



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.  
**NEWSletter**



## Editorial

### Changes and Challenges

The title could serve to usher in a New Year in which we crouch under the palpable threat of global financial melt-down, runaway climate change and a tinder-dry Middle East.

But, no — the ‘changes’ refer to this Newsletter. The multi-column layout has been dropped (almost) in favour of single column, a format preferred by the 10% of our membership who receive the Newsletter electronically, as an attachment to an email. (They get a full-colour-every-page version, save the planet a little and save \$5 per year to boot! An email to [pcowley@paradise.net.nz](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz) can get you switched over, should you want to.)

The other ‘big’ change is that you are getting a Newsletter even in January — in fact you will continue to get six Newsletters each year, instead of five — a decision of generosity made by your Steering Committee last year.

The challenges? Right from its inception (the first issue came out in November 1992) the Newsletter has offered a forum for debate. In this issue we have reached what is probably a high-water-mark of contention. And that is good. I recently came across the term ‘respectful agonism’ the process by which people who deeply disagree can still respect each other.

On Page 11 Bill Cooke is challenged by fellow-Aucklander Jim Feist about an article critical of Carl Jung which Bill wrote. On Page 8, I replied to Bill’s criticism of me for going overboard in criticising various humanist groups. In seeking reconciliation, I suggested that we are all adult children of the West and that we are contributing to building a more humane post-Christian West, using what Don Cupitt calls the ‘critical thinking’ which opposes dogma.

Lloyd Geering has faced and responded to two challenges in the Newsletter. In the previous issue, Raymond Bradley took Lloyd seriously to task for his book *In Praise of The Secular*. Part of Raymond’s objection was to the way in which Lloyd apparently defined words to his own advantage. Lloyd has written a defence and that’s on page 6.

At the 2008 Conference Lloyd Geering gave a Keynote Speech addressing the Conference theme ‘God, Gaia and Us’. Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch took issue with the speech and a shortened version of a critical talk that he gave appears on Page 2. Lloyd’s response appears on Page 4.

And there’s heaps more. So read on!

*Noel Cheer, Editor*

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## 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 Newsletter six times per year, 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 2008-2009 Secretary is yet to be appointed.

Membership of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ or \$15 for emailed Newsletter). Send remittance and details to The Membership Secretary, PO Box 15-324, Miramar, Wellington 6243 or Internet bank to 389000 0807809 00 and tell [pcowley@paradise.net.nz](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz). Members may borrow books, tapes etc from the Resource Centre (Suzi Thirlwall phone (07)578-2775.) See the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz) for a catalogue and other details about us.

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# Reflections on "God, Gaia, and Us"

**An abbreviated version of a talk given by Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch to his Local SoF Group**

For many years, I have had mixed feelings about Lloyd Geering's message. He is, of course, a towering intellect, and has single-handedly done much to make New Zealand aware of modern thinking about religion. I well remember standing in a queue at a Presbyterian General Assembly, to record my dissent from the Assembly's decision to distance itself from his views. So while I have little sympathy for the position of those who have been critical of him, I generally find his views unsatisfying. The following is an attempt to articulate that dissatisfaction by focussing on Lloyd's talk to the Sea of Faith's national Conference in 2008.

## The Classical Enlightenment Story: With Variations

Lloyd presented the standard Enlightenment story, which tells how modern thinking has emptied the cosmos — which was populated by heaven and hell, angels, and devils — of all those religious entities. This time, however, he went back to the time before the emergence of monotheism. He was critical of the endpoint of the story — we have shown hybris, which is why we are in an environmental crisis — and he acknowledges that “in some rather curious ways, the ancients may have had a healthier understanding of the universe than we do today.”

For me, it is too much the triumphant Enlightenment story, the story of how human reason, rational thinking, has questioned and undermined religious dogma and overthrown religious authority. Today, there is a terrible split between an enlightened unbelief and an unenlightened superstition. What we need is an integration of believing and thinking, of religion and the Enlightenment. What Lloyd gives us is still largely the story of how thinking has triumphed over believing.

Imagine listening to a communist Chinese official telling us the rationale behind his country's annexation of Tibet, destruction of the monasteries, and imposition of communism. Just think how he would rail against the primitive, unscientific medieval attitudes and views of the monks, of how inefficient they are in a productive sense, and how oppressive the old monarchical form of Government, with the Dalai Lama at its head, has been for the people. And yet, the Tibetans have been peace-loving, have lived sustainably with their environment, and have maintained a stable population level. We would find it hard to accept that this [communist] 'progress' was an unmixed blessing.

## Stuck in Demythologising Mode

Another way of expressing the same thing is to say that Lloyd is stuck in demythologising mode. This is what David Tacey said of Don Cupitt and Bill Cooke at a recent Conference. Listening to Lloyd tends to put me in demythologising mode too. I want to be critical and analytical and questioning. Often, I find myself applying just that demythologising mode to Lloyd's conclusions, tearing them down in the same way that he tears down traditional Christianity. Imagine, in a parallel universe, another Lloyd Geering giving a speech as I have imagined in the next article [see p3 – ed].

I actually think that Lloyd is right, that we do need a new mysticism, and I would like to have heard a whole lot more about it. As soon as I begin to take mysticism seriously, a host of questions arise. Why a mysticism of nature rather than a mysticism of love or of emptiness, following a Buddhist approach? How does a mysticism of nature deal with the realities of nature: of death and disease and built-in suffering? And how is this mysticism going to deal with anxiety? What will stop it fading away as soon as we fear a down-turn in the economy or international conflict that could result in war? How does this mysticism of nature differ say from Richard Dawkins' view of nature? If this mysticism is worth its salt, won't it challenge our assumptions about economic growth, globalisation, and the use of scientific research to perfect our exploitation of nature?

## Geering on God

My first reaction to the talk was disappointment that Lloyd Geering didn't have a good word to say about God. The wonderful progress of human science and reason has given us an amazing picture of the cosmos, which has no place for God. God is disappearing, like the grin on the Cheshire cat. The role that God used to play is today being fulfilled by human culture and language – the third of Karl Popper's 'three worlds'. When I re-read the talk, I noticed that he also said “The concept of God may now be seen as a symbol — a symbol for the duties and virtues we feel bound to respond to.” And at the end, he seemed to acknowledge that there would be people who would continue to use traditional God-language, as well as some who use the new Gaia language, and also the very down-to-earth who would simply use the language of ecology. There seem to be two strands in Lloyd's thinking that coexist a little uneasily: an Enlightenment strand, in which human reason does away with God, and another strand, which tries to constructively re-interpret God for the modern world.

Lloyd didn't directly address the question of whether Gaia is the new God. I was looking for a new understanding of God that would bring God down from heavenly transcendence, connecting him/her with nature in a panentheistic way. Instead, he stuck with the idea of God as a symbol for duties and virtues. I find this a very unappealing God. It is a super-ego God, a cold and rational abstraction, every bit as 'heavenly' and 'transcendent' as the God who is like the grin on the Cheshire cat. It is a God in the tradition of the iconoclasts, who forbade any images of the divine, or the Protestants, who rejected anything without direct scriptural warrant, or the Puritans, who insisted that everyone conform to their absolute moral code.

## The New Story of the Cosmos

For Lloyd, the Enlightenment story is actually embedded in a more comprehensive story, the story of the evolution of the cosmos. We humans are the culmination of this process. We are able to make a picture of things as a whole, we don't just see and hear and feel, we build a concept of the universe. Through us, the cosmos becomes aware of itself. I think that this story, although it derives a lot from modern science, goes well beyond it. It is, if you will, a modern myth, a kind of new religious world-view, or what the post-modernists call a grand narrative. This is the way Lloyd put it at a workshop at an earlier Sea of Faith Conference:

"If we interpret this discovery [of the unfolding process of the universe] as the moment in which the universe, through us, becomes aware of itself in origin and process, then it is a moment of supreme revelation. Moreover it is one which completely eclipses in importance the illumination experienced by the Buddha or the divine revelation in which Christians have long rejoiced."

I find this an astonishing passage, reminiscent of John Lennon's claim to be more famous than Jesus Christ. Comparing the Buddha's illumination with modern cosmology is like comparing chalk and cheese, the discovery of the double helix structure of DNA with psychotherapeutic methods for treating mental illness. It reveals a liberal perspective that has found a new truth to replace the old, a new way of finding meaning in life.

I can respect this new myth as part of the great diversity of human convictions and perspectives on life, but I'm just not a true believer in it. I can see it as *a* truth, but not as *the* truth. I certainly don't see it as replacing or trumping humanity's religious heritage. I think that is the difference between being liberal and being post-modernist. The liberal is critical of traditional ideas, but has replacements for them. The post-modernist is critical of everything. Nothing escapes deconstruction. There are no unbroken myths any more. I suspect that the negative reactions I have had to Lloyd's thought are because his new myth or vision is given the appearance of rational objectivity, of inescapable truth, of 'there is no alternative.'

The learned professor informs us that everything is connected, that God is disappearing like the grin on the Cheshire cat, and that there is a new manifestation of mysticism. However, these are not so much incontrovertible facts as persuasive rhetoric designed to convince us of his vision. In order to 'believe, in freedom' I need to free myself from the enchantment of this rhetoric just as I need to free myself from the manipulations of authoritarian Christianity.

*Laurie Chisholm*

## Rationality and the New Mysticism

*Laurie Chisholm imagines a parallel universe, in which another Lloyd Geering gives a speech which critiques the conclusions of the actual Lloyd Geering. Instead of telling us how God is disappearing and a new mysticism is emerging, this other Lloyd Geering tells us how old-fashioned notions of a mystical union with earth are disappearing.*

There is talk of a new mysticism, of a mystical re-union with the earth. There are claims that everything is connected, and that we must recover the unity with earth that ancient religions once had. We must remember that the progress of science, human reason, globalisation, and the free market is inevitable. Any talk of a new mysticism is nothing more than an attempt by religionists, who have never really accepted that religion has been superseded in the ongoing evolution of the universe, to resurrect religion.

These religionists say: "The hope of our species for a viable future depends on our mystical re-union with the earth." If we are going to deal with planetary problems, we need science, not mysticism; clear political action, not attempts to coin new religious ideas. Mysticism is a vain attempt to resurrect medieval religion and give it modern respectability, when in fact it is nothing but mystification, obfuscation, unwillingness to see things clearly and rationally. Science has demonstrated that the concept of a God is very unlikely, and we can adequately explain the universe without needing to invoke such a hypothesis. But what we find is that when you show one superstition out the front door, another slips in the back.

Science does not support the notion that everything is connected. We are of course, connected with the air that we breathe and the food that we eat. But the idea that I am connected with algae in the Atlantic Ocean, or a planet in a faraway galaxy, is far-fetched to say the least.

Science doesn't support the idea that we are all one, either. Living things have a boundary: we are each distinct, separate individuals. Of course, atoms and molecules come into us and go out of us, but we are not simply our molecules: we are an ongoing structure that continues, even though the molecules change. Our boundary is permeable, but it is a real boundary; there is a distinction between us and not us.

We are beginning to understand where these mystical feelings come from. Brain science shows us, that when subjects tell us they are having mystical feelings, particular parts of the brain show unusual activity, evidence for some unusual brain states, nothing more. Perhaps mystical feelings are a by-product of the evolutionary process. Or, the organism may have some kind of

memory of its pre-natal state, and when it encounters conflict and distress, it longs to return to the contentment and stability of the womb.

This is what Freud referred to as the oceanic feeling, and it may well lie at the root of mysticism. The notion that everything is one is to be understood as a regression to the womb, where the foetus is unable to differentiate between it and the mother.

Now the more we become mature, adult, responsible beings, and the more our culture shares in these properties, the less we will feel the need to regress in this way, and any desire for such 'mystical' feelings will simply fall away. We have to use our rationality to fix the problems, not get carried away with emotions and old-fashioned feel-good religiosity.

*Laurie Chisholm*

## Lloyd Geering Responds

In his talk in Christchurch about my Keynote Address at the SoF Conference, Laurie Chisholm said he 'found my views unsatisfying'. As I am always keen to find out how my thoughts can be changed for the better, I read several times what he had said. But I found it difficult to clarify just what his problems are and I wonder if this is because his words had to be abbreviated for publication.

Laurie says my presentation was 'too much the triumphant Enlightenment story' and that I am 'stuck in demythologising mode'. Perhaps I do leave that impression; yet while I am sure there can be no return to pre-Enlightenment thinking, I assumed that when I said 'the ancients may have had a healthier understanding of the universe than we do today' I was being critical of the idea of inevitable progress that came in the aftermath of the Enlightenment.

I drew attention to the parallel I see between the devout respect that the ancients had towards the forces of nature (conceptualised by them as the gods) and the new respect for the living planet that modern ecology is now teaching us to develop. I referred to this as a new form of mysticism. Perhaps that is confusing since the concept of mysticism needs to be expounded at greater length than there was time to do in the presentation. So, up to a point, I can understand Laurie's frustration. But I was certainly not 'attempting to resurrect medieval religion and give it a modern respectability'. And I agree with Laurie that when one superstition is shown out of the front door another easily slips in through the back door. Indeed, that was the very point that Jesus was making in his parable of the exorcism of the devils.

It is just because any notion of a new form of mysticism needs to be unpacked in order to be in any way convincing, that I turned to the idea of connectedness. It is a relatively new term, unblemished by any past history. But Laurie does not like this term either. So let us now examine it further.

I started by saying that everything in the universe is connected and it is this connectedness that makes it a *universe*. I agree that this is not a self-evident fact. The reason for this is that in the past human attention has been almost exclusively devoted to all the many objects *within* the universe, each with its own identity. That way of thinking, I suggest, is now changing to something more inclusive.

Laurie says that 'Science does not support the notion that everything is connected...the idea that I am connected with algae in the Atlantic Ocean, or a planet in a faraway galaxy, is far-fetched to say the least.' At first sight it does seem so! But have we not recently found that the algae play an essential role in the food chain on which we are dependent for life? And was it not Galileo, one of the founders of modern science, who was the first to discover that heavenly bodies, such as the moon, are of the same physical substance as the earth? And was it not Darwin who brought evidence to support the idea of biological evolution, which indicates that all species of planetary life go back to a common origin? And was it not Einstein and others who led us to understand that everything in the universe can be traced back to a common origin in the 'Big Bang'?

Of course living things have their own individual identity, each with its appropriate boundary. But that fact does not eliminate the continuing connectedness of everything. Not only do the members of a family remain connected by personal relationships, even though siblings may develop quite different personalities, but people of all races share the same human condition, the modern recognition of which has given rise to the notion of human rights. What is more, we share about 98% of our DNA with the chimpanzees. I could go on and on about our connectedness, and it is science that has brought it to light! It is this recognition of connectedness that I suggested is a new form of mysticism. The more we acknowledge our common humanity the less likely we are to engage in war. The more we acknowledge we are part of a living planet the more we see that it is in our own interests to care for it.

Finally Laurie says, 'We have to use our rationality to fix the problems, not get carried away with emotions and old-fashioned feel-good religiosity'. Of course we must use reason, science and technology but will they be enough, in view of our all too often irrationality, greed and self-centredness?

When Arnold Toynbee wrote his last book, *Mankind and Mother Earth*, he asserted that the present threat to humankind's survival could be removed only by a revolutionary change of heart in individual human beings, and that only religion could generate the willpower needed for such a task. I have been trying to sketch the form of what such a religion or spirituality might take. I can easily concede that it is vague and imperfect and can understand why Laurie feels unsatisfied. I sincerely hope he can produce something better, for we certainly need it.

*Lloyd Geering*

## Darwin's dangerous idea: Top 10 evolution articles

150 years after Darwin proposed it, evolution by natural selection continues to be both a battleground and a hotbed of ideas. Here are titles of some of in-depth articles about evolution from the magazine *New Scientist*. You can pick up the links to the full stories at [www.newscientist.com/article/dn16322-darwins-dangerous-idea-top-10-evolution-articles.html](http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn16322-darwins-dangerous-idea-top-10-evolution-articles.html)

- How trees changed the world
- Uncovering the evolution of the bacterial flagellum
- Evolution: What missing link?
- Evolution: 24 myths and misconceptions
- Rewriting Darwin: The new non-genetic inheritance
- Vestigial organs: Remnants of evolution
- Viruses: The unsung heroes of evolution
- Freedom from selection lets genes get creative

Natural selection is seen as a tough master, constantly applying pressure to improve the fit between an organism and its niche. Yet some researchers believe that when the pressure of natural selection lifts, genomes go wandering and unexpected effects can arise. To see the impact, he argues, we have to look no further than ourselves...

## “Nice Guy” or “Sucker”?

Given that ‘faith’ in a religious context is frequently equated with ‘trust’, this excerpt from an article on gullibility in the context of financial investment [Stephan Greenspan <http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/08-12-23.html#feature>] widens the application:

“Gullibility is sometimes equated with trust, but the late psychologist Julian Rotter showed that not all highly trusting people are gullible. The key to survival in a world filled with fakers (Madoff) or unintended misleaders who were themselves gulls (my adviser and the managers of the Rye fund) is to know when to be trusting and when not to be. I happen to be a highly trusting person who also doesn’t like to say ‘no’ (such as to a sales person who had given me an hour or two of his time). The need to be a nice guy who always says ‘yes’ is, unfortunately, not usually a good basis for making a decision that could jeopardize one’s financial security. In my own case, trust and niceness were also accompanied by an occasional tendency towards risk-taking and impulsive decision-making, personality traits that can also get one in trouble.”

## Transition Towns

*A piece by Norman Wilkins of Raumati, on the Kapiti Coast, north of Wellington.*

Our Conference this year was especially good, because the theme of the environment was in the forefront of our minds.

There is a movement called “Transition Towns” which started in Ireland and Britain in response to the threat of “Peak Oil” in particular. The movement seeks to make local communities more resilient within themselves, especially in terms of growing as much food locally as possible, but also for saving on energy consumption and obtaining building materials locally. Typically the local council is engaged with, and areas are identified where that community is particularly vulnerable because of dependence on oil availability.

The group I am attached to is on the Kapiti Coast and here we have focussed in particular on gardening groups where gardening skills are shared and we work together on each other’s gardens. A lot of our work has been in getting the message out and we have had movies and speakers. Our council has been extremely supportive and have sponsored lectures on ‘Understanding climate change’, ‘How to grow our own vegetables’, ‘Healthy homes for our kids’, ‘Sustainable neighbourhoods’, ‘Making our homes warm and dry’, and ‘Reducing water usage’.

We see the need to alert Civil Defence, the Police and Community Watch Groups to the need to develop a plan of action if, for example, the oil tankers stopped coming and trucks were no longer delivering essential supplies to our community.

One big spin-off has been the development of community where people who wouldn’t otherwise meet have come together. There are very roughly forty communities in New Zealand that are pursuing this vision in some way or other. We have a great website [www.ttk.org.nz](http://www.ttk.org.nz) If you visit it you will see a whole lot more that is being done.

Our Conference was not an isolated event, but part of a whole lot of action that is ongoing.

**Norman Wilkins**

## Bon Voyage, Geoff

Geoff Bonallack of the Mana SoF Group died on December 19th at the age of 92.

He had served in the British Army in World War 2 and so, as his coffin was carried from the church, the background music (which he had chosen) was “Wish Me Luck as you Wave Me Goodbye”.

Now that’s style!



# Humpty Dumpty and Language

## An Open Letter to Raymond Bradley from Lloyd Geering

Raymond, I thank you for the trouble you took to read and discuss my little book, *In Praise of the Secular*. [See Raymond's review in Newsletter 79 – ed]. I am very happy to respond, as you invite me to do, for I have great admiration for your philosophical expertise and always take your critical remarks seriously.

What did surprise me, however, was the emotive language in which you wrote. You refer to your feeling of irritation turning to anger about what I wrote. It rather puzzles me to find this in a philosophical critique. As you can imagine, I have been the recipient of many angry criticisms in the last forty years, but they have always come from fundamentalists.

It may seem quite ridiculous, if not actually offensive, to associate you with fundamentalism. But fundamentalism does not consist in the holding of any particular set of beliefs (for Christian fundamentalists condemn Muslim fundamentalists) but in the dogmatic manner in which those beliefs are expounded.

'There he goes again', I hear you say, 'making up his own definition of fundamentalism'. It is not so; the word 'fundamentalism' is now being used in areas far beyond its place of origin. In the field of economics, for example, it is not uncommon for right wing economists to be referred to as economic fundamentalists. Now, I regard Richard Dawkins (whom you seem to admire) as an atheistic fundamentalist, for he suffers from tunnel vision and dogmatically insists that only his way of interpreting data is the valid one.

So, at the risk of arousing your ire even further, let me now respond to your semantic criticisms, starting with your pertinent quote from Lewis Carroll. This is one of the subtle linguistic observations that this author tucked into his whimsical stories, with the intention perhaps of stimulating his young readers to think. Thus he has Humpty Dumpty utter the apparently outrageous statement, 'When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less'. I suggest that Carroll was shrewdly drawing attention to the way we all tend to use language and that, surprisingly enough, there is a grain of truth in Humpty Dumpty's words. (But perhaps, Raymond, you would disagree that truth ever comes in grains!) By not continuing with the quote, you seem to have missed Carroll's insight.

For when Alice heard this she said, 'The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things'. To this Humpty Dumpty replied, 'The question is which is to be master – that's all'. He then proceeds, in his playful way, to explain how he always exercises mastery over words and pays them more when he gives them extra work to do.

The subtle point that Lewis Carroll was making is this: we should not become the slaves of words. We humans have created them and must always retain the freedom to use them in the way that best serves our communication needs. That is why words change in meaning over the centuries.

Of course, if we move too far from the currently accepted meaning of words then communication breaks down. That is why your semantic warnings, Raymond, always remain timely and relevant. I accept that. But if these warnings are taken to an extreme they do not do justice to the nature of language. A living language never remains static but is always in the process of change, as its users determine. (Humpty Dumpty again!)

Because words often change in meaning in different contexts and eras they have quite a history. Indeed their history may throw light on their most basic meaning. Many words do not have only one exact and permanent meaning but have a variety of meanings, often depending on the context in which they are used. Any good dictionary shows this.

In times of rapid cultural change, like the present, language changes faster, so much so that one is often required to explain the use of a new word or how one is using an old word in a new way. All this is particularly so with the three words that you accuse me of misrepresenting – God, religion and secular.

I am very happy to accede to your request to affirm that I am an atheist, if this means disbelief in a personal supernatural deity. Indeed, I did so in a little book I wrote forty years ago, *God in the Twentieth Century*. There I described myself as a relative atheist, to distinguish myself from absolute atheists, who refuse to accept that 'God' can have any other use and who, like Dawkins, then become atheistic evangelists. .

Actually, I prefer to call myself a 'non-theist' for that best describes my disbelief. Even the word 'atheist' has its problems for it can convey different meanings in different contexts. The early Christians were called atheists because they denied the reality of the Roman gods. And today, as the Oxford Dictionary shows, the word 'atheist' can be used to refer to a 'godless person'. Now you, Raymond, are no more of a godless person than I see myself to be.



**'When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less'.**

It is not true to claim that 'God' can have only one meaning. Jews, Christians and Muslims are all monotheists but do not worship the same God. Even in the Western cultural tradition 'God' has been conceptualised and spoken about in a wide variety of ways. God is conceived as a supernatural personal being in theism but not in deism, pantheism and panentheism, nor when the word is being used metaphorically. The one aspect that is common to all uses is that it refers to whatever is conceived as being of greatest worth and can hence be 'worshipped'. This is why, even in the Bible, we find people referring to 'my God' or 'the God of Abraham', why St. John wrote 'God is love' and why St. Paul rebuked those whose 'God was their belly'.

In the days when it seemed self-evident to most people that they were surrounded by an unseen, spiritual and supernatural world, it was only to be expected that God would be conceptualised in supernatural terms, but now that our greatly expanded view of the physical universe has caused that supernatural world to dissolve into unreality, then that usage of God has increasingly become obsolete, which is what Bishop Robinson declared in 1963, and the 'death-of-God' theologians also affirmed.

The God-talk that has been traditional in the Christian and Muslim worlds may slowly vanish from our everyday converse, just as it did in the Buddhist world, but that does not necessarily mean that it may not be used metaphorically to refer to whatever it is that a person values so highly that he/she feels bound to respond to it.

Now this brings me to the use of the word 'religion'. This also is a word that has changed greatly in the way it has been used. Its nearest synonym used to be 'devotion'. Only in recent centuries has it come to be used in the plural to refer to cultural belief systems as different from each other as Christianity, Buddhism and Confucianism. Now what is it that they all these have in common that has led to their being called 'religions'?

It is in my attempt to answer this question that I have gone back to the etymology of the word and suggested the basic meaning of 'religious' is 'having a conscientious concern for what really matters', a definition you took strong objection to. It is this meaning that is intended today when people remark 'The chief religion of New Zealanders is rugby football'.

As you say, Raymond, our views are very similar on the nature of the secular age in which we live, except for my use of such words as 'God' and 'religion'. I suspect that the reason may lie in our personal experiences. As you told us, you were reared in a religiously conservative environment, questioned it in your adolescence, and have been militantly rejecting it ever since. This would explain your intense dislike of the words 'God' and 'religion' as shown by the way you ask me to 'cut out all the "God" crap and the religious cant'.

By contrast I was reared in a non-church going home. All through my high school days I had no belief in a God of any sort; I did not think of such things sufficiently even to call myself an atheist. During my student days I embraced the Christian faith (which in those days was of a very liberal kind) as it provided me with a sense of meaning in life. It continues to do this for me even though I have come to understand it in an increasingly radical way.

This is why I find that your reference to the 'malignant history of religion', though sadly true, is far less than the whole truth. When I wrote a review of Dawkins book, *The God Delusion*, I pointed out that his alarming series of evils which God-believing people have perpetrated through history was factually irrefutable. Unfortunately, however, it was completely one-sided and prejudiced. Dawkins, I wrote, 'is completely blind to all the good that religion has promoted through the centuries, to the impressive civilisations it has created, and to the arts it has inspired'.

Lloyd Geering

## Dawkins in a positive light

**It is a pleasure to find common cause with the *New Zealand Humanist News* #71 dated 19 December 2008.** It concerns the muddle that some Christians get in about the "virgin birth" (but more correctly "virgin conception") of Jesus. The following explanation appears in the second edition of *The Selfish Gene* (1989) page 270 by Richard Dawkins. The assessment contained in it is generally reckoned, by middle-of-the-road biblical scholars, to be the correct one.

"Several distressed correspondents have queried the mistranslation of 'young woman' into 'virgin' in the biblical prophecy, and have demanded a reply from me. Hurting religious sensibilities is a perilous business these days, so I had better oblige. Actually, it is a pleasure, for scientists can't often get satisfyingly dusty in the library indulging in a real academic footnote.

The point is in fact well known to biblical scholars, and not disputed by them. The Hebrew word in Isaiah is *almah*, which undisputedly means 'young woman', with no implication of virginity. If 'virgin' had been intended, *bethulah* could have been used instead (the ambiguous English word 'maiden' illustrates how easy it can be to slide between the two meanings).

The 'mutation' occurred when the pre-Christian Greek translation known as the *Septuagint* rendered *almah* into *parthenos*, which really does usually mean virgin: Matthew (not, of course, the Apostle and contemporary of Jesus, but the gospel-maker writing long afterwards), quoted Isaiah (7:14) in what seems to be a derivative of the *Septuagint* version (all but two of the fifteen Greek words are identical) when he said, 'Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel' (Authorised English translation, Matthew 1:22-23).

It is widely accepted among Christian scholars that the story of the virgin birth of Jesus was a late interpolation, put in presumably by Greek-speaking disciples in order that the (mistranslated) prophecy should be seen to be fulfilled. Modern versions such as the New English Bible correctly give 'young woman' in Isaiah. They equally correctly leave 'virgin' in Matthew, since there they are translating from his Greek. "

## Letter to the Editor

Chairman Norm poses the question: Which way is New Zealand religion really heading? and asks: Are we a secular state with enough of a secular power base to reject both options of Religious Right or Religious Left?

The issue of left and right leanings in any discussion about the future of religion in NZ pre-supposes a mid-point, or fulchrum, from which each side departs, so it's interesting to speculate as to who constitutes this central body in the case of religious people in NZ. My guess is that it is those who are adherents of 'trad' Christianity — probably not prepared to take the first chapter of Genesis literally, but still believing in the supernatural elements in both Old and New Testaments, and practising basic Christian values such as compassion, love, mercy and service.

They would differ from left-wingers who usually don't believe in a personal God, and indeed believe in Godness (embodying the above values) rather than the God of the Bible. Right-wingers apparently believe in the literal truth of the Bible and probably in heavenly rewards and hellish punishments..

In answer to Norm's question, I see a future for NZ religion where those who at present hold the central position become more attuned to the thinking of current lefties, mainly because an increasing number of people will read and study relevant works more widely. If they are intellectually honest they will come to accept the conclusions of theological scholars, archeologists and researchers who already have thrown much light on the authenticity of the Biblical text..

The general decline in church membership, plus the growing interest in the writings of such people as Lloyd Geering, Don Cupitt and Karen Armstrong, indicate the likely prospect of acceptance of the philosophy of informed secularism, and of a shift to 21st century enlightenment.

*Laurie Salas, Wellington*

## Letter to the Editor

I would like to comment on the assertion made on page six of the November 2008 *Sea of Faith Newsletter* that 'rationalist/humanist/skeptic organisations are predatory on a faltering Christian theism and seem to exhibit little of sense of mission outside this'. That this is demonstrably untrue is less disappointing than the damage claims like this do to the wider cause of achieving an open society.

The **Skeptics** are not predatory of Christian theism because they make a point of never directly criticising such things in their magazine or at their conferences. A five-minute flick through the pages of their magazine will show this. They restrict their attention to claims of the paranormal and pseudoscience and so on, a topic the Christian members of the Skeptics are as keen to pursue as the non-religious. Their mission is the preservation of the integrity of science. I don't belong to the **Humanist Society** and won't speak for them. But the NZ Association of **Rationalists & Humanists** is no more predatory on Christian theism than the Sea of Faith is. A glance at its website or an examination of its journal will show a range of topics covered, as many of them [more] positive articulations of what humanism is about than a criticism of theism, Christian or otherwise. Its mission, as each journal declares, is the promotion of a tolerant, open society and the stimulation of free inquiry. And it was in that spirit that Noel Cheer was offered the pages of its journal in 2005 to present a lengthy critique of the rationalist/humanist outlook, which was taken up with gusto.

So, if accusations such as this are not about the facts, what sustains them? It would be pointless to speculate, beyond noting the harm they do to all our organisations that should be looking more at what they have in common than in engaging in divisive mud-throwing. What does Sea of Faith gain by sectarian anathemas of this sort? And how does it assist the cause of building a climate of trust and cooperation between organisations that should be looking at the values they share?

*Bill Cooke, Auckland*

## Editor's Response

Yes, I'm sorry that I overstated my case. On reflection, I was carried away by perceptions rather than facts. Although various ways Skeptics, Atheists, Rationalists and Humanists (the non-religious ones) display an antipathy to religious faith and its forms of expression and occasionally a vigorous, almost missionising hostility. But my mistake was to represent these as their **primary** agenda. Bill is right to point out the excellent intellectual and humanitarian work undertaken by these people — both as individuals and under the banner of their organisations.

I am particularly heartened by Bill's phrase "building a climate of trust and cooperation between organisations that should be looking at the values they share". SoF shares a lot with all the groups mentioned. Intellectual integrity, disdain for cant and manufactured piety are examples. We have differences, but like adult children of The West (see the review of Cupitt's book) we can — and should — sensitively navigate those. In our own ways we are all contributing to building a more humane post-Christian West.

*Noel Cheer, Editor*



Could this be ....

## A God for Atheists?



## There are many objections to the assertion that ‘God exists’

and this book addresses two of them very well: the so-called ‘problem of evil’ and the accusation that God is merely a human construction.

To take the view that there *is* a God but that there is only *one* God puts an awful lot of responsibility on that God. He (always “he”) has got to do everything — even the disagreeable things. The prophet Isaiah underscored this by having God say (45:7) that he makes the bad as well

as the good. Some scholars confine the bad to natural evils and not moral evils but nonetheless the problem of theodicy arises. Wikipedia puts it like this “The goal of theodicy is to show that there are convincing reasons why a just, compassionate and omnipotent being would permit debilitating suffering to flourish.”

So we have always asked this: if God (the only God) is all-knowing and all-wise, then why does he permit rapes, murders and thefts from pension funds? In this book Michael Benedikt offers a radically novel answer: **We make God and God is only as good as the God we make.** Why did God permit Auschwitz, the Twin Towers, Stalingrad, the Inquisition ... and the myriad other obscenities? Because he wasn’t present — and that was because humans were doing evil and not doing good. God is (only) the good we do. As the author puts it:

“Whether or not God exists is entirely up to us. For God comes into being by what we do and do not do. Neither you nor I *are* God, but what we’re doing may be. This God, who lives as deeds not creeds, is the God we know firsthand. This God whose shape is action, not image, is the God we witness every day. This God’s presence is not guaranteed. **“God is good, and God does good”** the Talmud says, and Augustine said too. **“God is what God does”** we might add — or God does what God is, which is good. Goodness-of- deed is less God *manifest* than God *instanced*. God is in our hands and we are in ‘his’, as we choose the good and do it. Do good again, and again, and you “do God’s will”. “Do God’s will” and you bring God into being.”

Rather than God being ancient and all powerful, God is “the youngest and weakest force in the universe, the force of the good.” And goodness is “self-evidently desirable”.

Whatever we each make of this thesis, it is a novel response to those who criticise religious faith with the accusation that we invent God out of a feeling of insecurity. Benedikt agrees that we invent God but insists that it is our best invention. Our theopraxy (“god-making”) is not weakness but instead a passion to fully-realise the gift of our humanness. God, therefore, exists as ‘goodness-in-action personified ... and sanctified.’

Could atheists buy into this description? We might ask first, do they need to? Isn’t the morally responsible life sufficient in itself without another layer of explanation? That is the choice open to us all. But for those who want to wrap cardinal values in narrative then this approach could appeal. If an atheist (of whom SoF contains a few) or a non-theist (who flock in abundance to SoF) want to assign a top-level value to life then it is likely to involve goodness of some sort — compassion, justice, fair-play and the like. Many such might give the name ‘Goodness’ to this set of virtues which inspire us and which hold us to account. A few might follow Michael Benedikt and use the name ‘God’, despite the wide spectrum of inconsistent and some downright unpleasant associations that have accrued over the centuries. (A dip into Karen Armstrong’s *A History of God* will give examples).

Over on the other side, red-meat theists might see this book as a bit thin. Where the thundering Jehovah who “mounts the storm and rides upon the wind”? Where the quasi-historical narratives of escape from Egypt and covenant-forming at Sinai? Not to mention the Apocalypse. (Please don’t!) Benedikt is laid-back about that — any story or dogma or liturgy that entices one to do good is itself good. Note, here as elsewhere, that a story doesn’t need to be historical fact to be valuable. It’s a question of “deeds note creeds” with ‘works’ trumping ‘faith’ every time because, as Benedikt writes, “God begins and ends with us.”

Michael Benedikt is Australian by birth but has lived in Texas for many years. He is a university professor and an architect, a “not very observant Jew”, son of “parents who struggled with faith ever since their liberation from Nazi concentration camps in 1945.”

The book is nearly 300 pages in length with a rich set of footnotes (not, as is too often the case, endnotes). The chapters are short, the writing style an easy elegance. The only quibble is that there is no Index.

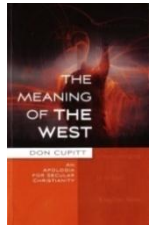
Michael Benedikt  
*God is The Good  
We Do:  
The Theology of  
Theopraxy*  
Bottino Books, NY  
2007

Noel Cheer

# The Kingdom Made Real?

**Don Cupitt**

**The Meaning of The West: An Apologia for Secular Christianity  
SCM Press 2008**



In this, one of his more accessible books, Don Cupitt advances and interleaves two current themes in liberal/radical Christian thought. The major theme is that ‘the West’ is primarily a product not of ancient Greek culture but instead of Christianity, even though the development process has been neither smooth nor unambiguous. The sub-theme is that Jesus was not particularly religious — perhaps only conventionally rather than passionately so — but was instead (as The Jesus Seminar also would have him) a wandering dispenser of wisdom and (as was the style in those days) and something of a healer of disorders that we would recognise as psychological in origin.

In 170 pages Cupitt tells us ‘The West’ is the best thing to have happened to the world. We should note that there is no cultural bloc that is systematically dis-engaging from the West even though there are West-hating dissidents within, such as radicalised Muslims. Major blocs — China, India, Africa, the Slavic and Latin America countries — are moving *towards* the West because, as Cupitt insists, it delivers a decent human life. Yes, it is ‘materialistic’ in two senses: it both systematically turns its back on spirituality and its economic engine is fuelled by acquisitiveness. Cupitt notes that Americans (especially) “devote themselves furiously, in the same day, to energetic guilt-driven *production* during their working hours and then to equally energetic *consumption* during their leisure hours.” Furthermore, the energy of the West comes from its use of management skills and its escape from the domination of tradition. The West is characterised and empowered by a secure civil society built of democracy with full voting rights (eventually) and not for only the privileged minority, as was the case in Athens.

Up until recently, ‘the West’ has been synonymous with the Western Church — approximately the Roman Catholic and its multiple fragments. Cupitt notes that because the EU has moved to more easily embrace parts of the Islamic world, the essence of the West is more politically convenient seen now as secular rather than as part of the twilight of Christendom.

That is not the loss that some might think it to be. The major theme running through this book is that the West today is the natural development of Christianity into a secular scheme of things — now that it is in the process of leaving behind the distractions and diversions that mis-shaped it in the first three or so centuries. This is where Jesus was *always* pointing — to the Kingdom, made real here and now, between and among those who acknowledge each other as neighbours.

There is a widespread opinion that the West emerged out of Classical Greek culture enriched with Roman testosterone (military) and ecclesiasticism (the Latin Church). It was said that Greek culture was mediated through Byzantine and Arab culture. But Cupitt says that this is a mis-reading of history. One example he gives is that the West didn’t really take off until it actually disengaged from both Aristotle (thank Galileo) and Plato (thank Hegel, Derrida and others). The Byzantines (following the Romans) could not have offered the secular way of life that characterises and empowers the West.

Instead, the West is built on the Judeo-Christian beliefs in “the government of all life, all reality, by a knowable and universal and divine law and ... the belief in a stable rationally ordered world.” Instead of capricious Greek gods in an unpredictable universe, the Judeo-Christian dispensation offered stability and a view of the worth of the individual out of which representative democracy would eventually emerge. Cupitt proposes that even the spiritual disciplines of monks transmuted into the discipline of the modern scientific method. Descartes, who got it wrong over mind/body dualism, got it right in his ‘Method of Universal Doubt’. “Western culture is an extraversion and objectivication of the main traditions of Christian spirituality and Christian ethics ... it takes biblical ideas about “the Kingdom of God on earth and recycles them as a Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, as anti-racism, and as modern humanitarian ethics.”

## Deferred Salvation

“The original Jesus remains historically controversial, but there is at least a case for saying that he was a Jewish teacher in the tradition of prophets like Jeremiah. He was critical of organized religion and tradition, and seems to have had little fresh to say either about God, or about sin and redemption. Instead, his chief concern was to convey a utopian vision of what human life could, should, and perhaps soon would, be. However, the ancient Graeco-Roman world was a harsh slave society, and after Jesus’ execution it was clear that there was little chance of any early realization of his dream. So he was seen as waiting in the heavenly world, from which he would one day return to earth to establish his Kingdom. The utopian vision was thus deferred, projected into the heavenly world and the far future, and Christianity slowly developed into a religion of eternal salvation from sin at the end of time.”

## God R.I.P. 1720

“I suggest then that some time around 1720 or so is perhaps the best date one can set for the Death of God. It is the date when metaphysical theism ceases to be sure, when the Great Tradition of Christian art peters out into the fantasy and illusionism of South German Rococo and the leading Enlightenment intellectuals begin mockingly to distance themselves from the Church. ... If then we take the 1720s as the most convenient date for the Death of God as a great and given public Fact, we will soon remark that the very same period also marks the beginning of the modern philanthropic and humanitarian tradition that has been growing steadily ever since.”

Samuel Huntingdon's *The Clash of Civilisations* (1993) saw it rather like that — with American Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture — now facing severe challenges — leading the charge into modernity. (Huntingdon died at Christmas 2008).

The Church, with what Cupitt called its “ugly moral backwardness”, has not been a good vehicle for the Kingdom construed in this humanitarian way — Augustine in the 5th century equated the Kingdom with ‘The Church’. The Church carried Modernity in its womb until it was forced to give birth at the Enlightenment. (This is my metaphor, not Cupitt's). But, as Cupitt notes, “around 1800 or so the Church died, and it too has been superseded by something bigger than itself, namely ‘the West’, which is simply radical Christian humanism, and a lot closer to Jesus than the Church ever was.”

Jesus, the ethical teacher, was promoting a “utopian cultural movement” which, after his death, was sidetracked into a system of power and patronage which Jesus would not have recognised. “The British Labour Party ... has done far more to build the Kingdom of God on earth during the past hundred years than the Latin Church achieved in the same territory during the whole millennium AD 600-1600.”

**The Church, Cupitt is saying, is dead. Long live the Kingdom —brought down to earth and into the street.**

*Noel Cheer*

## The Value of Jung to Sea of Faithers

A reply by Jim Feist of Auckland to ‘Theses on Jung’, by Bill Cooke, in Newsletter 79.

The article was brief and without the detail which was obviously supplied in the presentation it summarised. This article will also be brief, giving only a little of the detail that would be necessary to prove what I assert. It is based on my reading of the equivalent of three or four volumes of Jung's collected works, other books of his (such as *Modern Man and his Symbols*, and *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*), and on various other Jungian literature. I have also seen a couple of long filmed interviews with Jung, and read chunks of two of the books (Ellwood and Masson) cited in the article.

I summarise Bill Cooke's article as follows, with reference to its theses by number. Jung was personally unpleasant and in some ways immoral: he was self-absorbed and uncaring (2), megalomaniac (5), and dishonest (6); he held attitudes that were misogynistic (4), anti-Semitic (10, 14), cruel and violent (4, 11); in politics he collaborated with the Nazis (12, 13). A key concept, that of archetypes, was wrong, in being misogynistic and in reducing people to stereotypes (3). He was inexpert or outdated in his knowledge of the mechanism of evolution (7), of Mithraism (8), and of the permanence of the self in Hindu thought (9). Jung's work has little relevance today, except perhaps for his theory of personality types (1).

Here are a few details suggesting the kinds of error and misrepresentation in the article. As to collaboration with the Nazis: Jung was Swiss, and never lived within the Nazi domain; Aniela Jaffe, a Jewish refugee who was his secretary after the war accepts that he remained in the medical society and editor of the journal to do what he could to counter the Nazi influence on psychological theory and practice (Ellwood, whom the article cites). Ellwood also says that Jung helped Jewish psychologists in general and several individuals; I do not know whether he ever “took a principled stand against Nazism”, but he certainly showed repeatedly that its basis was psychotic and evil (Ellwood again). As to the archetypes: they are basic forces, and rather like sexuality, in that they cause much harm and much good, according to how they are ‘expressed’, and similarly take many forms, in both men and women; so it is wrong to call the theory ‘misogynist’ and to assert that they are ‘stereotypes’. (That variety of forms can make identifying them difficult, for psychiatrists and for readers trying to understand what they are.) All my reading, and seeing the interviews, makes the assertions about Jung's character quite unconvincing, although it seems possible that he made some caustic comments about people. I have no way of knowing directly how widely psychologists and therapists know and use Jung; so I asked a practising psychotherapist I was talking to (without giving any reason for asking); he replied that Jung is to psychology what Darwin is to biology.

The article has more fundamental faults. Most of it is about Jung personally, not his work; most of the rest is about marginal things such as his knowledge of Mithraism. The only piece about psychology or psychiatry (on the archetypes) is wrong. Of the two cited authorities which I have looked at, one (Masson, *Against Therapy*) is clearly biased (it is based on the belief that all therapy is necessarily harmful). The other (Ellwood) is used only for the unfavourable parts, ignoring for example the praise of Jung's wisdom page viii-ix), and the assertion that Jung was “closer to Burkean conservatism than to fascism” (page viii).

I conclude that Bill, whom those of us in Auckland know to be a scholarly and thoughtful man, has been led astray by his disbelief in all religious outlooks. For, if Jung is right, we need a religious outlook to reach full development and wholeness; we need to bring together our various faculties and the various dimensions of life into an integrated whole that transcends the everyday living that is absorbed by work and “leisure”, just as friendship transcends acquaintanceship, and love transcends friendship. Jung's work has persuaded me that all that is so, and has complemented my religious upbringing and my continued Christian worship in bringing spiritual strength that is very important to me.

I don't know that Jung “is of paradigmatic significance for the 21st-century”, but I am sure that he has a great deal to offer members of the Sea of Faith.

*Jim Feist, Auckland*

# My View

## From the Chair, Norm Ely

### **CHRISTMAS. It's been and gone — so what?**

What does Christmas mean to you? The celebration of the birth of Jesus? A visit to or from the relatives? The start of the summer holidays?

Why do we have Christmas at all? After all, in the modern secular New Zealand a large number of the population profess to be other than Christian. Why should non-Christian people be subjected to the Christian celebration pushed in front of them by the media, by Advertising, by in-store promotions, by the Churches of many denominations, and by all that is around them for at least two months leading up to Christmas Day.

### **We don't do this for any other Religions' day of celebration, so why Christianity?**

More so, why do we celebrate this in the southern hemisphere as others do in the northern hemisphere?

Jesus wasn't even born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, so why that day?

Is it not time for us to do away with Christmas entirely? The Christian community could do the same as other religious groups do now — celebrate their most important day on that particular day, without any major impact on other than their own faith community and without the need for everybody else in New Zealand being subjected to it.

We can then, as a country, have our summer holidays at what is generally the best time of the year rather than just follow on from Christmas. We could spread the holidays over two months or more, thereby allowing companies to stay operating and staff taking time off as they wish. It would better allow schools to close for shorter times allowing parents better opportunities to take time off with their children not only at summer but at other times of the year.

However this would have a serious impact on the manufacturing sector (especially China!), and the retailing sector. There would be no need for the massive pre- and post-Christmas sales and all of the crazy expenditure that takes place at present.

This would diminish considerably:

The Sales of Christmas paraphernalia

The Sales of Clothing

The Sales of Toys

The Sales of other Gifts

The Sales of Alcohol

The Sales of Excess Food items

The Massive promotions of everything possible for Christmas.

The Road Toll

The Family Toll (especially among the lower socio-economic groups)

The Hospital Emergency Department surge in patients mostly from some form of violent event

Based upon the financial downturn in this year's pre-Christmas retail spend — owing to the recession starting to hit New Zealand (reported to be around one billion dollars!) — one would assume that doing away with Christmas would save the population of New Zealand spending at least that one billion dollars if not two billion dollars. This would have a significantly beneficial effect of the spending of New Zealanders especially the lower socio-economic groups. It would reduce the call on credit offered by Banks, Finance Institutions, Credit Card Agencies and other organisations. It would reduce the call on overseas funds from the reduction in credit. This would be highly beneficial to the health of New Zealanders, less violence, fewer family traumas, fewer road accidents, and fewer alcohol-driven traumas.

It is important to note that these benefits would cover ALL new Zealanders not just Christians. After all, for some strange reason it is not just Christians who suffer from these celebrations and, thereby, the negatives of Christmas. In fact it is people of all or of no faith group who suffer as badly.

It would be of huge benefit to the population of New Zealand if only Christians were to celebrate Christmas with their own quiet celebration on December 25<sup>th</sup> or the nearest Sunday.

Of course it be could be that we will continue to celebrate Christmas in the way we do and thereby denigrate the Christian celebration, so that Commercial Operations can continue, and in fact increase, their financial gain from the population of New Zealand at large.

But to think that this is the case would be cynical to say the least.

*Norm Ely, Chairperson 2008-2009*

