



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

Arrangements Committee Report

Have You Forgotten?

Did you know that **Conference 2007** is less than a month away – 28/29/30 September?

Most registrations received to date have been for full accommodation so the pressure on suitable beds has been building up.

However the good news is that Kings has opened up School House for our use so there is still very good accommodation available.

It's not too late to decide to come to this Conference which will be equal to the best of those in the past.

You can find further details of the facilities at Kings College in the February, May and July Newsletters, but better still go to the Sea of Faith website for full information on the programme, speakers, workshops and Registration Form. The website is at www.sof.org.nz

If you have any problems contact –

John Irwin

Chairman, 2007 Arrangements Committee.
jonbarb@xtra.co.nz (09) 575 8523

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Notice of Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting of the Sea of Faith Network (NZ) (Inc) will be held at 4.00pm on Saturday 29 September at Kings College, Auckland.

Remits for the AGM should be sent to the secretary by September 14th. They will then be circulated in the Conference packs.

Please note that only financial members may submit a remit, or vote during the AGM.

Mary Boekman, Secretary, 138 Rata St, Inglewood, Taranaki, 4330 e-mail: bboekman@clear.net.nz

Conference Speakers

Friday 3:45: **Colin Gibson**

Saturday 9:00: **John Shelby Spong**

Saturday 1:30: Three Plenary Speakers:
Jill Harris; Pushpa Wood; Rehana Ali

Sunday 9:00: **Raymond Bradley.**

Sunday 11:00 Panel Discussion:
Colin Gibson; Raymond Bradley; Pushpa Wood; Jill Harris; Rehana Ali.
Chaired by **Noel Cheer.**

Biblical Religion and Deadly Wars

by Shadia B. Drury, Canada Research Chair in Social Justice at the University of Regina in Canada.
This is abridged from a longer article

We are living in the midst of a resurgence of biblical religion. This means that we are probably in for some very bad times, because biblical religion inspires the deadliest wars. There are at least four reasons for this.

Tribalism

If we examine the God of the Old Testament, we cannot help but be struck by the fact that he is a very tribal god, despite his claim to be the god of the whole world.

Today, little has changed: the Promised Land is still heavily populated, and the Israelites are still not satisfied to live among the inhabitants and are still trying to evacuate them all from land-hence the "occupied territories" that Israel has conquered but not yet ethnically cleansed of its original inhabitants so that it can be part of Israel proper.

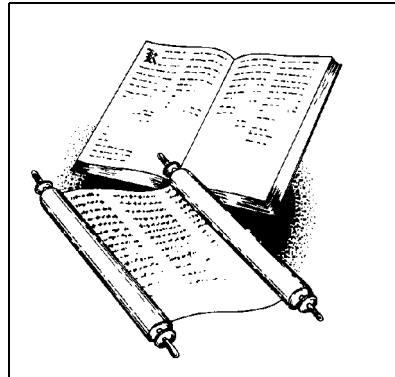
The same tribalism prevents the Palestinians from demanding a one-state solution in their current dispute with Israel, a solution that would make Israel a state for all its people; it could still be a Jewish state, but not an exclusively Jewish state. Instead, the Palestinians have elected a radical government whose foolish rhetoric proclaims the total destruction of Israel. The result is a genocidal war that will only end with the total annihilation of one of the antagonists.

The biblical god set the example.

Gratuitous Evil

This is a distinctively Christian idea. It has its source in the attitude that human beings are innately wicked and that this wickedness is totally unfathomable and gratuitous. This assumption is at the heart of the idea of original sin. It presupposes that human beings do evil for the sheer pleasure of it.

The Christian perception of evil is the key to the radical and warmongering nature of American politics in the neoconservative era. It explains why Americans are unable to ask, let alone answer, the question: "Why do they hate us?"



The assumption is that America is hated not because of anything that it has done, such as supporting brutal dictators, selling weapons of mass destruction to tyrants, and bombing innocent civilians, but just because it is good.

Collective Punishment

Time and time again, the biblical god punishes all of Israel for the transgressions of the few: "The anger of the Lord was kindled against the children of Israel" (Joshua 7:1). In the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah both parties were imitating the biblical god. Hezbollah was firing rockets at Israel indiscriminately because its goal was punishment of the Israelis in general. By the same token, Israel was targeting civilians in Lebanon, despite its claims to the contrary, the Israeli air force was bombing not only the civilians who supported and aided Hezbollah in

the south but all of Lebanon, including Christian and Sunni neighborhoods where Hezbollah is abhorred. **Again, the biblical god set the example.**

Infantilism

All three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, encourage infantile expectations of life either in this world or in the next. They lead people to believe in the

possibility of a perfectly just world where the good are rewarded and the evil are punished. They inspire the expectation that a life free from all earthly troubles is possible.

The hallmark of biblical infantilism is the belief that anyone who thwarts our plans, including unjust plans, is wicked; that it is possible to live in a world totally free of all wickedness — a world totally free of any obstacles to our plans.

More Stupid Than Animals

The religious infantilism that fuels the antagonists [fighting in the Middle East] makes humans more stupid than other animals are wont to be. The vigor of biblical religion in the Islamic world, the United States, and Israel indicates the continued reign of infantile politics, implacable enmity and endless war.

Recently Shirley Dixon saw and heard The Dalai Lama. She asks is he

God's Holy Fool?

Recently I, along with four thousand other Wellingtonians, had the opportunity to listen to a talk by a man who has earned tremendous mana in his position as leader of the Tibetan Buddhists in exile.

After being introduced by the Mayor of Wellington, the Dalai Lama sat in the centre of simply furnished stage, alone except for a translator who helped by providing an occasional English word. For the first ten minutes, while the latecomers in the audience were settling into their seats, the Dalai Lama lightheartedly, self-deprecatingly, and with frequent chuckles, presented the contents of his shoulder bag – his 'holy bag' – to us, including the red sun-visor which he then put on to shade his eyes from the lights that glared down on the stage. The Dalai Lama then changed key and began his hour-long talk on peace.

He spoke more in the tenor of a conversation than a dissertation, without notes, and in a simple, gentle, anecdotal style. What he spoke of was similarly simple – nothing academic, nothing 'new', nothing overtly religious – just plain commonsense basics about how to live maximally as human beings.

The Dalai Lama concentrated on the need to achieve inner peace if one is to live peacefully in relation to the difficulties we face every day – in relation to problems of the body (illness, old-age, facing death), problems with the people we relate to (stress, hurt, loneliness), and problems in relation to the communities in which we live (restlessness, helplessness, insecurity). He stated that the prime pre-requisite for dealing with any and all of these is the need to achieve a calm and peaceful mind. Such inner peace produces – and is produced by – the practice of kindness, learning, self-discipline, tolerance, contentment, compassion and forgiveness.

Some points made by the Dalai Lama were: the habit of spontaneous, un-biased compassion can be developed only with training; tolerance is a strength, not a weakness; forgiveness does not mean forgetting; to destroy your neighbour is to destroy yourself; difficulties should be dealt with calmly, because reactions done in anger involve blind energy, and this is both less effective in solving the difficulty and is hurtful to the self. He stressed that in all our relationships it is essential to recognise each person's essential humanity, and that all relationships should be based on a spirit of dialogue – of meeting and of listening.

The Dalai Lama stressed that training for inner peace should begin from earliest childhood. He emphasised the need for mothers to have a calm mind during pregnancy not only because of the effect on herself but also on her child. He spent a

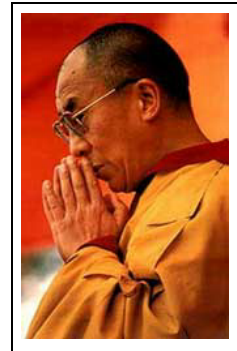
considerable time stressing the importance of breast feeding as being foundational as it provides the child not just with food, but with intimacy, affection and security.

There was no doubting that underlying the simplicity of the Dalai Lama's presence and presentation was deep learning and an incisive intelligence.

On reflecting later on the whole experience of seeing and listening to the Dalai Lama, I was reminded of the tradition in the Medieval Christian Church of the "Holy Fool" – a person whose life epitomized the text in I Corinthians 1:27:

Yet, to shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame what is strong, God has chosen what the world counts weakness. He has chosen things low and contemptible, mere nothings to overthrow the existing order.

Two people who have been considered "Holy Fools" are St. Simeon who lived a life of simplicity and played the fool in order to mock the idiocy of the world and to conceal his secret life of benevolence; and St. Frances of Assisi who lived in utter simplicity and who preached to the birds and animals. Parallels are also found in non-Christian traditions.



The Dalai Lama is a man of our own time, a man of high position: a major religious leader and recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize; yet he is not in thrall to worldly power and status. He presents himself as a simple, aging, unworldly monk and he speaks with such simplicity of the basic things concerning our humanity (which are, of course, the most difficult to achieve). Yet in doing this does not the Dalai Lama shame the wise and the strong of this world? As he said, "Some people will say the Dalai Lama is talking nonsense, but I say that idealistic views bring some vision".

So, I ask, might I not have been privileged to have been in the presence of a "Holy Fool"?

Shirley Dixon

Current Mythologies Driving Western Culture

This is an abbreviated version of a paper by Ian Crumpton of Christchurch.

The full version is on the website.

The Mythology of the “Free” Market

The “invisible hand” is a metaphor coined by the Scottish economist Adam Smith to illustrate how those who seek wealth by following their individual self-interest, stimulate the economy as a secondary effect and thus assist society as a whole. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith claims that, in capitalism, an individual pursuing his own good tends also to promote the good of his community, through a principle that he called “the invisible hand” of the market. Specifically, a free competitive market ensures that those goods and services perceived as most beneficial, efficient, or of highest quality will naturally be those that are most profitable. The mechanism for this, Smith saw as being the free price system. In his day, prices were largely set by the government.

Nothing remotely like a “free market” exists anywhere. It is a mythology fabricated by those who want to grow rich at the expense of environment and the rest of society, with little or no constraint for the good of all. It is based on a universalising and expanding of Smith’s concepts, which he never intended nor foresaw.

Despite its gross deficiencies, the mythology of the “free” market remains a major driver of Western culture, enabling the rich minority to grow obscenely richer, while exploiting the environment, the less wealthy majority, the poor nations, and even each other. The mythology has brought curses more than blessings, as we find ourselves in an environmentally unsustainable culture, driving a dangerous imbalance of planetary wealth.

A Mythology from Science

The current standard model of cosmic evolution provides the backdrop for a powerful creation mythology, sometimes held alongside other religious mythologies, sometimes replacing them. It goes something like this. In 1931, the Belgian priest Abbe Lemaitre proposed the universe began from a “creation event”, expanding in an explosion which has come to be called “The Big Bang”. With the expansion and cooling, matter and energy became differentiated, the universe became opaque, stars and galaxies formed, and the explosion of massive stars formed and scattered the heavy elements: “star-stuff” from which we and our world are made.

In our local setting, a combination of fortuitous circumstances have enabled life to appear: The

presence of a star which is neither too big nor too small and therefore long lived – which has no stellar companion. ... Thus simple life was able to get established, emerging here on our planetary home, possibly from complex molecules which arrived (panspermia) from Mars, or via cometary material. Once here life exploded ... and very recently, primates emerged, from whose ranks Homo Sapiens has appeared, spreading across the planet, developing intelligence, consciousness, and reflective capacity, and modifying the environment.

This mythology is based on current generally accepted science. But it is still a mythology: a story which helps to explain what we experience – to give pattern and meaning to life. As such it has enormous power over us, determining how we act, giving a framework for our hopes and dreams and fears.

The Green Movement

Another emerging mythology is that of the green movement, with its emphasis on curbing our activity and living more sustainably in harmony with the environment. It embodies such ideas as “back to nature,” and “the noble savage.” In its modern form it too rests largely on scientific understanding. But it also has powerful emotional overtones, and is beginning to change public perceptions of what “good progress” is. It is even beginning to curb the activity of market-driven economic development – but so far, only in minor ways.

Ian Crumpton

Jean Herbison

Ian Crumpton from Christchurch wrote:

We are saddened at the loss of Jean Herbison, a valued member of our local SOF group. Nurtured in the Reformed Christian tradition, Jean never “rested on her oars”, continuing to develop a radical and relevant faith that was so well integrated into her life of loving service and intellectual growth. Our condolences are extended to Ruth, Graeme and the family.

Iranians are suspicious of the West
The Soul of Iran

Afshin Molavi,
The Soul of Iran,
W.W.Norton and Co, 2005

For anyone wanting to know something about Iran, its history, culture and what is going on within it at the grassroots, this book would be hard to beat. Those who went with me to Iran in 2000 would find it both a refresher course and an updating. Although first published in 2002, a new introduction and final chapter have been added since then.

The author was born in Iran but now lives and works in USA as a journalist. He toured Iran, talked to as many people as he could, and brings to light what the ordinary people are thinking. And they do not all think the same by any means.

Along the way he introduces important bits of history, descriptions of important sights, conversations he had, and cameos of the great and important Iranians of the past (cultural, religious and political).

It also makes clear how much Britain, Russia and USA have interfered with Iran and, instead of promoting democracy, have actually prevented it from emerging.

This is not an anti-West book in itself but it makes clear why Iranians generally are so suspicious of the West. On the other hand many of the professionals in Iran want to migrate to the West (two million have already done so).

It has some gruesome descriptions of the dreadful 8-year war with Iraq, made worse by the fact that the West gave all their aid to Saddam Hussein!

It is easily read and is in a journalistic style rather than a literary one but is very educative. I got my copy from Amazon.com for US\$14.95 and it has 355 pp.

Lloyd Geering

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 ONZ, 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 Street, 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.

God: Through The Lens

"On the topic of God, Holloway contends that whether we believe [that] God is a supreme reality beyond the universe or whether we regard God as a human invention created by us humans to explain our existence, one fact is clear and unavoidable.

All our thinking about God is a human process, it cannot be otherwise.

We see God through the lens of our fallible human minds and therefore often distort God (whom no-one has ever seen) just as we misunderstand other people (whom we have seen). Hence our innate capacity to get God wrong."

From a review of *How To Read The Bible* by Richard Holloway, Granta Books

Talking Religion in Queenstown

Bill Cooke is a senior lecturer at Manukau School of Visual Arts, University of Auckland at Manukau. He is also chairman of the Auckland Group of SoF.

Being a typical Auckland, I rarely visit the South Island. But in June I was able to correct this oversight by attending the conference, held in Queenstown, of the **NZ Association of the Study of Religion** ... an organisation of religious studies scholars which meets every other year to present academic papers. And it is careful to distinguish what it does – religious studies, which is the academic study of religion – from theology, which is the business of demonstrating that one’s own religion is true and right.

Having missed the last few conferences it was a pleasure to be back among people of the same discipline as myself. The first impression was that a major generational change has taken place. Gone were most of the leading figures of the discipline from previous decades: Peter Donovan (from Massey), Colin Brown and Bill Shepard (Canterbury) have all retired. But though long retired, the most venerable religious studies scholar in the country was still there. Based at Otago, Albert Moore was for many years the face of religious studies until Lloyd Geering was brought in to establish a department at Victoria in 1971. Albert presented a paper on current representations of Judas, surveying non-fiction and fiction, noting in particular C. K. Stead’s recent novel *My Name Was Judas*.

So, among the New Zealand-based scholars at any rate, this conference was largely the preserve of the new blood. And it was interesting to see what motivated them. The keynote address was by **Mike Grimshaw** of Canterbury who gave a cartoon history of religion in New Zealand called ‘Bishops, Boozers, Brethren and Burkhass’. He had unearthed a range of cartoons from very early in the country’s history up to the present day, and commented on their implications. This was very interesting and gave a fresh perspective on an otherwise familiar tale. **Erica Baffelli**, only three days after arriving in the country to take up her new appointment at Otago, spoke on conversion stories in new Japanese religious movements. **Douglas Osto**, from Massey, gave an account of some translation issues in Tibetan Buddhist sources. **Will Sweetman**, from Otago, spoke about the study of Hinduism in the eighteenth century among Jesuits, noting the high quality of much of their scholarship. And **Eric Repphun**, also from Otago, spoke about his work of formulating a new theory of re-enchantment. So much re-enchantment talk is fanciful word-salad, so it was gratifying to hear some intelligent thought on this subject for a change.

James Harding, another Otago man, gave a particularly interesting paper, examining the current fetish for apocalyptic prophecy among fundamentalist writers, the most prominent at the moment being Tim La Haye and Jerry B Jenkins’ best-selling *Left Behind* series of novels and the accompanying non-fiction. Harding spent little time demonstrating the fallacies of the fundamentalists’ reliance on Daniel and Revelation, which is already too well known. Daniel was written around 165 BCE and so the ‘prophecies’ it was making related to events that had already taken place. All of the prophecies that Daniel does actually make failed to materialise.

But the most interesting point of Harding’s analysis is his look at conventional religious studies scholars and theologians who have responded to the apocalypticism of

the fundamentalists. While the scholars agree that their use of Daniel and Revelation is disingenuous and unscholarly, they are no more willing than their fundamentalist opponents to acknowledge the central point of all this: Daniel and Revelation both made prophecies which turned out not to take place. The scholars, no less than the fundamentalists, cannot bring themselves to acknowledge the fact that some things in the Bible are just plain wrong.

Among the older scholars was **Douglas Pratt**, from Waikato, who gave an excellent analysis of contemporary fundamentalism, distinguishing three broad categories: passive, assertive and impositional fundamentalisms. Professor Pratt has been advising several different governments around the world on the links between religious fundamentalism and terrorism. He also filled in for Paul Morris from Victoria, who could not attend, with another paper outlining the current state of inter-faith talks among the churches. **Greg Dawes**, fresh from acquiring a second doctorate (this one for philosophy) spoke on the current thinking on the conflict between religion and science. Thanks to the unstoppable flow of funds from the evangelical Templeton Foundation, it has become pretty much standard fare to announce there is no conflict between the two. Dr Dawes showed how this is all far too simplistic. While the earlier theories of conflict may well not work any more, the more nuanced understanding of the basic division between a supernaturalist and a naturalist view of the world is difficult to explain away.

Chris van der Krogt (Massey) gave a much-needed critique of some of the recent scholarship on the notion of jihad that has emerged over the past few years. The general drift of much of this work has been to distance jihad from the blood-and-thunder notion of popular imagining. While it is true that jihad can indeed refer to one’s inner struggle to overcome bad habits and so on, it does also mean the duty to kill infidels, and it’s not helping the process of understanding to try and sweep that fact under the carpet.

My paper focused on the origins of humanism and discussed some implications of these origins for the current understanding of the word.

There was remarkably little conflict, or even much open disagreement at the conference. That’s a problem in a way, because it suggests a greater level of agreement than actually exists. It’s probably the small numbers — there are so few religious studies scholars in New Zealand — which makes for a greater sense of what we have in common than what divides us.

What was most encouraging was the formal inauguration of the NZASR at the end of the conference, complete with the establishment of a constitution, an elected board, and an agreement that conferences should from now on be held annually. And three people were nominated Life Members in recognition of their services to the discipline over many years: Albert Moore, Colin Brown and Lloyd Geering. So in 2008 we all meet again, this time in the Waikato, and the phenomenon of religion in New Zealand will get another airing.

Bill Cooke

A report by Bev Smith of the SOF Auckland's One Day Conference on July 7

LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE

STRATEGIES, POLICIES AND REALITIES

There was Noel Cheer doing what he does so well, acting as Conference Chairman for Auckland's sixth One Day Conference, this year on the subject of Religious Diversity and how we are going to live with it.

First up, **PAUL MORRIS**, Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington brought to us the challenge of diversity and the recognition of difference. These are some of the points he made about particular religions:

Traditional Christianity did not recognize other faiths.

Jews recognize that all who follow the faith will eventually arrive at the Garden of Eden.

Islam has no recognition of equality.

And Brian Tamaki points out proudly that his congregations are made up of Chinese, Maori, Pacific Islanders, and that they are all Christians.

But they do not recognize the value of other faiths.

Other points that he made include the fact that the sheer extent of religious differences is unprecedented, as is the extent of movement, mixture and globalization. But today our diversity is different. Xenophobic people are fearful of difference and become defensive in their fear of the stranger. We are more comfortable with our own ethnic group and we mythologize the "other".

Europe has had an influx of refugees/ immigrants from far and beyond Saharan Africa and locations in Asia: all areas of strife.

Four and a half million Iraqis have left their country, bringing an increase of Muslims in France, UK, and Holland.

The challenge is how we are going to live together. Using Yugoslavia and the Czech Republic/ Slovakia as examples, people from "disassembled" countries suffer an identity crisis.

Having two choices presents a powerful agenda. Symbols of religious identity create dissension in the host countries, such as wearing turbans, a headscarf or skull cap.

Of concern in the UK is the Islamist fundamentalist plan that by 2030 Sharia law will be instituted over and above UK law. This will be accomplished by the breeding of Muslims to be MPs and the like.

In Finland the understanding is that a Muslim should be more like "me" — that is, Finnish. But they are not. Here in NZ our secular state is a useful precondition of religious diversity. No religion has precedence.

At present there are 36,000 Muslims in NZ, together with an increase of Hindus, but a decline in Christians, except for the Apostolic and Evangelical churches.

A little bit of goodwill is needed in dealing with such diversity in NZ. The migrant population is not the issue—but how we respond. Maori need time to go to tangis, and they take time in traditional welcomes. The answer to the Muslim need to pray five times a day (for eight minutes) is to take a shorter lunch break. NZ is hopeful that we can do better than France. We recognize the right of immigrants to exercise their beliefs.

DR MANUKA HENARE, Research Director, Mira Szaszy Centre, University of Auckland Business School, told us that he belongs to the Catholic tradition while maintaining his Maori culture: he doesn't drop one for the other. He suggested we should bring with us the things of our past.

With new discoveries shaking religious tradition, Manuka pointed to astronomy and spoke about the discovery of 60 million new stars as extending the work of James Cook on the transit of Venus, and his sharing of what he observed. Manuka put the

possibility that there could be other creatures on other planets, against the possibility that God through Jesus chose to come to our earth! Moreover, if God loves us what about the others? All this leaves most astronomers agnostic.

With globalisation comes diversity. Diversity is good for business. We want to feel safe in

Japanese and other business worlds without losing our Kiwiness, by understanding the differences.

In the 1980s NZ had its Treaty debates; we have gone through the bi-cultural, and now we must tackle the multi-cultural. Maori business is prospering globally. The Maori TV station is a success and our identities are secure. He sees new, great social values for our country.

continues

"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."

From The National Statement of Religious Diversity. For further information see www.hrc.co.nz/religiousdiversity

DR JAVED KHAN, President of the Islamic Association of NZ, said that the present focus of Islam in NZ is to live and let live. He feels very privileged to live in NZ.

He pointed out that war is used for ulterior motives. Diversity makes society culturally rich. Diversity brings social cohesion and racial and religious relations into the spotlight. Sadly, 4 in 10 Americans admit unease with Muslim integration, and 1 in 4 don't want Muslim neighbours. Islamic phobia has increased because of books such as Sam Harris's *Clash of Civilizations*. Islamic history is ignored, dismissed or rewritten.

NZ had a pragmatic approach to building our nation when early governments laid a strong foundation of equality, opportunity, peace and harmony. We have the Government's commitment endorsed by the Human Rights Commission.

Muslims make a contribution to our social and economic wellbeing, including their promotion of meat and dairy products, to the tune of \$250 million. He is confident that they will have a positive influence on the wider community and in religious harmony, after all the challenges of the past decade. All faiths today have a common concern for peace and justice, aspirations that are spelt out in the NZ National Anthem.

VEN AMALA WRIGHTSON, Sensei, Spiritual Director, Auckland Zen Centre, introduced another mood as she took up "Goodwill" from Paul's statement about a society which is just. Ill will arises out of injustice, from not being seen and heard. Goodwill comes out of genuine religious experience, and from going into it as deeply as we can. If everyone truly practised their faith our problems would be solved. She suggested we make every effort to understand the faith differences that come out of human experiences. Theologians argue; mystics smile. We can live outside the jargon of our belief. The difference between experience and expressing it is the limit of language. All problems come from expressing our experience, though it has a oneness.

Amala drew our attention to the enriching experience of reading the poet Rumi. Experience is what it is, but in expressing it we limit the experience. Zen teaches "abandon what we know" whereas Christianity's "into thy hands" imposes a total surrender to the ultimate other. Islam is a total submission. We attach to how we think we are. Clutching to I, Me, and Mine, causes conflict in the world. Everything out there is us—this is a true religious experience. Stay open to NOT KNOWING. Keep asking. Being here is wonder enough. Matter is spirit, and spirit is matter.

"Theologians argue: mystics smile"

Ven. Amala Wrightson

DR BILL COOKE, Programme Leader, Contextual Studies, Manukau School of Visual Arts, who is a self-confessed humanist and atheist, gave us an entirely different view.

He asked why one segment of society, i.e. religious organizations, should enjoy tax exemption. The Government should ensure that everyone has the same rights whether they are religious or not. Is it that 1.3 million people in NZ haven't seen anything that attracts them? This faith, that faith, where is the representative or reasoned or moral need to believe? Dialogue depends on modesty; we are irrelevant to the cosmos.

In Saudi Arabia or Alabama we couldn't be having this conference. But in a secular society we do have the opportunity to discuss religions. We should appreciate the value of a secular society as secularism doesn't mean the absence of religion. Fundamentalism poses a danger to the secular state and Clay Nelson of St Matthew's would prefer the fundamentalists to show the compassion of Christianity to be visible. Atheism has no founder and no scriptural belief; there is not enough evidence to believe in God.

SOME COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL

We are formed by this land and we all have our particular place here. We could hope that future Maori history will clarify our future.

People are concerned about Muslim terrorism. But when Britain was suffering from IRA terrorists they didn't go to their Christian leaders to ask them to do something about the terrorists.

In Britain there is a trend that Muslim migrants don't want to be defined as Muslims. They want to be British.

The Muslim community in NZ represents 45 different nationalities: we can celebrate their cultures. To appreciate religious diversity in NZ we could attend the Moslem Awareness Open Day each year. Become involved with people who are different, and enjoy their celebrations.

Can a country be Christian? Brian Tamaki raised this question. We don't have an established church in NZ.

For the first time a trainee journalism course has 4 hours on religion and humanism.

Schools should function in a way that reflects diversity.

After 9/11 we are beginning to discover that the more we know about the religion of others the more we understand them.

Buddhists believe that we should not project evil on to others. We should listen to one another.

The Human Rights Commission booklet on religious diversity has been revised, and endorsed by religious communities, including Jewish and Muslim. It is available now.

Bev Smith.

My Understanding of Prayer

This article first appeared in the May 2007 Newsletter but, owing to the way it was edited it gave the impression that the views expressed were the view of its author, **Don Feist**.

Furthermore it appeared as though he was in two, somewhat contradictory, minds on the subject. The fact is that he was quoting the views of two of the twenty people who offered short presentations on this subject. .

“Oh My God” – “I do not pray!”

These two expressions 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. 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.

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.

**The Newsletter welcomes
(but rarely receives!)
Letters to the Editor
on this or on any relevant subject**

In My View

Is it Ethical?

Recently the Wellington Ephesus group held its annual weekend at Otaki. The theme of the meeting was “Civil, Civic, Civilised – The Art of Living Together”.

The speakers were Lloyd Geering and Nicky Hager ably assisted by those present in a forum style of presentation and debate.

This programme centred on Ethics and Morals, (including the difference between the two), and their effect on society and the governance thereof. It also canvassed the changes that have transpired, over time, in the way that society and thereby governments view various issues.

I came away from the weekend really buoyed up after quite intense discussion on the issues raised by the speakers and by way of questions raised and discussed. However the more that I have pondered on these weighty issues the more I have become concerned at events that are occurring with seemingly little response from society at large. Over the last few years we have seen:

- § Legislation enacted to “prevent”; “assist in tracking” and “prosecute” terrorists. Human Rights groups have raised these issues as negatively affecting the rights of society at large.
- § Imprisonment of people on spurious grounds under various forms of Anti Terrorist legislation. Human Rights groups and lawyers of many nationalities have raised these issues as negatively affecting the rights of these people and to a lesser degree society at large.
- § “Illegal attacks” on other nations under the guise of protecting the populus at large and/or “the World”. Condemnation of these “illegal attacks” has been made by many groups throughout the world with no other real action being taken.
- § Police corruption in many places around the world including New Zealand. Our politicians assure us that all is now well, whereas other members of our society tell us the opposite.
- § The murder of defenceless children in NZ and throughout the world regardless of their ethnicity. We talk a lot about what needs to be done but in effect do nothing.
- § A small segment of our youth and other members of our society causing mayhem. We and our politicians talk a lot about what needs to be done but in effect do little except seemingly to extend more freedoms to them.

§ Ongoing and increasing harassment and condemnation of minority groups. Members of our society (including the media and politicians) regularly harass and condemn minority groups without much, if any, understanding background, mores or activities of the minority groups.

These are to mention a few of the issues that I could have set out here.

The questions in my mind are these: as Sea of Faith members, some of whom see ourselves as faith-based people in a faith-based organisation, **what should we do; what are we doing as individuals and as a group to address these issues? In fact should we do anything at all?**

Both ethically and morally I am finding that I am becoming less able to continue to sit and watch what I personally believe is an erosion of society’s fabric without taking some action.

These issues and the results of this continuing erosion affect us all. It is clearly going to take its toll on future generations. It does not matter where we stand as members of Sea of Faith within the Sea of Faith network — we are all participants in this erosion.

Historically “church based groups” would have had some comment to make and many would have been at the forefront of lobbying for change. In more recent times we had protest marches on a number of important issues, in many instances the protesters were supported by Church based groups. Whereas in the present day they and other groups in our Society either go unheard or make no comment at all.

Is it ethical and or moral for us as individuals or as a group to do nothing? If it is not, what should we be doing? Should I as Chair even address these issues with you? These are interesting questions for us to ponder.

If you have any comment I would be pleased to hear from you. My email address is nely@clear.net.nz

Norm

