



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

Arrangements Committee Report

‘Retelling the Story’

Have you been vaguely or actively thinking of Conference over the last few months?

Well now it is time for action. Enclosed with the Newsletter you will find information on the SoFN Conference to be held at Kings College, Auckland, and a Registration Form for attending. The Timetable is set out on page 9 of this Newsletter.

In the Registration Form are details of the Guest Speaker — Bishop John Spong — and the Keynote Speakers — Dr Colin Gibson and Professor Raymond Bradley — as well as a synopsis of each of their lectures.

An innovation this year is that we will hear all of the Elective Lectures. They will be delivered consecutively by three women: Reihana Ali, Jill Harris and Pushpa Wood. Further details appear in the Registration Form.

The Panel Discussion on Sunday will involve both of the Keynotes and the three Plenary speakers.

The eleven Workshops from which you will make a choice pose a challenge — they all look great.

Facilities available to us at Kings are of a very high standard (see the February Newsletter, page 2 for details).

Details of the Accommodation options are given in the Registration Form on page 2. Please indicate your choice. Allocations of rooms will be made a ‘first come, first served’ basis. If you are sharing, don’t forget to specify who with — or you might get a surprise!

The theme of the Conference this year – “*Retelling the Story: the Familiar; the Unfamiliar*” – promises to be well addressed by speakers, lecturers and workshop leaders.

All the details of the Conference including the Registration Form are available also on the website at www.sof.org.nz

Why not encourage a non-member or two to come? They would be welcome.

We look forward to seeing you at Kings.

John Irwin

Chair of the 2007 Arrangements Committee.

jonbarb@xtra.co.nz

(09) 413 8513 until July 31

(09) 575 8523 after July 31



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July 2007

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Conference CDs

The CDs of the 2006 Conference are no longer available. We will offer CDs of the 2007 Conference, provided that the quality is adequate.

Let's Not Part Like This

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

Membership Secretary and Treasurer Ron Wilson expresses his gratitude for those who have already renewed.

A Co-created Universe

Margaret Gwynne, of the Hawkes Bay Group offered this ...

I'M WRITING IN RESPONSE TO THE ARTICLE "The Theistic God Must Go" by Alan Goss in the *Sea of Faith Newsletter* No.71, May 2007. Alan speaks of efforts being made to portray God in new and more satisfying ways. I offer one of them.

Recently I presented a talk to our local Sea of Faith branch, based on Carol Christ's book *She who Changes – Re-imagining the Divine in the World*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Carol takes the "six theological mistakes" of traditional Christianity: unchanging, perfect God; omnipotence; omniscience; unsympathetic in his goodness; immortality; infallible revelation. She examines the unfortunate consequences for humanity of these ideas – for example, dualism, hierarchy, slavery, oppression of women and children, a remote God exercising power over all, human beings evading responsibility for the state of our planet and fighting religious wars over rival claims to infallible revelation.

Then Carol offers what to me is a compelling alternative. She proposes a universe co-created at every moment by Goddess/God* and all individual beings in the cosmos. We are in Goddess/God and can feel Goddess/God as a power within our deepest self. Also Goddess/God is within us, participating in our experiences, suffering when we suffer, rejoicing in our joy. Goddess/God is omnipresent and influences the universe and all beings within it through the power of persuasion towards life, harmony and beauty. She/he cares deeply about all individual lives and the fate of the universe as a whole. **"Power over" is replaced by "power with"**. In a co-created universe, Goddess/God is not omniscient, although she/he has fuller knowledge of past and present than any other being and therefore a clearer sense of possibilities for the future.

Nevertheless, Goddess/God can and will be surprised by the future actually co-created. There is

genuine risk for all participants in a co-created universe, including Goddess/God. We are engaged in an adventure.

As far as immortality is concerned, Carol sees no reason to hope for life after death. She suggests that the purpose of life is to enjoy this life as much as possible and seek to increase the joy of others.

As our knowing is always fragmentary, we can never know the whole truth. This makes life interesting and unsettling. We are to have faith in the creative process of the universe, supported and sustained by a divine power that profoundly desires that all individual beings enjoy life as much as possible, a divine power that exerts a persuasive influence towards life on all individual beings in the universe.

Such a concept of Goddess/God places the responsibility squarely on human beings for all

humanly created suffering and evil. Ours is the task of healing our planet. What will inspire us to respond to this challenge?

the "six theological mistakes" of traditional Christianity

Throughout the ages, human beings have tried to imagine a divine power, helping us in our life struggles. This present time demands a new source of inspiration, a new foundation story, drawn from what we now know about the universe – a story all people can relate to, a story that speaks of sacrifice like that of the supernova, exploding so that life-generating elements could come into being, of interdependence like bees and flowers. The ancient spiritual traditions could take their place as examples of the universe story.

Once we have our story, we need to flesh it out in rituals, symbols and opportunities to wonder. Will the churches be inspired to take on this essential role? Will Sea of Faith?

Margaret Gwynn

* Goddess/God – Carol uses this term because she understands the divine power to be beyond gender and inclusive of all genders. She hopes to break the hold of God as male on the human mind.

Can't Say The Creed . . . ?

Donald Feist, a retired Presbyterian minister living in Dunedin, wrote this for the Otago Daily Times in February 2007.

[The newspaper commentator] Garth George, in criticising Bishop Richard Randerson for expressing his honest opinion, [O.D.T. 23.01.07], touches on a question that is becoming increasingly acute ... for the many church people who feel that the rigidity of the church is squeezing them out.

Looking from the church's side, the problem is this: What are they to do about ministers ... who make it clear, publicly, that one part or another of the Church's creeds or confessions, is no longer acceptable to them as a statement of their own understanding of God, or Jesus, or the Christian faith?

Mr George claims that some of the things Richard Randerson has said publicly are incompatible with the creed and with the answers he gave to questions in the service for his ordination as a bishop. Because these questions concern loyalty to the church as an institution, it is quite proper to ask whether Mr Randerson is carrying out these obligations to the church honestly or acceptably. However, Mr George takes no account of the fact that Bishop Randerson is not only a paid staff member with obligations to the organisation that pays him; at the same time he is both an individual trying to live a Christian life, and a church leader whose obligation to the church includes helping church members to follow the way of Jesus for themselves.

I believe Mr George is quite correct that Bishop Randerson has made it clear that some of the forms of words the church still holds to, are incompatible with his own understanding. In this, of course, Richard Randerson is not alone. Bishop John Robinson,

Bishop John Spong and Professor Lloyd Geering are three of the best-known who have said that for them, as Christians within the Church, many of the old traditional statements are no longer acceptable. There are also thousands of other church members who find they cannot honestly assent to important parts of the creeds or their Church's confession. And there are many more, who have left the church because of similar difficulties over words and doctrines, but who are still trying to live as followers of Jesus. For all these people, it is not so much following the teaching and example of Jesus that is the problem, but that the church limits too narrowly the words it considers acceptable in talking about Jesus or about God.

Since the Reformation, almost all of the Christian bodies who broke with the Roman Catholic Church have found it necessary to state where they stood, or to define who they are, by adopting a confession or creed or catechism of their own, in addition to continuing to recognise the much older Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. For each of these churches, words about faith, words about God, words about the teaching of the church, became important in a new way — important both to their self-understanding, and in explaining or justifying themselves to others, to a degree that creeds or confessions never were to the church catholic before the Reformation.

In the 400 plus years since the Reformation, the world has been changing ... dramatically. There has been an explosion of knowledge of ourselves as humans and of the universe around us. At the same time our understanding of what knowledge is, and the basis on which we are willing to accept things as true, have been

transformed. For these reasons many of the words in which doctrines were expressed 400 years ago, have become an embarrassment or a liability; and the problems which many Christian people have with these words about God or about faith have escalated.

Mr George would like to deal with this problem by requiring church leaders who can no longer accept the words and statements of the past, either to remain silent, or to resign their positions. Many people in all the churches agree with him.

Insisting that silence or resignation are the only options might perhaps, in the short term, make the church appear to be strong, to know clearly what it believes, and to be of one mind.

But what does the church exist for? Is its basic purpose to ensure the continued existence and the appearance of strength of an unchanging church in a changing world? Or is it something more like helping all those people who want to, to be followers of Jesus?

If the primary purpose of the church is to ensure its own continued existence, then either muzzling or squeezing out thoughtful, honest and outspoken people like Bishop Randerson may make some sense. But if its purpose is to help people to live a Christian life, muzzling its most creative and adventurous people makes no sense at all. It would be as damaging as the Cultural Revolution policy of getting rid of

to page 4.....

**But what
does the church
exist for?**

... from page 3.

all thinkers and creative people proved to be. To insist that no one can be counted a true follower of Jesus in the 21st Century, who cannot or will not subscribe to forms of words from the 17th Century or earlier, is, on one hand, to exclude increasing numbers of people from being recognised by the church as followers at all, and thus to ensure that the Church becomes more and more incapable of meeting the spiritual needs of those people. It is also a betrayal of the church's true purpose, because it attempts to make people, in all their variety, fit one set of doctrines, and thus makes doctrines more important than people. There are still quite a few people in our day who are comfortable belonging to a monolithic, hierarchical and authoritarian religious organisation. But increasing numbers of people are no longer willing to be subservient to such an institution. In our day, the church is going to have to learn a new humility, and a new openness to people as they are. A policy of asking every priest or minister to resign, who tries to communicate deep things and ancient insights in a new way, would mean that the church was betraying its true purpose of being a servant to people, and thus to God, and was at the same time, choosing a quick road to irrelevance.

Don Feist

We welcome articles like this, and those on pages 2 and 9, for publication. Contact addresses are in "All About Us" at the end of this Newsletter.

John Spong's Visit to New Zealand

Bishop John Spong will be touring New Zealand in September. He will speak at our Conference and at a morning SoF seminar in Wellington. Here is his full schedule.

- Thur 13 Sept 7.30pm:** St Matthews in the City, Auckland *"The Bible is the Problem"*
- Fri-Tues 14-17 Sept 7.30pm:** Alexandra Clyde Lauder Union Parish, Community Centre, Skird Street *"Why Traditional Faith is Dying and How a New Faith is Being Born"*
- Thur 20 Sept 7.30pm:** University of Canterbury Christchurch Lecture Theatre C1 *"Jesus for the Non-Religious"*
- Sat 22 Sept 9:00am-1:00pm:** Sea of Faith Network, St Andrews on The Terrace Wellington *"Jesus for the Non-Religious"*
- Sun 23 Sept 4.30pm:** XplorationsNZ Centre St Lukes Church, Masterton *"Jesus for the Non-Religious"*
- Mon 24 Sept 7.00pm:** Kapiti Uniting Parish 27 Raumati Road, Raumati *"Jesus for the Non-Religious"* followed by questions
- Wed 26 Sept 7.30pm:** St Stephens Church 2 Mahoe Street Hamilton *"Jesus for the Non-Religious"* followed by questions
- Friday 28 Sept 7.30pm:** St Matthews in the City Auckland Weekend Conference *"Rescuing Jesus from the Church"*
- Sat 29 Sept 9am-10.30am:** Guest Speaker at the Sea of Faith Conference *"Jesus for the Non Religious"*
- Sat 29 Sept 2pm-9.30pm:** St Matthews in the City Weekend Conference (continuing)
2 sessions: 2pm, 7.30pm
- Sun 30 Sept 10.00am:** Preach at St Matthews in the City, Auckland

Enquiries to Liz Robinson, phone (04) 568-2794

Letter to the Editor

The Editor,

The Chairperson has asked SoFers to say what they want. Our branch were unanimous in wanting the Newsletter to maintain its past high enjoyable standards, and not slip into negativity as did much of the May No. 71 issue.

The noble defence against Lloyd Geering's critics in their book "A Religious atheist?" was prime Bill Cooke. However academic animosity seemed a factor on both sides of the fray and many of the arguments were at Doctorate level of rationale and reference, so it was hard to absorb. We would like more from Bill Cooke but in précis form perhaps?

The gem of 'Value feelings' was explained well in Laurie Chisholm's article from the Cologne talk about values, but the major feelings that lingered were the hopelessness and inevitability of values, including child-raising ones, being swallowed by evil economics. In contrast in the more positive quote from Lloyd Geering's autobiography, reviewed Dec No 69 newsletter. He posits that "Post Christians will meet in small groups of their choice..... to add value to life". These are already current in N.Z., among them are values-conscious parents, some of whom also serve quietly on school boards.

The testy Editorial about assumptions that 'religion=theism' was certainly a positively-put negative. An article expounding the "core business" of religion might help in the suggested educational mission of SOF, about the wider sense of the word.

The Chairperson's zeal to stir up SOF is appreciated, the May "In My View" was less so. The underlying pull-up-your socks censure was like a disgruntled mainline clergyman's homily to his dwindling congregation. Never-the-less good wishes go for the crusade and we will be interested to hear what dialogue ensues.

**Margaret Whitwell
Te Puke**

The Chair's Response

I am delighted that we have a Letter to the Editor. I struggle to believe that everybody agrees with the comments in the Newsletter.

Thank you Margaret for the comments in your letter in respect of my comments in the "My View Column" in the last two newsletters.

I really don't mind if our member's socks are up, down or at half-mast what I was really trying to do was present an on-going issue for the future of Sea of Faith NZ — Membership. I have no intention of preaching to anybody. One of the key points I made to the rest of the Committee when they elected me to this position and repeated when I spoke to the whole Conference shortly afterwards was "that I will Chair the Sea of Faith Steering Committee". "I will NOT present papers, discuss issues of faith or be involved in Sea of Faith in the way that Noel Cheer was".

My background is in very senior management in the Commercial field where I was well trained in chairing and organising very large corporate groups, I was most certainly not trained in the realms of the Clergy, not even Lay Preaching. After discussion with many members of SoFNZ and listening to gossip and general chit chat I have determined that there are significant issues that need addressing if Sea of Faith NZ is to progress into the future in a strong vibrant and enquiring manner.

Equally, Sea of Faith NZ is set up as a Bottom Up organisation not a Top Down one. The membership of the Local Groups are supposed to communicate to the Steering Committee where they want to see the overall body progress to and how. In other words YOU set the Objectives and Directions of Sea of Faith NZ not the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee then sets the path to meet those objectives.

However, this has not been the case over recent years. For whatever reason the Tail is wagging the Dog.

I am therefore intent on drawing to the attention of the Membership and Local Groups, the processes and facilities they have before them to function in the way originally intended. At Conference 2007 I am

also going to give the attendees, (the membership), the opportunity to decide on how they want Sea of Faith NZ to serve them in the future, hence the "Who are We?" programme.

I look forward to meeting you at Conference 2007 where the Steering Committee very ably assisted by the Arrangements Committee have, I believe, organised a Conference of significant quality in speakers and in theme.

I really do thank you for your letter, it has given me food for thought and it is one of the first examples for a while of "Bottom Up" communication.

**Sincerely
Norm Ely, Chairperson**

Editor's Response

I echo Norm's delight at even receiving a Letter to The Editor. I probably don't need to defend my "testy Editorial" because I am confident that there would already be a large degree of irritation, at least amongst our members, at the simplistic equation of religion and theism.

My personal view is that new religious thought forms are emerging that can see the sacred other than in a personalised God and that SoF is a seedbed for such developments.

Noel Cheer, Editor

Copy Deadlines

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

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 10.

Noel Cheer, Editor

What is the Universe ‘About’?

This summary of opinions about the nature of the universe comes from the Afterword of Paul Davies’ *Cosmic Jackpot, Why Our Universe is Just Right for Life* which is published by Houghton Mifflin Company Boston and New York, 2007

The Absurd Universe: The universe just happens to support life — it’s a vast accident. Had it been different we would not have been here to argue about it. There is no point to it all.

The Unique Universe: There is a deep underlying unity in mathematics and physics. A “theory of everything” is in principle possible. The extreme version says that the universe must exist necessarily. The less extreme version says that other unique universes were possible but we got this one.

The Multiverse: There were multiple “big bangs” producing a potentially unlimited number of universes. Universes which are hostile to life are in the majority but could contain no observers. An extreme version says that all possible worlds exist — this explains everything because it contains everything.

Intelligent Design: The traditional monotheistic religious view is that the universe is created by God and is designed to be suitable for life. This explains why the earth is life-friendly and the universe in general is apparently “fine-tuned” to support it. Because it does not explain the origin of God it is a less than full explanation.

The Life Principle: There is an over-arching, though as yet undiscovered, principle that requires life and mind to exist. This is questioned by scientists because it embraces “purpose” and by atheists because it seems to sneak God in through the back door.

The Self-Explaining Universe: The universe (or multiverse) explains and creates itself.

The Fake Universe: It’s all a computer simulation. [Remember the *Matrix* series of movies?]

None of the Above: Davies’ view is a mixture of The Life Principle and the Self-Explaining Universe. “I concede that the universe at least *appears* to be designed with a high level of ingenuity. I cannot accept these features as a package of marvels that just happen to be, that exist reasonlessly. ... the universe is ‘about’ something.”

INSTRUCTIONS FOR LIVING

This came as a chain email with an invitation to hand it on so that “your life will improve”. Here goes ed.

1. Take into account that great love and great achievements involve great risk.
2. When you lose, don’t lose the lesson.
3. Follow the three R’s
 - Respect for self,
 - Respect for others and
 - Responsibility for all your actions.
4. Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck.
5. Learn the rules so you know how to break them properly.
6. Don’t let a little dispute injure a great relationship.
7. When you realize you’ve made a mistake, take immediate steps to correct it.
8. Spend some time alone every day.
9. Open your arms to change, but don’t let go of your values.
10. Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.
11. Live a good, honorable life. Then when you get older and think back, you’ll be able to enjoy it a second time.
12. A loving atmosphere in your home is the foundation for your life.
13. In disagreements with loved ones, deal only with the current situation. Don’t bring up the past.
14. Share your knowledge. It is a way to achieve immortality.
15. Be gentle with the earth.
16. Once a year, go someplace you’ve never been before.
17. Remember that the best relationship is one in which your love for each other exceeds your need for each other.
18. Judge your success by what you had to give up in order to get it.
19. Approach love and cooking with reckless abandon.

Killing the Buddha

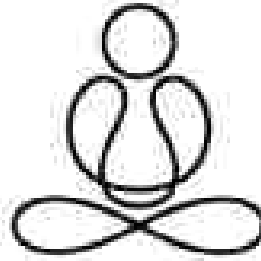
Killing the Buddha is a religion magazine for people made anxious by churches, people embarrassed to be caught in the "spirituality" section of a bookstore, people both hostile and drawn to talk of God. It is for people who somehow want to be religious, who want to know what it means to know the divine, but for good reasons are not and do not. If the religious have come to own religious discourse it is because they alone have had places where religious language could be spoken and understood. Now there is a forum for the supposedly non-religious to think and talk about what religion is, is not, and might be. Killing the Buddha is it.

The idea of "killing the Buddha" comes from a famous Zen line, the context of which is easy to imagine: After years on his cushion, a monk has what he believes is a breakthrough: a glimpse of nirvana, the Buddhmind, the big pay-off. Reporting the experience to his master, however, he is informed that what has happened is par for the course, nothing special, maybe even damaging to his pursuit. And then the master gives the student dismaying advice: If you meet the Buddha, he says, kill him. Why kill the Buddha? Because the Buddha you meet is not the true Buddha, but an expression of your longing. If this Buddha is not killed he will only stand in your way.

Why "Killing the Buddha"? For our purposes, killing the Buddha is a metaphor for moving past the complacency of belief, for struggling honestly

with the idea of God. As people who take faith seriously, we are endlessly amazed and enraged that religious discourse has become so bloodless, parochial and boring. Any God worth the name is none of these things. Yet when people talk about God they are talking mainly about the Buddha they meet. For fear of seeming intolerant or uncertain, or just for lack of thinking, they talk about a God too small to be God.

Killing the Buddha is about finding a way to be religious when we're all so self-conscious and self-absorbed. Knowing more than ever about ourselves and the way the world works, we gain nothing through nostalgia for a time when belief was simple, and even less from insisting that now is such a time. Killing the Buddha will ask, How can we be religious without leaving part of ourselves at the church or temple door? How can we love God when we know it doesn't matter if we do? Call it God for the godless. Call it the search for a God we can believe in: A God that will



not be an embarrassment in twelve-thousand years. A God we can talk about without qualifications.

Killing the Buddha insists that if religion matters at all it matters enough to be taken to task. We believe it's high time for a new canon to be created, and that the Web is just the place to collect it. We refuse to accept the internet as a world wide shopping mall. We know intuitively it can be a sort of Talmudic cathedral, a tool of transcendence made of words. We're here to build it. If the end result looks more like Babel than the City of God, so be it. Babel, after all, came close.

Found at:
www.killingthebuddha.com/manifesto.htm

The email of the species is more friendly than the mail . . .

Please send an email to our Membership Secretary, Ron Wilson, with your name and address in it so that he can add your email address to his membership database. With the price of stamps having increased, email is becoming increasingly attractive. Ron's email address is ronw@paradise.net.nz

On a related matter, if you would like to receive this Newsletter as a pdf email attachment *instead of* on paper, then mention that to Ron too. The pdf version gets to you a bit sooner and has colour text and illustrations. As a bonus we throw in, for free, the monthly email to Local Groups sent out by the Chairperson.

Curious Obsessions in the History of Science and Spirituality

by Rachael Kohn

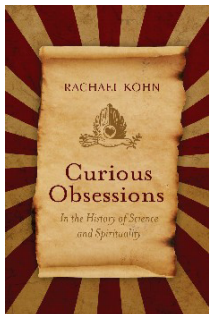
A monk who kept banned books in secret library under the nose of the pope; an abbess who designed extravagant royal garments for her nuns; utopians who never quite found what they were looking for; explorers who searched for the lost tribes of Israel but found new continents instead; an eccentric doctor and a mad monk who intuited scientific truths well before future generations would prove their theories correct ...

It is one of the delicious quirks of history that individuals dismissed by their contemporaries as eccentrics and mad are often those who have most impact on the world. The frontiers of religion and science have always been pushed forward by obsessive passion and vision.

'*Curious Obsessions in the History of Science and Spirituality*' is a captivating look at the famous and the forgotten, at episodes - both extraordinary and disastrous - from the past that, whether in astronomy or medicine or the New Age, exert their far-reaching influences today.

Rachael Kohn, Ph.D. LL.D., produces and presents 'The Ark' and 'The Spirit of Things' on ABC Radio National. Her previous book is *The New Believers: Re-imagining God*. Rachael was a keynote speaker at the 2005 SoF (NZ) Conference.

Order through
abcshop.com.au



The Myths that Make Us, How Myths have Influenced Western Civilisation and Culture

by Julie Hunter,
Hazard Press, Christchurch, RRP \$34.99

"I have struggled with Christianity most of my life, finding the Old Testament too violent with its emphasis on sin and punishment, and the New Testament unbelievable. Yet, I knew there was something deeply religious in me."

This is how Julie Hunter took the path opposite to the current fashion led by Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens. Looking for the baby in the bath-water led Julie to the subject of myth and Joseph Campbell's summary "Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths". Her professional experience, gained as a service provider to the Accident Compensation Corporation, led her to identify the profound effects of 'personal myths'. Further research led her from Sumerian civilisation to the present day while, on the way, looking into Babylonia, Abraham, Christianity and Mysticism.

The God of the Old Testament is put in his place with a quote from Carl Jung: "The absence of human morality in Yahweh is a stumbling block which cannot be overlooked ... "

We might note that this is the starting point of complaints that led to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, to Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*, and to Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

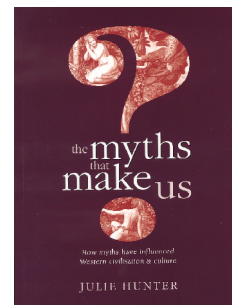
The Gospel of Thomas (which is printed in full in an Appendix) is introduced with appreciation for its seminal status in underpinning all other Gospels, a status in line with The Jesus Seminar's promotion of it. Julie Hunter usefully distinguishes (on page 47) between the interiorised divinity preached by Jesus and the exterior figure of God promoted by Paul, and (on page 74) between the attention-diverting accounts of Jesus' miracles and his far more important sage-wisdom.

The link into the psychological world is touched on (on page 100) through the author's noting that 'myth', 'mysticism' and 'mystery' are all derived from the same Greek word. It is here that metaphors, myths and symbols become indispensable forms of expression. Inevitably this requires reason to be relativised, though not abandoned.

It is useful to remember that the title speaks of the Myths that Make Us — that is, it is an ongoing process.

This book depicts the process well.

Noel Cheer



My Understanding of Prayer

“Oh My God” – “I do not pray!”

Don Feist, Dunedin

THESE TWO EXPRESSION SUM UP THE PERSONAL PUZZLE THAT I HAVE WITH PRAYER.

On the one hand, I don't pray and haven't prayed for decades. I don't believe I'm worse or better as a result, nor that anyone else is, for that matter. I don't believe I'm entitled to pray. I cannot pray because I don't have an object of prayer.

But on the other hand, I often find myself uttering, usually under my breath, “Oh my God”. Why? Because it's a residue from my past, it persists almost universally in our culture, and it serves as an acceptable expletive. But it's by no means just a response to mild irritation. There's something more to it than that. I have trouble with it, but have never found a satisfactory alternative.

In the briefest of prayers, one would have to assume that the most important word is, “God” but there's the rub – who or what is god? No sooner do I think I have found an answer than she, he, or it or even “the one” becomes ipso facto “my God”, and that is an oxymoron, whether I realize it or not. A God that is mine is no longer divine. [See “Killing The Buddha”. p7 - ed] So all I'm really left with is the interjectory, “Oh”, which may well be the key to the whole thing. Yet “Oh” is hardly even a word. To borrow St. Paul's expression, it is a sigh too deep for words. A yearning, a groaning – indefinable but indispensable. A touch of the transcendent. Something I desperately need.

I cannot pray because I don't have an object of prayer

So that's prayer for me. I think it's possible and even desirable to be both prayerless (in one sense) and prayerful (in another). I find most conventional prayer superficial mumbo jumbo. I welcome more exploration of prayer at a mystical and visceral level.

I need to make a difference between public and private prayer.

I understand public prayer to be shaped by the God-concept of the person leading it and by the expectations of the people being led. Although these may be different from mine, it seems to me valuable that members of a community should spare time together to acknowledge shortcomings, to pay attention to the needs of others and to voice our hopes for a better world. For me it is not the words

that make any difference, but the response from the people listening to them, and my reservation is that sometimes we seem to feel we have discharged a duty by saying the words only.

And private prayer. When, in middle age, I regretfully said goodbye to the grandfatherly God who'd accompanied my childhood, I stopped praying altogether for a while. But I felt a loss and realised that, beside the Grandfather I had other, amorphous concepts such as: Love, Life, God within me, values, ground of my being. It doesn't bother me now that I can't put them together into a neat definition. That is the closest I can get to a concept of God. In the light of that concept, I try to think as seriously, reverently, honestly as I can, about people, issues and experiences I care about, worry about, find hard to bear, rejoice in or regret, about things I learn which may lead to wonder or despair, about my hopes and fears for people I love. In that thinking I try to be aware that it is the Love, Life, god within me, values, ground of my being, that I am communing with and that both question and response come from within me.

Don Feist

CONFERENCE TIMETABLE

Friday 28 September

2:30-3:30	Afternoon Tea & Registration
3:30-3:45	Conference Opening
3:45-5:15	Keynote: Colin Gibson
5:30-6:30	Happy Hour
6:30-8:00	Dinner
8:00-9:00	"Who are We?"

Saturday 29 September

7:00-9:00	The chapel is available for reflection
9:00-10:30	Guest: John Spong
10:30-11:00	Morning Tea
11:00-12:30	Workshops
12:30-1:30	Lunch
1:30-3:30	Three Plenary Speakers.
3:30-4:00	Afternoon Tea
4:00-5:15	AGM
5:30-6:30	Happy Hour
6:30-8:00	Dinner
8:00	Entertainment

Sunday 30 September

7:00-9:00	The chapel is available for reflection
9:00-10:30	Keynote: Raymond Bradley.
10:30-11:00	Morning Tea
11:00-12:30	Panel discussion
12:30-12:45	Conference 2007 Close
12:45	Lunch

In My View

Well it's all happening in Sea of Faith (NZ).

As part of Conference 2007 we are going to have a look at ourselves. In the "Who are We?" section we will explore where we have come from; where we want to go in future, and whether we want to increase our membership — and if so, how?

When I step back and consider the events from now leading up to and including Conference 2007, this may seem a strange time to ask these questions.

The Auckland Local Group has a regional Conference on Saturday 7th July from 9.30 to 4.30. It is titled "Living with Difference. How are we going to live with Religious Diversity?" There are three very good speakers and Noel Cheer is chairing the day.

The combined Wellington SoF Local Groups have a morning seminar on Saturday 22nd September from 9:00am to 1:00pm at St Andrews on the Terrace. Bishop John Spong will be speaking on "Jesus for the Non Religious". This will consist of two one-hour presentations followed by a question-and-answer session. Again Noel Cheer will be chairing the morning.

Then in September we have Conference 2007.

Attendees will have the opportunity to hear some excellent presenters and to attend stimulating workshops, all on the theme of "Retelling the Story. The Familiar; the Unfamiliar". We are also taking a bold step of not having three Keynote Speakers but a Guest Speaker and two Keynote Speakers. We are taking a second bold step in not having three Elective Speakers — of whom you can only hear one — but having a Plenary Session with all three Speakers in the same session, thereby giving you the opportunity to hear them all.

The Registration Form accompanies this Newsletter so please get you applications in ASAP. Detailed information about Conference 2007, including a printable Registration Form, is on our Website at www.sof.org.nz.

As an aside, when did you last visit the website? It really is an excellent product with information about everything to do with SoF. Also, if you are involved in a Local Group and you want to share information or promote your events contact noel@cheer.org.nz — its all free. You can even list your scheduled regular meetings if you wish.

So why are we asking "Who are We?"? Simply because we have detected a feeling that Sea of Faith NZ may not be entirely providing adequately for the needs of many of our members — and it obviously didn't provide for the needs of ex-members.

We do not intend this to be a "Big Deal" — the rest of the Conference is the big deal simply — but it seems the time is right for a review and, if necessary, a modification of what we are doing to help us provide for Sea of Faith NZ and its future members as well as existing members in the years ahead.



Norm

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