



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

After Religion – What?

Is Nothing Sacred Anymore?

You'll find enclosed with this Newsletter* information on the annual Conference, with abstracts of Keynote addresses and Elective lectures, venue information, and a form for you to use in registering. There are two forms in each pack but should you wish additional copies, all of this information is available also on the website, sof.wellington.net.nz

You'll notice some changes of arrangements from previous years, especially in the loss of the Core Groups which have proved controversial. However, there will be the usual high profile speakers, forums and informal times to discuss with others, multiple workshops, and trips to choose from. The ever-popular panel of Keynote speakers will be chaired by the inimitable Noel Cheer.

Note that the theme is addressed in contrasting ways by the three Keynote speakers, and that the electives also provide searching variety. All three Keynote speakers, Don Cupitt, David Tacey, and Bill Cooke, have radically different answers to the questions posed by the Conference theme.

Most interesting to me is that two speakers promise to critique the Sea of Faith: Bill Cooke and Ian Harris.

Both courage and intelligence, and perhaps more, will be needed to think through the issues raised.

Thanks are due to the members of the Steering Committee who have assembled the speakers and Workshop leaders.

As trips in the vicinity of the Conference have proved popular in previous years, we offer you a choice of five, but have scheduled two workshops at the same time for those who would prefer a workshop.

We have provided for informal discussion times over meals, tea and coffee, happy hours (both evenings), and coffee lounges near the accommodation. We have extended the question-and-answer period at the end of each Keynote address.

As previous reports in this Newsletter have tried to convey, the venue, Nga Tawa in Marton, is comfortable and welcoming. Padded chairs are provided to encourage concentration, not repose. The sleeping and eating facilities are clean, warm, and modern. While the school is well over 100 years old, the facilities are up-to-date. Your hosts are keen to provide you with an excellent weekend where the ideas and fellowship of the Conference take precedence over more mundane

matters. Costs are in line with previous years.

Please register soon because early registration improves your chances of attending the elective, workshop(s) and trip of your choice and helps the Arrangements Committee.

Please note that transportation to and from Palmerston North Airport will be provided as part of the Conference if you let us know beforehand that you require it. We welcome any enquires about the Conference, the venue, or the Marton area, either with the registration or separately.

Larry Haist
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Arrangements Committee Chairperson 2006



Don Cupitt



David Tacey



Bill Cooke

**Number 67
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* email recipients should look on the website www.sof.org.nz

The Perks of Piety

Religious Devotion and Adventitious Reinforcement

After he retired as Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Massey University, Peter Donovan moved to Wakefield, near Nelson, where he continues to pursue his inter-religious interests. This article is a summary of a talk given to the Nelson group last August and it is based on a paper prepared for the 2004 Conference of the NZ Assn for the Study of Religion.

Peter opened his talk with the observation that “adventitious reinforcement” is not a term you’re likely to hear in church, nor the more familiar phrases “lucky break,” “happy coincidence,” or “stroke of good fortune”. Luck, chance, fortune, coincidence and the like are religiously a bit of an embarrassment. He then noted how conventional theism had its ways of absorbing the notions of luck, fate and fortune. Natural blessings like sunshine and rain, falling on the just and unjust alike, have been received as from the Heavenly Father’s hand. Coincidences have been woven into the divine providence. In the eyes of rationalists and sceptics, however, and those of a rigorously scientific outlook, theological manoeuvres like these have seemed something of a hijack or a forced baptism. For the occurrence of many events which *may seem* purposeful, but which to the best of our knowledge come about purely by “luck” (that is, natural coincidence or sheer accident) does pose an intellectual problem for religion.

He emphasised how striking coincidences simply happen and provided some examples such as running into a next-door neighbour on the other side of the world. Amazing events do sometimes occur by sheer chance. He suggested that the tendency of piety to focus on a *selection* of such happenings, ones that perhaps seem somehow morally or spiritually relevant, simply shows its tendency to inflate claims beyond what the evidence justifies, and to want to draw religious lessons from pure happenstance seems to be bordering on the obsessively pious or the naively superstitious.

He examined the experimental work that had been undertaken by the famous behavioural psychologist, B.F. Skinner, on pigeons in boxes, who observed the

tendency for many of the birds to develop repetitive acts a turn, a hop, a raise of the head) when given small amounts of food automatically at regular short intervals even though it had no causal relation at all to the food’s release. Skinner referred to this phenomenon simply as “accidental reinforcement;” but the word “adventitious” has stayed in the wider literature.

He commented on James Frazer’s comprehensive study of magic and religion in 1922 (*The Golden Bough*), Frazer saw as essentially a matter of spurious connections, whether of a sympathetic or a homeopathic kind, occurring in the mind of primitive man. Simple people let the association of ideas lead them into false beliefs about the way things actually worked in the world. Frazer noted that in many cases, the desired event (e.g. rains) would eventually happen after the performance of a particular rite.

He summarised the objections have been made to this by two of Frazer’s best-known critics, Malinowski and Wittgenstein. Both were quick to insist that users of magic and ritual were not “making a mistake” but were engaged in practices that have to be understood in ways entirely different from Frazer’s understanding. Wittgenstein is dismissive. It can’t be that simple, he implies. People just aren’t that stupid. Malinowski believed that the efficacy of ritual is found in its pragmatic and psychological power, at individual and at cultural and social levels. Ritual mobilises and motivates individuals and groups to cope with the unknown and the risky; it anticipates hoped-for success, and it emboldens in the face of potential disaster.

He commented that there was no room in Skinner’s methodology for speculating on the mental life of his pigeons but it is conceivable that tests would show those pigeons, who assumed they were in control of their food supply through their superstitious ritualising, would turn out to be happier, better-adjusted pigeons than the others. Likewise, people who believe they are blessed or favoured by a superior power may not only be more settled in their intentions to find good in their lives, but also better situated to make use of the

opportunities and benefits that come their way. It could be called the power of positive thinking. It may be implied in the advice to “ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you”. [Matthew 7: 7]

He asked people to think of the conventions relating to good fortune. What happens when a lottery ticket is purchased? The buyer also purchases a chance to obtain a big prize or a large amount of money. The purchase of a lottery ticket not only provides the chance of winning it but the right to that prize or money if it is won. A lottery ticket is a licence to the benefits of good luck.

He asked why people need this entitlement to good luck, then noted that it may not be needed, but is important to have. In our well-informed public domain, the sudden acquisition of large quantities of unearned wealth invites adverse comment and calls for a convincing explanation. People want to ensure there is no question about our right to enjoy it once we they have it. They want legitimisation. And for many, this legitimisation is achieved through the conventions of religious devotion and pious ritual.

He noted that rituals provide mechanisms for reassurance that people are entitled to their good fortune. To claim something in the name of a higher power, to offer it back in some token manner, to publicly give thanks for it, are conventional ways of strengthening their entitlement to the use and enjoyment of that benefit. They provide moral and legal endorsement. They spread the burden of proof and place any challenger to our rights in a more difficult position.

Piety entitles people to their unearned prosperity; it legitimates their good fortune, puts perk-busters in their place, and silences qualms about the fairness of it all. *God bless America!* Yes indeed. And once you’ve struck it lucky, protection is what you need above all else. *So God defend New Zealand* is even more to the point.

Peter Donovan

FORGET THE WORD 'SIN'

JUST GET ON WITH REDEEMING THE WORLD

Don Cupitt gave a talk with the title "The Ethics of Value-Creation" for the 2005 National Conference of the Sea of Faith Network (UK). Here are some excerpts.

"I have been attempting to describe a purely-affirmative ethics of value that simply does without ideas of sin, evil, warfare, punishment, vindication and so on. I have felt that above all I must try to cut out of my ethics all the stuff that poisons the soul." [In a footnote: "I draw upon ideas first put forward in *The New Christian Ethics*, SCM Press 1987. Notice that I make ethics thoroughly subjective and emotive. We, and we only, put the values into life by the ways in which we feel about things.]"

"... our language gives us a choice. We may accept and go along with the received current evaluations of things, and so fit in with and accept the conventional wisdom. But it quite often happens that we disagree with the current evaluation of something that is coded into the way it is currently spoken of. We feel that it has been unjustly given a bad name. It is underestimated. In which case, we can argue

for a change in the vocabulary that is used to describe that thing. During the 1960s, as people first realized all these points, there were successful campaigns to alter somewhat the vocabulary in which we all of us habitually spoke of — and therefore acted towards — women, homosexual men, black people and many other groups who had long been linguistically stigmatized. And mention of the 1960s reminds me that it was indeed during that period that we all of us gradually learnt to think about morality in the new way that I am describing — i.e. as human, as transactional, as embedded in language, and as changeable by consent, through public debate and linguistic change."

"The world as such, and independently of us, does not contain any ready-made, pre-existent moral facts, and does not prescribe any ready-made ethical theory to us. In the matter of ethics, we are not given anything. There is no divinely-revealed moral code, the physical universe does not have any natural moral law built into it, and our conscience is a cultural creation which is not at all a reliable moral guide. There are no ready-made human rights or absolute obligations

that just present themselves to us. The moral order is not a ready-made, intelligible system out there, which we are pre-designed to live in. On the contrary, I am suggesting that we invented all the strange jumble of moral theories that we have inherited, and I say that most of them are not very good. So I am proposing only a very liberal moral theory that says that it is rational for us all to pick out and follow practices that will enhance our life's perceived value and our overall enjoyment of it. To that end we should all love life and try to live it to the full — which is what ordinary language nowadays recommends to us. We should try to raise the value of our own corner of the world by making a habit of avoiding the negative emotions — *ressentiment* and so on — and cultivating as generous and affirmative an outlook as we can. This will involve valuing each person and each aspect of the world and of our life as highly as is self-consistently possible. Then, leave it at that. Don't discuss sin: forget the word. Just get on with redeeming the world, by revaluing it."

Don Cupitt

DI RYO

"... the only true religious beliefs are heresies, ... [those] that you personally have appropriated and tested out in your own life, and have articulated and defended in conversation with others."

Don Cupitt *The Way To Happiness* p67

The word "heresy" comes from the Greek, *haireisis* (from, *haireomai*, "choose"), which means either a choice of beliefs or a faction of dissident believers. It was given wide currency by Irenaeus in his tract *Contra Haereses* (Against Heresies) to describe and discredit his opponents in the early Christian Church. He described his own position as orthodox (from *ortho-* 'straight' + *doxa* 'thinking') and his position eventually evolved into the position of the early Christian Church.

Thus it will be perceived that 'heresy' has no purely objective meaning: the category exists only from the point-of-view of a position within a sect that has been previously defined as 'orthodox'. Thus, too, any nonconformist view within any field may be perceived as "heretical" by others within that field who are convinced that their view is 'orthodox'; in the sciences this extension is made tongue-in-cheek. [perhaps - ed]

Heretics usually do not define their own beliefs as heretical. Heresy is a value-judgment and the expression of a view from within an established belief system. For instance, Roman Catholics held Protestantism as a heresy while some non-Catholics considered Catholicism the "Great Apostasy."

For a heresy to exist there must be an authoritative system of dogma designated as orthodox, such as those proposed by Catholicism. The term orthodox is used in Eastern Orthodoxy, some Protestant churches, in Islam, some Jewish denominations, and to a lesser extent in other religions.

From Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heresy>

To readers not familiar with New Zealand English, the somewhat cruciform title is derived from the initial for two quintessentially New Zealand attitudes: the handyman's "Do It Yourself" and the cigarette smoker's "Roll Your Own". Those attitudes translate perfectly into religious heresy.

Vaguely Spiritual

Between Mythos and Logos

Although it is often said that Britain is not a particularly religious country, it is even less of an overtly irreligious one.

Atheists remain in the minority, with the majority being what one BBC survey described as "vaguely spiritual".

Part of the problem with assessing how religious we are is that it is not clear what "being religious" means. There is, however, one sense in which being religious is extremely common indeed; so common, in fact, that even many atheists fall under the description.

This version of religiosity, however, is often missed, squeezed out between two competing notions of religion as logos or mythos, ideas which Karen Armstrong has been so effective in explaining and disseminating.

According to this account, religious truth is often assumed to be fundamentally about certain creeds that are literally true, sacred texts that describe historical facts and values that are absolute. This is religion as logos.

The alternative view is that religious truth should be seen as mythos — not myth in the dismissive kind of way, but as a source of insight into reality and how to live. To understand religion in this way requires a certain mental dexterity, since it rejects the attempt to treat religious teachings as "mere metaphors" that need to be translated into non-sacred language as firmly as it does the attempt to see them as literal descriptions of the way the cosmos is.

Yet logos and mythos do not exhaust the meanings of religiosity. There is a third sense, one which I believe is more important and more widely held. This is the idea of having a religious attitude.

Attitudes are not beliefs at all, literal, analogical or otherwise. They are, however, deeply important to how we live, for they determine our entire orientation to the world around us.

Among the primary religious attitudes are those of awe, reverence, gratitude and humility. What each have in common is that they capture a sense that there is something greater than us, which commands us, and which we cannot control. And it is the perceived absence of these attitudes in atheism that lends it the reputation for arrogance. Yet although religion arguably allows for a more natural expression of these attitudes, they are compatible with even the most naturalistic cosmology.

A theist, for example, has a clear object for their feeling of gratitude: the creator God. But an atheist can clearly have a sense of their own good fortune and an understanding that any period of prosperity may be impermanent. Likewise, a theist feels awe and reverence for "creation", yet as even the atheist Richard Dawkins has described in his *Unweaving the Rainbow*, almost identical emotional responses to the natural world can be shared by materialist scientists.

As for humility, believing in an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent deity certainly gives you clear cause to be humble. But so can an awareness of the limits of human knowledge, power and benevolence.

There are some, such as the philosopher David Cooper, who argue that secular humanism cannot sustain such attitudes. If man is the measure of all things, how can we accept that our own judgments are answerable to something other than ourselves?

Yet even for humanists, beliefs have to be answerable to the facts and to the court of human experience, not just the experiences of ourselves and those whose beliefs we share.

If atheists can hold such religious attitudes, is it therefore right to describe them as religious? That would be misleading, but the question itself is not important. We don't need to be religious to see that one of the great benefits and attractions of religion has nothing to do with its truth as mythos or logos, but for the attitudes towards the world, life and others it fosters. If that is correct, then believers and non-believers alike would do well to make sure that when they embrace or reject religion, they don't lose sight of what is truly good in it.

Julian Baggini, editor of The Philosophers' Magazine, In The Guardian 29 April 2006

Vaguely Critical

A Bit of Naivete is Good for Us

"... a major need for contemporary readers of the Bible is to move from precritical naivete through critical thinking to postcritical naivete."

Precritical naivete is an early childhood state in which we take it for granted that whatever the significant authority figures in our lives tell us to be true is indeed true. In this state ... we simply hear the stories of the Bible as true stories.

Critical thinking begins in late childhood and early adolescence. One does not need to be an intellectual or go to college or university for this kind of thinking to develop. Rather, it is a natural stage of human development; everybody enters it. In this stage, consciously or quite unconsciously, we sift through what we learned as children to see how much of it we should keep. Is there really a tooth fairy? Are babies brought by storks ... Did creation really take only six days? Were Adam and Eve real people?

Postcritical naivete is the ability to hear the biblical stories once again as true stories, even as one knows that they may not be factually true and that their truth does not depend upon their factuality. [It] is not a return to precritical naivete. It brings critical thinking with it. It does not reject the insights of historical criticism but integrates them into a larger whole.

Marcus Borg, from pages 49-51 of "Reading The Bible Again for the First Time" HarperSanFrancisco 2001



A Coherent Spirituality Without The Supernatural ?

Richard Holloway, *Looking in the Distance* Canongate, Edinburgh 2004. 215 pages. £12.99. ISBN 1841955353.

A review by David Rush, an American retired professor of Paediatrics and Epidemiology. He is an active participant in the SoF email group and has given workshops on non-theism among Quakers in the US and UK.

This book is the companion volume to Bishop Richard Holloway's *Godless Morality*.

In that book he described an ethical framework constructed from our human experience on this Earth (as far as most of us understand, the only one we have). In this book he addresses a related concern: whether a coherent spirituality is possible without reference to supernatural forces.

For this reviewer he has succeeded admirably, especially considering that this is a short book (215 pages of text, on small pages). The book has a minimum of references and endnotes, but many germane quotations, including a large number of poems. I found them very well chosen, and often moving.

The four sections are entitled **Looking, Speaking, Listening**, and what was for me the best of all, **Leaving**.

In 'Looking', Bishop Holloway meditates on the amazing world in which we are all immersed, and describes how he now takes the world full on, without any urge to explain what cannot be explained, especially by traditional religion. He quotes the poet Hafiz that:

**The Great Religions are the Ships
Poets the life Boats.
Every sane person I know has jumped
Overboard...**

Holloway says 'we may be no closer to understanding why there is a world, but we are now able to accept the fact that the world itself is the source of the values and meanings we prize most, not

some hypothetical transcendent reality which did none of the work yet claims all the credit. One way to express this is to say that the spirit is now engendered by and encountered in the world in which we find ourselves. Rather than positing an external force to account for our most cherished experiences, we begin to understand how they were generated within us in response to the life process itself.'

In 'Speaking', subtitled 'Telling Tales', Holloway looks to literature to express the truths of the human condition, and begins to formulate an active and creative response to the reality he finds in which we are immersed. He says, 'The fact that we are now on our own makes it all the more imperative that we reach out to one another 'sometimes hand to hand'.

'Listening' is provocatively subtitled 'Playing it by Ear'. In this section he explores what our religious traditions have to tell us, and says we must go beyond what has been given us by the past if we are to meet the urgent challenges of our moment. For a flavour of what you will find in this rich meditation, one section is entitled 'We confuse preferences with morality'.

The last section was for me the richest, and alone worth the price of the book. 'Leaving' is subtitled 'After all'. In it Holloway talks about how an old man considers his death. There is nothing formulaic in his thoughts, and for this reviewer, who is just about his age, his thinking about how we might approach death is wonderfully clear, honest, and unflinching.

You have probably already surmised that I am deeply grateful to Holloway for writing this book. It is very much a practitioner's book, one that would probably not pass scholarly muster. But his practice is that of a wise and compassionate priest and minister, someone who has lived long, and has much to say. I think any local Sea of Faith group would find much value in reading this book together; you will be in the presence of a wise, loving and compassionate sceptic. I find this a landmark book for religious humanists.

David Rush

A World We Have Lost

Patti Whaley of the SoF in the UK offered her observations of a review of Michael Burleigh's *Earthly Powers: the clash of religion and politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War*.

The review the NY Times by Mark Lilla discusses the secularisation of Europe and the extent to which different "fantasies" about the fate of religion after the French revolution played themselves out, i.e.:

- the new world without religion
- the return to Catholic orthodoxy
- the humanistic reform of religion, which (according to Lilla) led not to the sort of enlightened religion that we like to imagine, but to totalitarianism.

Here's a quote from near the end of the review:

"Nostalgia, like hope, is a subtle but explosive force in human history, and in modern Europe it has been largely destructive. A "world we have lost" is usually one we never had but which its discoverers would like to create. That is where religion can come in: not as a path to God, but as a dike against the present and a bridge to the future.

"The West as a whole, and not just Europe, faces a double political challenge from religion today. One is to realize that the world is full of peoples whose genuine faith in the divine gives them a precise, revealed blueprint for political life, which means that for the foreseeable future they will not enter into the family of liberal democratic nations. Only if we give up the fantasy of a universal historical process driving all nations toward a secular modernity can we face this fact squarely and humanely. "The other challenge is to learn how to distinguish between those whose political programs are inspired by genuine faith, and those whose defense of religion is inspired by a reactionary utopianism having less to do with God than with redirecting the faulty course of history. In radical Islam we find both phenomena today, authentic faith and antimodern fanaticism, shaken together into an explosive cocktail. "





Living a Better, Happier, More Successful Kind of Life

Richard Templar, *The Rules of Life, A personal code for living a better, happier, more successful kind of life.* Pearson Education Limited, (2006), UK.

It has been suggested to me that SoFers may not be that familiar with the self-help shelf at your favourite bookstore.

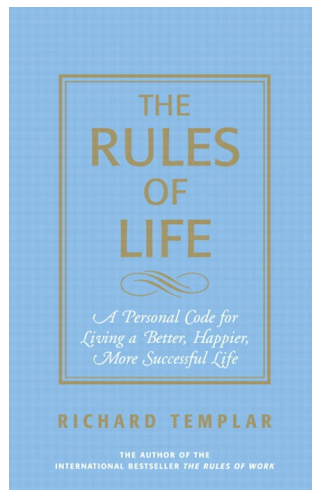
This genre has certainly exploded in the last 20-30 years with names like Stephen Covey, Anthony Robbins, Louise Hay, Wayne Dyer and Robert Kiyosaki enjoying considerable profile in our culture. Some may not have bought or read a self-help book since Spock or Carnegie (who according to Amazon has now sold 15 million copies of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*) and may be missing out on some of the most original thinkers and teachers of our age. SoFers are already well aware of the declining influence of established religion in the west and combined with increased societal pressure to succeed, get rich, seek alternative health remedies, lose weight, get fit etc. The self-help authors have a huge market of people looking for answers and guidance on life's road.

I was unable to find out what the actual size of the market was relative to the total market of book sales. I will admit that I read more books in this genre than conventional novels and I doubt that I am alone in this. Most authors claim to have triumphed over some adversity or have a more conventional qualification, and others simply start with their own celebrity. At their worst their books can be expressions of the author's ego and offer little substance and at their best self-help books can change your thinking for the better. They can motivate you towards health, inspire you towards wealth, or provide new and original insights into the human condition, and even touch your soul on the way.

The Rules of Life has a pastel and plain cover with no toothy portrait and a claim of being the bestselling author of

The Rules of Work (2002). Further research reveals *The Rules of Management* (2005). In the introduction, Templar offers little of his background or history except to say that he had an unconventional and dysfunctional upbringing and he had to decide to get past it to survive and succeed and further that he was expert at people watching and believed he could notice what works. His self-effacing style and English turn of phrase are quickly engaging and easy to read. He does not preach or lecture, rely on evidence from scientists or use some theological authority to express any of his views, just the weight of his own conviction, hurrah! **Templar claims that the happiest and most contented people are so because of the choices they make every day.**

The format of the book is simple. Templar sets out 100 Rules for life each with no more than two pages of explanation. He successfully develops genuine distinctions in these 100 Rules without



repeating the same message. For those of us more used to self-help books, you may be pleased to learn the *Rules Of Life* does not require you to stop reading to create lists, plans and strategies, answer quizzes or other distractions common to the genre.

The theme underpinning each is to go through life with your eyes open, conscious and aware of what we are doing and the effect we have on the

environment and others. Templar encourages the reader towards being a better person and citizen, and does not judge those who might fall short of the Rules.

My favourite Rules would have to be **"...aim to be the very best at everything you do, failing is fine, aiming for second isn't,"** (17) and a memorable quote for when the situation becomes tough and unpleasant: **"This, my dear, is what we call an adventure"** (50).

Templar remains very secular in his advice, Rule 1 is called **"Keep it under your hat"** amounts to the separation of self and ego as the Buddhists might teach and Rule 81 **"Doesn't hurt to forgive"** comes with no reference to 'turning the other cheek'.

Templar's Rules are always upbeat and positive, Rule 7 (entitled: **"Be flexible in your thinking"**) he suggests:

"...see life not as the enemy but as a friendly sparring partner. If you are flexible you'll have fun. If you stand your ground you're likely to get knocked about."

I enjoyed the *Rules of Life*. It would make a safe gift for nearly everyone. Who wouldn't like to be happier or operate in the world with more ease? Templar's style is probably more palatable to many without the loud Americanisms you get from the biggest selling and celebrity authors from the U.S. I believe Templar delivers some great advice, more grandparently (it's a word if I want it) wisdom than profound wisdom. Templar proves that you don't have to present new information to be valuable, but his angles and distinctions will help me remember them and to put them into action.

I recommend reading the Rules one at a time, open the book at random and let fate determine what you read.

You may be surprised how quickly a situation arises to test your new rule!

Score=3.5/5

Brendan Clegg, May 2006

Religion After The West

Alan Goss of Napier reflects on a talk with this title which was given by Don Cupitt.

None of the major world religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, can survive or be modernized as they stand. Nevertheless religion is still important, so we must attempt a new beginning and re-assess what we mean by religion and religious thinking.

This has been an unfolding concern for the Cambridge Philosopher/Theologian Don Cupitt for the past decade or so. This article summarizes a talk he delivered to a London audience last January which outlines these concerns.

According to Cupitt we have got to let go the old type of traditional organized religion which people associate with talk about God and a life in some supernatural real beyond the grave. The vast cosmic myth of man's redemption from sin is now also redundant and no longer captures the popular imagination.

This change to a new way of religious thinking is evident in people's use of ordinary language, instead of talk about God, the soul and heaven above our main agenda is life in this world, how we can make sense of it, do our own thing in it, feel at ease with

it, not only for ourselves but also for those who will follow. That's what religion today is on about. It's about throwing oneself into life with all the intensity we can muster. For in so doing we are helped to conquer the fear of death. As Cupitt puts it, we live a life that dies all the time.

In the Judeo-Christian religion and for philosophers like Hegel and thinkers like Marx, history has often been portrayed as coming to a happy-ever-after conclusion, a grand climactic finale. At the Enlightenment reason, progress and human perfectibility were on the march but inevitably things began to falter. Nietzsche gave us nihilism and Oswald Spengler wrote "The Decline of the West". During the twentieth century the rot set in. Two world wars and political upheavals ended four centuries of European dominance and the old

European civilization was replaced by the new - and very different - American consumerism. This capitalist-consumerist culture doesn't need philosophy, or religion, all it needs is technology and the rest is decoration. The consumerist craze has left almost nothing of value, all we're left with is a god-shaped blank and with our inherited religious traditions crumbling into the dust.

So where do we go from here? Cupitt's answer is that we must get on with the task of re-inventing religion, from scratch. There must be more to life, he argues, than the candyfloss celebrity and media culture which fills the whole of cultural space and dominates people's lives. It's a square box, hardly anyone can "think outside the square".

With the end of the old West and all the major cultural traditions Cupitt contends that first we must form in our minds a minimal idea of what the world is and what our place in it is. That is, we

we must get on with the task of re-inventing religion, from scratch.

establish for ourselves a simple and clear worldview. Secondly, we need to define religion. In Cupitt's terms religion is about coming to terms with life and learning how to live and die. Coming to terms with life involves accepting the fact that our life is subject to certain permanent limits. These limits are time, chance and death. Time allows us to experience life but only in bits, it is not something that we enjoy or suffer, or do, all at once. Time, and life, are one way journeys, there are no return tickets.

Chance is always with us - conflicts, triumphs, disasters, are all part of the daily round. So we try to take control of our lives even though we can never entirely succeed.

Death means that our life is finite and never delivers completely all our hopes and dreams.

In the past, says Cupitt, the great religious belief-systems and

philosophies acted to cushion people from the harsh realities of life, including death. But in recent years those assurances have melted away leaving many people feeling lost and abandoned as they face the terrors of existence and the great unanswerable Questions that prey upon their minds. Which is why religion is so much needed: it helps to pilot us through the terrors and to find personal happiness and fulfilment in life. This requires conversations with others, so the religion of the future will therefore need to have a social dimension.

Cupitt argues that we have moved from a God-made, law governed, finished work to humanly constructed world which is always shifting, slightly fuzzy, and the product of consensus. In this process our life has changed radically. In the old God-made world one's life was begun, and ended by God. God and God only controlled your life, it was pre-programmed down to the smallest detail. Today's scene is vastly

different. People try to take responsibility for their own lives, there is no supernatural order to escape to, everything is on one level with no heaven "up there" nor hell below. This world is all we have.

So we work for a culture that is not built on illusions but is truthful, honest and open all the way down. The religious life means finding a lifestyle through which we can best express ourselves. It involves trying to take control of our life and assuming full responsibility for it. And it calls us to add fresh value to the world which we share with all our fellow creatures. In more recent years feminism, anti-racism and environmentalism are examples of moral advances which have enhanced and increased the overall value of life.

Cupitt claims that his reinvention of religion is what most people already think, it is written into the idioms of our everyday speech. And it is hard to dispute that the formula "Life and My Life" are not at the top of our ordinary everyday agenda.

Alan M Goss, May Day 2006

Faith in Cyberspace



For an exploration of how and why places become **invested with sacredness** and how the sacred is embodied or made manifest through art and architecture visit: <http://witcombe.sbc.edu/sacredplaces/sacredness.html>

“Keeping the right honest and the church balanced” is the job of the **Forum of the Christian Left**. They’ve got a Conference coming up in Wellington at the end of June. Details at: www.focal.org.nz

Dignity NZ is a charitable trust established in 2005 to promote education on end-of-life decisions and related subjects within New Zealand. Formerly EXIT NZ, Dignity NZ was rebranded in March 2005 as there was a need to differentiate themselves from EXIT International, an organisation based in Australia which focuses on end-of-life technologies, regardless of legislative change.

Dignity NZ focuses on promoting education to New Zealanders via workshops, discussion groups, public speaking opportunities, publications, use of the media and private consultations.

Their website at www.dignitynz.co.nz speaks of “the best possible environment for end of life decisions in New Zealand — the best Palliative Care services we can possibly provide combined with a legal option of Voluntary Euthanasia.”

If all else fails then try this: *“Date Tens of Thousands of Sexy Catholic Singles. Register Free.”* www.CatholicCupid.com

Our Sincere Thanks

... go to the **Australian High Commission** for their financial assistance for us to bring **Rachael Kohn** to the 2005 Conference in Christchurch.

Especially to Paul Irons of DFAT for patiently steering our request through their processes.

Conferences

Auckland SoF One Day Conference

Lloyd Geering will present **“The Greening of Christianity”** on Saturday July 29th 9:30am to 3:30pm at St Luke’s Church Centre, Remuera.

Register for \$15 on the day.

Enquiries (09) 845-1561 or (09) 478-2490

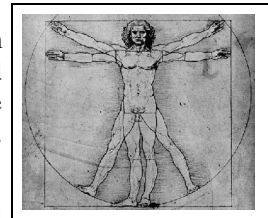


Colloquium

- **Christianity and the Feminine**
- **The Da Vinci Code Phenomenon**

THE WELLINGTON THEOLOGICAL CONSORTIUM consists of a partnership between the Bible College of New Zealand (Wellington), Booth College of Mission (The Salvation Army), the Wellington Catholic Education Centre, and the Wellington Institute of Theology (Anglican) for the purposes of advancing the intellectual exploration of Christian faith and mission.

Their 2006 colloquium focuses on **Christianity and the Feminine** as well as the **Da Vinci Code Phenomenon**.



Its promotional material asks:

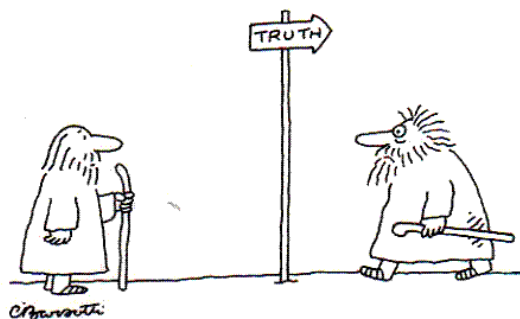
- Why is "The Da Vinci Code" enjoying such popular success?
- What social, cultural and spiritual hungers is it tapping into?
- Is its view of Christianity credible?
- Has Christianity suppressed the Feminine?

Saturday 8 July, 9.30am - 5pm.

Mercy Centre 15 Guilford St Wellington.

Waged \$40, Unwaged \$25.

For information and registration contact kingsley_sampson@nzf.salvationarmy.org (04) 5288628 extn 763, PO Box 40-542 Upper Hutt.



Local Groups

Te Puke

"In May, we tackled the subject of gender, with its manhood and womanhood that are unique to Homo Sapiens, as author Steve Jones puts it. Individual members presented facets of the topic, beginning with a glimpse through the verbal microscope at evolution's cellular happenings and the Y chromosome.

Gender facts and fallacies were given an airing, along with homosexuality and spirituality. Are women more spiritual than men; and is men's forte in toughness, independence and business acumen as was once thought?

Already there are numerous smaller interest groups, support groups and churches going along with wider concepts and freedoms as the pundits predicted.

To close the session, some members told of a spiritual moment their opposite party had not understood, or conversely, had shared. It was clear that spirituality does not fit easily in gender boxes; being personal, it has a kaleidoscopic variety.

We decided that man should not fear being made obsolete to woman..... she likes him.

Furthermore, and again in Steve Jones' vernacular, "Mars and Venus do not speak different languages; although at times they do speak different dialects".

Contact: Margaret Whitwell (07) 5735821

Others

One of the benefits of the Newsletter is that it provides a vehicle for Local Groups to exchange ideas about the things that they discuss. Please forward

to me your Newsletters and especially those that provide summaries of what you have already discussed — notices of meeting to come are interesting enough but a good meaty summary of a discussion is more valuable - ed.

A Decade Ago

From Newsletter 17,
July 1996

"If the concept of God has any validity or use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him."

James Baldwin : The Fire Next Time

"postmodernism suggests [that] the world is actually too complex and messy for us to understand"

William G. LeFurgy "Culture in Cyberspace"

"Always Carry a Corkscrew — The Wine Will Provide Itself"

Author Unknown

Copy Deadlines

These are the dates by which I will need copy:

Issue	Deadline
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 copy neatly 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)*

AGM Remits

So that we can mail AGM Remits with the September Newsletter to meet our obligations under our Rules, they must be in the hands of the Secretary, Mary Boekman, 138 Rata Street, Inglewood by August 15.

Potential Apocalypses

Fred Marshall's article in Newsletter 66 made reference to the disasters that human-kind could bring down on itself. Editing of the article excised some important details:

"The crisis is heightened by the pressures of human population on the natural order, by the destruction of habitat, by the over-exploitation of resources, by climate change precipitated by rising levels of carbon dioxide and methane.

"The supply of water and oil and the loss of tillable land are already sowing the seeds of desperation in many parts of the world and there are enough atom bombs concealed about the globe to precipitate a man-made disaster in response to competition for resources and inequity of distribution."

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, (04) 236-7533

The **Secretary** is Mary Boekman, 138 Rata St, Inglewood, (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 ...

"sofia" 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

"I'm not religious but I am spiritual"

Yeah, right

I HAVE THE GOOD FORTUNE TO HAVE BEEN INVITED to give a paper at this year's UK Sea of Faith Conference in Leicester on July 19th. As part of my address I will draw hearers' attention to the semantic confusion that arises in many discussions of religion and I will offer a way out of it, especially in respect of the word 'spirituality'.

As a preliminary example I will invite my listeners to compare the very different ways in which these words such as 'myth', 'mystery', 'truth', 'belief', 'faith' and 'spirit' are used in a religious and in a popular context.

I will demonstrate that the usage of 'spirituality' has changed over time and that we can now observe three stages of use that are all still with us.

The oldest supposes 'spirits' (and its latter-day manifestation 'angels') to be real entities operating in a real supernatural realm. Spirituality was what you did in order to conform to their wishes or to get them to conform to yours.

A different focus came about in the last half-century in a privatising approach which aids those who feel the need to reject dogmatic authorities — both ecclesiastical and rational — while letting them retain their pastel-coloured metanarratives and sentimentalised views of the cosmos, the earth, dolphins, whales, trees, the solstices — and of their 'perfectable' selves. These uses, like those of the earlier metaphysical dualism, will undoubtedly remain, but as one set of options among many.

The most recent attempt at definition comes from the American theologian, Owen Thomas, who gives the name 'spirituality' to our built-in 'itch' (my word, not his) to transcend the Darwinian legacy. Instead of participating in Tennyson's "Nature, Red in Tooth and Claw" we are inspired to exercise life-affirming traits of mercy and love and justice and support. Spirituality, seen in this way, is the basic inherent human characteristic (comparable to language) which underpins and accounts for the two earlier versions.

I will conclude with the proposition that spirituality is not a free-thinker's **alternative** to religion, as New Agers would have it, but its very **source**.

Noel Cheer

Steering Committee Chairperson, 2005-2006



P.S. Readers outside NZ may not recognise the opening caption as derived from a well-known advertisement for beer