



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

# CONFERENCE 2006

## Newsletter Supplement

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This Supplement contains abbreviated versions of major addresses from the Conference.

The full papers can be found on our website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)

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### **After Religion — What? and The Religion of Ordinary Life**

A keynote address by **Don Cupitt** who is the founding figure of Sea of Faith (though not the founder -- it just grew!) Since *Taking Leave of God* twenty-five years ago, Don has serialised his spiritual autobiography at the rate of more than one book per year. His most recent, *The Great Questions of Life*, continues the theology of everyday language. His website is at [www.doncupitt.com](http://www.doncupitt.com)

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A keynote address by **Bill Cooke**, Senior Lecturer, School of Visual Arts, University of Auckland at Manukau, Fellow of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion. All his work revolves around re-articulating an authentic humanist world view for the twenty-first century. His latest book is *A Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism and Humanism* (Prometheus: 2006). He can be contacted at [bill.cooke@manukau.ac.nz](mailto:bill.cooke@manukau.ac.nz)

### **Memories of The Panel Discussion**

By one who chaired it.

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# From 'Supernatural' Religion to Natural Religion

Lloyd Geering

*These are excerpts from the paper which Lloyd Geering delivered at the Conference.  
The full text is available on the website.*

Before we can adequately discuss the transition of supernatural religion to natural religion we have to clarify what it means to be religious. Many people assume that supernatural components, such as miracles and gods, constitute the *sine qua non* of religion. There is an increasing number of people in a secularised society like New Zealand who not only say they are not religious but who also firmly believe that all religion is becoming as obsolete as the view that the earth is flat. As they see it, we are moving into a non-religious era.

On their view of religion they are probably right. By religion they are referring to such things as belief in a personal God, prayer as appeal to supposed supernatural forces, the reality of life after death and so on. These have certainly been integral to the traditional Christian religion though they do not apply to all forms of religion. Buddhism is an obvious example of a non-theistic religion. Originally it was also non-supernaturalistic.

So what counts as religion? Can there possibly be some form of religion consistent with today's non-supernatural understanding of reality? When does religion simply turn into superstition? The answers to such questions depend on how we define religion. Some of the discussion about religion turns out to be a question of semantics and we need to avoid a merely verbal debate.

It is only since the advent of the modern world, say about four hundred years ago, that the problem of what constitutes religion has emerged. W. Cantwell Smith, in his seminal book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, has shown that our use of the word 'religion' as an objective noun to refer to a set of beliefs and practices is quite modern. The word religion never used to be used in the plural, as when we today talk about 'the religions of the world'. Smith urged us to stop talking about 'religions' and to fasten attention rather on the capacity of people to be religious.

But what is it to be religious? Derived as it is from the Latin religio, 'religion' did not originally refer to an external, objective thing, but to the humanly subjective attitude of devotion. Religio, and hence 'religion', basically meant devoutness, commitment, or what I call 'a conscientious concern for what really matters'. It was not a concrete noun naming a thing but an abstract noun referring to a state of being — the state of being religious. To be religious, therefore, is to be devoted, whole-heartedly committed, and zealous. That is why we talk about religious zeal.

But zealous for what? Albert Einstein, who was not himself religious in any traditional sense at all, said: 'To be religious is to have found an answer to the question of what is the meaning of life.' The theologian Paul Tillich defined religion as 'the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life'. An Italian scholar, Carlo

della Casa, defined religion as 'a total mode of the interpreting and living of life'.

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In the radical cultural change in the Western world which has occurred in the last three hundred years, we have been moving step by step from one kind of culture to another. The elves, fairies and hobgoblins were the first to go. From the late nineteenth century the reality of the Devil and his demons began to be questioned and later abandoned. During this century the objective reality of God has come to be questioned more widely. God is certainly no longer conceived to be living in the sky, for the ancient and medieval view of the universe has been completely replaced by the vast space-time continuum of modern physics.

For an increasing number of people in modern times the whole spiritual world on which our forebears focused their attention has largely dissolved into unreality. It has been replaced by a complex physical universe of unimaginable dimensions of space and time, stretching from sub-atomic particles to the distant nebulae. Where our forebears in the pre-modern age spoke of spiritual forces — in the form of God, spirits, angels and Satan, we talk about physical energy in the form of gravity and the nuclear forces. We talk of electrons and quarks, DNA and chromosomes, immune systems and amino acids, neurones and synapses. For us these are the basic components of reality with which to explain the nature of the world, the phenomenon of life within it, and even how we human organisms think through our brains.

This does not mean, as too many have concluded, that our forebears lived in an illusory world which they, in their ignorance, had created, whereas we live in the real world because we have now discovered the truth. It is not nearly as simple as that. Both sets of terms are the creation of the human mind. Even though we feel we have very good reason to prefer one set to the other, it is important to acknowledge that both sets of terms have been humanly constructed and neither can claim absoluteness or finality.

Each set of terms constitutes a conceptual language with which we interpret and structure the world of which we are a part. When we create a new way of talking about the world, it is as if we are creating a new world order.

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Much religious belief and practice that has survived into the modern world is to be judged superstition from the standpoint of the world most of us see ourselves now living in. As we are still in the process of moving from one culture to another, some still live happily in the old world-view, provided they stay within its restricted horizons. For them the traditional beliefs and practices are not superstition but serve as genuine religion.

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What our ancient forbears did unconsciously, in slowly creating their world of meaning, we now have to do for ourselves, quite aware that we are doing it. This, basically, is what it means to be religious in today's world. First we have to choose the verbal symbols we deem most appropriate for us to use in order to create meaning. Our choice may depend on the culture that has shaped us. The Buddhist may prefer to stick with Sunya, the Hindu with Brahman, the Taoist with Tao. We in the West have to decide whether to retain the world God or find a replacement. It is not an easy choice.

If we choose to retain the God-symbol, we must then enunciate the content to be put into the word 'God'. That choice is over to us and is the next step in the creation of meaning. The content we put into the God-symbol is over to us and it will depend on the way we conceive reality and the values we find within it. Whatever the content we place in the word God it is by the lives we live that we demonstrate whether we are ready to worship that God. In other words, to be religious in the world of the future is to create meaning for ourselves by responding to all that ultimately concerns in the context in which we live.

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[T]he American historian Lynn White, [wrote] "until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one ... Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not".

For such a religion we need to draw in part on the cultures and languages of the past. In the evolution of culture there may be crises and radical changes but there are never complete breaks. Of course in the new global context the Christian tradition is not the only one involved in meeting the challenge. We in the West are not in a position to prescribe or even suggest how they should respond. Our responsibility is to see how we can respond out of the post-Christian West.

First, we must acknowledge that we have entered a post-Christian era and that this means that we must discard some concepts and beliefs of orthodox Christianity altogether. These are some of the things that must be jettisoned:

- The idolising of the Bible.
- The idolising of Jesus of Nazareth as the divine and only Saviour of the world.
- Reliance on a priestly hierarchy.
- The notion of the church as a monolithic and rigid ecclesiastical organisation.
- Divine revelation as a source of knowledge.
- The making of absolute and exclusive claims about the Christian Gospel.
- The notion of God as an objective, though invisible, personal being.
- Prayer understood as conversation with an external personal deity.
- Expectation of a post-mortem personal existence.

Secondly we must be prepared to create new terms and concepts, and new rituals and patterns of social behaviour. There is no way at the present in which we can say just what those may be. But we can observe that a great variety of such things are already beginning to emerge. Only in the last thirty years or so, have such terms as spirituality, culture, eco-theology, our earth-mother, come into more common use.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we must explore how certain concepts and themes from the past may be used in radically new ways. At the Axial period, the primitive

gods were left behind but the word 'god' was retained and given a new meaning. Now is the time to take that process a stage further. ...

I am often surprised by the degree to which this was already beginning to occur in biblical times. From the New Testament itself we have long learned to say that 'God is love'. Mahatma Ghandi taught us to say that 'God is truth'. To this we can readily add that 'God is life'. God is all that we value. All that is of lasting worth to us is, in fact, our God. ... In other words the God-symbol, if we still choose to use it in the twenty-first century, will refer to the sum-total of those things which will concern us most and which call forth from us the same gamut of emotions of awe, wonder, gratitude and obligation as they did in the past when our forbears had a different view of reality and used a different conceptual language.

To worship God in the 21st century is to stand in awe of this self-evolving universe of which we are a part and which is so vast in space and time that our tiny minds cannot cope with it.

To worship God in the 21st century is to marvel at the living ecosphere of life on this planet of which we are the product and on which we depend for our existence and continuing sustenance. Life on this planet is itself the manifestation of God and we are all part of the living God.

To worship God in the 21st century is to be grateful to the successive generations of our human ancestors who have slowly created the various forms of human culture that have enabled us to become the kind of human beings we are.

To worship God in the 21st century is to value everything with which we are endowed as human beings, our capacity to think and to be engaged in the quest for what is true and meaningful, our capacity to feel, to love and be loved, to show compassion and selfless sacrifice.

To worship God in the 21st century is to accept in a responsible and self-sacrificing fashion the burden of responsibility now being laid upon us for the future of our species and for the protection of all planetary life.

To be religious in the 21st century is to be devoted to maximising the future for all those whose destiny is increasingly in our hands.

To be religious in the 21st century is to value even more than ever the importance of the human relationships that bind us together into social groups. Because we humans are social creatures we are dependent on one another for being what we are, for the way we think, for the understanding and practice of religion.

There will be no one form of religious ritual but a great variety of rituals and devotional practices, mostly drawn from our diverse cultural past but adapted to the new situation. Indeed we shall find that, even after discarding much of our own past cultural tradition, there is also much of it that will suddenly light up with new meaning and relevance.

Such then is a sketch of the natural religion that may replace the supernatural religion of the past.

*Lloyd Geering 2006*

## Conference CDs

Until about mid-2007 we are offering the Conference audio sessions on CD. Go to the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz) for details

Don Cupitt, Emmanuel College, Cambridge, UK

## After Religion — What?

*This is both the Conference theme and the title of Don's Keynote address.*

*The full text can be found on the website. This is an abstract:*

"In 1912 the great sociologist Durkheim defined 'the division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane' as 'the distinctive trait of religious thought'.

This definition works very well for tribal religions and for medieval religion, but in the modern West something very odd has been happening. The sacred world seems to be changing, declining, or even disappearing altogether.

For Hegel the merging of the sacred world into the profane world began with the Incarnation, and its completion is the fulfilment of Christianity. Marx, following Hegel, translates the old history of salvation into a new revolutionary political ideology. Nietzsche, more radically, sees 'the Death of God' as leading to nihilism. When humans have become completely demythologized, and have lost all their old guiderails and landmarks, what will they live by?

I hold that after nihilism religion must return into ordinary language, everyday life, and solar living in the present moment. This new religion of life began to appear as early as Wordsworth, and has recently become prominent in our everyday speech."

*Don provided a Supplement about which he wrote:*

In 24 brief slogans, I have tried to present a short systematic theology of the religion of life that (I think) most people in the West already believe, or are coming to believe. Some people may prefer to describe it as a philosophy of life (German, *Lebensphilosophie*). Other people may wish to think of it as the final stage of the historical development of religion, to which Christianity itself looks forward. **Below is that supplement in full. It bears the title:**

## The Religion of Ordinary Life

### 1. LIFE

#### i) Life is everything.

Life is the whole human world, everything as it looks to and is experienced by the only beings who actually have a world, namely human beings with a life to live.

#### ii) Life is all there is.

Our age is now post-metaphysical. The world of life is not dependent upon, nor derived from, any other realm, nor is there any other world after it, or beyond it.

#### iii) Life has no outside.

Everything is immanent, interconnected, secondary. Everything remains within life. When we are born, we don't come *into* this world, and when we die we don't *leave* it. There is no absolute point of view from which someone can see 'the Truth', the final Truth, about life.

#### iv) Life is God.

Life is that in which 'we live and move and have our being' (*Acts 17:28*), within which we are formed, and of whose past we will remain part. Both our ultimate Origin and our Last End are within life. Life is now as God to us.

#### v) To love life is to love God.

Every bit of our life is final for us, and we should treat all life as a sacred gift and responsibility. We should see our relation to life as being like an immediate relation to God. We are moved and touched by the way all living things, and not just we ourselves, spontaneously love life, affirm it and cling to it.

### 2. LIFE AND MY LIFE

#### i) My life is my own personal stake in life.

The traditional relation of the soul to God is now experienced in the form of the relation between my life and life in general. As, traditionally, one's first responsibility in religion was for the salvation of one's own soul, so now a human being's first duty is the duty to recognise that I simply

am the life I have lived so far, plus the life that still remains to me.

#### ii) My life is all I have, all I'll ever have.

I must *own* my own life, in three senses: I must claim it wholly as mine, acknowledge it, and assume full responsibility for the way I conduct it. I must live my own life in a way that is authentically mine. To be authentically oneself in this way — the opposite of 'living a lie' — is the first part of the contribution one should seek to make to life as a whole.

#### iii) Every human person has, in principle, an equal stake in life.

This principle is vital to our ideas of justice and of love for the fellow-human being. Murder and other offences against the person are almost everywhere regarded as equally serious, whoever the victim is. The love of God is love and fellow-feeling for 'the neighbour' or *the fellow creature*, generalized without limit until it becomes the love of all life.

#### iv) In human relationships, justice is first in order, but love is first in value.

We should esteem love most highly of all; but love itself must be based on justice, not least in parental/filial and in sexual relationships. The work of justice is to clear a level space for love.

### 3. THE LIMITS OF LIFE

#### i) Life is subject to limits. In life, everything is subject to temporality.

On life everything is held within and is subject to movement of one-way linear time. Life is, as people say, a single ticket. There are no second chances or retakes.

#### ii) In life everything is contingent.

In life, the one-way linear movement of time makes every moment final and every chance a last chance; but at the same time everything is contingent. This painful combination of finality with contingency is what gives rise to people's talk

of luck or fate. More to the point, it also follows that there are no fixed or unchanging absolutes in life. There are no clearly and permanently fixed realities, or identities or even standards.

**iii) Life itself, and everything in the world of life, is mediated by language.** Consciousness is an effect of the way language lights up the world of experience, and self-consciousness is an effect of the use of language to talk about itself. Thought is an incompletely-executed motion of language somewhere in our heads.

**iv) Life goes on, but my, life is finite.**

The only deaths we need to prepare ourselves for are the deaths of others who are dear to us. We will never experience our own deaths. So we should simply love life and say Yes to life until our last day. There is no point at all in making any other preparation for death.

#### 4. FAITH IN LIFE

**i) When I have faith in life, love life, and commit myself to it, I have bought a package deal: life with its limits**

Whereas in traditional theology 'evil' was seen as a secondary intruder into an originally perfect world, and therefore as being eliminable, the limits of life, which were traditionally called 'metaphysical evil' or 'evils of imperfection', are essential to life. Unlike God, life is finite and imperfect, and has to be accepted as being neither more nor less than what it is. If I want to refuse the package, the alternative for me is 'passive nihilism' or thoroughgoing pessimism. For the religion of life, apologetics takes the form of an attempt to show that pessimism is unreasonable.

**ii) The package deal of life cannot be renegotiated.**

There is nobody to renegotiate the deal with. We cannot hope to vary the terms on which life is offered to us.

**iii) Life is bittersweet, and bittersweetness is greatly to be preferred to pure sweetness.**

In the classic iconography of Heaven, everyone is 33 years old, everyone looks the same, and everything is oddly dead, like a plastic flower on a grave. In real life, we love imperfections, irregularities, beauty spots, and signs of frailty or age. The mortal actual is far more loveable than the ideal.

**iv) We should never complain, nor even feel any need to complain.**

Life should be loved purely affirmatively and exactly as it is. Everyone gets basically the same deal, and nothing else is on offer. Any sense of victim hood or paranoia or grievance is out of place, and we should get it out of our systems. Never say, nor even *think*, 'Why me?'

#### 5. SOLAR LIVING

**i) Life is a gift (with no giver) that is renewed every day, and true religion is expressive, 'solar' living.**

By faith, and without any qualification or restriction, I should let life well up in me and pour itself out into symbolic expression through me. Thus I 'get myself together'.

**ii) Solidarity is creative living-by-dying.**

In solar living I live by dying because I am passing away all the time. In my symbolic expression I get myself together, but as I do so I must instantly pass on and leave that self behind, I must not be *attached* to my own life, nor to my own products, or expressed selves.

My self, and all my loves, must be continuously let go of and continuously renewed. Dying therefore no longer has any terrors for me, because I have made a way of life out of it.

**iii) Solar living creates great joy, and happiness.**

My symbolic expression may take various forms, as it pours out in my quest for selfhood, in my loves or my work. In all these areas, continuous letting-go and renewal creates joy, which on occasion rises and spills over into cosmic happiness. This 'cosmic' happiness is the modern equivalent of the traditional *Summum Bonum*, the 'chief end' of life.

**iv) Even the Supreme Good must be left behind at once.**

I, all my expressions, and even the *Summum Bonum*, the Supreme Good itself, are all of them transient. Eternal happiness may be great enough to make one feel that one's whole life has been worthwhile, but it is utterly transient. Let it go!

#### 6. THE END OF 'THE REAL WORLD'

**What people call 'reality' is merely an effect of either power, or habit.**

**i) The Real: a product of lazy, unthinking habits of perception and interpretation.**

The fixity and unchangeability that people like to ascribe to the real world out there is in fact merely the effect upon them of their own lazy habits. They are in a rut of their own making.

**ii) There is no readymade Reality out there.**

There is no readymade meaningfulness out there, and no objective Truth out there. Meaning is found only in language, and truth belongs only to true statements. Because life is always language-wrapped, everything in the world of life is always shaped by the language in which we describe it, and in a living language everything is always changing. It follows that we ourselves, and our language, and our world, are shifting all the time like the sea. Nothing is nor can be objectively and permanently fixed.

**iii) We ourselves are the only Creator.**

As we become critically aware, the objective world melts away. So many supposed features of the world turn out to be merely features of the language in which we describe it. By now, critical thinking has dissolved away objective reality, leaving us with just the human world-wide web, the stream of all our human activity and conversation, and the changing consensus-world-picture that it gives us. Our world is our communal, partly-botched work of folk art.

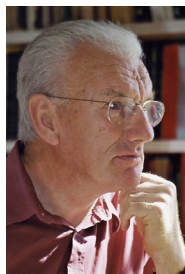
**iv) Nihilism and creative freedom.**

There is no stable real world, and no enduring real self. But this situation is not one for despair: it offers us the freedom to remake ourselves and our world. By solar living we can each of us make a personal offering, a small contribution to life, an oblation.

#### 7. DEATH

**i) Passing out into life.**

Unattached, but loving life to the last, I am, able at the end of my life to pass out into the moving flow of life in general. The only sensible preparation for death is the practice of solar living.





## After Disbelief: Remythologising And Spiritual Renewal

David Tacey

**In order to find God, you first have to lose him. Meister Eckhart**

*This is the opening section of David Tacey's paper. It can be found in full on the website.*

### Introduction

To gain a deeper understanding of God and to recover our spiritual wellbeing and connectedness, the modern mind needs to perform two related tasks. The first is *demythologising*, which sets us apart from traditional religion and establishes us as 'modern', and the second is *remythologising*, where we return to the religious viewpoint of the past, but from an entirely different perspective. Remythologising follows demythologising, and cannot be conducted without it, but the second task is not a straightforward product of the first. Remythologising involves a leap of imagination and a recovery of faith in the invisible world, which demythologising does not always encourage. The majority of secular people in the modern West are in the demythologising mode, whether they realise it or not. I would argue that demythologising is a transitional state for humankind, and as such the secular modern West is itself a transitory phenomenon. I do not expect it to have enduring value. A mind or culture preoccupied with demythologising cannot last long, because it is divorced from the wellsprings of energy that give it life and purpose.

### Unravelling Old Myths, Stories, Traditions

Demythologising is useful, but mainly at certain points in history, where religion requires a radical shake-up, and when the official spirituality of culture has become weak and ineffectual. At such times, the objects of belief have to be swept away, and we have to reconnect again with the primal spiritual impulse from which all belief systems originate. When this radical activity is carried out effectively, it can lead to a remythologising process and to the recovery of a new and profound kind of faith.

In the demythologising mode, the mind asks critical questions about traditional conceptions of God, religion and spirituality, and finds the old answers to be unconvincing and inadequate. It experiences religion as a series of stories or 'myths' which have to be unravelled, interrogated, reduced to allegories and perhaps abandoned. The myths are viewed as obscure, fantastic and 'untrue' in terms of the modern understanding of truth. Demythologising arises as a natural expression of the growth of reason, and from the mind's increasing scepticism toward metaphysics and the invisible world. It is an inevitable outcome of the rise of education and the development of the scientific attitude, which asks for proof of the existence of a deity or metaphysical order.

The theological response that religious truth has been gifted to us by revelation, and should be gratefully received in faith, is unacceptable to the modern scientific

mind. As such, unreconstructed theology cannot resolve the modern problem, because the mind's refusal to believe is pre-theological, existential, and cannot be resolved in the traditional manner.

Finding no proof of the existence of God, secular reason concludes that God does not and never did exist, and the material world is the only form of reality. This leads to atheism and materialism, and from there it is often a short step to nihilism, despair and depression. Modern philosophers sometimes argue that since there is no inherent meaning in the universe, we have to create our own meaning, and thus existentialism is born. Humanism asserts, along with existentialism, that we must make man and woman the measure of all things, since the divine measure is missing, and we have to fill the vacuum of meaning with human constructs. In response to this crisis, the religions plead with us to 'return' to the faith of the past, to brush our questions and doubts aside, and re-embrace the traditional God in which we will find solace and meaning.

But the modern crisis cannot be resolved so easily. Our questions are not answered by a simple return to the past. If we go back to earlier attitudes, modernity is annulled, and the challenges inherent in the modern phase are squashed or ignored, in favour of bolstering the old religious order.

The old order is collapsing for a variety of good reasons, and not merely because we have become 'wayward' or have diverted from the path of righteousness. The deep historical splits in the religious mentality between spirit and nature, spirit and body, the sacred and the sexual, heaven and earth, are causing the old religious mentality to split up and disintegrate. Repressed nature, body, eros, and sexuality are hitting back in our civilisation, and with a considerable vengeance, with the result that the religious morality that encouraged these repressions is widely discredited and reviled. The old religious ideal of perfection is viewed as neurotic and anti-life. Humanity has outgrown the old ethical order, and it is demanding a new ethical vision that religion, as yet, has been unable to deliver.

But at the same time, the credibility of religious ideas and assumptions has been shattered. The notion that one religion can claim absolute truth for itself, and treat other religions with disdain or disrespect, no longer has validity in our complex, pluralistic world. The notion that God privileges one tradition above others, is today viewed as a category error and has to be abandoned. Moreover, the fact that religious language has been read literally by faith institutions is a travesty of the spirit and a misrepresentation of its meaning. The time has come for a new vision that enhances life, that brings the whole of life into relationship with itself, and that recovers the integrity and diversity of spiritual truth.

We are on a path to a new understanding of religious truth, and although this path may eventually reinvigorate the faith institutions, a renewal cannot take place until the old forms, values, and habits of thought have been unravelled. As we return to a spiritual standpoint, we cannot afford to return to the religious forms of the past.

We have to *dream onward* our understandings of God, so that as we return to the idea of transcendence, we need not fall back on outdated and inadequate answers to the eternal questions. 'Eternal truth demands a language that changes with the spirit of the time'.

### Back to Beyond: the Return of Transcendence

In an optimistic mood, I envisage us returning to the idea of transcendence, but in an entirely new way, and with the help of new understandings of myth, symbol and language. These new understandings will be gleaned from depth psychology, philosophy, scriptural studies and the history of ideas. As we recover transcendence, and retrieve the ancient perception of God and spirit, we must move forward and accept the historical complexity of our situation. The spirit of progress compels us onward, even if there is something weary in our souls, which would like nothing more than to forget the present confusion, rest in the bosom of tradition and assert its unconditional truth.

But we cannot go back, prior to atheism and existentialism, prior to the experiment of the modern period. Our way is through and beyond the wasteland of atheism and the desert of rationality. I believe that historically we have already reached the edge of the wasteland, and I see signs of this everywhere. But the signs are small and scattered; in a dozen or more highly specialised disciplines, we see the return of the sacred in our modern world.

This renewal of spirit has not yet been institution-alised, although it will undoubtedly occur in the future. Meanwhile, to find this renewal today one has to read the spirit of the time correctly, by observing the creative developments in such diverse areas as physics, biology, postmodern philosophy, depth psychology, the arts, music, cinema, and so on. There is a new sense of openness to the sacred in many of the sciences and in various streams of philosophy. It seems that the two major forces that shook up and discredited the old religious order, namely, science and philosophy, are the forces that will bear witness to the return of the sacred. There is internal logic in this: the knowledges that chased the sacred away and declared the world to be disenchanting, are the very knowledges which will lead the movement toward a re-enchanted universe.

Ironically, the new spiritual momentum in culture may not appear in religion itself, or not at first. Sometimes, as I will argue, the new spirit appears in religion in distorted or negative form, as resurgent fundamentalism. This is mainly because religion is not open to the new spirit and is still trying to assert the validity of the old metaphysical order and to prop up collapsing structures. The creative spirit may be discerned more clearly – somewhat ironically – in secular and nonreligious areas of enquiry, such as the arts and sciences. This predicament will change in due course, once religion has understood the direction and meaning of the spirit. But for the time being, the new spirit and religious institutions seem to inhabit different worlds. New spirit is rising in the secular domain, and old spirit is collapsing in the religious domain. The present time is paradoxical and suggests an

old formula: he who has his faith shall lose it, and he who loses his faith for the sake of the new will find it.

But there has to be risk and adventure, before the new faith can be found, before the new God can be encountered. We need to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, through the desert of rationality to find the new experience of the transcendent. If we remain ensconced within the traditional worldview, the next phase of our religious understanding will most likely not be revealed to us. To be truly religious, we have to become heretical; and to be truly spiritual, we have to question everything that has gone before. To renew the religious traditions, the traditions need to be betrayed, so that we can move beyond established conventions and see what the spirit is asking us to do. The time commands us to heresy and creativity, because spirit is trapped and stifled by old religious forms that no longer serve its purpose.

We experience God today not through knowing, but through *not knowing*. The present is a time of 'negative theology', in which the divine is affirmed not through revelation or rituals, but through openness, rupture, woundedness, exposure, alienation. To encounter God in a destitute time, we have to brace ourselves for many blows and disappointments, and open up to reality with honesty and integrity. God today demands radical measures and radical commitment. The journey is not for the faint-hearted but only for those who are prepared to take risks and move ahead without prior assurances, and without pats on the back from authority figures. In times of radical transition, 'authority' is often wrong, while creativity and rebellion have the support of the spirit.

### This is how the paper concludes

Our learning and culture can only be protected from violence and inundation if we open our society more to the otherness of the sacred and the power of the divine, and this means using myths and symbols as containers of the energies that might otherwise overwhelm us.

This is where re-mythologising plays such a vital role in society, in the health of the mind, and the moderation of religious desire. In re-mythologising, we open ourselves again to the autonomy of God, but we refuse to allow this power to destroy our reason, to cramp our imagination or to attack our science and education. We are able to say that the statements of scripture are true, but they are not literally true. By using an educated approach to language and myth, we are able to appreciate the power of the religious symbol to designate a spiritual reality that must not be confused with literal fact. All true symbols are able to carry religious meaning, but they are relative and not absolute. They are our best possible expressions of a spiritual reality that remains apart from, or greater than, our ability to know or comprehend that reality.

Re-mythologising and resurgent fundamentalism are both inspired by the revitalising impulse to reassert the power of spirit in the face of a disbelieving world.

Re-mythologising, however, accepts the findings of science and the doubts and questions of education. It accepts the need, expressed in the demythologising process, to destroy the literalisms of the past and unsettle the security of idolatry and traditional creeds. It understands that when God becomes too known or familiar, we need to unravel the forms of religion and return to an awareness that God is above our finite knowing, and above all religion and culture.

Re-mythologising sides with God against religion, but it realises, at the same time, that religious images are all we have, and they have to be rediscovered for what they can tell us about the nature and character of the Unknown God.

# The Fatal Flaw in Religious Liberalism and How to Avoid It

Bill Cooke

This is an excerpt from Bill Cooke's paper which can be found in full on the website.

## The fatal flaw and God

One way to illustrate the fatal flaw argument is to look at the liberal Christian/religious humanist views of God. A prominent example is Paul Tillich, who spoke of God as both 'the ground of all being' and the 'source of your being.' I am not claiming to be saying anything new when I ask what is meant by all this. A number of philosophers have queried whether 'being' means anything at all and whether instead it makes the logical fallacy of assuming the word 'being' corresponds to something that exists. Tillich has presumed to cut away all the dogmatic and supernatural excrescences of the Christian idea of God, and stops only with 'ground of all being'. But the fatal flaw argument would ask, why stop there? Is it not entirely arbitrary to determine that God can still legitimately be spoken of in this way? And does it not have the troubling moral implication of still grounding us, not so much in 'being', but in anthropocentric conceit?

Having drastically pared God down to little more than a sentimental urge, Tillich turns directly to the unbeliever and invites him in.

And believe me, you who are estranged from religion and far away from Christianity, it is not our purpose to make you religious and Christian when we interpret the call of Jesus for our time. We call Jesus the Christ not because He brought a new religion, but because He is the end of religion, above religion and irreligion, above Christianity and non-Christianity.

Is it any wonder that those who are estranged from religion have not heeded this call? If we can abandon or ignore every item of Christian dogma, as Tillich invites us to do, what is left of Jesus Christ? And is not 'Jesus Christ' an invention of Christian dogma? Was not the simple message of Rabbi Yeshua, a message entirely of its time, entirely directed to his fellow Jews, precisely the message that was reworked and ignored in favour of the universalising Christ that Tillich remained party to? To reject Tillich's bloodless, abstract, de-Judaised Christ, or Bishop Robinson's 'man for others' formula, I do, is to show Rabbi Yeshua more respect than he has traditionally been accorded by those who profess to champion his name. This respect is shown in the sense of a clear understanding of what has been rejected; and clear in the sense that truth-claims have been made and have been accorded the respect of a fair hearing on those terms.

And neither does Tillich's radical misreading of humanism act as incentive to bring those estranged from religion in. He wrote:

Humanism has transformed the inaccessibility of God into the sublimity of His moral commands.

Humanism has forgotten that God's majesty, as experienced by the prophet, implies the shaking of the foundations wherever He appears, and the veil of smoke whenever He shows Himself. When God is identified with an element of human nature, as in humanism, the terrifying and annihilating encounter with majesty becomes an impossibility.

Tillich misses the point here in several important ways. Humanism has not *forgotten* God's majesty, but rather doubts such an idea is meaningful. The more secular half of the humanist spectrum, at any rate, does not make the mistake of identifying God with an element of human nature. Humanity is on its own, with no guarantee that its physical, intellectual and moral resources are sufficient to sustain it.

Not only does Tillich's view of God demonstrate clearly the fatal flaw, it also runs the risk of violating Douglas Pratt's first principle of religious studies; that of using language the practitioner can recognise. Tillich's idea is one neither the vast majority of conventional believers or unbelievers would recognise and so stumbles at the first hurdle in the arena of demotheology.

More recent thinkers have progressed beyond Tillich. Don Cupitt has said straightforwardly that we should give up the idea that God exists while continuing to see the idea of God as useful in our lives. He goes on to say 'I still pray and love God, even though I fully acknowledge that no God actually exists.' Lloyd Geering has abandoned the God idea just as comprehensively. And Keith Ward likened God to the practice of virtue and the cultivation of excellence. He then adds: 'If God bothers you, forget God, and think of adopting a way of self-transformation which sees human life in the light of values that are of eternal worth.' But if all modified, relativised visions of God can be so easily jettisoned, I fail to see how they can meaningfully help in attaching us to ideas of eternal worth. Bishop Robinson justified retaining use of the word 'God', despite it not standing for anything substantial, by virtue of the depths it implies, depths that naturalists and secular humanists cannot recognise. What these depths might be was left conveniently vague and to my mind illustrate once again the dangers of the fatal flaw in religious liberalism. And in any case it leaves unresolved the objection that it is an anthropocentric conceit to presume that values we hold dear are of eternal worth. Once again the wisdom of George Santayana is so valuable. Spiritual life is not a worship of 'values', he wrote, 'whether found in things or hypostasised into supernatural powers. It is the exact opposite; it is *disintoxication* from their influence.' (36) Half a century later Richard Holloway said much the same thing when he made it clear that the use of God in moral debate 'is so problematic as to be almost worthless.'



Having made my differences with these thinkers plain, I want to state clearly at this point that I agree strongly with what they are trying to do. I agree that people need a fabric of meaning in their lives. I also agree that much of this fabric of meaning is constructed and expressed with the use of symbols. People need a structure, a purpose and a code of some sort. All people need this, and the extraordinary variety of beliefs we have generated is testimony to human inventiveness. Much of it will be fanciful or delusional and/or anthropocentric, but we seem to need it. I also sympathise with the fear that the dreary shallowness of postmodernism and what has been called Affluenza is posing as grave a threat to any sense of meaning than competing ideologies. But I find myself completely unconvinced that we need to retain the hollowed-out shell of religion as a vehicle for meaning. My question is: why persist with such an attenuated, evacuated God idea—one which fails to clear the hurdles of demotheology, scriptural warrant, logical consistency, linguistic coherence, or moral utility? The goal of an integrated, meaningful, committed life that we all share, I am arguing, is best served in two ways: by resisting as much as we are able the hubristic lure of anthropocentrism, and by grounding as many of our beliefs as possible in knowledge that is, at least in principle, open to question. I argue that the fatal flaw at the heart of religious liberalism works as an obstacle to these things happening rather than the boon it should be.

#### **The fatal flaw and faith**

The fatal flaw at the heart of religious liberalism is also at work with one of the central ideas of the Sea of Faith; that we are all animated by faith, which is distinguished from belief and defined broadly as a deeply committed, joyous zest for life, a condition fundamental to our humanity. To begin with, this conception of faith is not shared by most humanists, or by most philosophers or even by a majority of theologians. With respect to secular humanists it is clear that insisting on the universality of faith will drastically violate Douglas Pratt's first principle that descriptive terms be acceptable to those to whom they apply. Worse, it runs the risk of being extremely insulting, as it implies that people without faith in this sense are somehow not fully human.

Neither is faith understood in this way at the level of demotheology, or by scripture. Among the theologians, the dissident Catholic Hans Küng has spoken of a basic attitude of commitment, which he calls fundamental trust. However, Küng has taken care to distinguish fundamental trust from faith. For Küng, faith is 'religious faith, faith in God or Divine, and, in a special way, of faith in God and the Bible.'

From a different perspective, the former Catholic—now agnostic—philosopher, Anthony Kenny, has also discussed this question and concludes that faith 'is a belief in something as revealed by God; belief in a proposition on the word of God. Faith, thus defined, is a correlative of revelation; for faith to be possible it must be possible to identify something as the word of God.' (42) Neither Kenny nor Küng see any merit in stripping faith of its original core understanding, that of a non-rational commitment to

God. Kenny goes on to see faith as a vice unless the existence of God can be rationally justified outside faith, something he is frankly sceptical about.

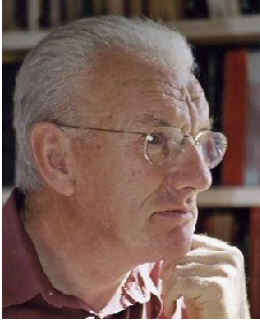
As well as its greater philosophical coherence, there are two other advantages to this restricted understanding of faith. First, it conforms to popular usage, the demotheology of faith, and to scripture. As you all know, Hebrews 11:1 says 'Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.' What is more, 'faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.' (Romans 10:17) Not surprisingly, we find a similar message in the Qur'an, where faith and submission to Allah is linked, and where faith is the condition of having no doubts. (49:14-15) One Hadith has a message from Muhammad saying that 'None of you has faith unless I am dearer to him than his father and his son and all mankind.'

These passages from the New Testament and the Qur'an highlight the two main objections to faith in the context of this paper. The Hebrews reading serves to encourage our anthropocentric conceit by giving scope for eternal life as a principal function of the unseen. The Qur'anic notion of faith emphasises the suppression of our scepticism. And the Hadith passage gives reference to the fanaticism that is so often a corollary of true faith. These passages, in other words, provide justification for anthropocentric conceit, credulity and bigotry. Is it any wonder that Anthony Kenny saw faith as a vice?

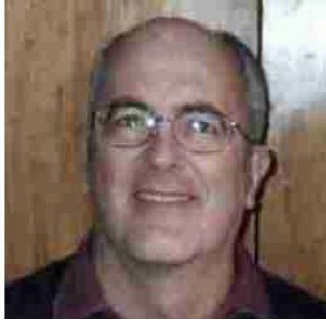
The other, related, problem with persisting in speaking of faith as some broader commitment torn from its original meaning tied up with supernaturalism is that at some point we need to turn our attention to what we have faith in; to the content of the faith. To focus exclusively on the existential act of faith and ignoring the content of the faith commitment is to take some unacceptable risks. Is mere intensity of belief enough? We need to preserve some criterion of judgment for evaluating the worth of someone's faith commitment. If, to take an extreme case, my ultimate concern is in becoming wealthy through the supply of methamphetamines to children, by what standards could this be found wanting? The Buddha was right when he said that path to enlightenment begins with right belief.

But, the objection could be that this is old news. New, more inclusive conceptions of faith have been articulated. And so they have, although I seriously question their inclusivity. But the problem of Howlett's fatal flaw remains.

What justification do we have to casually cast scripture aside? At which point do we cease trying to regar old shibboleths? If we abandon Hebrews 11:1 as being outdated and problematic, why is it justifiable to linger at the God is love passage of I John 4:16? Is there not something arbitrary and self-serving in picking and choosing in this way? And does not the criticism of the fundamentalist proclivity to pick and choose scripture lose its force when the liberal critic does the same thing? Is there, in fact, not something more honest and respectful in simply rejecting the whole Christian message and starting afresh? And would such an act not shake the foundations so much more meaningfully than merely knocking on the door with a feather duster?



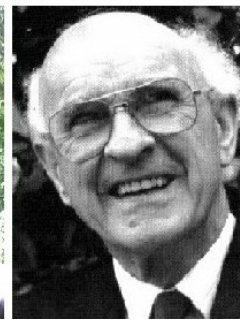
Don Cupitt



Bill Cooke



David Tacey



Lloyd Geering

## The Panel Discussion

In chairing this panel discussion I was conscious that I had the greatest diversity of views that we had so far heard on a SoF Panel. The usual arrangement is that the speakers form a ‘straight-line’ spectrum with more-or-less conservative at one end and more-or-less radical at the other.

But Bill Cooke’s secular humanist position gave us more of a triangle. It was interesting too that at any time two of the speakers could be together in their disagreement with the third. The combinations mixed and e-mixed.

I launched off by trying to get some thoughts on what counts as sacred and whether sacredness was built-in to the person or place or whether we ascribed sacredness to something or someone. David Tacey took the view that “all that exists is potentially sacred while Bill Cooke maintained that things are sacred only inasmuch as we say so. Don Cupitt called for ending the distinction between sacred and profane.

Turning to ‘religion’ and ‘spiritual’ Bill said that words like religion get in the way of exercising stewardship of the earth. David is happy to use the word ‘spiritual’ but dissociates it from the supernatural, preferring instead to take Tillich’s ‘depth’ motif and understand ‘spiritual’ to refer to ‘that

which is deeper than natural’. Is this just a switch of metaphor?

Bill, from a secular standpoint, can use ‘spiritual’ to refer to ‘the thoughtful love of life’.

When Jung was mentioned he was approved of by Don and David (and lagter by Lloyd Geering who joined the panel after David left early) but was roundly condemned by Bill as ‘narcissistic’.

There was widespread agreement that the lexicon by which we talk about religion is on something of a mess and that before a sensible conversation can be undertaken, we need to clarify terms.

All of the Keynote Panelists agreed that all cultures tell stories in order to create a metaphorical framework by which to live. Don observed that, from about 1973, traditional religious morality started to change to lifetsyle ethics. He is glad at the decline in the use of religion to frighten people into behaving themselves. Lloyd brought the panel to a positive conclusion by saying that, no matter how worried we might be at developments in world affairs, faith and hope are necessary so that what needs to be done will be done.

Noel Cheer