



## Conference 2008 Update

**As Marlborough settles into autumn and is awash with wine, the planning for our spring Conference is well underway.**

Oddly there is no separate Sea of Faith group here, having merged with the local Unitarians. The local Clubs have also merged to build the largest Club in New Zealand — The Clubs of Marlborough.



This will be the base for our gathering. Located between Blenheim's Civic centre in Seymour Square and the river it's within five blocks walking distance of the motels and hotels listed below — which you will need to know about because, like Inglewood, this is a non-residential Conference:

- 193 Aorangi Manor
- 171 On High
- Lugano Motor Lodge.
- Blenheim Palms Motel
- Bella Vista Motel
- Ashley Court Motel
- Centre Court Motel
- Waterfront Motel
- Bings Motel with the Blenheim Bridge Top 10 Holiday Park provide the most modest accomodation if you are a group and don't mind single beds!
- Scenic Circle, Chateau Marlborough, Copthorne Hotel Marlborough and Hotel d'Urville are the upper end.

Further options can be found in Jasons Accomodation Directory or by Googling "Accomodation Blenheim" on the NZ page of the web.

The Conference theme "**The Ecological Imperative — Is Tomorrow's God Gaia?**" is a contemporary topic as is the challenge of organising the event from four centres; Blenheim, Christchurch (Workshop presentations), Nelson (Registration), with Wellington and the Steering Committee providing overall coordination.

We hope you will come and enjoy our region. The Saturday night dinner will be at a local winery — without loud music! Why not plan to stay on a little longer to enjoy the Sounds or other experiences we have to offer. "You're Going To Love Marlborough" — that's what they say at [www.destinationmarlborough.com](http://www.destinationmarlborough.com)

**John Craighead,**  
*Chairperson of the 2008 Arrangements Committee*

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### The Speakers

**Keynotes:** Prof. Lloyd Geering; Dr. Carolyn King (Waikato University); Craig Potton (photographer and conservationist).

**Plenary on Saturday afternoon:** Juliet Batten (writer, artist, ritual-maker and psychotherapist) and Bevan Tipene-Matua (working with local communities as part of his Doctorate to develop a spiritual framework for conducting genetic research in partnership with Maori.)

**Workshops:** perhaps you? See page 2.

**More Details:** will appear progressively on the website and in the Registration Pack with the next Newsletter.



## CONTENTS

### Reviews

3. Atheist Universe

5. On The Bible

### Articles

4. More on "Give Us Bread, Not Stones"

6. Mainstream Religion in Contemporary New Zealand

11. James Lovelock and the 'Gaia Hypothesis'

### Miscellaneous

1. Conference Arrangements Committee

2. Letter to The Editor

2. Anyone for Sex?

2. Conference Workshops

4. Sounding The Good Life

9. In My View

10. The Myth of Life as a Journey

10. The Lord's Prayer for the 21st Century

12. All About Us



Bitsandpieces bitsandpieces bitsandpieces bitsandpieces

## Letter to the Editor

7 March 2008

Dear Editor,

Thank God for Norm Ely and Noel Cheer! It's always gratifying to read articles by people who enunciate one's own views lucidly and comprehensively, so I appreciate the contributions of these two friends in the latest Newsletter. For my part Sea of Faith and, to a lesser extent, Ephesus, provide me with sufficient bread to feed my 'spiritual' life; as Norm advocates, we should continue to explore and question - while concurrently keeping our focus on the basic virtues of love and compassion and helping our neighbour.

I am sure there must be many people 'out there' who don't know about the objectives and philosophy of the Sea of Faith, and who would welcome the opportunity to subscribe to the Newsletter and join the loose membership. Are the Newsletters easily available in libraries, including university libraries? Has someone written an explanatory article in The Listener, or North and South lately? Are copies of the Newsletter put out in the display areas of church foyers? With such competent scribes in our midst I'm sure the word of enlightenment could be spread further afield, to the benefit of those seekers after truth who haven't as yet heard about us.

**Laurie Salas, Khandallah**

*[Gratis Newsletters are sent to university religious studies departments and some media people. We can easily extend the list at no cost by sending email copies — send me suggestions accompanied by email addresses - ed]*

## Did You Get The March Newsletter?

If you didn't and your membership is in good financial status then you can confirm the fears of our Treasurer and Membership Secretary, Peter Cowley, who worries that he might have missed a few labels. You can help him put it right by emailing him at

**pcowley@paradise.net.nz**

or by phoning him on (04) 934 6224 in the evening.

## Anyone for Sex?

"Christianity is almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body — which believes that matter is good, that God Himself once took on a human body, that some kind of body is going to be given to us even in Heaven and is going to be an essential part of our happiness, our beauty, and our energy ...

Christianity has glorified marriage more than any other religion: and nearly all the greatest love poetry in the world has been produced by Christians. If anyone says that sex, in itself, is bad, Christianity contradicts him at once..."

**[www.achristiansexsite.com/husband](http://www.achristiansexsite.com/husband)**

## Conference Workshops

### A Conference needs Workshops ...

... because they are the opportunity for the membership at large to have their say on matters relating to the theme of the Conference. There are two kinds of Workshop:

1. In which the group do most of the work, after the leader has made a brief presentation of the topic and outlined exercises to facilitate discussion.
2. In which the leader makes a full presentation of the topic, but encourages active feedback and discussion by the participants.

There is more information on the website.

If you would like to offer a Workshop then please contact Derek McCullough, 4 Hatherly Lane, Christchurch 8081, phone (03) 384-9099. Email **[mcculloughs@clear.net.nz](mailto:mcculloughs@clear.net.nz)**

# Atheist Universe

## The Thinking Person's Answer to Christian Fundamentalism

By David Mills (*Ulysses Press, 2006*).

Book Review by Beryl Myers, from the SoFIA Bulletin March 2008

**“You talk to God, you're praying: if God talks to you, you have schizophrenia.”**

**Thomas Szasz, M.D., psychiatrist.**

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**The above quote is just one of the many by different people that are printed throughout this book.**

The opening chapter entitled 'interview with an Atheist' is an eye-opener to those people who do not claim to be atheists, but often have doubts in the Christian religion and would like answers to many questions.

It is interesting that David Mills (the author) is able to quote Bible verses back to the interviewer. Atheists are often viewed as taking their stand because they have not had the benefit of Bible study. Apparently the opposite appears to be the case as atheists are often those who have received a lot of orthodox Christian teaching. Instead of just accepting all the stories of the Bible as a child and later as an adult, they begin questioning, 'God made everything and everybody in the world, who made God?' As the author writes, children are not born Christians, Muslim, etc.

They have to be taught those beliefs and if their family is mixing with their own kind of people who also have the same beliefs, the children naturally will accept what is taught as the only true religion.

The teaching of Creationism (now called Intelligent Design) is examined and found wanting. 'The only way Creationism could qualify as a scientific explanation for existence of the universe would be for Creationists to detail the precise mechanism or the means by which nothing was transformed by God into something' ... 'Proclaiming that 'it is a Divine mystery' or that 'creation resulted from the Law of cause and effect is decidedly not a scientific explanation.'

How often when a child asks a question which stumps the average adult, the answer is given that God makes the rain, the wind or sun, etc. It is very convenient to put everything we can't explain onto God. A fundamentalist Christian is smug enough to think he is instructing the child in the truth. The preferred answer would be, 'I don't really know, but we could borrow a book from

the library and find the answer' (or in this age, try the Internet.)

As the author states, the ancient civilisations created gods as their explanations to cover the seasons, death, disasters and good times. Naturally to expect a good result, a payment would be given in the form of a sacrifice, worship etc. When it is pointed out that the Bible stories are very similar to the myths of ancient times, you realize that unless ancient social history is studied there will never be much criticism of Bible writings. How many people do you meet who have deeply studied ancient history? Just as we all have a bias or different opinion on subjects, we cannot know how far our childhood beliefs still colour our adult understanding. The author seems very definite in his explanations and arguments that Atheism is the true thinking person's belief.

I enjoyed reading this book and although the author believes death is final and there is no life after death, I am not fully convinced. I still cannot dismiss the numerous stories I've read about people who are dying or have died and have at the same moment contacted (through a dream or a feeling) a close relative, e.g., a soldier calling his Mum on his deathbed and the mother knowing of her son's death at the precise same time.

Or the cases of precognition in children as well as adults. I suppose I would now answer to the 'religion' question on forms as 'agnostic' or 'no religion'. As for the beauty of nature being God's handiwork, I like to refer to it as Mother Nature's work. Nature will always win in the end, despite the advances of science. I wonder if the atheist of today has changed from worshipping a religious god to another material god, be it creating wealth or the science that often takes people away from the natural laws of nature in farming and living. I'd end with another quote, this time from the chapter titled: 'The Miracle of Life on Earth'.

**‘Which is it: is man one of God's blunders, or is God one of man's blunders?’**

*Friedrich Nietzsche.*

Comments on Laurie Chisholm's

## “Give us bread, not stones”

In reading Laurie Chisholm's article in the March Newsletter I was very encouraged to learn that somebody else feels the way I do about the Sea of Faith.

To me, much of the concern that Laurie expresses arises from our stated common interest in exploring (only) religious thought and expression, which I experience as very limiting. While for many of us with a traditional religious background that exploring has been liberating, what does it leave us with? What happens next?

While I know that there are those who say that terms such as faith, belief, religion and spirituality are interchangeable, I see a distinction, at least between spirituality and any of the other three. I would say that religion involves adherence to a doctrine, or a given set of beliefs. Religion is something that can be taught, learned and argued about, and believed or not believed. If you believe, you 'belong' to the community of this or that religion. Spirituality, on the other hand, I would say has to be, and can only be, experiential. There is no set of beliefs, no doctrine, just an individual experience and awareness of the sacred. For example, I believe that ancient peoples were spiritually aware, but not religious.

Because of its nature, religion engenders a lot of intellectual discussion, analysis and debate, and this is what we do in the Sea of Faith. We are stuck in the field of exploring religious thought and expression, rather than exploring our spirituality. We are stuck with the 'stones', rather than sampling the 'bread'. We talk from the head, rather than from the heart. Where and when do we have our spiritual experiences? Not at Sea of Faith meetings or conferences.

David Tacey, one of our Keynote speakers at the 2006 conference, believes that spirituality is the best term to describe the individual spiritual experience which is replacing formal religion. In his book "The Spirituality Revolution," he describes spirituality as a new cultural paradigm, which "refers to our relationship with the sacredness of life, nature and the universe, and this relationship is no longer felt to be confined to formal devotional practice or to institutional places of worship." (as religion might be). Tacey says that many people are now "keenly pursuing spirituality and individual pathways to sacred meaning."

A major problem with pursuing individual spiritual pathways, as I'm sure many in the Sea of Faith have found, is that we do not have the sort of community that religious people can enjoy. In the words of SoF member Barry Allom, we must

"move along as spiritual solitaries". But is it possible to harness these spiritual solitaries, to bring us together within an organisation such as the Sea of Faith? To do this, in my view, we would need to 'loosen up' and widen our focus, moving away from the limitations of religious discussion, to travel down this broader pathway of spirituality.

For example, we could consciously indulge ourselves in the treasure trove of our mythological spiritual heritage; we could embrace the spirituality of the natural world or that of our spiritually motivated ancestors. Perhaps we could have some spiritual experiences together, kicking away the stones and sharing some bread.

Maybe, even, we could develop some appropriately spiritual, non-religious ritual.

*Derek Pringle, Auckland*

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"Give us bread, not stones!": We were very interested in this attitude, and we expect there are many other people with these feelings, although we are not one of them. It would seem that they have realised that the 'Horse and cart dogma' of the churches is of no use in this space age. Like every one they need a code to live by, but they want an organisation to give it to them (bread). This is something the Churches are unable to do. For us this is **not** the job of the Sea of Faith, which has been and still is a great help and encouragement for us.

It has shown us that we are not alone with our heretic ideas, and we have been given the opportunity to listen to other people with different thoughts, and this has helped us modify our own personal religious outlook and form our own code of ethics on which to base our lives. We do not want to be told what we should believe, that is our business, so long as we do not interfere with other people. It is our hope that we have given as much as we have taken from the Sea of Faith.

With kind Regards and thank you for all that you do for us.

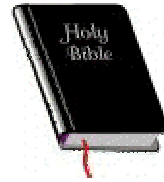
*Philip & Jenny Poore, Bay of Islands*

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### SOUNDING THE GOOD LIFE

There are at least seven 'notes' that aspiration to the best life might seek to sound: the note of *meaning*, the note of *intimacy*, the note of *endeavour*, the note of *truth*, the note of *freedom*, the note of *beauty*, and the note of *fulfilment*."

A.C. Grayling *The Choice of Hercules*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 2007, p28



## Bible: Good and Bad

A review by Alan Goss

*On The Bible*, Karen Armstrong, Allen and Unwin

**In her epilogue to this book Karen Armstrong puts her stamp on the Bible in clear and forthright terms. She is concerned that in an age when people want certainty 'at the click of a mouse' the Bible is in danger of becoming dead or completely irrelevant. It also provokes fierce argument, even hatred, and is used as a sword rather than a ploughshare.**

When we study the Bible, says Armstrong, we need to bring to it a spirit of charity and compassion, for it means different things to different people and is coloured by their particular circumstances at the time. The Bible has never encouraged its readers to follow a strict party line. The modern practice of quoting proof texts to give divine authority to this or that ruling or belief is out of step with the way the Bible has been interpreted over the years. From the very beginning, says Armstrong, the biblical authors contradicted each other but their conflicting insights were included in the final text. **Indeed the Bible's inconsistency is a virtue rather than a vice**, a point well made by the New Zealand author Kate Camp in a recent book. In discussing the Old Testament, Camp writes, "... it is this very inconsistency that gives the Old Testament its strength and durability ... Instead of finding strength in its unmovable, monumental certainty, it finds it in its fluidity and flexibility. It can absorb any shock, any change, any challenge: the text is earthquake-proofed by its own elasticity."<sup>(1)</sup>

In technical terms the Bible has built into it a kind of self-correcting mechanism which helps us to avoid going down any one route (belief, doctrine, orthodoxy etc.) which its adherents claim is the "only way". Throughout her book Armstrong takes pains to show how down through the ages Jews and Christians "have tried to cultivate an intuitive approach to scripture." Today, she says, we are much more strident, talkative and opinionated and need to heed Augustine's call for charity when studying the scriptures.

Armstrong freely acknowledges that there are good things and bad things in the Bible. She deals with the topic of violence in the scriptures which raises problems for many people.

Armstrong suggests that the time is ripe for Jews, Christians and Muslims to establish a counter-narrative, or 'canon within a canon'<sup>(2)</sup>, which will stress the more peaceful and benign aspects of their respective traditions. Those texts which are violent and problematic and which have been exploited by some of their followers would be clearly identified and the reasons for their inclusion in scripture explained.

In this book the Bible is presented as a rich and varied story of colour and design with no single message. The Jewish authors of the Bible revised the texts they had inherited and interpreted them freely to fit the circumstances of their times. It is crucial to note, says Armstrong, that reading the Bible literally is a modern development.

Karen Armstrong has written a scholarly but very readable book which is timely, balanced and wise. As she says, today the Bible and other scriptures have a bad name. They are charged with breeding violence, superstition and fanaticism and prevent people from thinking for themselves. Perhaps, like the original authors of the Bible, we need to be more free and playful in our approach to scripture, openly identifying what are the 'good and bad things' within its pages, as the idea of 'a canon within a canon' suggests. This would involve co-operation and understanding with the other monotheistic faiths to work out a common way of interpreting scripture and call for the exercise of tolerance, openness and charity in the process. It is worth a try.

Armstrong maintains that when people read the Bible with an open receptive ear they found it led them to an experience of transcendence. For Jews and Christians it is the Word of God. However, over the past 150 years or so there has been a biblical revolution which has greatly affected the mainline churches. It is freely acknowledged that they are under pressure if not in state of crisis. It is therefore vital that people be exposed to new thinking about the Bible as well as old, that they be helped to become biblically and theologically literate. This book would be a big step along the way.

Alan M Goss, March 2008

(1) *Kates Klassics*, by Kate Camp. (Penguin Books)

(2) A term suggested by Michael Fishbane, Professor of Jewish Studies, Chicago.

# Mainstream Religion in Contemporary New Zealand

A Personal View by Ian Crumpton, Christchurch

## The Decline of Traditional Christianity

Throughout Western culture, traditional Christian churches are growing fewer in number and smaller in size as their membership grows older. Many of these churches have disappeared, or will shortly do so. Those remaining struggle to find and fund clergy, and to maintain ageing buildings. At the same time, fundamentalist charismatic and pentecostal churches attract large numbers with a broader age mix. The older traditional churches tend to use a classical hymnody but a contemporary theology. The fundamentalist churches are the opposite: their music is contemporary electronic pop, and their theology is pre-17th Century. The patterns are different in other respects too: in the traditional style churches, those who belong have in the main been there for many years. But the fundamentalist churches have large back doors: many come but do not stay, often moving to another similar church. This style evolved in contemporary culture, which allows mobility and freedom.

## The Fragmentation of Traditional Christianity

New layers of religion are being continually added to the mix: In New Zealand, the arrival of Pacific Island Polynesians boosted the conservative wing of Methodist and Presbyterian churches from the sixties on, masking the decline of those denominations for some years. Buddhist, Hindu, and Moslem immigrants have all added their influence in the wider culture too. Nevertheless, institutional religion has ceased to be part of the life of most people in Western cultures. These trends have been late arriving in the USA, where belonging to a church is still common. But even there, we see the fragmentation of Christianity. A recent example is the secession of the whole diocese of San Joaquin from the Episcopal church, over the issue of ordaining gays and lesbians. This issue has caused deep rifts in Christianity right across the West. The conviction of a number of clergy on sex charges has deeply damaged the reputation of the Christian church, both Protestant and Catholic. Once the complaints see the light of day the cover-ups of a number of these historic offences has exacerbated the damage done.

## Faith 'Under the Radar' of Western Media

These are the things that hit the headlines. Sensation sells papers, makes news. The vast bulk of people who belong to all these religious groups just get on with life, worship, pastoral care, prayer, meditation, social action, and caring – all under the radar of public awareness and media focus. A huge amount of good continues to be done. Faith sustains, motivates, and guides many people today, as ever. But faith has been privatised in our market-driven culture of consumption. How this has come about?

## The Seventeenth Century Enlightenment

The process began with the deepest shift in our [Western] understanding of the nature of reality and of truth – the Seventeenth Century European movement historians call 'The Enlightenment.' A new understanding of 'truth' slowly emerged. Truth was no longer understood to be a set of eternal verities dropped from on high, but a body of knowledge built up, tested, and then accepted tentatively. The Greeks had taken steps towards this understanding, but only in a piecemeal way. They were, in the main, still haunted by a horde of jealous and grudging gods. It wasn't until much later that some friars – on the very margins of the civilised world – began to lay down principles to guide intellectual inquiry consistently and systematically. These were the Englishmen Roger Bacon and William of Occam. They were followed by other seminal figures in the history of thought: Locke, Hobbes, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Kirkegaard, et al. The BBC series *Sea of Faith* written and narrated by Don Cupitt over twenty years ago remains an excellent introduction to their thought.

## The Old World View Continues

But the old ways continued. When new religious paradigms come along, as Hans Kung has pointed out, they just stack up on top of the old ones. As one cynic has said, "There is hardly an absurdity of the past that cannot be found flourishing somewhere in the present."<sup>(1)</sup> And religion, always the most conservative element in a culture, has preserved the language and imagery of 'eternal verities'. Religious authorities have resisted new insights, new ways of understanding reality, which not only contravene the 'eternal truths' which they believe are entrusted to their guardianship, but also threaten their own power

and control. Yet at the same time, the Christian church uniquely encouraged and enabled the rise of science, western democracy, and capitalism, by giving reason equal standing alongside revelation in the scheme of things. Rodney Stark tells this story well.<sup>(2)</sup>

### Protestantism and Evangelical Revival

The invention of printing remains the most important technological development yet. It gave many more people access to knowledge in their own right. They need no longer rely on authority to tell them what to believe. Protestantism was born on this tide, replacing an infallible church with infallible scripture. Biblical translation and scholarship, thus begun, came in time to show Holy Scripture as humanly produced and culturally grounded document – no longer fixed and unchanging. The Evangelical Movement took the privatisation of faith to another level: personal conversion, and a personal relationship with Jesus became the new requirement. The change is reflected as we move from the hymnody of Isaac Watts (“O God *our* help in ages past..”) to that of Charles Wesley (“Forth in thy name O Lord *I* go”). With the Evangelicals, faith became not outward and collective, but inward, emotional, personal. This at a time when the Industrial Revolution was uprooting people from their social context, turning them into anonymous automatons in the factories of industrial towns. Wesley, and later William Booth, developed and offered faith that enabled people to feel valued: (“Just as I am, ...I come...”) Many of us were brought up under the influence of this style of faith. It’s last great practitioner who still drew support from the ‘mainstream’ church was Billy Graham. That was in the fifties. The Korean Christians arriving in New Zealand today are still in that mindset; still using the evangelical hymnody of Ira Sankey and his ilk, albeit translated into Korean.

### The Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements

Much has been said about the ‘baby-boomers’, and the ‘sixties’ when churches experienced accelerating decline, as young people found new freedom, rejecting the values and institutions which has sustained their parents. Some rejected only the style of their parents, but retained the evangelical faith, by moving to the exploding Pentecostal churches in the seventies and eighties. This group was never a large proportion of society as a whole. Their stridency, and

propensity to gather in a few large city-wide churches, gave them a disproportionate visibility.

Immigrants bringing faiths that have never known any equivalent of the transformation of the 17th Century Enlightenment have added complexity. These have included Orthodox Christians, Moslems, Hindus and Theravada Buddhists. Their understanding of truth matches that of the Christian fundamentalists who have met, and rejected, the more fluid understandings which began in 17th Century Europe. However many new arrivals hold allegiance to no historic faith.

### Loss of Contextual Understanding of Scripture

We no longer catechise catechumens! Few children today attend Sunday Schools and Bible Classes, even fewer learn that “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” The statutes, ordinances and decrees have lost their power. Biblical texts are unknown by most people, or if known, their historical context remains a mystery. Few would know that “Thou shalt not kill” originally carried the corollary “..another Israelite.” Even fewer would know that the prohibition against adultery was to ensure that an Israelite’s progeny were indeed his own – because in the days before the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead was developed, an Israelite could only participate in the future of Israel through his offspring. Fewer still would know that the Ten Commandments replicate an earlier, Egyptian code. So the arcane study of ancient Hebrew culture, fundamental to the understanding of its sacred texts, passes over the heads of all but a handful of scholars today. Fundamentalist Christians fill this gap in essential background knowledge with the astonishing teachings of John Nelson Darby<sup>(3)</sup>, views then publicised through the Scofield Reference Bible.

### ‘Truth’: Fixed, Unchanging, and Divine – or Tentative?

**The real change underlying all these trends is the radically different understanding of the nature of truth.** Truth is a moveable feast – to be modified when more knowledge is acquired. The scientific method adopts, for the time being, those ideas which experimental verification show to be useful. They are always open to modification, or rejection, in the light of further evidence. Ideas and beliefs arise within a particular culture which gives them context and meaning. In any other culture or age, their meaning will change, or be lost entirely. Faith

itself is continually evolving, developing to meet needs which may never have existed before. The question which should guide us is the same one asked by the Israelites when taken in captivity to Babylon: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” How can we achieve a dimension of relevant spirituality, faith or religion, in the world in which we find ourselves today — where the institutions which hitherto enshrined religion are in collapse, and faith has become so beliefless, doctrineless and privatised?

### Our Intrinsic Religious Capacity

There seem to me to be two self evident ‘truths’: the first, for which there is mounting scientific evidence, is that the religious disposition is part of humanity — an evolutionary gift bequeathed by the last hundred thousand years or so of adaptation. Religion, spirituality, faith — call it what you will — is not an option for the few, a relic from a pre-scientific age. It is the ability to contemplate the universe with a sense of awe and wonder; the ability to reflect, meditate, and to mentally reach beyond the reality we perceive in ordinary ways. It is the ability to understand the holiness — the special nature — of the universe, and the way in which we are grafted into that whole. Religion is no easy thing to define. Expression in poetry, music, drama and dance is often part of it. The capacity to be religious is a dimension of humanity.

### Religion — Relevant or Irrelevant

The second truism, is that unless religion can help us deal with the deepest human issues, the most important matters that we face, then far from being useful, it is a real part of humanity’s problems, a danger and a threat to us all. Such ‘bad’ religion is a distraction, a diversion, and an escape from the reality in which we live. The ‘we are the chosen few’ mentality that it often promotes is a recipe for conflict in a global age. In their establishment phase, most religions develop this mentality. But unless they move beyond it, towards a more pluralistic acceptance of others, they remain a dangerous ideology. By way of contrast, helpful religion always expresses itself in contemporary understandings, and addresses contemporary issues of how we “sing the Lord’s song...” in the framework of today’s world view. The more liberal margins of many of the historic faiths are moving towards this style. Such groups address issues like re-sacralising the environment, and helping the irreligious to develop their innate spiritual capacity without imposed doctrine or religious requirements. But again as Hans Kung has

pointed out, these are the weakest and most terminally ill sections of those religions. Many people of a more liberal disposition have simply abandoned their group to the conservatives, whose view will often remain supernaturalistic and exclusivist.

### Where is the Hope?

The hope lies with those who have either moved beyond, or have never known the teachings and constraints of institutional religion, but have nevertheless been able to develop their spirituality, their ethical concern for the world and for others, and their sense of the numinous. The hope lies with those who are able to draw from their rich heritage of religious and artistic expression — to continue to value it without being trapped in it. The hope lies with those who listen sensitively to the intelligent commentators and scientific investigators of our time, to develop ways of acting, individually and collectively, that address today’s fundamental concerns — concerns which, in the main, stem from the presence of too many humans on the planet, who are consuming beyond the planet’s capacity to deliver and so destroying its vital ecosystems.

The hope lies with those who can look beyond a ‘technological fix’, can move beyond a culture of consumption, and can recover a sense of connection with the environment. **Throughout history, change and challenge has always come from the margins** — those with power have a vested interest in retaining the status quo. For example, slavery was deeply embedded in the economy and culture of the world; but was gone in a few decades. The prime opponents were a handful of Quakers — well outside the religious establishment.

Today’s equivalent challenge is warfare which is just as deeply embedded in culture and economy as slavery once was. Sister Wendy Beckett reminds us that religion is being renewed by those who have fled to the margins. That is where the challenge to military activity will come from too.

Any religion which does not address such central current concerns brings not blessings, but curses. How shall WE sing the Lord’s song in the foreign land of today?

*Ian Crumpton*

1. Will Durant
2. “The Victory of Reason: How Christianity led to freedom, capitalism, and western success” — Rodney Stark Random House, New York, © 2005
3. A very readable account of Darby’s influence is contained in Bruce Bawer’s book “Stealing Jesus” ©1997; Three Rivers Press; Chapter 4: “Darby’s Kingdom.”



## In My View: Norm Ely, Chairperson 2007-2008

### The Ecological Imperative: Is Tomorrow's God Gaia?

**This is the theme for Conference 2008 to be held in Blenheim from Friday September 27th to Sunday 29th September.**

As I explored the origin of Gaia it seemed that we may be 'completing the circle' as humans have generally tended to do throughout history. Perhaps the theme of the Conference should have been "Are Yesterday's Gods becoming Tomorrow's Gods?"

The following is a précis of Gaia according to Greek myth:

Gaia or Gaea was known as Earth or Mother Earth (the Greek common noun for "land" is **ge** or **ga**). She was an early earth goddess born from Chaos, the great void of emptiness within the universe, and with her came Eros. She gave birth to Pontus (the Sea) and Uranus (the Sky). This was achieved parthenogenetically (without male intervention). Other versions say that Gaia had as siblings Tartarus (the lowest part of the earth, below Hades itself) and Eros, and gave birth to Uranus (Sky), Ourea (Mountains) and Pontus (Sea) without a mate.

Does this sound familiar to Christians?

It is interesting that Lovelock used Gaia to name a process of marvels or occurrences that 'Mother Nature' and/or natural processes able to be described by Science, may take place to allow the Earth to protect itself against the ravages of human activity. It is interesting because further analysis of the Gaia myth shows Gaia to be not only protective of herself (the Earth) but violently so.

Gaia took as her husband Uranus, who was also her son, and their offspring included the Titans, six sons and six daughters. She gave birth to the Cyclopes and to three monsters that became known as the Hecatoncheires. The spirits of punishment known as the Erinyes were also offspring of Gaia and Uranus.

To protect her children (the Cyclopes and the Hecatoncheires) from her husband, who was fearful of their great strength, Gaia hid them all within herself. Gaia found her offspring uncomfortable and at times painful, when the discomfort became too much to bear she asked her youngest son Cronus to help her. She asked him to castrate Uranus, thus severing the union between the Earth and Sky, and also to prevent

more monstrous offspring. To help Cronus achieve his goal Gaia produced an adamantine sickle to serve as the weapon. Cronus hid until Uranus came to lay with Gaia and, as Uranus drew near, Cronus struck with the sickle, cutting the genitalia from Uranus. Blood fell from the severed genitals and came in contact with the earth and from that union was born the Erinyes (Furies), the Gigantes and the Meliae (Nymphs of the manna ash trees).

After the separation of the Earth from the Sky, Gaia gave birth to other offspring, these being fathered by Pontus (her son). Their names were the sea-god Nereus, Thaumias, Phorcys, Ceto and Eurybia. In other versions Gaia had offspring to her brother Tartarus; they were Echidna and Typhon, the later being an enemy of Zeus. Apollo killed Typhon when he took control of the oracle at Delphi, which Gaia originally provided, and then the Sibyl sang the oracle in Gaia's shrine.

It was Gaia who saved Zeus from being swallowed by Cronus. After Zeus had been born, Gaia helped Rhea to wrap a stone in swaddling clothes, this was to trick Cronus into thinking it was Zeus, because Cronus had been informed that one of his children would depose him, and so to get rid of his children he had swallowed them, Gaia's trick worked and Zeus was then taken to Crete.

Gaia being the primordial element from which all the gods originated was worshipped throughout Greece, but later she went into decline and was supplanted by other gods.

As noted in the previous Newsletter, Lovelock in his book *The Ages of Gaia* wrote:

"Gaia is a religious as well as a scientific concept, and in both spheres it is manageable. Theology is also a science, but if it is to operate by the same rules as the rest of science, there is no place for creeds or dogma.

By this I mean theology should not state that God exists and then proceed to investigate his nature and his interactions with the Universe and living organisms. Such an approach is prescriptive, presupposes his existence, and closes the mind to such questions as: What would the Universe be like without God? How can we use the concept of God as a way to look at the Universe and ourselves? How can we use the concept of Gaia as a way to understanding God? Belief in God is an act of faith and will remain so. In the same way, it is otiose [pointless] to try to prove that Gaia is alive. Instead, Gaia should be a way to view the Earth, ourselves, and our relationships with living things."

Many of our members would not accept that there is a God in the same way they would not

accept Gaia as being alive. If we are to accept 'Tomorrow's God' as Gaia then we must accept that there is a God.

Alternatively, if we are accept God as a myth and unreal, then Gaia can clearly become Tomorrow's God as a symbol of a process of protecting the Earth.

But what do Emeritus Professor Lloyd Geering, Dr. Carolyn King and Craig Potton have to say on the subject of **"The Ecological Imperative: Is Tomorrow's God Gaia?"**



These three excellent Keynote Speakers will be presenting to Conference 2008. They will be ably supported by the Plenary Speakers Juliet Batten and Bevan Tipene-Matua.

This is a Conference not to be missed and, in such a central location, it is one that is within every member's reach.

Norm

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### **"The myth of life as a journey..**

. . . that always moves out in a great circle, and then returns refreshed into ordinary life, and sees it for the first time — this myth is an allegory of the role of the creative imagination and of art in our lives. We always start from everyday reality.

The [creative] imagination sees [life] under fresh metaphors, heightens it, tranfigures it, invests it with glory and then brings something of that freshness and glory back into the way we perceive everyday reality. So art renews life."

*Don Cupitt  
The Old Creed and the New  
SCM Press 2006 p137*

Cupitt tells us that the reference to "the first time" is from *Little Gidding* in T.S. Elliott's Four Quartets

"We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our explorings  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."

## **Time is Running Out ....**

- If you want CDs of last year's Conference speakers then you should order them soon. Cut-off date is June 30. We want production out of the way in time for this year's Conference. There's an order form on the website.
- Subscriptions to SoF(NZ) fall due on the 30th of June each year. Some members have paid for years ahead and have nothing to worry about. For the rest — you'll get a couple more warnings before we lower the boom!

## **The Lord's Prayer for the 21st Century**

Some SoF members might dismiss as archaic and formulaic the Lord's prayer found in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4 and as recited seemingly endlessly by church congregations.

Gerd Lüdemann, a member of The Jesus Seminar has adapted the version from the Prayer book of the Anglican Church of New Zealand. The result, though no less formulaic, at least gets nearer the 21st century mind - ed.

Eternal Spirit,  
Source of all that is and ever shall be,  
Loving Parent in whom we discern heaven,  
May knowledge of your holiness inspire all  
peoples,  
And may your commonwealth of peace and  
freedom flourish on earth  
Until all of humankind heed your call to  
justice and compassion.

May we find the bread that we need for  
today,  
And for the hurts we cause one another  
May we be forgiven in the same measure that  
we forgive.

In times of trial and temptation, help us to be  
strong;  
When life seems overwhelming, help us to  
endure;  
And thus from the yoke of sin deliver us.

May you reign in the power of human love,  
Now and forever.

Amen.

# James Lovelock and The 'Gaia Hypothesis'

A Conference Backgrounder synthesised by Noel Cheer

There are at least three ways of looking at the earth in the context of climate change: that the earth is *sacred*, that it is *vulnerable* and that it is capable of *retaliation*. The Gaia hypothesis, offered by James Lovelock, is a symbolic representation of this last point of view.



## Who is James Lovelock?

**James Ephraim Lovelock**, CH, CBE, FRS was born on 26 July 1919. He is an independent scientist, author, researcher, environmentalist, and futurist who lives in Devon, England. He has observed and documented a close connection between the evolution of life and the evolution of the environment. He has his own website at <http://www.jameslovelock.org>

## What is The Gaia Hypothesis?

Lovelock uses both 'hypothesis' and 'theory' in his writings. They are different in that theory has survived at least some critical scrutiny, but the difference should not bother us. Lovelock wraps his observations and projections of the inter-connectedness of life and environment into a theory called 'Gaia', named (at the suggestion of his then neighbor, the novelist William Golding) after the Greek goddess of Earth — see pages 9 and 10.

The theory, described in Lovelock's 1979 book *Gaia*, has been summarised, in his words: "...the biosphere is a self-regulating entity with the capacity to keep our planet healthy by controlling the chemical and physical environment." Others have described the theory as the idea that Earth itself acts like a single organism. It seems that different authors give this observation different degrees of literalness but Lovelock does not accord intelligence to the earth. He writes that "life and the material environment evolved tightly coupled together as a single entity. Self regulation is then an emergent property of the system".

## What is the scientific evidence for it?

Lovelock believes that living processes regulate the surface temperature of Earth. He says the average surface temperature of Earth has remained within a narrow range — between 10° and 20° C — for over three billion years. The temperature, he says, has not varied from the mean by more than 5°C. Other research shows that the range could be wider, but the constancy of Earth's surface temperature since life became established is still remarkable. This stability is in

spite of the fact that, during that time, the sun's output has increased by between 30% and 40%.

Studies that Lovelock made of atmospheric temperature changes that he observed on the planet Mars — the temperature can swing by 45 degrees Celsius within days — give strong evidence that a mechanism to keep Earth's surface temperature steady is needed and, in fact, exists.

## How serious is the outlook?

Central to Lovelock's point of view is that climate change, especially increasing temperatures, will not proceed linearly, but rather will accelerate in the way that an avalanche accelerates. He believed that we may be approaching 'tipping points', when heating suddenly escalates because of feedback. At the current rate, global temperatures will rise by nearly two degrees Celsius in the next fifty years.

At that point, the rainforests will begin to die, releasing vast amounts of carbon dioxide. Algae will fail and the ocean will stop generating cooling clouds and absorbing carbon. The Greenland glaciers will go into meltdown, and release enough water to flood many of the world's cities. Crop failures, human migrations, the emergence of brutal war-lords will follow. We know the story, but not in our 'real world' minds. Global heating is not yet part of our collective unconscious in the way 'the bomb' was.

In his most recent book, *The Revenge of Gaia*, which reads at times like the Book of Revelation, Lovelock's vision of the planet's 'revenge' isn't one of a deliberate and spiteful attack against *homo sapiens*, but rather of a comprehensive collapse of the systems that have kept earth habitable for billions of years. If we understand that 'Gaia' means the interdependence of all organisms on earth, then we can see that its breakdown implicates all organisms. Lovelock believes that it is our — human — fault, exclusively.

Global warming was not much more than a rumour in 1979 when Lovelock launched the Gaia hypothesis, an audacious vision of the living earth as an organism, whose geology and life-forms had together evolved ways of maintaining a climate and an atmosphere congenial to life. At

that time he seemed confident that Gaia's intricate connections, linking forests and oceanic algae to cloud formation, would be able to counter the earth's warming from man-made carbon dioxide. But, as global temperatures creep relentlessly higher and climatic disasters proliferate, he now believes that we may have already gone beyond the point of recovery.

Lovelock angered climate scientists with his 'Gaia' theory of a living planet and then alienated environmentalists by backing nuclear power. He has said that a traumatized earth might be able to support less than a tenth of its current six billion people.

"We are not all doomed. An awful lot of people will die, but I don't see the species dying out," he told a news conference in 2006. "A hot earth couldn't support much over 500 million. Almost all of the systems that have been looked at are in positive feedback ... and soon those effects will be larger than any of the effects of carbon dioxide emissions from industry and so on around the world."

According to James Lovelock, by 2040 the world population will have been culled by floods, drought and famine. The people of Southern Europe, as well as South-East Asia, will be fighting their way into countries such as Canada, Australia and Britain. Lovelock believes it is too late to repair the damage. "If you take the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predictions, then by 2040 every summer in Europe will be as hot as it was in 2003 — between 43 and 50 degrees Celsius. It is not the death of people that is the main problem, it is the fact that the plants can't grow — there will be almost no food grown in Europe. **We are about to take an evolutionary step and my hope is that the species will emerge stronger. It would be hubris to think humans as they are now are God's chosen race.**"



**But he looks happy enough.** emissions, 'sustainable retreat' into cities as well as synthetic foods to give the planet a chance to recover. There has even been a suggestion (though not by him) that if house roofs were painted white there would be a beneficial effect from the reflection of heat back into space. Lovelock is a passionate advocate of the rapid expansion of nuclear power to cut fossil-fuel

emissions, which has won him few friends among his natural constituents. He's dismissive of wind-power and biofuels as woefully inefficient and wasteful of wild land better reserved for Gaia's ancient arts of regulation.

In a (probably) unconscious denial of the biblical mandate in Genesis 1:8 to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" he berates our hubris in believing that we have the knowledge to 'manage' the planet.

**Sources: The Sunday Times (UK) January 29, 2006; Wikipedia; others.**

## 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 (UK) and Noel Cheer.

The **Chairperson** is Norm Ely, 16B Mawhare Street, Titahi Bay, (04) 236-6026

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**, PO Box 15-324, Miramar, Wellington 6243

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](http://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](mailto:noel@cheer.org.nz)