



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter



Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Conference 2007 “Re-Telling The Story”

Arrangements Committee Report

As you can see in the panorama above, the venue at Kings College in Otahuhu, South Auckland is situated in tranquil comfortable surroundings. All of the facilities, which we told you about in the February Newsletter, are first class, fully meeting the needs of our Conference.

All speakers will speak to the theme, “**Retelling the Story — The Familiar, The Unfamiliar**” and they promise a variety of treatments.

Again this year, the Speakers are of very high quality.

We are very pleased to confirm that **Bishop John Shelby Spong** will be attending Conference as our Guest Speaker.

Our Keynote Speakers will be **Raymond D. Bradley**, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy; and **Noel Cheer**, Life Member and Past Chair of SoF (NZ) and regular media commentator and interviewer.

In place of the usual Elective speakers we are introducing a different concept. Three women of different faith groups will “Retell the Story — The Familiar, The Unfamiliar” from their own liberal Faith Group perspective. **Rehana Ali** (a Muslim), **Jill Harris** (a Methodist and member of Ephesus and Sea of Faith) and **Pushpa Wood** (a Hindu) will each bring another perspective to our Theme. This process will allow the whole Conference to hear all of them instead of having to make a selection of only one. There will be a Panel Discussion with all three of these speakers present.

There will be the usual wide range of workshops to choose from. If you are interested in *presenting* a Workshop then see the invitation on page 5 if this Newsletter.

All in all, this Conference promises to very stimulating and thought-provoking.

Not everyone will have access to rooms sharing an en-suite in Selwyn, but wherever your room is it will be very comfortable. If you are very keen to share an en-suite in Selwyn, decide who you wish to share with and register early. Allocations of rooms will be made on a “first come first served” basis. Registration forms will be included with the July Newsletter. If you want to attend a thought-provoking and memorable Conference then start planning your attendance NOW.

John Irwin, Chairman 2007 Arrangements Committee,
jonbarb@xtra.co.nz (09) 4138513

Number 71

May 2007

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Important

If you have received a subscription renewal form, it is because we believe that your subscription becomes due on July 1 and we want to make renewal easy for you.

A Religious Atheist?

Critical Essays on the Work of Lloyd Geering

Edited by Raymond Pelly and Peter Stuart, Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2006

Reviewed by Bill Cooke of Auckland

LLOYD GEERING IS BY FAR NEW ZEALAND'S BEST-KNOWN THEOLOGIAN. Indeed, most people would be hard pushed to name another one, let alone demonstrate any familiarity with their work. Now that this book has appeared, it seems odd it took so long for Geering's colleagues to have their say. Most of the contributors to this collection of essays are theologians, with a smattering of religious studies scholars and a philosopher.

A Religious Atheist? claims to be an exercise in dialogue, although there are several good reasons to question that. In their introduction Raymond Pelly and Peter Stuart are anxious to say they are not questioning Geering's honesty, courage or motives. And neither, they say, are they criticising him from any one particular standpoint. They insist that there is no 'party line'. But having said this they assert the following:

The world view which Geering brought to this controversy was shaped by reductionist use of scientific rationalism and by the analytic stream within twentieth century philosophy, and it became part of the framework for his continuing explanation of religion. (p 9)

Take care to note the buzzwords here which are strongly reminiscent of a party line: 'reductionist use of scientific rationalism' and 'analytic stream within twentieth century philosophy'. **There are few more telling warnings of a party line than the recitation of jargon terms and phrases.** These phrases are reminiscent of continental philosophy (particularly Heidegger, Derrida and others) so influential among postmodernist-inclined theologians. At no time is any acknowledgement made that these thinkers are themselves under serious and consistent attack and that postmodernism is clearly on the wane.

No less problematic is Pelly and Stuart's reliance on a key article of the very scientific rationalism they affect to despise. After assuring readers they are not questioning Geering's honesty, they say: 'We ask not 'was it courageous of Geering to say x, y or z', but 'is it true?'' (p 9) 'Is it true?' Can one ask a question more central to the 'project' (another postmodernist buzzword) of 'scientific rationalism' than this? **Asking whether something is true or not surely involves some assumption that there is a reality out there which we can take some reliable measure of.** Yet this is the very point that most of the critics of scientific rationalism have sought to deny, or at least 'question'. Derrida must be rolling in his grave.

Now I am not implying base motives to Pelly and Stuart, any more than they are with respect to Geering. But what is one to make of this? One item in their list of key points raised by all the essays reads: 'Is it appropriate for the secular media in New Zealand to consult him as the necessary and sufficient oracle on all matters religious?' (p 17) It would be sad if we were getting to the heart of the matter here. The least that can be said of this is that it was unwise to include that as a major bone of contention, if only for the very unfavourable impression it creates.

PART ONE IS CALLED 'PERSPECTIVE'. And the singular is deliberate, because the only contribution in this section comes from Raymond Pelly, having already co-written the introduction. Once again, one can't help thinking that when only one perspective is offered we have, in effect, a party line. Pelly makes little attempt to hide his animus against Geering, who is accused of three main failings: an absence of any genuine dialogue in his work; a failure of imagination linked to an inability to use symbol, myth and metaphor; and a corresponding inability to understand that 'scientific rationalism' cannot produce a person-centred ethics or an enduring sense of the sacred. (p 27)

Pelly's own world view is sufficiently different from Geering's that there is little evidence of 'dialogue' in his essay. **He criticises Geering for having too much of a God's eye view while permitting himself exactly the same vantage point.** Pelly assumes the superiority of his postmodernist viewpoint (much as he criticises Geering of doing with his secular viewpoint) and nowhere acknowledges that his own assumptions have themselves been subjected to a considerable amount of criticism, or that the trend is moving away from it toward a variety of positions, the most coherent of which is critical realism, which has a great deal more in common with Geering's view than with his own. Neither does Pelly discuss the clear dissonance between the relativism inherent in his postmodernism and the position of 'truth' he and Stuart are seeking to measure Geering against. Pelly is also disproportionately critical of Geering for not resorting to metaphor more often in his writing. This hardly seems a significant criticism, and its power is undermined by Pelly making no use of metaphor in his own work.

As part of his criticism of not engaging in genuine dialogue, Pelly accuses Geering of putting Isaiah, Jesus and Paul 'through the blender', not allowing them to speak along the way. 'The result is a lot of rather trite generalisations designed to make the modern reader feel superior to the biblical narrative (and its *dramatis personae*) and unchallenged by it (or them).' (p 28) But in the very next paragraph, Pelly quotes a theologian on Paul (not Paul himself) and concludes: 'This is the authentic Paul, the one worth entering into dialogue with.' (p 29) It is hard to see how Pelly is setting a superior example of dialogue here. Or of allowing people to speak for themselves. The issue seems to be not so much that Geering does not engage in genuine dialogue, but that Pelly disagrees with him.

PART TWO IS ENTITLED 'FUNDAMENTALS' and at least we get a variety of viewpoints here. The first contribution comes from Kai Man Kwan, of Hong Kong Baptist University. Kwan quickly leaves Geering behind and delivers a lengthy critique of what he called 'projectionism', as if this refuted Geering's views. In a wide-ranging criticism of atheism — his real target — Kwan relied on some of the more fundamentalist American publishing houses and authors and cited only the slimmest

smattering of atheist thinkers, and those very selectively. Kwan's essay is the weakest in the collection and seems to me vivid confirmation of many of the problems with dogmatic theology that Geering has been warning us against.

The next three articles are hardly less critical of various stances Geering has taken over the years, but are conducted with greater objectivity and less rancour, and are more effective critiques for that reason. Christopher Lewis is critical of Geering's use of the secularisation thesis and brings to bear impressive evidence in favour of his argument. And Christopher Marshall makes some worthwhile (though to me unconvincing) criticisms of Geering's thoughts on resurrection. And I can't resist observing that, before writing off Geering's notion of resurrection as 'trite' he should perhaps look to the sugary, theological-speak solution of Jürgen Moltman that he prefers. Moltman talks of 'faith in the resurrection is the faith in God of lovers and the dying, the suffering and the mourners.' Pots should always take care what they accuse kettles of.

PART THREE IS CALLED 'SPECIFICS' and is much the longest section, featuring six substantial contributions from respected scholars. In most cases, we get a more sympathetic critique from these older scholars, critiques free of the party line. The first of them by John Bishop, questions Geering's non-realist theology and suggests a role for God that is real but without all the bells and whistles of the traditional God – OmniGod, as Bishop calls him. One is left not greatly encouraged that his realist-though-not-OmniGod is a surer bet than Geering's non-realist conception. Gregory Dawes makes some important points about the value of God-talk when stripped of any

conventional meaning. **His was the most sympathetic and broadly-conceived of all the essays in this book. It**

would have set a better tone for the book had this essay been included as a 'perspective' to complement Raymond Pelly's more party-line approach. Neil Darragh considers Geering's work in the context of myth-making and accuses him of anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism and a range of other arrogances, even throwing in Rogernomics for good measure, despite acknowledging that Geering has specifically and at length written against all these things. Peter Donovan discusses Geering's understanding of mysticism and Paul Morris is critical of what he sees as some unhelpful attitudes with respect to Judaism and Israel.

DOES GEERING'S WORK SURVIVE THIS ONSLAUGHT? The weakness most frequently cited, and given the most thorough grilling, is Geering's view of progress and his equation of 'secular' with 'modern'. While a lot of these criticisms are worth exploring, they are compromised by their own no less contentious postmodernist assumptions. To take one example, several contributors employ the very party-line criticism of postmodernists; that Geering is engaged in zero-sum game (my win is your loss). But none show awareness of committing the same crime – if such it is – when they play the classic zero-sum game of

postmodernist=good/modernist=bad. Geering's supposedly modernist grand narrative is condemned in the name of the postmodernist grand narrative which sees modernism as something 'so twentieth century'. Paul Morris criticises Geering's secular Supersessionism (the term used to describe the Christian claim to have superseded Judaism and the 'Old Testament') but several essays here seem to assume a postmodernist Supersessionism that is no less flawed. What remains unscathed, in my view, is the nobility of Geering's overall vision for the future. It's easy to pick holes in this or that aspect. But Geering is at least prepared to offer a unifying vision of how things could be made better. That is why he is read as no other theologians are read, and why the media consults him.

And finally, another point about dialogue needs to be made. Much is made of the value of dialogue, and Geering is criticised on several occasions for his supposed want of it, but it has to be said that this book makes little progress in this regard. The title of the book is *A Religious Atheist?* and yet no clearly atheist, secularist or humanist opinion has been included. In some essays the 'secular worldview' is condemned and atheism is described as something one lapses into or is otherwise at the end of the spectrum. The book's title trades on that usage. Generalisations are made, some of them little more than caricatures, about what atheists and humanists are supposed to think. But no essay makes any serious reading of secular or atheist literature. As a result of this oversight, no attention is given to issues such as Geering's use of 'faith' to include people who reject the term, his understanding of humanism, and the similarities and dissimilarities with the wide range of humanist thinkers who have written in a similar way; people like Paul Kurtz, Richard Norman, Tzvetan Todorov and Jeanane

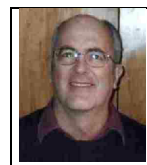
Fowler. This is not a failing unique to this book. It is symptomatic of an enclosed world of some theologians, who want to extol dialogue, expound

"Geering is at least prepared to offer a unifying vision of how things could be made better. That is why he is read as no other theologians are read, and why the media consults him."

on the fate of the 'Other' while also condemning secular humanism and atheism unread.

Another, even simpler, way to give true voice to dialogue would have been to include a reply by Geering to his critics. It is possible such an invitation was extended although I doubt it. It would have got too much in the way of the party line. How much stronger would this book have been if it had walked the talk on dialogue.

Bill Cooke is Senior Lecturer at the School of Visual Arts, University of Auckland at Manukau. He is author of *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism and Humanism* and a Fellow of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion. Bill is also a member of the Steering Committee of SoF(NZ).



On July 14th a seminar under the auspices of VUW Continuing Education and led by Raymond Pelly will be held in the Lecture Room of Rutherford House in Wellington. The subject will be the book *A Religious Atheist?*. Lloyd Geering will speak at this seminar.

Theism: *n.* the belief in the existence of a God or gods

The Theistic God Should (Must) Go

By Alan Goss of Napier

In 1996 former Presbyterian Moderator Alan Brash wrote a short book on the Bible, one chapter spoke of the difficulties readers face when confronted with biblical texts which portray God as violent. These violent images of God pervade the Bible — and indeed some other sacred Scriptures — and present a challenge which none of us can ignore.

The heart of the problem is the continued and widespread belief in a theistic God, that is to say belief in a personal supernatural being "out there" who intervenes in and has control over all human affairs. In the theistic world-view God is the all-knowing, all powerful landlord who created an earthly home for us to live in, who gives us rules to live by, who has mapped out our lives from birth to death and who has promised us that, come what may, his Will would finally be done. While it is freely acknowledged that over the centuries belief in a loving personal God has been and continues to be a source of comfort and inspiration for many people, theistic views of God are declining. They no longer make sense to growing numbers of people and can now be justly labelled as dangerous. For some years I possessed a German soldier's belt buckle which was inscribed with the Nazi swastika and underneath were written the words "Gott Mittuns". (God with us) The name of God is still being used to support questionable and sometimes ruthless nationalistic purposes while TV evangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell regarded the 9/11 terror attacks as punishment from a violent God for their nation's acceptance of homosexuals and other so-called social evils, e.g. feminism and abortion. My argument therefore is that the theistic God must go. Efforts are already being made to re-imagine, or portray God, in new and more satisfying ways.

Lloyd Geering has written that God is a term used "to focus on all that we supremely value and on the goals which make human existence meaningful and worthwhile; and there is no thing and no place in which we do not encounter this God."

The first epistle of John links God with love. Others simply use the term Presence or a Voice to express their understanding of God. John Hick, the eminent multi-faith scholar, has even offered the view that God will have to be dropped - at least for a while. Shades of Bonhoeffer who said of God that we must now learn to do without him.

Whichever view of God we take, whether he is a reality "out there" or a human construction, all our views of God have to be filtered through our human consciousness. We invent God in the same way that we invented politics, science, sport, education and all the various religions. As Richard Holloway in his superb little book "How to Read the Bible" says, in our imaging of God we have frequently gotten God wrong!

As Christianity struggles to take new shape and leaves many of its former traditional beliefs and practices behind, one of its enduring contributions to society at large would be to publicly and openly disavow all belief in a theistic God. Of course that will not happen, not yet anyway, because there is too much at stake. The authority of a theistic God confers privilege and power which influence the decisions of individuals, churches and governments like the United States. So we live in hope as a new day and new Christian age slowly begins to dawn.

Keeping Track of all the "isms"

Freely adapted from Christianity Without God by Lloyd Geering.

In **Theism** 'God' names the supernatural personal being who created the world and who continues to have oversight over its affairs. Being personal, he enters into personal relationships with humans who are made in his image. Christian orthodoxy today strongly affirms theism. Evangelical Christians use it as one of the essential tests of orthodoxy: 'Do you believe in a personal God?'

In **Deism** 'God' is the name of the creator of the universe. But this God is not involved in the world in any personal way. Deism appealed to thinkers in the time of the rise of modern science and at the Enlightenment. It is now strongly rejected in theological circles but lingers on quite widely as a vague popular belief. It is the type of God referred to by some modern physicists.

Pantheism identifies God with all that there is, regards all finite things as parts, modes, limitations, or appearances of one ultimate Being, which is all that there is. It originated with the philosopher Spinoza who was roundly condemned. Yet it has continued to surface from time to time.

Panentheism is a 19th Century term and was an attempt to find a middle road between theism, which was thought to over-emphasise the 'otherness' of God and pantheism which was thought to over-emphasise God's immanence. Where pantheism says 'everything **is** God', panentheism says 'everything **is in** God'. Though accused of being pantheists, Teilhard de Chardin and Paul Tillich had a more panentheist outlook.

Mysticism has associations with both theism and pantheism. The only reality is one undiversified Being. In mystical thought, and in much of its practice, the multiplicity of things is ultimately repudiated. Mysticism has been dallied with both in mediaeval and in modern times but generally rejected in the circles of Christian orthodoxy, which like to affirm an unbridgeable gap between God and all whom he has created, including ourselves.

Atheism: Though it is primarily the rejection of theism, atheism is often used to deny that the concept of 'God' has any meaningful use.

Faith In Cyberspace

Beyond Belief

Two months after our 2006 Conference, a 'Beyond Belief' Conference was held. The Science Network brought together an extraordinary group of scientists and philosophers to explore answers to questions of faith and science. The conversation took place at the Salk Institute, La Jolla, CA from November 5-7, 2006. Like our Conference, the subject was 'After Religion — What?' For those with broadband there are ten videos to watch, of two hours each, that can be downloaded for viewing or streamed.

Names of contributors recognised by your editor: Steven Weinberg, Sam Harris, Michael Shermer, Richard Dawkins, V.S. Ramachandran, Paul Davies, Patricia Churchland. The website is:

<http://beyondbelief2006.org/Watch/>

ABC Religious Program News

To subscribe to a weekly newsletter with links to programmes go to this website
abc.net.au/religion/maillinglist/

Thought Bubbles

Thought Bubbles (TBubbles) are an initiative of SoF in the UK. They are short reflective essays (between 500 and 800 words) on a wide variety of topics by a wide variety of writers. The purpose of TBubbles is to stimulate dialogue, discussion and debate.

<http://www.sofn.org.uk/thought-bubbles/>

Morality Research

Now you can do your bit to uncover more about how human morality works. Go to
<http://moral.wjh.harvard.edu/index2.html>
and take the Moral Sense Test.

You will be presented with a series of moral dilemmas designed to show "the psychological mechanisms underlying our moral judgments".

Earth Charter International

The Earth Charter is a widely recognized declaration on a common global vision, values, and ethics for a just, sustainable, and peaceful future. Addressing climate change, caused by the human release of greenhouse gases, raises profound ethical questions and creates a set of ethical imperatives for action. They welcome your input, either via posted comment on the website, or by sending an email to editors@earthcharterinaction.org.

<http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/climate>

When an agnostic dies, does she go to the
"great perhaps"?

author unknown

Conference Workshops

Retelling the Story

Call for Proposals

Offers of workshops are invited for the SOF Conference at Kings College, Auckland, 28-30 September, around the theme

Retelling the Story — the Familiar, the Unfamiliar.

Workshops (either presentation, discussion or activity) should be of about 90 minutes duration, and will take place on the Saturday of the Conference.

We are looking for bright ideas from you, or other people you might suggest.

Here are some starters: all aspects of storytelling, mythmaking and interpretation, archetypal human themes; stories of origins; stories from the great religions and cultures; stories of heroes, saints and sages; retelling, reinterpreting the sacred writings; writing contemporary parables; science fiction; the future story of earth; folksongs and ballads; family history; humour and games; the novel as conveyor of truth; narrative in the visual and performing arts; the image as story— film, TV, video art; hypertext and the World Wide Web as story medium.

Please make your offers and suggestions of workshop facilitators direct to

Ralph Pannett

pannett@actrix.co.nz

phone (04) 384 4892

without delay.

Ralph will supply the necessary information and other ideas for running great workshops.

Historic moments of Ethical Recognition

After murdering Abel, Cain justified his act, and his parents denied their responsibility for it. Otherwise, the dread pattern of accusation and recrimination would have been checked right there. Humans have been enslaved by this dynamic ever since. Does that vindicate the United States with a "realist" claim to inevitability? No. Because historic moments of ethical recognition regularly present themselves, and one just did. The Baker commission, whatever its faults, defined the folly of any further American pursuit of "victory" in Iraq. Yet, with Bush's mantra of "prevail," other "studies" commissioned to dilute Baker's, and fresh Pentagon talk of brutal escalation, the aim of victory through mass violence is being reaffirmed. The unoriginal sin, by now, but more deadly than ever.

James Carroll, "The Boston Globe", Dec. 18, 2006

It does look as if great forces of ennui, of boredom, build up inside complex social systems and strain for a violent release. In that case war would not be a kind of hideous stupidity of the politicians, an accident, which the sane mind could surely have avoided. No, it would be a kind of essential balancing mechanism to keep us in state of dynamic health. And even as we say this we know that its an horrendous absurdity, because we are now at a point where, if we we pursue this line of thought, we come up against wars from where there is no survival, no second chance, no repair of the equilibrium of the body politic.

*George Steiner "Nostalgia For The Absolute" CBC
Massey Lecture 1974*

Editorial

A LOT OF IDEAS COME ACROSS MY DESK in assembling these Newsletters and most are a delight to deal with. But, again and again, I am irritated to read the simplistic equation of

“religion” = “theism”

The popular press is full of it. Dawkins The Destroyer does it all the time.

One of the missions that SoF might set itself to is to challenge the notion that religion is primarily about “believing in God”.

Two things are inadequate about the religion/theism equivalence. When “religion” is reduced to a debate about whether something exists, it has become distracted from its core business. Philosophy and physics are much better equipped to deal with such matters.

Furthermore, if “God” is seen only as the theistic paternalistic tyrant of pre-Enlightenment thinking then religion is hitching itself to a fading star. The theistic God is dead. RIP.

Noel Cheer, Editor

Copy Deadlines

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

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Deadline</u>
July	13 June
September	15 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! My addresses are on page 9.

CASI on the Case

The **Churches' Agency on Social Issues** is supported by Methodist, Presbyterian, Churches of Christ and Quakers. They produce a monthly newsletter. Their website is at www.casi.org.nz

In the March issue they reported that CASI members identified these issues as areas for their concern in 2007:

- **Climate Change**, the practical and the theological aspects.
- **Family Issues**, especially family violence.
- **New Zealand's 'binge culture'** in drinking, gambling and spending.
- **Re-thinking Crime and Punishment:** are prisons really the answer?

Melbourne has won the bid to host the 2009 Parliament of Religions Conference. It will run for 8 days and is expected to attract 10,000 participants.

NATIONAL STATEMENT ON RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

This is a project of Te Ngira, The New Zealand Diversity Action Programme. It was prepared by the Victoria University [of Wellington] Religious Studies Programme with widespread consultation. For further information see www.hrc.co.nz/religiousdiversity

NEW ZEALAND IS A COUNTRY OF MANY FAITHS with a significant minority who profess no religion. Increasing religious diversity is a significant feature of public life.

At the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, Governor Hobson affirmed, in response to a question from Catholic Bishop Pompallier, "the several faiths (beliefs) of England, of the Wesleyans, of Rome, and also Maori custom shall alike be protected". This foundation creates the opportunity to reaffirm an acknowledgement of the diversity of beliefs in New Zealand.

Christianity has played and continues to play a formative role in the development of New Zealand in terms of the nation's identity, culture, beliefs, institutions and values.

New settlers have always been religiously diverse, but only recently have the numbers of some of their faith communities grown significantly as a result of migration from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. These communities have a positive role to play in our society. It is in this context that we recognise the right to religion and the responsibilities of religious communities.

International treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights uphold the right to freedom of religion and belief — the right to hold a belief, the right to change one's religion or belief, the right to express one's religion or belief, and the right not to hold a belief. These rights are reflected in the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act and Human

New Zealand's Religious Profile (approximate)

Christian	52%
Anglican	15.7%
Presbyterian	14.3%
Roman Catholic	14.3%
'No Religion'	37%
Hindu	1.8%
Muslim	1.0%
Jewish	0.2%

Rights Act. The right to religion entails affording this right to others and not infringing their human rights.

The following statement provides a framework for the recognition of New Zealand's diverse faith communities and their harmonious interaction with each other, with government and with other groups in society:

1. *The State and Religion*

The State seeks to treat all faith communities and those who profess no religion equally before the law. New Zealand has no official or established religion.

2. *The Right to Religion*

New Zealand upholds the right to freedom of religion and belief and the right to freedom from discrimination on the grounds of religious or other belief

3. *The Right to Safety*

Faith communities and their members have a right to safety and security.

4. *The Right of Freedom of Expression*

The right to freedom of expression and freedom of the media are vital for democracy but should be exercised with responsibility.

5. *Recognition and Accommodation*

Reasonable steps should be taken in educational and work environments and in the delivery of public services to recognise and accommodate diverse religious beliefs and practices.

6. *Education*

Schools should teach an understanding of different religious and spiritual traditions in a manner that reflects the diversity of their national and local community.

7. *Religious Differences*

Debate and disagreement about religious beliefs will occur but must be exercised within the rule of law and without resort to violence.

8. *Cooperation and understanding*

Government and faith communities have a responsibility to build and maintain positive relationships with each other, and to promote mutual respect and understanding.

What's the Value of Values?

Submitted by Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch

We often hear laments about the loss of values and calls for parents or the education system to inculcate values in young people. But what are values and how to you define them or establish their truth? Laurie Chisholm recently came across a talk that Eugen Drewermann gave (in German) to an educational conference in Cologne in 2000 on the theme of values. What follows is a paraphrase and summary of his talk.

These days we are participating in a global destruction of values that is happening with unbelievable speed. Economics is engaged in a hostile takeover of the concept of value, which belongs to philosophy. What is really of value is to be determined by the free market, not by an overarching concept of humanity or nature. The value of something is the price that it can realise when it is sold or bought. The underlying reality of value is its convertibility into a sum of money.

This is the world that our children are pushed into. The TV news treats the rise and fall of share indexes as immensely important. Advertisements encourage children to begin on the share market as soon as possible. If you look at this economy with humane eyes, you can see how it exploits people and natural resources. The economy has become the first nature, a complete overlay over the real nature.

There is an unbelievable schizophrenia. On the one hand, we demand of teachers and churches and cultural organisations that they give children an awareness of values, to oppose the value-cynicism of the younger generation. On the other hand, we experience in today's economy, that there is no value other than the dollar price.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant reflected 200 years ago on how values could be established in a context of value-destruction. Different cultures have different value-systems, so the only way to provide a foundation for ethics is to remove all content. Kant therefore talked about the categorical imperative, a purely formal concept. Because freedom is the basis of all ethics, he also concluded that you must treat people as an end in themselves, never as a means to an end. In the political arena, actions should be such that their intentions could be made public. If the politicians were to follow Kant, there would be no spying, no secret diplomacy, no preparations for war, no weapons of mass destruction.

Kant's great pupil Schopenhauer saw why the politicians don't take Kant's advice. In a world of competition and violence, they are afraid to make their intentions known to a potential opponent. As long as there is violence, there will be lies as an

intellectualized form of violence. But how can we bring people to act based on particular values and to handle the anxiety that might be involved in doing this? In 1910, Max Scheler wrote a major work in response to Kant. He argued that the intellectualized formality of ethics wasn't enough to give people the motivation to be good. People are not formed by thinking about what is good and what is evil, but by what is unquestionably evident to their feelings. Scheler talked about 'value-feeling' and argued that it was the foundation of all ethical behaviour.

So what psychological conditions are needed to build such a 'value-feeling' in a child? In the 1950s, Austrian psychologists produced a film, showing how three four-month old children responded to an identical situation. The child from a healthy family played with the coloured building blocks. The child whose mother was taken away at birth sat apathetically. The child who had been separated from his mother a month ago stared at the cameraman, as if asking whether that person would stay or go like his mother.

These scenes show that a child experiences the world as full of value, as value-neutral, or as rejecting of value, depending on its experience of his parents. Children don't have access to the reality of the world of objects as such but only through the mediation of a system of values, which is established by personal contact with parents.

Behavioural scientists conclude (through the observation of baby seals for example) that play is only possible for higher mammals within the context of trusting safety provided by the nearness of the mother. And play is essential for baby seals, so that they can catch fish later on. Curiosity and play are possible only on the basis of a trust that lets the world as a whole appear to be trustworthy rather than menacing, even before it is experienced.

These things are the foundation on which learning builds, and without such a positive, living relationship to reality, the destruction of values in our current economy will only confirm the valuelessness of everything. Drewermann claims that teachers will do best in mediating values when they give at least equal weight to subjective understanding (in Dilthey's sense of a personal appropriation) and feeling-meaning alongside curriculum content and informative explanations of world reality. Most of us can't remember the geometry or calculus we learned at school, but we do remember our feelings when our teacher praised or criticised our work. Feelings are more important than thoughts. Only when teachers succeed in taking pupils seriously as individuals, in liking them, and in stamping their influence on them, will they succeed in passing on any values to them.

What does all this mean for school classes? Drewermann offered a proposal for discussion, aware that he has not taught in school for many years. Biology classes can only be meaningful if children learn a more differentiated love for living things, through careful observation and sensitive contact. It would be great if they learned how to feed and look after a particular animal. Today, we have enormous amounts of animal observation on film. We have learnt literally to talk with animals and to understand their language. But at the same time, biology classes reduce the diversity of living things to technical questions of genetics and biochemistry. This destroys the immediacy of our relationship to living things. Reverence for life is the foundation of all ethics, according to Albert Schweitzer. How can biology classes be led back to mediate the value of life?

The teaching of religion in schools has long troubled Drewermann. East German schools taught atheism and Marxist critique of religion and resulted in a population that was 80-90% atheist in 1989. West German schools taught Protestant and Catholic religion, but resulted in a similar proportion of atheists, evidence that teaching religion has, if anything, a negative impact on spirituality. Religion teachers have gone from despair to skepticism about their profession. They are in a bind. The Churches want them to teach the religion of a particular confession. But students resist this. If they have any awareness of religion, they know that God is greater than any religion, confession or nation. Religious texts need to be interpreted so that they connect with real experience. Turning a religion into objective religious knowledge destroys spirituality and values.

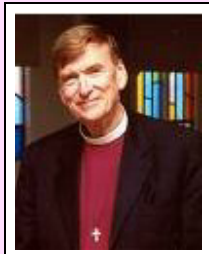
Source:http://www.vds-bildungsmedien.de/pdf/forum/f_20/seite92.pdf (retrieved 12 February 2007)

John Shelby Spong in NZ this year

Retired Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong will be in NZ in September. He will speak at a half-day event in Wellington on September 22 and at the SoF Conference on September 29.

He will also be promoting his latest book *Jesus for The Non-Religious*.

More details in later Newsletters.



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 three **Life Members**: Lloyd Geering, Don Cupitt and Noel Cheer.

The **Chairperson** is Norm Ely, 7 Bay Drive, Titahi Bay, (04) 236-5749

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

Membership of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$27 if outside NZ). Write your cheque to "SoF (NZ)" and mail to: **The Membership Secretary**, P.O. Box 35651, Browns Bay, Auckland. (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 There is a catalogue on the website,

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 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. For instructions on how to subscribe, send an email to noel@cheer.org.nz

SATRS Booklets: Many of the study booklets referred to from time to time in this Newsletter are available from The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society. A catalogue and ordering instructions appear on their website at www.standrews.org.nz/satrs

In my View

WHAT DO YOU GET FROM SEA OF FAITH NEW ZEALAND? WHAT DO YOU GIVE TO SEA OF FAITH NEW ZEALAND?

- Do you pay your membership fees, receive the Sea of Faith Newsletter and perhaps attend Conference most years?
- Are you more active, in that you belong to a Local Group or in some other way gain from Sea of Faith activities?
- Are you less active in Sea of Faith matters?
- Does Sea of Faith give you support and sustenance in your Faith Journey and Exploration?
- Do you give anything to Sea of Faith to allow it in turn to support and feed you mentally?

It seems to me that these are all interesting questions that we on the Steering Committee do not have answers to. The Steering Committee is set up to carry out the wishes of the members of Sea of Faith NZ. However, this poses a problem in that apart from the Annual Conference the members never communicate with the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee, therefore, organises the Annual Conference and provides a Newsletter based largely on what the Steering Committee Members *think the members want*. If the Steering Committee is providing you with things you really do want then that is largely by good fortune and not by design.

I am very interested in getting a better cross dialogue going between members, local groups, other interested parties and the Steering Committee. I really want the Steering Committee to be working *for* you.

There is reasonable representation for you around New Zealand, the members of the Steering Committee are:

Auckland; Bill Cooke; Derek Pringle; Ron Wilson.
Taranaki; Mary Boekman. **Wellington;** Peter Cowley; Norm Ely; Ralph Pannett. **Christchurch;** Bob Geddes.
Timaru; Betty Manning. **Dunedin;** Geoff Neilson.
Shirley Wood is also a member from **Tauranga** but is currently not living there.

We also have an Archivist, Alison Eng in Woodend, **North Canterbury** and a Resource Centre Curator Suzi Thirwall in **Tauranga**.

If you want speakers, resources (Tapes/CDs/Books/Past Conference information etc), we can help facilitate all of those things for you or a group you are associated with.

These Steering Committee members and resource people are very happy to help you with any of your needs, you only need to call them. For more information see "All About Us" in this Newsletter or visit www.sof.org.nz.

There are Local Groups in: Bay of Islands; Warkworth; Auckland; Manakau/South Auckland; Hamilton; Matamata; TeKuiti; Katikati; Tauranga; Te Puke; Gisborne; Hawkes Bay; New Plymouth; Wanganui; Palmerston North; Wairarapa; Kapiti; Mana; Hutt Valley; Wellington (2); Nelson; Golden Bay; Blenheim;

Christchurch; Timaru; Central Otago; Dunedin; Invercargill.

Have you ever belonged to a Local Group? For more details on Local Groups visit www.sof.org.nz.

There are also Sea of Faith Groups in other Countries; Sea of Faith UK; The SnowStar institute of Religion Canada; Sea of Faith In Australia.

All of these have resources you may want to access in some way.

When did you last use the Sea of Faith Website? All the information you need in respect of the above items is contained on the website – www.sof.org.nz.

This website has a large amount of information and resource data for your use, plus there are links to other related sites.

This is all provided as part of your membership fee.

If you want to make comment or provide articles for the newsletter please don't hesitate to contact the Editor, Noel Cheer [address on page 9]. I am sure he will be very receptive of new commentary to put in the Newsletter.

Some of you may also be able to help us out. We would like to hear from you in respect of what else Sea of Faith NZ could do to meet your Faith needs. What can we do to improve your continuing exploration of Spiritual Thought and the wider social and philosophical implications of that exploration?

Do you feel that Sea of Faith no longer meets your requirements as it once did? If so we need to know why and how this is now the case. Maybe you have moved to a different point of the compass. Maybe we need to review whether we should in some part be at that same point also.

Do you have friends/associates who are seeking answers to similar questions? We are an ageing group and I am certain there are many younger people with spiritual/philosophical concerns that you may have had a decade or more ago.

Do you know of any of these people?

If so then perhaps you could introduce them to Sea of Faith in some way.

Is it possible to drop copies of these Newsletters to your local Library for others to access or perhaps leave in your local church or community centre? If so please let us know if you want more copies to leave in various places. (Please ensure you have permission first).

I am very keen on not only providing a cross-fertilisation of information between us within the Sea of Faith Family, but also to provide a service to the wider community and hopefully expand on our membership base at the same time.



Norm