readers, for whom faith is usually cast in a positive light as a non-doctrinally uplifting human urge. But in 1992 the British philosopher Anthony Kenny came to very different conclusions about faith. *In What is Faith?* Kenny, a lapsed Catholic, concluded that faith was a not a virtue at all, but a vice. Faith, Kenny argued, only has meaning unless it is faith in something for a particular reason, namely that God has revealed it. But unless the existence of this God can be demonstrated by means other than faith, then that faith becomes insubstantial and prone to manipulation in the service of unreason. As Goya warned years previously, ‘the sleep of reason brings forth monsters.’ Well, a new century has opened, and events have done little to dispel the fears of Goya and Kenny. In fact, *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris carries on in their footsteps.

Sam Harris has nothing positive whatsoever to say about faith. Early in the book Harris notes that while all faiths have dabbled to some extent in ecumenism, ‘the central tenet of every religious tradition is that all others are mere repositories of error or, at best, dangerously incomplete.’ Later on the same page Harris states that ‘[c]ertainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one.’ (p. 13) Another example: Faith ‘is the search for knowledge on the instalment plan: believe now, live an untestable hypothesis until your dying day, and you will discover that you were right.’ (p. 66) The first few chapters lay out his argument to justify these claims. None of the arguments are particularly new but Harris’s turn of phrase and confident generalisations add bite to familiar territory.

At times his enthusiasm runs away a bit. He declares that we ‘are at war with Islam. It may not serve our immediate foreign policy objectives for our political leaders to openly acknowledge this fact, but it is unambiguously so.’ (p. 109) This is getting back into the more hysterical clash of civilisations rhetoric that I thought we’d finished with.

What is valuable about Harris’s book is that his militant attack on faith will hopefully open up much needed discussion about the role faith really should have in people’s lives. His scorched earth approach has created room for more measured criticisms to survey what has for too long been a no-go area. This book should help expose the long-standing unwillingness to expose religious beliefs to any sort of rational criticism.

Goya:
The Sleep of Reason



A more trivial gripe is that titles like *The End of Faith* may help to sell books, but it probably doesn’t help much to generate understanding. Whether we like it or not, we will never see the end of faith. The focus for people’s faith may change, but as a human foible, we are unlikely ever to see the end of it. Faith is not going to go away, any more than atheism is going to go away. But the British apologist Alister McGrath had his book entitled *The Twilight of Atheism*, presumably in same vein of wishful thinking that motivated Harris. It would be wiser, rather than wishing the end of something, to suggest ways we can live together in harmony.

Bill Cooke, Auckland

Fundamentalist and Happy

“FUNDAMENTALISTS ... TEND TO BE HAPPY, sincere and healthy. According to Sara Savage, who researches the psychology of religion at the University of Cambridge, that may be because they believe they are playing a role in the greatest story ever told. “Story is probably the biggest form of security we have as humans. It’s very powerful in giving you identity.’ Secular western culture, on the other hand, doesn’t provide a ‘grand narrative’ to participate in ... [instead it] ... offers multiple options for making sense of the world around us — a mess that most human minds to struggle to deal with.”

New Scientist
8 Oct. 2005
pp44-45



sofia 75 January 2006

An Example to Follow

George Ridley of Christchurch attended Rod Donald's funeral and was moved by it.

ON THURSDAY 10TH NOVEMBER I attended the funeral service of Rod Donald M.P. [the co-leader of the Green Party]. It was a moving experience, more profound and meaningful than any other service I have attended, be it funeral, marriage, christening or ordinary church service. It made me think hard about our Sea of Faith Network, what I have learned from it, and where it has now left me.

For me, gone is the vision of a personal supernatural god, the vision of an after life in heaven (or hell!) and of Jesus as something other than human. In its place is a reverence for life itself in wonder and awe, and an acceptance that we have no evidence as to why the universe is, nor why life evolves as it does. Many say that "God" has made it all happen. That's fine, but trouble comes when people try to define or describe "God". There is not a whit of evidence that "God" has human attributes. All we can do is observe closely how the universe and life processes work. That is what scientists do. The theories they produce are based solely on these observations.

Nature does not permit unlimited growth. An organism grows to maturity, reproduces, and then dies. It is then recycled to generate new life. The cycle may be extended or cut short for whatever reason, but always Life must continue. Humans, in their self indulgence, have introduced a host of technologies which can lead to the fatal collapse of Nature's balances. That is the evil that we must fight and it is LIFE itself which we should be worshipping.

At Rod Donald's funeral, the overwhelming theme was recycling — the preservation of Nature's balances.

There were no hymns, as such. Instead the A Cappella choir sang "Wanting Memories", the local Zimbabwean community sang and danced their thanks to a local hero. Pink Floyd songs "Shine You Crazy Diamond", "Wish You Were Here" and "Time" were features of the ceremony along with the tributes, stories, love, laughter and tears.

On the service sheet was the poem "The Song of the River" which likens the cycles of life (and Rod's life) to the cycles of water on our planet, rain on the hills, bubbling springs, turbulent stream, riotous river, out to sea, into the clouds, back to the hills.

The coffin was simple and made of pine, decorated only with a sheaf of flax.

An electric bus brought family and coffin to the cathedral, followed by a host of Rod's friends and admirers on bicycles.

The service sheet, itself, was printed on recycled paper, manufactured from 100% post consumer waste, process chlorine free, acid free, Green Seal certified, and made using wind power. A side flap depicts an unfolding fern frond and is detachable as a bookmark.

The reading was not from the bible. It was the children's story of "The Lorax", a favourite environmental message of Rod's. Under the heading "Prayers and Blessing" was recognition of our traditional Christian heritage.

The coffin was carried off to Warner's Hotel to the sound of the Cathedral bells.

There are those who think that the magnificent facilities and beauty of the Christchurch cathedral should not be used for such a service. But isn't the example of Rod Donald's funeral rather showing us the way that our churches must move if they are to retain credibility.

Come on SoFers, shouldn't we be promoting these changes, not only in our own churches, but in Islam, in Judaism, and across the religious world? That way we may earn the right to be the dominant species on Earth.

George Ridley, Christchurch

Resurrection Aotearoa?

ON NATIONAL RADIO on 11 October 2005, Sir Edmund Hillary was being interviewed in connection with a fund-raising appeal to preserve the classic Antarctic huts, including that of Sir Ernest Shackleton who had been a particular hero of his. He said this:

"When I first went to Shackleton's hut I remember opening the door and going inside, and I have a distinct memory of a man, who obviously was Shackleton, walking across the floor towards me with a hand held out to welcome me. I don't go in to these sort of ideas all that much, but this was a very very clear picture I had of Shackleton welcoming me to his old hut. "It was very short. And of course it probably didn't happen, you know, in actual fact. But I remember very clearly that it did occur, that there was Shackleton walking across towards me, welcoming me and in a sense giving his blessing for us to do more and more work on the maintaining of his great hut."

A few weeks later there was an interview with Pamela Stephenson, the wife of Billy Connolly. After their marriage she studied to doctorate level in psychology, and now has a busy practice in the USA, including university teaching. A couple of years ago she had what she calls an epiphany. Her life was just too busy; she wanted to break the pattern. She had been reading about Robert Louis Stevenson and his wife Fanny. And then

"Fanny came into my mind in a fairly physical way, the closest thing to a sort of real kind of biblical vision. Nothing which I could particularly explain psychologically, which is nice."

Stephenson then decided to retrace the voyage of Fanny and Robert round the Pacific.

I had always been rather sceptical about such "veridical hallucinations". And it is interesting that, in their written accounts of these incidents, both Hillary and Stephenson downplay the perceived reality of their experiences. Hillary:

"On entering the simple building I believe we all had the same sensation. It was as though Shackleton himself was coming forward to meet us — a most eerie experience indeed."

And Stephenson:

"A female spectre clad in pale Victorian garments floated up from my subconscious realm. I recognized her immediately. It was Fanny."

But these two local incidents are remarkable and to me convincing examples that such things do happen. The recent scholarly *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* notes that Jesus' resurrection appearances

"can be best explained in terms of *altered-states-of-consciousness experiences*. The ancient Mediterranean cultures, along with almost all cultures other than our own, recognise dreams, trances, ecstasy etc as ways in which some people, sometimes can be aware of that dimension of reality in which the deity and spirits reside. In their terms the disciples truthfully recounted that they 'saw the Lord'."

David Simmers, Wellington

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

Let's Be Positive

THE SEA OF FAITH NETWORK WAS STARTED by people who felt that, although the various Christian churches have largely lost the plot, the plot nevertheless remains important.

That is the best way round to put it — see a shortfall, then move to fix it. But one of the dangers that lurk nearby is for us to act as though our only mission is to lament the state of the churches. We might moan and point to absurd practices and corrupt evangelists and sexually deviant priests — but there are more than enough bodies already doing that. Humanists and Rationalists and Skeptics do it all the time. Richard Dawkins seems to do little else.

But having claimed for ourself the right to 'explore religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint' (putting ourselves in the **humanist** camp) we go on to 'affirm the continuing importance of religious thought and practice as a vehicle for awe and wonder and for the celebration of key social and spiritual values' (further specifying that we are **religious** humanists.)

From there we must leave behind the quarrels that we might have with religious institutions and strike out into the unknown. If it was good enough for Abraham, then we too should give it a go. We can look back on the past with gratitude for what it taught us and we can retain, or even recover, some of the gems from the crumbling institutions. No bitching though — we have a world to build and we must not squander our energies.

Like an adolescent leaving home, we take with us *some* customs but reject *others*, we accept *this* parental directive and reject *that*. To be a forward-looking, optimistic member of the **Sea of Faith Network** is a bit like growing up.

So let's make sure that our behaviour is appropriate to people who see religious humanism as an adult response to the joys and challenges of life.

Noel Cheer, Steering Committee Chairperson, 2005-2006

This is important: If the date on the envelope says '2006' then your sub lapses on June 30. Details later.