



THIS YEAR, 2011

... is the 1300th anniversary of north African Muslim forces invading Spain at Gibraltar. In seven years “the Moors” conquered the Iberian peninsula which became one of the great Muslim civilisations. It reached its summit with the caliphate of Córdoba in the tenth century when Toledo enjoyed a golden age known as *La Convivencia* in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims co-existed. Muslim rule ended in 1492 when the last stronghold, Granada, was conquered by the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella.

... is 400th anniversary of **The Authorized or King James Version of the Bible**. The Old Testament was translated from Hebrew, the New Testament from Greek, and the Apocrypha from Greek and Latin. Work was begun in 1604 and finished in 1611. Like it or not it, the King James Bible is a part of Anglophone culture along with Shakespeare and Jane Austen.

... is the 300th anniversary of the birth of the Scottish philosopher David Hume. It is to him we owe the dictum that you cannot derive “ought” from “is”.

... is the 100th anniversary of the forced abdication of China's Imperial Dynasty. A republic was proclaimed, under Sun Yat-Sen. This may be counted as a major step on the way to modern China.

... is the 10th anniversary, on September 11th, of coordinated attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and on the Pentagon. Almost 3,000 were killed.



The next Newsletter will report on the progress of the Steering Committee in planning the 2011 Conference to be held in Christchurch, October 14-16, 2011

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“ITS ALL IN THE MIND, YOU KNOW”

[Eccles, *The Goon Show*, 1950s]

Fingerprints of God

What Science is Learning about the Brain and Spiritual Experience

Barbara Bradley Hagerty

Riverhead Books (Penguin) NY 2009

The author's writing style is both open and lucid though a tad chatty for this reviewer. Hagerty is the religion correspondent of National Public Radio in the US. Much of the writing is memoir in real time, letting you suppose that even the author doesn't know what is in the next paragraph. It's a survey by a lapsed Christian Scientist: "If I were to draw a road map for this journey, I would say the first part is driven by personal questions about my own spiritual experiences." (p12) On the other hand, what is striking is the moderate tone of the writing, given the subject matter. She avoids both the hard-science put-down of 'spiritual' experience and the anti-rational hedge of "well, science doesn't know everything, so God could well be lurking in the cracks between the quarks".

Few nowadays would doubt that the mind is what the brain is doing.

Even fewer can tell us how it's done and even fewer could predict which of the phenomena that are currently side-lined as 'para-normal' might one day be admitted as normal.

The focal point is 'spiritual' experience. Unless we specify where 'spiritual' takes us in this book we could find ourselves in strange, supernatural worlds. This author does seem, at times, to entertain some sort of supernaturalism, though obliquely.

She allows the owners of the experiences to offer their own explanations of cause and significance while leaving open the general hypothesis, offered by most clinical neuroscientists, that the probable sequence of events starts with an unusual pattern of brain activity — perhaps courted by meditation, perhaps provoked by drugs or perhaps met as a random brain event. The owner of the experience then offers to herself, or to a questioner, her account of its origin and significance which is likely to be informed by the religious ethos that she moves in. Thus 'spiritual' might imply supernatural or it might not.

Aldous Huxley publicised his 1960s LSD experiences in *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*. He makes a couple of appearances in this book to offer an explanation for events in which someone becomes privy to information that ordinarily she could not know. To Huxley it's 'Mind-At-Large', a sort of noetic Internet that we ordinarily have only a filtered access to — as protection from being overwhelmed. According to Huxley, some religious practices such as chanting and flagellation impinge on body chemistry (hyper-oxygenation and the toxic effects of septic sores) and cause the protective 'reducing valve' to leak-in cosmic information.

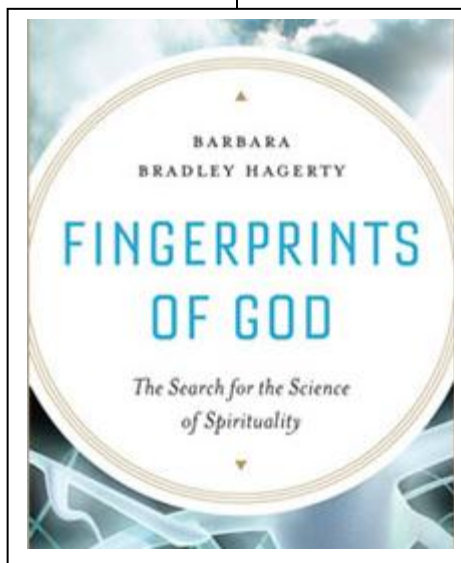
This present book has the author visiting this lab or that therapist or another radiologist to gen up on the various ways that the brain may be tickled, prodded or swamped into delivering an unusual set of internal experiences.

In Chapter 2 she wonders whether spontaneous experiences occur because God 'breaks and enters'. Chapter 3 deals with prayer therapy, an issue that gets mixed with issues as diverse as quantum entanglement and her lapsed Christian Science background. The questions of Chapters 4 and 5 ask whether individuals are pre-disposed, genetically or by brain chemistry or other, to unsolicited experiences which they recognise as somehow significant.

In this regard the author inclines to a theory of 'brokenness' — emotional and psychological trauma — as a predictor of spiritual experiences. (In his 1967 book *The Politics of Experience*, the Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing argued that mental illness was an adaptation to intolerable circumstances and a potential door to transcendent experiences.)

As a provoker of experiences, drugs enter at Chapter 6 along with the aforementioned Aldous Huxley. The author mostly likes to leave questions open but somewhat closes at least one on page 133 (emphases added): "Is it *faulty* wiring that leads

to a sort of madness, or *superior* wiring that leads to spiritual insights?" That sentence was a rhetorical flourish to sum up her speculation, a page earlier, that if God were trying to contact us, it would have to be via brain mechanisms. Chapter 7 asks whether epilepsy — 'the firestorm in the brain' — is another door of perception. Hippocrates in 400BC called it 'the sacred disease' and it was thought to afflict the Apostle Paul, Saint Theresa, St Francis of Assisi and George Fox. Both detractors of religion and promoters of an experiential approach to religion would say "told you so" — but with opposing valuations.



Chapter 8 talks of ‘spiritual virtuosos’ and irritated the language purist in me by not using the plural ‘virtuosi’. But, however we name them, they *cultivate* spiritual experiences through techniques of prayer and meditation. The explanatory mechanisms, for there are several, are offered by Andrew Newberg (who is ‘Andy’ from the start.) His *Why God Won’t Go Away* (Random House 2001) initially launched this reviewer into a strong interest in neuroscience and its sub-sections: neurobiology, neurotheology and even neurophrenology (remember the Victorian marble heads with mind zones drawn on them?) Coupled with John Searle’s 1984 Reith Lecture series *Minds, Brains & Science* (Penguin Books 1984) and Francis Crick’s *The Astonishing Hypothesis* (Simon & Schuster 1994), these together with Hagarty lay a good base for taking seriously the materialist explanation for consciousness as approached from any or all of the neuronal, the conceptual, the evolutionary and the experiential points of view.

So it is a bit disappointing to see the author flirting with Platonism and Cartesian dualism with a sort of ‘perhaps Descartes was right all along’ passage on pp188 and 189.

In the scores of interviews for this book, I noticed a predictable chasm between people who had experienced transcendence and those who had not. Both would burn at the stake for their positions.

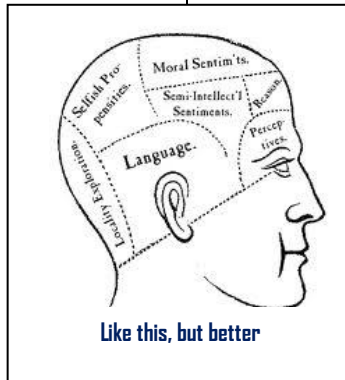
On the one side marches the well-armed, highly trained, battle tested brigade of scientists who insist that everything is caused by neural processes. These scientists — and they are the vast majority of the academic community — believe that thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions arise from the interaction of brain chemicals and electricity. They arrive at this conclusion through observation, using material instruments to measure a material brain. They echo the assertion of Nobel Prize winner Francis Crick ... In his book *The Astonishing Hypothesis* he stated, "You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules."

On the other side of the debate is a small, underfed, under-armed guerrilla force lobbing single grenades from the bushes. These scientists insist that cells and molecules do not determine all of human existence. They claim that molecules do not explain love, or willpower, or the occasional glimpse into spiritual dimensions. Significantly, I noticed that scientists who had *themselves* waded into spiritual waters — through prayer, meditation, or a near-death experience *always* fall into the spiritual camp. Their personal experience trumps the assumptions of modern science.

On page 191 the author is ruminating: “Maybe we do have a mind, consciousness — a soul — that works with the material brain but is independent it.” ‘Maybe’ is just not good enough.

Chapters 9 and 10 address, respectively, out-of-body and near-death experiences. Readers will, as with the rest of the book, take what they will from the interviews and anecdotes.

Chapter 11 adds to the vast literature that arises from the juxtaposition of mysticism and quantum physics. The assumption that ‘everything is connected to everything else’, at least at the quantum level, suggests to the author that, whatever counts as the ‘holist medium’ of connection, could well be a better name for ‘God’. This leads quite effortlessly in Chapter 12 to a consideration of ‘paradigms’. The author acknowledges our debt to Thomas Kuhn, whose 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* gave



us the term ‘paradigm shifts’. She tells (p270) of a public exchange between Richard Dawkins and the Cambridge mathematician John Barrow. Dawkins challenged, “why do you want to look for divine action?” The audience were captivated by Barrow’s reply, “For the same reason that someone might *not* want to.” Paradigms are not proofs, they are conceptual frameworks and, as Kuhn showed, they have a normative effect on the way we approach phenomena. They are the filters by which we consider evidence to be admissible even before we test it.

And we all carry paradigms. Mine favour the ‘materialist’ opinion that we need no more than interactions within matter to account for mind and that we need no more than the vagaries of mental processes seen through cultural filters and prompts, in order to account for experiences by which people sincerely believe that they have seen themselves from above an operating table, or have talked to near- or long-dead relatives, or have suffered alien abduction, or felt the presence of any number of celestial beings all the way up the line to God, holist medium or no.

As a scientific discipline, neuroscience is new. Its first suite of paradigms is only now coming under scientific challenge.

Fingerprints of God (I would be more comfortable if it were *Fingerprints of ‘God’?*) is a particularly fine study of the issues and will provide debates for years to come.

On her website (www.barbarabradleyhagerty.com) she writes: “I may not be able to give you absolute answers, but I hope that you will feel provoked, energized, and richer at the end of the journey.”

I was.

Noel Cheer

TAKING TJS TO TASK

Fred Marshall doubts that they got it right

***JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES: the Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Richard Bauckham, William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K. 2006**

***THE JESUS DYNASTY: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family and the Birth of Christianity*, James D Tabor. Simon & Schuster, 2006.**

My tangential acquaintance over the years with the Jesus Seminar and its findings filled me with an uneasy but unsubstantiated suspicion that the Jesus they uncover is not the Jesus which the Gospels purport to reveal. So I read *The Five Gospels* with growing disquiet and finished the book with three certainties: that the method adopted is not apt to reveal the personality of Jesus or his motivations; that the Jesus revealed is a pale shadow of the person presented by the Gospels, and that the dismissal of the Gospel of John as an unreliable account is unjustified. So I sought counter-weights to the opinions of the Jesus Seminar and found them in these two books, quite distinct in their purpose, and their character.

JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES (JE) was awarded the Michael Ramsey Prize in 2006. In what is a solid and rather daunting work of scholarship. Bauckham refutes the view that the Gospels emerged from 40 or so years of an uncontrolled oral folk tradition – an assumption on which the conclusions of the TJS depend. He argues that the Gospels conform to the historiographic conventions of the time in the importance placed upon the testimony of eyewitnesses whose authority sanctions and constrains the tradition, and he determines by the technique of *inclusio*, practised by writers of the Gospel period, that Peter was clearly indicated as the eyewitness guarantor of *Mark*, and less emphatically of Luke, and with Peter, John the Elder was the guarantor of *John*. The technique involves placing the name of the eyewitness first at the head of the account and last at the end. Bauckham is at pains to establish that the practice of the ancient historian was not primarily to present the facts but to understand their significance. He makes a distinction between the *Gospel of Mark*, where Mark, who was not an eyewitness, can only put down what Peter has told him but cannot round it out into a comprehensive picture, whereas John who was the authenticating eyewitness for his book can place the facts into the framework of his understanding. So the current critique of bias made against John reflects a modern misunderstanding of the historian's art as understood in the first century, and on the other hand Mark's limited task of recording what he was told preserves for us details like Jesus' relationship with his family and John the

Baptist's significance, which are smoothed over in the reworking of the material in later gospels. On the other hand it is noted that details about who did what are, from time to time, enveloped in a deliberate anonymity because of the danger incurred in the middle of the first century by participants in the Jesus group as witnessed by the fate of James and later Simon.

The upshot of this book is that the tradition was controlled by church leaders during the formative period of the Gospels and that the record of the sayings and doings of Jesus is more accurate than TJS allow. That clearly does not preclude the massaging of the tradition to cover, by a fanciful birth story, the illegitimacy of the leading figure or the progressive presentation of Jesus as unique and divine.

These are questions which Tabor takes up in *THE JESUS DYNASTY*. James Tabor is an archaeologist and ancient historian. His book (JD) is quite different from JE and derives the facts on which it is based from the excavations he has done in Palestine and from 'digging' in the detail of the Biblical text for testimony from the Old Testament and the Gospels of significant facts and events which the tradition has progressively airbrushed out. This is what Spong did in *Born of a Woman* for Mary Magdalene, whose role was diminished to make room for Mary the Mother of God, and what Lloyd Geering did in *Excavating Jesus* to expose the process of divinisation expounded by Paul and completed in *John*.

On p.143 ff Tabor describes the apocalyptic fervour current in Palestine at the time of Jesus' birth, arising from the circumstances of the time and calculations based on prophecies like the seventy years of years of *Daniel 9*; there was an expectation of the coming of the kingdom of God on earth signalled by the appearance of not one Messiah but two, an anointed king of the line of David and an anointed priest of Aaron's line. Jesus was to be the king through his adopted father Joseph, and John the Baptist was the priest, from the tribe of Levi and directly descended from Aaron. Mary, whose ancestry is found in Luke's genealogy, is in a special position since she is a descendant of David via Nathan, by-passing the curse on the descendants of Solomon provoked by Jechoniah, and she is also from the priestly line – the ideal mother of the king messiah. We are presented with an extended family who see messianic hopes vested in them and whose time has come, living in an age when prophecies seem to be being fulfilled, in a place associated with Messianic hopes – Nazareth, (JD p 55) and with the two messianic lines predicted in Isaiah and Zecharia. Then Mary, the key to the throne of David, gets pregnant to an outsider - perhaps Jacob Pantera, a Roman soldier from the First Cohort of archers. This perspective explains for me a great number of things about the story of Jesus which puzzled me. It explains Joseph's willingness after his first reluctance to

adopt an illegitimate child because of the significance of Mary's birth lines. It also gives a reason to the precautions taken to cover up the birth – banishment to Elisabeth's house when the baby started to show, the trip to Bethlehem at the time of the birth and the story spread abroad about angels and shepherds to point the finger of responsibility at God. It explains the behaviour in Jerusalem in his twelfth year of 'the child born to be king', his meditation in the wilderness on the strategies to be adopted in order to assume the kingship as the apocalyptic scenario developed, this equivocal relationship with his mother throughout his life. There are telling details about Jesus' baptism by John when he joined the Mission team, which are generally overlooked.

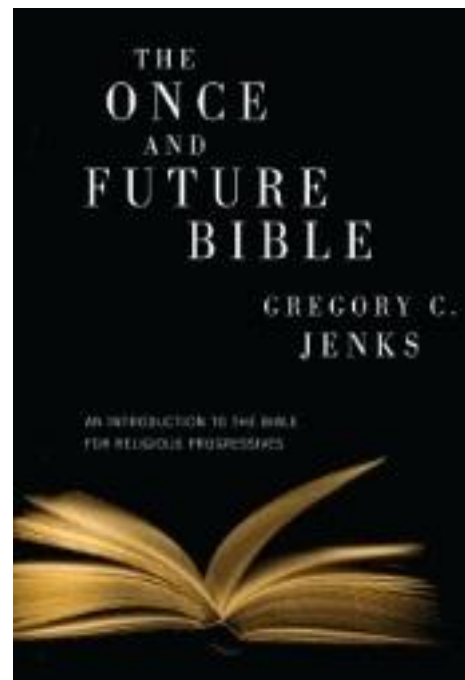
To counter the deliberate attempt by the four Gospels to write John the Baptist out of the story as 'supporting cast' to the 'Son of God', Tabor leads us step by step through the joint ministry of John and Jesus, finding clues in early relics of the text before the air brush was applied, and particularly in *John*, where precise details of times and places are to be found. We see the measures Jesus, the king presumptive, took to establish a government, the surprise when John was imprisoned by Herod, the shock and despair at his execution, the refuge from Herod's malice which the group found across the Jordan, the growing awareness of the price to be paid for messiahship, the decision to confront that unholy alliance, – the temple establishment with its vested interests, Herod with his fear of a legitimate king, and the Romans with their implacable repression of troublemakers – in the faith and hope that the confrontation would precipitate the apocalypse and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. In this context the words from the cross "Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani" take on the full poignancy of perceived failure. Tabor then describes the regrouping of the Jerusalem church, i.e. the kingdom, under James, Jesus' brother, and, when he is killed, under another brother, Simon, and its progressive eclipse in the face of the Pauline church and the rewriting of the records to legitimise the new theology.

There is much more in *The Jesus Dynasty* than this brief sketch, which takes no account of the archaeological support for Tabor's theories. The importance of the book for me is that it provides a view of Jesus' life and motivations which is credible and based on a discriminating treatment of source texts, which recognises both their limitations and their potential for understanding the people and the forces at work in their world. Bauckham gives us a literary justification for placing trust in those sources and defines their limitations in a different way. Each book complements the other but they disagree in one particular. Important to both is the identity of 'the beloved disciple'. Bauckham sees this person as John the Elder, not a member of the twelve;

Tabor identifies him as Jesus' brother, James. I leave the last word with Bauckham, p. 492:

Participant eyewitness testimony has a special role when it comes to events that transcend the common experience of historians and their readers. The more exceptional the event, the more the historical imagination alone is liable to lead us seriously astray. Without the participant witness that confronts us with the sheer otherness of the event, we will reduce it to the measure of our own experience. In such cases, insider testimony may puzzle us or provoke disbelief, but, for the sake of maintaining the quest for the truth of history, we must allow the testimony to resist the limiting pressure of our own experiences and expectations.

Fred Marshall, Hamilton



Gregory C. Jenks:
The Once and Future Bible
*An introduction to the Bible for
religious progressives*

Greg Jenks knows his Bible as "ancient texts that come from another world and another time," wholly human in origin, sometimes mad, sometimes magnificent. He buries the notion of a supernatural "word of God," only to affirm the continuing relevance of these words of yesterday's men for today's "religious progressives who live the questions, not dodge them." David Boulton

Details at: www.onceandfuturebible.com/

JESUS V. CHRIST?

Bill Cooke reviews

The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ

by Philip Pullman, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2010

Most fictional accounts of the life of Jesus are dull.

They try too hard to break new ground, or to puff up some timid new take on the story. Most end up rehashing the same old rag-bag of half-truths. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* managed to be different, but not for reasons one could be proud of. It was the most clever piece of cinematic anti-Semitism since Leni Riefenstahl.

It was brave, therefore, of Philip Pullman to take on this notoriously difficult area, and *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* succeeds where the other fictional attempts have failed. Why? The title gives a clue. We've known of this yawning gap between the historical figure, Rabbi Yeshua, and the metaphysical phenomenon called Jesus Christ for more than a century. Explaining it has been a staple of non-fiction accounts, but the fictional works have not taken this challenge up. The most successful such attempt was *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in particular the conversation between Jesus and Paul. This conversation between two men who never met in real life is full of insight.

Pullman's bold innovation is to write about Jesus and Christ as two separate people. By this means, he can have the two converse and argue in a way that sheds really interesting new perspectives on a story which suffers from having been told too often. Mary gives birth to twins, Jesus and Christ, and Pullman then tells the story of the childhood, youth and adult careers of these two men. The chapters are short and read much like the way they are in the New Testament.

Not surprisingly, the relations between Jesus and Christ are far from straight-forward. Which of them, for instance, is the focus of attention of the three wise men? And who in Pullman's story leads the soldiers to Jesus at Gethsemane? And why? Also, why does Pullman have Christ as the scribe of Jesus's ministry? Pullman also gives Jesus a daring new line of thought at Gethsemane, something not considered by any other fictional account I know of. His handling of these and other complex issues gives this book a real depth and quality not reached by any other fictional life of Jesus.

Pullman ably illustrates just how different, even incompatible, the goals of the two men are, and therefore of the two outlooks he has personified. And he does all this in a short work, a book that can be read in one sitting. *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* would, in past ages, have earned Philip Pullman the stern disapproval of the authorities. Even today, unamused churchmen have

harrumphed their displeasure. But he has earned our gratitude for shedding new light on an old story, a story on which one could be forgiven for thinking no new light could be shed. I feel tempted to keep this book sitting next to my copies of the New Testament rather than with other novels. It will be valuable to read Pullman's take on each incident in Jesus's life in the Gospels alongside the standard account.

Bill Cooke, Auckland

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Fred Marshall offers an alternative gospel

In this time of wild rumours and wilder hopes it is fitting that you should understand what we in the Mission have done and why.

The birth of Jesus took place in this way. The time was ripe, the stage was set. The Romans were oppressing the People of the Land. That great imposter, Herod, was murdering all who claimed a better right to reign than he did, so we have gathered in Galilee to avoid his claws. The time for God's coming to set this wicked world to rights has arrived. By a miracle John, the Priestly Messiah, has been born to old Elisabeth and Zecharia in a direct line back to Aaron; Joseph is the legitimate heir of David, and Mary, his betrothed, was a perfect vessel to bear the Kingly Messiah since her line on one side goes back to David by Nathan and on the other to Aaron. She carries the blood of both Priest and King. What a gift to the Mission of God's Salvation! But what were we to do? She got herself with child, it is rumoured to that soldier Panthera, We could have had her stoned or put away quietly. She deserved it. But this would mean losing a generation for the renewing of the Kingdom, always provided there were proper vessels available at the later time. God's time is now. So we decided to go with this child as if he was the son of Joseph. We kept the affair secret by sending Mary off as soon as the pregnancy showed to Elisabeth who knows not to talk, and we made sure that the child was born far from wagging tongues and stayed away for a time after the birth. Bethlehem was suggested since that was where we came from. Because we of the Mission are the servants of God in the fulfilling of His will for His People, we have attributed the responsibility for this birth to Him. There were plenty of passages in the Prophets and the Psalms to create an appropriate scenario for a divine birth. Now we have heard from Joseph that the child, Jesus, is born and that they have gone south for a time. When they return it will be our task to see that both John and Jesus have the education that will prepare them for the bringing in of the Kingdom. Let us start planning for that now.

Joshua

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Editor,

George Boston of New Plymouth challenges my assertion for an Intelligent Designer using the examples of the human nervous system, dolphin pelvis, bacteria and diseases such as malaria which afflict humans, and finally brings up the argument of theodicy. In my first letter I argued that DNA is an extremely complex microscopic information code made up of chemicals that have no meaning in themselves. Information is information. Nucleic acids are just chemicals. Information is the software. Nucleic acids are the hardware. Shuffling together a deck of millions and millions of nucleic and amino acids randomly will not make a new species. One day we humans may get smart enough to write our own software from nucleic hardware and create a unique species. This will be the combinatorial work of many hours of the sharpest minds - intelligence.

In the Qur'an we read of Allah's challenge to humans to create something as simple as a fly. Who knows, one day we may be able to create from scratch a little black insect that flies around, is extremely hard to catch, can change direction in a split second, mates with an almost exact replica of itself, lays eggs which hatch into maggots, which feast and grow on rotting flesh or dung, develop legs and wings and fly off and does the same ad infinitum. All of this programmed from a neatly and compactly designed microscopic package of millions of genes made up of billions of nucleic acids. The DNA of a fly contains more 'letters' than the complete works of Shakespeare. Evolution theory depends on the notion that ...given enough time... 50 monkeys punching away on typewriters may eventually fluke all the writings of Shakespeare. Evolutionists have faith that incredible complexity, far beyond what our own minds can produce to date can come out of random basic chemicals, in spite of a lack of evidence. I don't. The nearest evidence is Stanley Miller's experiment 57 years ago, and this doesn't even register as a step towards first base, let alone a home run as far as creating a simple life form from basic chemicals and natural random processes goes.

To address the specific points that George raises, humans do have a similar nervous system to other primates. If we share 98.5% of our DNA with chimps, this can be expected. Pelvis bones in whales and dolphins are claimed to be vestigial organs. One hundred years ago it was reported that we humans contained 180 vestigial organs. That figure is now pretty much zero today, as all of these 'vestigial organs' appear to play some part in our

human development. Malaria is spread by mosquitoes, which like flies are finely tuned creatures, and it has been said mosquitoes are responsible for more human deaths than any other animal. 'Nature red in tooth and claw' may seem contradictory to the Biblical concept of a loving Creator unless one buys into the fundamentalist theodicy that all death and sickness are a result of Adam's sin. Intelligent Design theory is not Biblical creationism, and makes no claim to a Creator having any greater affinity for human beings than mosquitoes. One could even surmise that an Intelligent Designer may be pretty annoyed at what we humans have done to this world in a space of a few thousand years with pollution, loss of biodiversity and causing many thousands of species to become extinct.

Robin Boom, Hamilton

The Editor,

Survival as the first concern of the hunter-gatherers is valid, and, who knows, dawning religion may have affected their way of life. Perhaps there was another motive for their lifestyle: they liked it. Has an historic study ever been made of endorphin genes in relation to challenge and intellectual growth? Research data shared by all the disciplines could give a more holistic view of our evolution's wondrous subtleties.

Evidence of nonreciprocal altruism as long as 500,000 years ago has been found in Northern Spain, in the bones of a Homo Heidelbergensis (an upright species of mankind preceding Neanderthals). The spine is bent and hunched, there is a slipped vertebra and a bony growth on another vertebra; all painful conditions. The man would have been dependent on others for food and shelter, unable to hunt or carry loads. He was elderly when he died at 45 years of age. A 12 year old child with a malformed skull had also been cared for by the same humane group. (*New Scientist* 16th October 2010).

A human Jesus, a real bone and flesh boy, is portrayed by *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. This version is the oldest of several forms of the infancy gospels; it was written in Syriac in the 6th Century. (*The Complete Gospels* edited by Robert J. Millar). Jesus was a prodigy at school, impatient with the limitations of his teachers, sometimes quick tempered and self-seeking. Later, he became devoted to his parents and concerned for the weak. Finally he emerged as the beloved teacher and healer.

We come back to the genes, a 21st Century consideration. Did Jesus too, inherit traits from his primitive ancestors, through his mother?

Earlier this year a B.B.C. documentary was aired on Radio NZ National, where the young interviewees called themselves Secular Moslems and Secular Jews. None

attended the mosque or synagogue. They were content in their chosen and fulfilling lives. One Jewish mother still served the traditional weekly meal she had been accustomed to while growing up. (In the same way some New Zealanders eat fish on a Friday.) Religious apologists see many values in ritual. The secular life too has a plethora of customs. They express both pain and happiness, for example: the flags flown at half mast in nationwide mourning for someone who has died, or more joyously, birthday 'rites of passage' with treats marking an individual's own uniqueness. A parade of freethinking people is like a bright thread stitched in the fabric of history. It is true that Christianity helped shape the West of today. Despite the church's past egotistic conceits causing serious injustices, it is a very laudable progression.

It will be a happy day indeed when their synchronicity of basic ethics is agreed by both the remaining religious persons and the secular stream.

Margaret Whitwell, Tauranga

The Editor,

I thought there were some very important issues in the November News letter. I would like to generalize from it. Altruism is an old problem. The Church and Judaism make the claim that Isaiah introduced justice, but was it Cyrus, or Confucius, Socrates, Buddha etc? So are we to say religion has failed? Yes and no. Religious nations usually do well. But it has also given us the United States with its Darwinism (commercial good is Godly) and Calvinism.

On the other hand evolution has given a mankind who has learnt how to kill each other better, and the survival of the fittest. Religion, politics or education has not given us altruism, and certainly not evolution or atheism. It is the environment we live in that decides our politics or compassion. Christianity has given us charity; what the rich can spare. Isaiah's equality was not a necessity; we are doing very well thank you. Am I my brother's keeper?

So the atheists argue, there is no God! Blind fools. You cannot blame God for Christianity, blame Paul. Nor can you say there is no intelligent designer and suggest how damaging 'God' got it. If you read Dawkins and co you will be uninformed. Without earthquakes we would not exist. My understanding is, floods and climate change are manmade. Study these things and you find there is a reason for everything. But in the end it does not matter. Understand the universe cannot be any other way. No it is not evil or a Devil. Like evolution, atheism is a void. It is not omnipotent, omnipresent or omniscient.

Religion, education politics and philosophy has not given us an altruist society. Our instincts give us compassion, provided it is not detrimental to our

privileged position. The realization there is no such thing as 'Divine'

" intervention will we begin to understand this Earth is ours; its survival depends on humans. But has man got the intelligence? Will religion, politics and education unite and learn from science to save ourselves and make our Earth a place worth living on. I am not excluding God, just that we have the wrong God. It is why we have atheists.

R.L.(Bill) Robottom, Whanganui

The Editor

Doug Sellman has put a lot of thought and effort into his suggestion to rename the Sea of Faith (see *Newsletter 91*).

Explaining ourselves as a discussion group is common, and, interesting as the 'religious discussion' sometimes is, though it is not our most important activity - 'exploration' is our first priority. It is more intellectually satisfying, and without it, there would be nothing much to discuss. We are an international network, too, not just a national one.

The first and second new objectives say virtually the same thing. The third could become a subtle ploy to introduce unwanted lobbying. Any individual member is free to "contribute to the good of N.Z. and the world" and many do.

Let us keep the present name and objectives. The words are adequate and aesthetically pleasing.

(It was a good try, Doug, but the opposition remains).

Margaret Whitwell, Tauranga

Review

"GOD IS NOT ONE"

***"Like Gandhi, the Dalai Lama affirms that
the essential message of all religions
is much the same'."***

So says Stephen Protheroe in *God is Not One* [HarperCollins and Black Inc. 2010]. He claims that the great scholars of world religions, Huston Smith and Karen Armstrong, have both been of the same opinion. But Protheroe disagrees with them. "This is a lovely sentiment" he says, "but it is dangerous, disrespectful and untrue". Most of the book is then devoted to outlines of those religions that have the greatest numbers of adherents - Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba Religion, Judaism and Daoism plus "A brief Coda on Atheism". So the subtitle of the book - "The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World & Why

their Differences Matter” – gives a more accurate idea than the main title, of its contents.

I wondered, as I began to read, whether ‘rival’ in the subtitle betrayed an agenda to demonstrate some antipathy among religions. It doesn’t – although Protheroe does see them as in de facto competition in the world. He clearly has both first-hand experience of and sympathy for each of the religions he speaks of. His accounts of them have been honed by years of lecturing, and discussions with students from many faith traditions.

It is impossible in a short review to give any sort of summary of his accounts of these religions. He devotes around 35 pages to each one, and in each case describes both of its development through history, and the major variants there are, or have been.

“Each religion” he says, “articulates:

- * a problem;
- * a solution to this problem, which also serves as the religious goal;
- * a technique (or techniques) for moving from this problem to this solution; and
- * an exemplar (or examples) who chart this path from problem to solution.

For example, in Christianity,

- * the problem is sin;
- * the solution (or goal) is salvation;
- * the technique for achieving salvation is some combination of faith and good works; and
- * the exemplars who chart this path are the saints in Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy and ordinary people of faith in Protestantism.

And in Buddhism ...

- * the problem is suffering;
- * the solution (or goal) is nirvana;
- * the technique for achieving nirvana is the Noble Eightfold Path, which includes such classic Buddhist practices as meditation and chanting; and
- * the exemplars who chart this path are arhats (for Theravada Buddhists), bodhisattvas (for Mahayana Buddhists) or lamas (for Vajrayana Buddhists).”

Using this framework, he shows how each tradition has developed, in such a way that the history throws light on the variety of expressions of it that exists today. Within Christianity, for example, Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, Anabaptists, Mormons, Evangelicals, Pentecostals and mystics each get sympathetic attention.

I found his treatment of Hinduism particularly helpful.

“Under Hinduism’s sacred canopy” he says, “sit a dizzying variety of religious beliefs and behaviours practiced in the wildly complex and contradictory subcontinent of India and its diasporas”. And a little later: “Religions are often described as trees with roots, trunks and branches ...”.

But Hinduism will not fit within this metaphor. Rather, it is like a geological formation where, in various places,

older rocks from several older and quite different formations, may be seen beside much newer deposits. So, among Indians around the world today, Vedic religion, philosophical Hinduism, devotional Hinduism and *puja* may be seen side by side – a more bewildering variety than Sunni and Shia in Islam, or Theravada, Mahayana and Zen in Buddhism.

In the same spirit he is insightful and sensitive about atheism today, pointing out that the aggressive and evangelistic “New Atheists” are very different from many people who may put down “no religion” in a census. “Some distinguish between strong atheists (who actively deny God) and weak atheists (who simply do not affirm God), but the distinction between angry and friendly atheism is more useful”.

“It is easy,” Protheroe says in conclusion, “to imagine that the task of the great religions is to transport and transform us The world’s religions do promise the magic of metamorphosis, but the metamorphosis on offer is often less dramatic than spinning golden gods out of human straw ... religion works not so much to help us flee from our humanity as to bring us home to it.”

“To explore the great religions is ... to enter into Hindu conversations on the logic of karma and rebirth, Christian conversations on the mechanics of sin and resurrection, and Daoist conversations on flourishing here and how (and perhaps forever). It is also to encounter rivalries between Hindus and Muslims in India, between Jews and Muslims in Israel, and between Christians and Yoruba practitioners in Nigeria. Each of these rivals offers a different vision of ‘a human being fully alive’.”

I didn’t get all of this from reading this book, but I certainly got some of it. For anyone interested in “the exploration of religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented viewpoint”, this book is very well worth reading.

Don Feist, Dunedin

Review

IS INEQUALITY BAD?

The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better (Hardcover)

The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better For Everyone (Paperback)

Profs Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (Penguin paperback, \$31)

The book deals with data from 23 rich countries (p275), published by the World Bank in 2004 and shows...

- The richest 20% are many times richer than the poorest 20% in some countries (fig 2.1, p17)
- As income inequality rises, the index of health and social problems rises (fig 2.2 p20)
- As income inequality rises, the UNICEF index of child well-being gets worse (fig 2.6, p23)
- As income inequality rises, the % people trusting others falls (fig 4.1, p52)

- As income inequality rises, the index of women's status falls (fig 4.5, p60)
- As income inequality rises, the % income spent on foreign aid falls (fig 4.6, p61)
- As income inequality rises, the % population with mental illness rises (fig 5.1, p67)
- As income inequality rises, the index of drug use rises (fig 5.3, p71)
- As income inequality rises, the life expectancy (years) falls (fig 6.3, p82)
- As income inequality rises, the infant mortality rate rises (fig 6.4, p82)

And there is more in a similar vein. The unsettling discovery from all of the above is that in New Zealand there is now a wide gap in income equality and we fare very badly on all the above measures.

Is inequality a 'given' in societies? Since earliest times, the move away from the divine right of kings and absolute monarchs towards more democratic societies, with the abolition of slavery, female emancipation, independence from former colonial powers and so on, the world has been trending towards more equality. Thus, based on this very long-term trend, there is cause for optimism in the future. (One might add that with the engagement of Prince William to 'commoner' Kate Middleton there is another indication of the change in traditional class boundaries in the UK). [Though the distinction persists! – ed]

However inequality has risen considerably in countries such as USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand, over the last 40 years. We remember how Rob Muldoon tried to keep the gap in New Zealand small through his interventionist policies but those policies of Reagan and Thatcher (followed in New Zealand by Douglas, Richardson and, perhaps, Shipley) allowed the gap to widen, to the benefit of a few but the detriment of many more.

Can anything be done to redress the balance? Some countries such as Japan score well on the indicators as they have a small level of inequality of income in the first place. Others, such as Finland, Norway and Sweden, score well as they use high rates of taxation to redistribute their wealth.

The authors suggest that now that we have hard facts, and the data are gathered from UN or state-provided sources which are internationally comparable (for example the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests for education) we can examine our society and discuss the way we wish it to develop, to influence politicians to enact laws that will make life better for all and not just a few.

This is a significant book and deserves a place on the bookshelf of any local group. A video interview with the authors and the graphs can be freely downloaded from... www.equalitytrust.org.uk

Alan Jackson, Dunedin

ANOTHER CANDLE GOES OUT

We've lost another light against the darkness, with the death of Denis Dutton.

By Vicki Hyde, Media Spokesperson,
former Chair-entity, NZ Skeptics

Denis Dutton was a founder member of New Zealand Skeptics, back in 1984 when it was known as the NZ Committee for Scientific Investigation of the Paranormal. For many years he was the face of organised scepticism in New Zealand, fronting up to the media with many a pithy comment and a wry sense of humour.

I'll always associate Denis with laughter – not scornful, nor dismissive, but rather his genuine delight in the wonder and absurdity of the human condition, and his joy in discovery and debate. He challenged me, and so many others, to think, to critically evaluate what we think we know, to be prepared to suspend judgement when evidence is lacking, to have the strength to acknowledge when we'd got things wrong, and to change our ideas in the face of a better explanation of how the world works.

Denis had a deeply moral sense in that he abhorred the exploitation we so often see underpinning skeptical issues. He reserved his scorn for the shysters willing to exploit vulnerable people for their own gain – psychics claiming to be in touch with the dead, counsellors convincing their clients that their problems stemmed from suppressed memories of infant ritual sexual abuse. He spent year after year fielding calls about everything from alien abductions to moa sightings, and managed to retain a sense of humour throughout.

What more could you wish from someone once referred to as New Zealand's Arch-Skeptic?

But Denis was so much more than that. He was an inspirational and thought-provoking speaker whose reach extended way past his University of Canterbury classes to a global audience through his widely acclaimed **Arts & Letters Daily** website. He was a man of intense enthusiasms and had a willingness to get involved, whether campaigning to keep National Radio uncommercialised or championing a Bad Writing Contest to highlight academic obfuscation.

The world is a darker place without him. But I also know that Denis would be the first to remind me of a quote associated with Carl Sagan, another skeptic lost far too early:

"It's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."



The Arts and Letters Daily website is simply the best:
its at www.aldaily.com – ed

IS THE WORLD REALLY STUFFED?

The cartoon reproduced below might provoke a range of opinions among our readers. Expecting that to be the case, I invite readers to send Letters to the Editor. To prime that pump I have offered some points of debate below.

Noel Cheer, Editor

STUFF

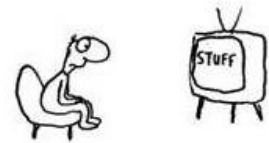
There is more stuff in the world than ever before.



Stuff you can touch.
Stuff you can think.
Stuff you can use and consume. Stuff you can know with all of your senses.



The growth of stuff is out of control. It is now being created by means of an unstoppable, exponential CHAIN REACTION.



Stuff has become a major threat to freedom and happiness. It destroys nature and peace. It steals time and space. It fouls beauty.



It is relentless, virulent, invasive and addictive. Stuff makes us exhausted and mad. There is too much stuff



The following common statements can be taken VERY seriously:—

"I'm stuffed."
and,
"The world is stuffed."



- What justifies the statement 'There is too much stuff'?
- Isn't some 'Stuff' actually good?
- Would you surrender your refrigerator, car, books? Why?
- Who would employ those whose jobs depend on the production of 'Stuff'?

THE BIG RELIGION CHART

"The ReligionFacts "Big Religion Chart" is an attempt to summarize all the complexities of religions and belief systems into tiny little boxes on a single, quick-reference comparison chart. Yes, of course this is impossible. As we always warn with our comparison charts, this is no substitute for reading about religions in greater detail, talking with religious adherents, etc. But this religion comparison chart can (hopefully) be a useful and accessible way to "get the gist" of some unfamiliar groups and compare basic beliefs and practices of the world's religions and belief systems. Currently, 43 belief systems are listed." Its at www.religionfacts.com/big_religion_chart.htm

FROM THE CHAIR



Looking back at the beginning of the New Year, it would be hard to argue with the news report that has labelled 2010 the deadliest in history.

Whatever the basis for this conclusion, we can review the devastation of events such as:

1. Volcanic eruptions in Iceland, Ecuador, Guatemala, Russia and Indonesia.
2. Floods in Pakistan, Australia and at least 20 other areas.
3. Drought in the Sahel, China and the Amazon.
4. Earthquakes, in Chile and closer to home in Christchurch.

And associated with almost all of these, and a background of ongoing conflict and war – fear, hunger and famine, loss, disease and disability.

In 2010 the Sea of Faith Conference focused on Compassion, and the “Golden Rule” as the heart of compassion. Today, reviewing the past year we might agree with Chris Patten, Chancellor of Oxford University who, in his December address “A Good Year for God”, suggested:

“For a happier New Year, we should listen to the core messages of all the great religions, above all the Confucian golden rule that we should never do to others what we would not like to be done to us. What religion should teach us is not how to hate, but to borrow again from Confucius how to develop societies that look after and welcome the poor, the stranger, and the oppressed. That is the most important message for everyone, atheists included, to take from the Christian story of Christmas.”

Looking back on the events of 2010, it is clear that societies vary in the extent to which they wish to, or have the potential to develop resources to look after their people, or contribute to the care of those beyond their borders. However as the quote suggests, compassion is not only a quality required in times of conflict, misfortune or tragedy, but is an asset in the planning, development and conduct of any society.

We are moved by the plight of others in distress, and after events such as those we have witnessed or experienced in 2010, the value of a contribution motivated by compassion is not to be underestimated. However it can also be seen in many situations as the treatment of a symptom rather than what it might more effectively be – a consideration in addressing the cause, or preparing to minimise the effects of the disease itself.

Here, I would like to recall Craig Potton’s address to the 2008 Conference in which he quoted Andre Gide’s 1940 Journal and introduces the idea of human responsibility:

“When a certain stage of history is reached, everything appears in the guise of a problem, and people’s responsibility increases as that of the God’s decreases. It devolves upon people alone in the final reckoning to solve all these problems which he alone has presumably raised”

... and Craig’s injunction “It is we who are destroying nature, it is we humans who must save it”

The crises of 2010 have various and generally multiple natural and human causes, none the least among them climate change and economic management. Knowing that we cannot overestimate the enormity of the task that faces us, today, the questions become:

“What is the collective human responsibility?” and
“How does one individual respond in a effective way?”

There is no end to suggestions as to how individuals can contribute to limiting the misuse of the planet’s resources and it’s destruction, and no doubt we all work in a variety of practical ways to do the best we can in our own situation. Nevertheless, it may seem that these efforts are isolated, fragmentary and inchoate if measured in the context of the task as a whole and the lack or possibility of any agreed national or international direction.

Craig Potton in his paper is lobbying for political action, but at the same time recognising that the extent of our responsibility for all life and the planet itself, extends practical and political action to include a personal spiritual response:

“Political action is only one movement of the spirit. There is some kind of double movement required of the soul, on the one hand to set out and help realise God’s Kingdom on earth through fighting injustice, and yet on the other hand to realise that the Kingdom of God is already within you.”

Responsibility for the life and wellbeing of our world then perhaps begins with seeing the Earth as sacred and the recognition and acceptance of the values underpinning a spiritual and compassionate approach to the planet and life as a whole. This provides a foundation for a personal response and contribution to collective action.

In Lloyd Geering’s book *Coming Back to Earth* we read that there is good news in that conservation and environmentalism are being adopted by many individuals and groups and acknowledged as desirable social aims by local, national and international governments. This is welcomed as “a vast change in human consciousness, one that will take us forward to a new understanding of what it means to be human.” [p. 97].

On page 114 of *Coming Back to Earth* we are offered a framework of ten resolutions – a foundation for a contribution towards the respect, honour and care of our planet and life on it. And for those who make New Year resolutions what better than these “Ten Resolutions” which could help us build a healthy world to hand to those who follow us:

1. Let us take time to stand in awe of this self evolving universe.
2. Let us marvel at the living ecosphere of this planet.
3. Let us set a supreme value on all forms of life.
4. Let us develop a life style that preserves the balance of the planetary eco system.
5. Let us refrain from all activities that endanger the future of any species.
6. Let us devote ourselves to maximizing the future for all living creatures.
7. Let us set the needs of the coming global society before those of ourselves, our tribe, society or nation.
8. Let us learn to value the human relationships that bind us together into social groups.
9. Let us learn to appreciate the total cultural legacy we have received from the past.
10. Let us accept in a self sacrificing fashion, the responsibility now laid upon us all for the future of our species and of all planetary life.”

Natali Allen, Chairperson 2010-2011

1 www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/patten36/English

2 Potton, Craig [2008] *Prophetic and Mystic Voices*. Paper delivered at the Sea of Faith Conference, Blenheim

3 Geering, L [2009] *Coming Back To Earth: from gods, to God, to Gaia*. Oregon: Polebridge Press