

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Raping for Chastity?

Do you, like me, have misgivings about the military execution of Osama bin Laden?

Is it just possible that the United States has made a counter-productive move when measured, not only in ethical terms, but also in common sense? Could this anti-terrorist move come to be seen as ineffective as raping in order to bring about chastity – a destruction of the intended result?

That much of America is jubilant is undeniable. Many news clips and the buzz of the talk shows records it. The President's ratings have experienced a 10-point 'bump'.

Beyond that, prospects are murkier. The dumping of bin Laden's body at sea (some reports say that there were Muslim funeral rites) was to prevent the setting up of a martyr's tomb. But surely a dead, invisible martyr can still have enormous pulling power, as the history of Christianity demonstrates.

The history of guerrilla fighters records that, when the figure-head is cut off, another rapidly appears. In fact it is the removal of the head that provides the feeling of anger and emergency to energise the succession. Did the assassination of Gandhi or Martin Luther King destroy their movements?

Then there is the moral revulsion of summary execution in the presence of his family – by a country for whom rule of law is claimed to be paramount, except perhaps Guantanamo Bay and extraordinary renditions (extra-judicial kidnappings). We condemned the Communists for their execution of the Romanovs in 1918 and the atrocities of the Mau Mau, Pol Pot and all the rest. Is there really a moral difference?

In a media statement by Cuba's Fidel Castro, distributed by their embassy in New Zealand, he wrote, " ... Bin Laden was, for many years, a friend of the US, a country that gave him military training; he was also an adversary of the USSR and Socialism. But, whatever the actions attributed to him, the assassination of an unarmed human being while surrounded by his own relatives is something abhorrent. Apparently this is what the government of the most powerful nation that has ever existed did."

While I have much affection for the United States I feel that they have crossed a moral divide and have taken on too many of the characteristics of their enemy.

The grand, almost operatic, beginnings of the United States of America in the 18th century seemed to talk of a grander, more just nation – one that practices what it preaches.

Noel Cheer, Editor

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CONFERENCE 2011

October 14-16

Rangi Ruru Girls' School 59 Hewitts Rd Christchurch

"Pulling Us Back From The Brink: Economics? Science? Religion?"

The detailed programme will be published in early July, but we can tell you that the Conference is scheduled to start at 2:30pm (Registration open from 1:15pm) on Friday October 14 and will end with lunch at 1pm on Sunday the 16th.

Speakers:

- Jeanette Fitzsimons
- Geoff Bertram
- Bob Lloyd
- Val Webb
- Tom Hall
- Details page 12



As details accumulate they will appear in the Newsletter and on the website www.sof.org.nz

IT'S THE NEW REALITY: BUT WILL IT CATCH ON?

The Fountain: A Secular Theology
Don Cupitt, SCM Press 2010

The publisher's synopsis on the back cover pushes all the main buttons: the old Christian theological order, based on Plato, is finished, so we must make a new one, because only we have the power and motivation to do so.

While we might say that God or Nature or Chance (Cupitt's preference) made the **Earth**, only we humans make, and re-make the **World** by ongoing re-negotiation among ourselves.

Cupitt's foundational position that transience is the only reality was set out in his 'solar living' and 'solar ethics' of the mid 1990s:

"We should live as the sun does. The process by which it lives and the process by which it dies are one and the same. It simply expends itself gloriously, and in doing so gives life to us all."

After All, SCM Press 1994 p109

In this book, the 'Fountain' metaphor is perhaps more satisfactory in that the sun must look to an end-time when it has all burned up.

"The basic fountain-idea, [is] that endlessly self-renewing utter transience is very beautiful and religiously consoling". (p33)

We must, Cupitt has insisted in many books, move from a metaphysics of *substance* to one of *process* – where Buddhism has always been. As for our selves, we are not substance either but we stream out our lives in body-language, clothes, and various modes of verbal and written expression. On page 35 Cupitt thinks that Nietzsche

"... was the very first to voice the suspicion that there is no real self behind all our various assumed images, roles, masks. Just as [in discourse at large] there are no facts but only interpretations, interpretations all the way down, so he suggests that there is no real self or 'core' self, but only masks behind masks, all the way down."

The discovery that our very self is a transient element in the great flow of **It All** should not bother us. Once we get over the notion, gifted to us by the Greeks, of permanent entities – self, language, institutions, the natural order – we can enjoy the same flowing show of which we are all part.

But – and this is the biggest 'but' in all discussion of religion – can we live with such austerity?

Like a medical operating theatre, here there is nothing unhygienic, nothing present just for decoration, nothing excessive to immediate requirements, nothing – well – human. We humans, as Cupitt has well taught us, the sum of the myths that we subscribe to and 'God' (by any name we choose) is the biggest of those – the symbolic term that, suitcase-like, packs everything into a cosmic order in which we feel at home.

I suspect that the ambivalent response accorded to Buddhism by westerners is that for some, it is gloriously 'ultra-light' (another of Cupitt's terms) but for others it is just too thin, dilute and unfocussed.

This book is dedicated to "the Members of Sea of Faith with my gratitude" and it will be well-received by us. But can we run with it? Can we propagate it? What is there to tell my grandchildren – that having swept our view of reality clean of supernaturalism, we can systematically create a new philosophical and religious order? But has this ever before been done in such a deliberate way?

The jury is still out as to whether SoF can be, as this reviewer has often recommended, a 'Seedbed of Faith' in which new faith-plants are nurtured before being offered to the wider public.

We members of Sea of Faith have followed Cupitt, with our own gratitude, from the crunchy pebbles of Dover Beach over 25 years ago to this book's even larger tidal outflow. In 1984 it was the Sea of 'Faith' in its institutionalised forms that was draining away – now it is the very philosophical core of the West that is caught in a tsunami of re-evaluation. It would take another story to chart the declining Western morale in our status vis-à-vis: a resurgent China; the challenges of climate change; and the suspicion that capitalism may be riddled with irreconcilable contradictions. But in his other recent book, *Another Great Story*, Cupitt traces the demise of the very underpinnings of such issues – the Western Grand Metanarrative.

From Cupitt's recent writings, we can hear his own assessment that he is standing on the slopes of his own Mount Nebo, seeing the Promised Land in the distance but confident that he won't make it. (In passing – is it so that, past a certain age, we each find ourselves in the same position?) But how can we, who are heirs of Plato, as Cupitt so often points out, move away from our foundational myths of **Permanence, Order and Eternal Life**, and adopt Cupitt's **Time, Chance and Death**, however compelling are Cupitt's recommendations? He asks us to abandon Nature, God, and Soul. In leaping that chasm will we fall – and into what? Cupitt ends the book with just this question.

Isn't fantasy and theatricality and even the 'six impossible things before breakfast' which energise the faith of so many people who, so energised, go out – as they did earlier – and turn the world upside down? Cupitt's sympathetic treatment on page 8 of the Virgin of Vladimir, an early Russian icon, emphasises this:

"... the peasants are sustained by the vision of a love that eternally understands, suffers and still loves ..."

It's that very sad and very human face of the Virgin that moves the viewer who remains unaware of her own metaphysical pre-suppositions. That is why Christianity has persisted, however imperfectly, for so long.

Noel Cheer

DID WE EVOLVE TO BE RELIGIOUS?

Publisher Blurbs

The study of evolution has uncovered invaluable information about many aspects of human behavior and culture, from the physiology of our bodies and brains to the development of hunting, technology, and social groups.

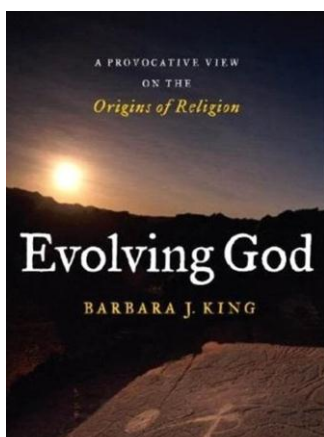
But an understanding of the intangibles of human experience, especially religion, lags far behind. Attempts to discover the source of religiosity through genetic analysis and neuroscience have so far yielded intriguing but incomplete insights. *Evolving God* represents an exciting breakthrough.

Drawing on her own extensive investigations into the behavior of our closest primate relatives and the most up-to-date research in archaeology, anthropology, and biology, Barbara King offers a comprehensive, holistic view of how and why religion came to be.

King focuses on how the Great Apes, our human ancestors, and modern humans relate to one another socially and emotionally, and she traces the growing complexities of communication throughout the course of evolution. She shows that, with increased brain capacity, the scope and nature of socio-emotional ties began with one-to-one relationships and expanded to group relationships (families and communities) and then to connections with long-dead ancestors, animal spirits, and “higher beings.”

Her incisive, highly readable narrative takes readers from the earliest common relative of humans and apes (more than 6 million years ago), through the Neandertal period and the Stone Age, to the dawn of religion in early human societies. *Evolving God* explores one of the greatest mysteries in human history—the question of whether humankind is innately religious—and provides evidence that will have a tremendous impact on current debates about evolution, creationism, and intelligent design.

Author Barbara J. King , Publisher Doubleday, Pages 272 Size 165x250mm ISBN-13 9780385511049



TIME TO LIGHTEN UP THROUGH SPIRITUAL PROMISCUITY

**Humanity has lost its mind,
all because of religion.**

For a cultural phenomenon that's existed as long as Man has been afraid of the dark, religion remains a divisive and misunderstood subject. A recent poll by The Pew Forum found that many religious groups know little to nothing about one another, or even about their own theologies. Yet people are afraid of what they don't understand and willing to kill and die over their concept of the divine.

Project Conversion: Twelve Months of Spiritual Promiscuity has a mission: To enlighten and entertain.

For Andrew Bowen., theology is a playground. His fiction and essays splash in the often murky waters of religion and spirituality. For more on Andrew's writing, visit his website at <http://bowenandrew.blogspot.com/>

Over the course of this year, Andrew will be immersing himself in one religion per month. With the help of spiritual mentors and research, every step of the journey will be documented via photos, video, and blog entry. In addition, each week of each month will focus on one of four areas:

- Religious Practices; Worship, and Ritual
- Culture and Art
- Social Issues/Conflicts
- Personal Reflection on the Month

Andrew hopes that, by the end, a few folks who may have been reticent to find out about different faiths will learn something by vicariously practicing for a month through him.

The above, and more, at <http://projectconversion.com/>



"You picked the wrong religion, period.
I'm not going to argue about it."

TIME TO LIGHTEN UP THROUGH BETTER DIALOGUE

Nine Guidelines for Listening to Others

These guidelines were developed by Kay Lindahl, the founder of the Listening Center in Laguan Niguel, California. Kay is also the chairperson of the North American Interfaith Network (NAIN).

We include these guidelines here because listening is so vital to any form of dialogue, not only interfaith dialogue. These guidelines are designed to facilitate healthy dialogue and deep listening and to create a safe space for meaningful conversation on all levels:

1. **WHEN YOU ARE LISTENING, SUSPEND ASSUMPTIONS** - What we assume is often invisible to us. We assume that others have had the same experiences that we have, and that is how we listen to them. Learn to recognize assumptions by noticing when you get upset or annoyed by something someone else is saying. You may be making an assumption. Let it be - suspend it - and resume listening for understanding of the other.
2. **WHEN YOU ARE SPEAKING, EXPRESS YOUR PERSONAL RESPONSE** - This will be informed by your tradition, beliefs and practices as you have interpreted them in your life. Speak for yourself. Use "I" language. Take ownership of what you say. Speak from your heart. Notice how often the phrases "We all", "of course", "everyone says", "you know", come into your conversation. The only person you can truly speak for is yourself.
3. **LISTEN WITHOUT JUDGMENT** - The purpose of dialogue is to come to an understanding of the other, not to determine whether they are good, bad, right or wrong. If you are sitting there thinking: "That's good", "That's bad", "I like that", "I don't like that", then you are having a conversation in your own mind, rather than listening to the speaker. Simply notice when you do this, and return to being present with the speaker.
4. **SUSPEND STATUS** - Everyone is an equal partner in the inquiry. There is no seniority or hierarchy. All are colleagues with a mutual quest for insight and clarity. You are each an expert in your life. That is what you bring to the dialogue process.
5. **HONOUR CONFIDENTIALITY** - Leave the names of participants in the discussion room so if you share stories or ideas, no one's identity will be revealed. Create a safe space for self-expression.
6. **LISTEN FOR UNDERSTANDING, NOT TO AGREE WITH OR BELIEVE** - You do not have to agree with or believe anything that is said. Your job is to listen for understanding.

7. **ASK CLARIFYING OR OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS** - these will assist your understanding and exploration of assumptions.
8. **HONOUR SILENCE AND TIME FOR REFLECTION** - Notice what wants to be said rather than what you want to say.
9. **ONE PERSON SPEAKS AT A TIME** - Pay attention to the flow of the conversation. Notice what patterns emerge from the group. Make sure that each person has an opportunity to speak, while knowing that no one is required to speak.

Interfaith Lessons I Have Learned

James Fleming is an Irish, Roman Catholic priest with extensive experience in Muslim-Christian dialogue.

- **Relate** to others as equal partners in the search for truth.
- **Recognize** that listening as well as speaking is necessary for a genuine conversation. Remember the words of St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel always, and when necessary use words."
- **Treasure** the sense of wonder that comes with encountering the new, the unusual and the surprising. Record such experiences in a journal if possible.
- **Be hungry** for knowledge about the other person's culture and religion. Learn to understand what others actually believe and value. And allow them to express their beliefs and values in their own terms. This does mean that we cannot, with experience and knowledge, challenge other people's cultural values.
- **Be honest** in sharing your beliefs and do not try to water them down to accommodate. Other people see through this and lose respect for you.
- **Do not misrepresent** or disparage other peoples' beliefs and practices.
- **Be aware** of your own need for ongoing conversion to your own professed beliefs. Remember, it is not our job to convert others to our beliefs, but to be faithful to our own.
- **Respond** to others as a gift, not as a threat.
- **Be sensitive** to vulnerable people and do not try to exploit them.
- **Remember** that it's our differences that can make a difference, so rejoice in the richness of our diversities.



The Shack,
William Paul Young.
Windblown Media 2007

"When the imagination of a writer and the passion of a theologian cross-fertilize, the result is a novel on the order of *The Shack*. This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did for his. It's that good!"

Eugene Peterson, Professor Emeritus Of Spiritual Theology, Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.

A poorly written, philosophically bankrupt, theologically challenged airport novel.

Drew Ross, author of *Christian with a Brain*

Confused?

These reviews might help you form an opinion

THOMASINA, DICK and HARRIET

A Review by Alan Goss

Readers may wonder how a review of a novel written by an evangelical Christian author appears in this Newsletter. Three reasons. Soon after publication it had notched up over a million copies sold; it was No.1 on the New York Times Trade Fiction Best-seller list; it moves gently into radical territory challenging some long held traditional theological concepts – or completely ignoring them altogether. A pity, as we shall see later, that the author, while willing to get his feet wet, doesn't go far enough.

The story-line is compelling with a page-turning air of suspense. The six year old youngest daughter of an average American family is kidnapped and murdered by an unknown assailant. The crime takes place in or around 'the shack' where the daughter's blood-stained dress is found. It is a remote wooded area where most of the novel's action takes place. The family is naturally devastated at the loss of their daughter and four years later a still grief-stricken father, Mack, receives a strange message in the post. It asks him to return to the crime scene and is signed 'Papa', his wife's pet name for God. Mack agonises over the message but eventually takes off for the shack in the dead of winter. On the advice of a friend he is armed (it's America) with a gun. The icy weather, the ramshackle shack, the bloodstained floor, and a lurking sense of danger all add to the tension. Suddenly everything is transformed. The woodlands

merge into a veritable Garden of Eden, the shack becomes a haven of light and, hallelujah of hallelujahs, Mack meets the three Persons of the divine Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But with a difference! In place of the Father there is a woman named Elouisa, the kind, friendly, Black Mama of a past movie era who does all the cooking and offers comforting words of wisdom to the lonely and the lost. The Second Person, the Son, is an ordinary blokish male handyman who wears jeans and is named 'Jesus'. He comes across as a quaint, decent, fairly innocuous individual who is a pale imitation of the subversive sage from Galilee. And in place of the peace-loving, energy-charged Holy Spirit there is yet another woman, Sarayu, of oriental origin who is as bland as butter and lacking the passion and verve of, say, the feisty and beautiful Carla of Coronation Street. This odd trio - I've nicknamed them Thomasina, Dick and Harriet after three pesky bantams our family once owned, are a cosy and matey threesome, there are hugs and lots of good natured banter so that Mack feels immediately drawn into their circle. Although three distinct individuals they are also a unity, and they merge into one in a very close relationship.

Mack meets separately with each member of the Trinity, and it is here, from a theological perspective, that the novel comes to life.

The author, William Paul Young, is an evangelical Christian and his story reflects his evangelical roots. With one exception. One would expect that the serial killer of Mack's six year old daughter would be judged and consigned to the fires of hell. Not so. All references to mankind's depraved human state, God's judgment and threats of eternal damnation, are ignored. Even 'sin' is low key. Humanity's real problem is that it wants to go its own way, we are like naughty self-willed children who play with fire and who burn their fingers as a result. That's our punishment. Our political, social, economic and religious institutions are instruments of power and only temporary solutions to all our problems. God is no stern, judgmental and punitive figure, rather God is a loving, forgiving, compassionate Being with no-one excluded from his/her presence. The same applies to the author's quaint Trinity, Mama God and her two co-equals, Sarayu (Holy Spirit) and 'Jesus'. No-one will be damned and all will be saved. This includes not only the murderer of Mack's youngest daughter but also Mack himself. Past relationships with his violent father are clouded with suspicion and guilt. For Christian evangelicals this softer approach represents a marked shift away from those severe core doctrines which hitherto have been a crucial part of their armoury.

There is much in this novel that is soupy sentimental dross. A friend gave up half-way. It's real interest, apart from a readable story-line, lies in the way the author treads ever so tentatively into more human and radical territory. As we have seen, long-held traditional doctrines, which are bread and butter for Christian evangelicals, are either softened or ignored. We can also applaud the imaginative way in which the author pictures the Trinity. Two of its Persons are women, one an Afro-American Black (God), the other of oriental origin (the Holy Spirit). But in the end William Paul Young doesn't go far enough. His mind-set is still locked into a supernatural world which is no longer relevant. A supernatural world view has now been replaced by the secular-scientific age, a vast and growing body of knowledge that has radically changed our view of reality. Lloyd

Geering refers to this reality as the new secular, or this-worldly, trinity. It is also sacred. It sets the agenda for dealing with those challenges confronting us today. Briefly:

First, let us marvel at, care for and value all forms of life on this planet.

Secondly, let us devote ourselves to care for the needs of people everywhere regardless of race or nation and value those deep human relationships that bind us altogether.

Thirdly, let us cherish our rich cultural heritage and the vast body of knowledge and value without which we could not be human.

These three - the universe; the human species; humanity's cultures and values, are essentially one. They constitute the symbol we call God. For religious radicals and for countless others who have long since given up on belief in a remote supernatural God, this secular or this-worldly trinity offers us a more credible view of reality and of the challenges facing us in the days ahead.

The novel concludes with Mack home from his miraculous experiences at the shack, now a changed and contented man. In spite of a horrific car accident on the way back, his faith in God is restored, he is at peace with himself and with everyone, there is love and forgiveness in his heart. QED.

This review was written during and in the wake of the second Christchurch earthquake. The Anglican Cathedral has been badly damaged and will need to be replaced. Other churches around Christchurch have been similarly hit. The old has gone, the new has come, a new religious era is already emerging. Will a new Cathedral be a people's Cathedral, do old denominational clothes still fit a growing and changing body, will we be willing to take on a new cut? The Dean of the Cathedral was possibly being more progressive than he knew when he said "It's not about buildings, it's about people. It's all about us." That message is not just about the Cathedral, it's world-wide.

Alan Goss, Napier, March 2011

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Alternative point of view

Rodney Eivers of Brisbane, *Sea of Faith In Australia Bulletin* March 2011

***The Shack* is an intriguing book. On just about every page it raises questions which provoke thought.** It is the sort of book I would love to chew over in an analytical Christian study group or in one to one conversations particularly with someone exploring Christian faith.

The author is innovative in many of his illustrations. He sets up an allegory, depicted in a fantasy, which he weaves around the protagonist's response to the tragedy of his murdered child. He has clearly attempted to universalise the appeal of Christianity by, for instance, making a strong point about ignoring, or even highlighting racial and gender differences. Homosexuality does not get a mention though there is plenty of male-to-male hugging and intimacy. The exclusiveness is still there, though to some degree. I suspect that a great many people of the world would read some degree of Christian arrogance into the statement (p. 194) "Creation and history are all about Jesus."

At another level the writer is highly conservative. He accepts holus bolus and very firmly an orthodox view of Christian doctrine. A central theme of the book is the trinitarian formula. That is, the interaction between the persona representing God the father, Jesus the son, and the Holy Spirit. Sophia, (wisdom) does, however, also get something of a look in.

Forgiveness plays a key part. I have no quarrel with this and, indeed, find it highly commendable as being, for me, at the heart of the Jesus gospel of unconditional love.

That is why it puzzles me that Mr Young and all those who adhere to the orthodox road find anything attractive about the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. This – although that term is not used as such – is another aspect of orthodox Christianity which is highlighted throughout *The Shack*. (e.g. on p165)

This understanding of the gospel was developed by St. Anselm in 1197 and permeates our liturgy, our hymns, the Christmas story and so much else of traditional doctrine. We acknowledge this every time we claim "Jesus saves".

The idea is that God became so angry with Adam and Eve for disobeying him in the Garden of Eden that he (or she) felt it necessary to punish humankind. The most effective way to do this would be to have them kill someone who was a very good person. That very good person turned out to be Jesus whom people, from the time of Paul onwards, came to regard as a supernatural Son of God. When humans had killed this good person, God said, "Because you have killed him (or as some theologians argue, we human beings gave him to God to be killed) I forgive you and now I will let you live forever more."

Like theologians down through the ages Paul Young uses some rather convoluted reasoning to link this theology of wrath with the murder of the young daughter of the hero of the book.

Some readers, like me, will see some contradiction in explaining how a God, so keen on punishment, is set up by us as an ideal exemplar of forgiveness.

At one point, the author seems to be recognising the way the church has deified the human Jesus. The Jesus character in the book declares, "Who said anything about being a Christian? I am not a Christian." He then goes on to list the wide range of people who are drawn to him. To my mind as a progressive Christian, however, the value of this revelation is nullified by the emphasis on attachment to the messenger (Jesus) as against attachment to the message (of unconditional love).

This is all done through the highlighting of the divine 'relationship' as against 'rules' in the Christian life. All very commendable, but from what I know of the struggles and let-downs that people have experienced in seeking to have a fulfilling relationship with a somewhat amorphous supernatural entity, I would prefer the gospel to focus on our loving one another at a real natural human level.

If I may sum up, I would recommend *The Shack* as highlighting in a readable and gripping way some of the questions which Christians need to be able to explain. Anyone not immersed in Christian orthodoxy and seeking to explore the nature of God might, however, find confusion in such exploration as handled here.

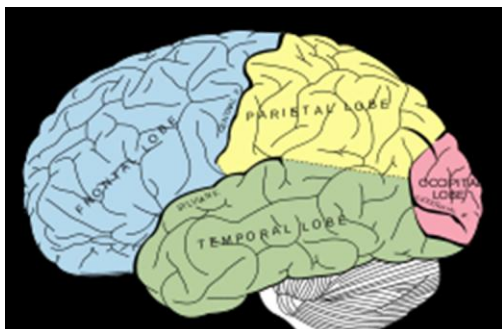
DOES THE LAW REALLY UNDERSTAND Us?

Our understanding of the way the brain works could help us create a better legal system, says neuroscientist David Eagleman. Below are three excerpts (page references unknown) from *Incognito* by David Eagleman, published by Canongate.

"A human brain is three pounds of the most complex material in the universe. It is the mission control centre that drives the operation of your life, gathering dispatches through small portals in the armoured bunker of the skull. This pink, alien computational material, which has the consistency of jelly and is composed of miniaturised, self-configuring parts, vastly outstrips anything we've dreamt of building."

"Using those brains, humans have done something unique. As far as we know, we're the only system on the planet so complex that we've thrown ourselves headlong into the game of deciphering our own programming language. Imagine that your desktop computer began to control its own peripheral devices, removed its own cover, and pointed its webcam at its own circuitry. That's us."

"The problem is that the law rests on two assumptions that are charitable, but demonstrably false. The first is that people are 'practical reasoners', which is the law's way of saying that they are capable of acting in alignment with their best interests, and capable of rational foresight about their actions. The second is that all brains are created equal. Everyone who is of legal age and above an IQ of 70 is assumed, in the eyes of the law, to have the same capacity for decision-making, understanding, impulse control and reasoning. But these ideas simply don't match up with the facts of neuroscience."



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

You ask, rhetorically: Aren't you glad you subscribe? and I reply; Yes I am: thank you for assembling (again) an excellent collection of cogent articles and letters which include plenty of ideas to ponder upon, or question, or mentally subscribe to.

I'm glad therefore that you thus provide a platform for these ideas to be further teased out, in the various groups of thinking people, such as Ian Harris enumerated in a recent *Honest to God* column.

It's disappointing to me that in the Ephesus group that I belong to it's only occasionally that we take a theme - such as 'The Evolutionary Origins of Religion', or T.H.Huxley's definition of agnosticism, and discuss it in depth, with further reading recommended by someone in the group.

So I particularly value your directing us to such texts and websites as may lead to further understanding of 'humanistic religion' Such reading I'm sure will be rewarding exercises for those of us who have a common interest in exploring the wider reaches of religious thought, and hopefully will lead to a more satisfying life.

Yours sincerely, **Dame Laurie Salas, Wellington.**

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 five **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, Ian Harris, and Alan Goss.

The **Chairperson** is Natali Allen, P.O. Box 120, Rawene, Northland. Phone (09) 405 7755.

The **Secretary** is Alan Jackson, 55 Evans St., Opoho, Dunedin (03) 473 6947.

Membership of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both charges drop to \$15 if the Newsletter is emailed.

Send remittance and details to The Membership Secretary, PO Box 15-324, Miramar, Wellington 6243 or Internet bank to 38 9000 0807809 00 and tell pcowley@paradise.net.nz your mailing details.

Members may borrow books, CDs etc. from the **Resource Centre** managed by Suzi Thirlwall phone (07) 578-2775. See the website at **www.sof.org.nz** for a catalogue and for further details about us.

To offer a comment on material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact the **Editor**: Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay 5022, Phone (04)236-7533 email: noel@cheer.org.nz

VISITING STORYTELLER

Recently, the Rev. Dr Jim Cunningham of Wellington accepted an invitation to address the Gisborne Group of the Sea of Faith Network. (There is a subsidy to help this happen). Here is Bev Smith's account of his presentation.

Jim opened his presentation by asking us to picture the Scott and Shackleton photographs taken at the South Pole in 1902, thereby setting the scene for the story.

Once upon a time many ice floes huddled together at the South Pole. They were terrified of warmth and need cold to survive. One day - they wondered 'what there is further North', so they thought they'd explore and they melted.

When the last of the ice floes melted - it was found that deep inside and frozen were hundreds of colourful fish - the fish came to life and took off to swim the world.

The moral of the story? What happens when you take the risk?

Jim then asked those present to pair up and tell/listen to each other a two minute slice of your life. This was done three times. In some instances, the story got better. Sometimes the story reminded us of something similar in our lives. We floated into warmer water, our imaginations were stimulated.

Jim asked if we remembered the *Taranaki Gate* and related a tale of a man with a model T car and the difficulty he had on approach to a farm house and how tangled up he became in the gate when it rolled around him.

When preaching people remember the children's stories rather than the sermon!

The Good Samaritan - we were urged to look beyond the story and at the world around us. The fact that the story is set in times 2000 years ago. We must pull it through experiences of other people and ourselves. To look at story through others' eyes and the knowledge we have ourselves.

That story is in Luke's gospel. Luke was concerned with wholeness and healing and women's lives, in relationships beyond his circle of Judaism. In Palestine, the time of the Roman occupation - in the story - where would you put yourself? As a lawyer, a Levi or some other? Ask the questions instead of trying to find the answer.

There was a robber, someone was beaten and stripped of assets, stripped of reputation, a hot story in the media. Do I do that?

Nobody travelled from Jerusalem to Jericho on their own. The person who was robbed did. Sometimes we too must take the risk.

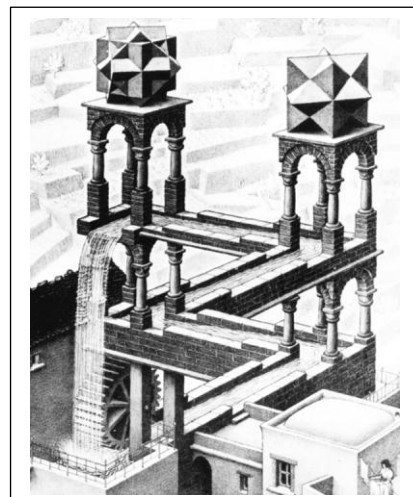
Decisions, decisions - The Priest on priestly business - knew that if he touched a dead body, he would become unclean and he had obligations. What does he do when coming across a situation when help is needed? Cross the boundary? He didn't. He wouldn't.

The story of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar at Belshazzar's feast where they drank and ate watched by thousands. Problems and solutions - there is always someone in your kingdom when you share your story. Someone will help you find meaning.

Assisi - after the earthquake - the rubble, the damaged paintings, there were gaps in the ceiling, the sense of loss as what was held dear came tumbling down. Even with repairs, there were gaps, the ceiling was not the same.

What do we do - how do we manage our grief? We have friends, work, we rebuild our lives and repair the memories - something is retained that gives help that will give meaning.

Beverley M. Smith, Gisborne



**"We do not
see things
as they
are, but as
we are."
Immanuel
Kant**

Detail from an etching by
Maurits Escher 1961

TWO LETTERS FROM LAURIE CHISHOLM

On Flammarion ...

Seeing the Flammarion engraving (Newsletter No. 93) was like running into an old friend again.

I often used this image when teaching religion classes in Germany in the '70s. However, our understanding of this intriguing picture was rather different. For us, it was a pictorial representation of the Copernican revolution in cosmology. The right-hand side of the picture shows the traditional firmament, a transparent hemisphere with sun and moon and the stars pinned to it. The left-hand side is not so obvious, but we took it to be representing heavenly bodies and their pathways through space. We thought this picture came from the 16th century, but experts say this is not possible. The most likely explanation is that Flammarion commissioned it for his book on the atmosphere. Also new to me is the fact that the picture represents a traditional legend, according to which a missionary or monk reaches the place where heaven and earth meet and is able to squeeze through a gap and see beyond. But that is, if you like, the 'literal' level of interpretation. There is also a 'symbolic level' of interpretation, which Flammarion himself attests to:

Our ancestors imagined that this blue vault was really what the eye would lead them to believe it to be... And yet this vault has, in fact, no real existence!

And

Previous to the knowledge that the Earth was moving in space, and that space is everywhere...

For Flammarion himself, the picture combines the old geocentric world view and the modern world view, where Earth is one little planet somewhere in a vast universe.

We often combined this picture with two others: one representing the biblical world view, with water above the firmament and the earth as a flat disc resting on foundations, and the other as modern cosmology portrays it: earth with a magnetic field shielding us from the solar wind and the solar wind in turn shielding the solar system



from cosmic rays coming from outer space. The Copernican revolution made people feel radically homeless in the universe, but modern cosmology, we said, shows how many factors combine to protect us. World views change, but faith is still needed. But does that faith come from a scientific picture of the

world, as in cosmic spirituality, or does it come from somewhere other than empirical reality, which gives us such things as the Christchurch earthquakes, providing a counter to it?

Laurie Chisholm (Christchurch)

On Holloway ...

I find Richard Holloway's review of Karen Armstrong's book ("Is Christianity Compassionate?" Newsletter 93) odd to say the least.

On the face of it, he is questioning Karen Armstrong and doubting whether she is right to say that compassion is the essence of religion. Most readers will take that away as their conclusion. It's only if you read it really carefully that you realize that Holloway himself actually agrees with Armstrong. The resurrection is mythos and we should be compassionate with homosexuals now instead of worrying about their alleged eternal punishment. But the whole thrust of the article is that the church and its official teachers must resist the claim that the resurrection is a myth and that Christianity is a redemption religion, not a wisdom religion.

Why does he feel the need to do this? Surely the official teachers of the traditional church don't need him to speak on their behalf; they are quite capable of doing it themselves. And why is his own stance almost invisible and the general tone of the review critical rather than supportive? Did the Guardian tell him to make it controversial, no matter how? Has his Episcopal experience of evangelicals so traumatized him that progressive religious thinking provokes an anxiety attack? Does he want to provoke the official church to fight with Armstrong? Who knows. But I am left disappointed that what looked like a critical dialogue with Armstrong turned out to be nothing of the sort.

Laurie Chisholm (Christchurch)

From Holloway's Review:

"But is she correct in suggesting that, *au fond*, the essence of the main religions boils down to compassion? It is probably correct where Buddhism is concerned and it is from Buddhism that her best insights and examples come. I think she is on shakier ground when she applies it to Christianity and Islam. Christianity and Islam are redemption religions, not wisdom religions. They exist to secure life in the world to come for their followers and any guidance they offer on living in this world is always with a view to its impact on the next. This radically compromises the purity of their compassion agenda."

**Laurie Chisholm chairs
the Arrangements Committee
for the Conference
at Christchurch.**

“HE MADE IT UP”

Tom Hall finds it “very gratifying to have had a chance to blow the whistle on Paul.”

Reprinted from *The Fourth R* with permission of Westar Institute.

Some seeds take longer to germinate than others. The same is true of ideas.

One of the latter that lay dormant in my mind for an unusually long time was planted at the spring 2010 meeting of the Westar Institute. Its origin was an observation by Ted Weeden in the summation of his paper for the Seminar on Christian Origins. He noted that Paul’s narrative of Jesus’ final meal with his disciples, the familiar account of the institution of the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 11:23b–25), is introduced by the Apostle’s assurance in verse 23a that, “I received from the Lord what I passed on to you. ...”

But wait a minute, Paul never met Jesus! How, then, are we to construe his citation of Jesus’ words and actions? Weeden’s bluntly honest and entirely logical answer was that Paul must have made up the story. For since he does not attribute the account to some specific human source or existing tradition, it must be either the conscious product of his imagination or the result of what he fancied to be a direct revelation from the person he believed to have been raised from the dead.

Now to be sure, a number of respected exegetes would have it that Paul was in fact passing on a tradition he had learned from the Christian community of Antioch or perhaps of Damascus. He was simply fudging a bit by elevating hearsay to first-person evidence in a worthy attempt to cure the Corinthians of an unworthy meal practice they had fallen into (see 1 Corinthians 11:17–22). But whatever the case, one may begin to wonder how trustworthy any number of his other statements may be.

Among my notes on Weeden’s presentation, I found three brief entries:

- Meal ritual.
- Began in Antioch?
- Could a Jew or a Jewish Christian have ‘invented’ the liturgy?

These no doubt represent a blend of his proposals and my mental responses. Indeed, the second and third especially reflect a problem I had long wrestled with: it is difficult to imagine that a Jewish teacher and sage, be he ever so committed to reforming a compromised tradition and a corrupt cult, would propose to his Jewish followers a liturgical practice that not only involved eating human flesh but also prescribed a direct violation of the Torah’s prohibition of ingesting blood (Leviticus 17:10–12). (As a lay

pastor I early on rewrote the Communion liturgy to suggest that in such a context the historical Jesus would more likely have urged his followers to observe open table fellowship and to accept the necessity of self-denial.) Would not Paul’s Jewish sensibilities have been powerfully offended by a story that surely could not have originated among Jewish Christians? What could possibly have led him to endorse a ritual with strong echoes of Greco-Roman martyrological formulas, and that some suppose to have sprung up and gained currency among Gentile Christians? Could he have been led to this seeming apostasy by an all-consuming zeal to become The Apostle to the Nations? Did the sense of having received such a calling enable him to proclaim a vision and a rite that denied his birthright but promised a triumphant future? Or was his conversion experience so overwhelming that, having turned from persecution to proclamation, he came

at last to do a further about-face and adopt the Gentile ‘body and blood’ scenario? We will never know.

Be that as it may, we should probably not be surprised by Paul’s problematic testimony. Several years earlier, when he was apparently trying to calm doubts that had arisen among members of his Thessalonian flock, he declared “by the word of the Lord” that the parousia and the rapture would proceed as promised (1

Thessalonians 4:13–18). And not long after attributing the Last Supper account to Jesus, he sought to burnish his personal image and certify his vulnerable apostleship by reporting a direct experience of Paradise and the Lord’s personal assurance of Grace (2 Corinthians 12:1–9).

At last I concluded that while probably not a willful and flagrant purveyor of untruths, Paul was at least a pragmatist driven by a desire for preeminence, and therefore able to persuade himself of the truth of claims that won him approbation and authority—whether such affirmations involved supernatural communications or hearsay reports that required unquestioning acceptance to preserve ‘the good of the order.’

Then, a couple of months after those first shoots had put forth a rudimentary leaf, another scriptural vector was added to the force diagram. Though I had seldom preached from the Epistles (and had obviously overlooked some of the details of Weeden’s paper), I retained a hazy recollection of a similar Pauline assertion, and soon enough discovered its source in the first chapter of Galatians. There in verses 11 and 12 Paul assures his



Painted in the 16th C by either Valentin de Boulogne or Nicolas Tournier

troublesome flock in Galatia that the gospel message he had given them was the one true rendition of the Good News, the only correct understanding of the significance of Jesus' life and death. And to place his claim beyond question, he assured them that this gospel "is not of

human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

Here the notion of a former tradition is specifically denied, and the essentially redundant claim of a divine source becomes categorical. Clearly, Paul's theological presuppositions had no difficulty with the idea of a theistic deity who both could and often did plant ideas (with either protracted or instantaneous germination schedules) within the minds of those whom he wished to serve him. Had not God (by Paul's own admission) set him apart before he was born, specially called him to the apostolate, and granted him a special revelation of Jesus (Galatians 1:15-16)?

But twenty-first century readers will find this scenario at best dubious. Modern psychology has pretty well persuaded us that whatever ideas we do not receive from other human beings must arise within our own minds—and of course this process includes combinations and adaptations of other people's ideas, which then bear the additional stamp of our original thinking.

In short, whether Paul was implying a special revelation—as in 1 Corinthians, or explicitly claiming it—as in Galatians, he was "making it up." And many will give him a pass in view of his having played a major role in putting Christianity on the map. My problem with this decision is that the 'Christianity' he put on the map represents fundamental distortions of Jesus' message. It is not only that Paul made up a religion that has for two millennia included symbolic cannibalism in its defining ritual; far worse, I fear, is his definition of its central teaching. Consider 1 Corinthians 1:23: "but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." Lest we overlook his emphasis, he repeats and accentuates the essence of the good news in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

Forget the moral and spiritual lessons of the parables and aphorisms; forget the Sermon on the Mount and the injunction to love God and neighbour; forget the Kingdom of God that is all around you and waiting to be realized by living according to Jesus' urgings. Forget the evidence of Luke 10:38-42, in which the author points out that the essential business of a disciple is to internalize the master's teaching and then put it into practice. Forget the very different Christianity of the Q and Thomas and Didache communities—the so-called 'Life Tradition' that portrays Jesus as a transformative teacher while all but ignoring the themes of death, resurrection, and atonement. Forget those demanding commitments and exhortations; all you need to know is that God sent his Son to be a blood sacrifice and thereby provided you with a ticket to Heaven.

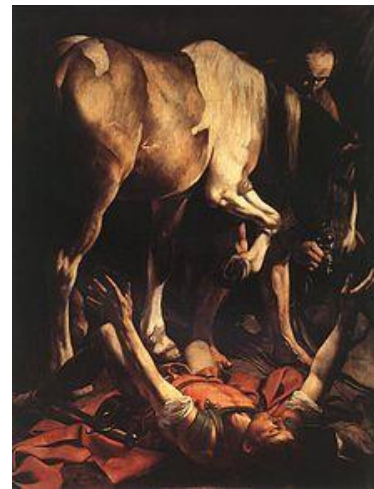
That's Paul's gospel, and one can't help seeing it as the source of what Bob Funk called creeds with empty centers: liturgies that jump directly from "born of the virgin Mary" to "crucified dead and buried." For millions of people such recitations constitute a weekly lesson that Jesus' life didn't amount to very much; his sacrificial death is what really counts. In this regard, it should be noted that Professor Weeden titled his paper "Christianity's Death Tradition," and in it offered a meticulously documented demonstration of how fundamentally Jesus' life and teaching were misrepresented by that belief system—along with several strong indications of who played the leading role in making it up.

Tom Hall,
from <http://www.westarinstitute.org/>
"Dedicated to the advancement of religious literacy."

Tom will be a speaker at this year's Conference

Photo Essay: Noel Cheer

These two events from the life of Paul: his conversion on the road to Damascus and his preaching on the Areopagus ("Mar's Hill") in Athens, are recognised by some scholars as stories with enormous polemical pulling power but with little historical substance. The paintings are by, respectively, Caravaggio and Raphael.



FROM THE CHAIR

With the title of “Pulling Us Back From the Brink: Economics? Science? Religion?” the 2011 Conference is planned to give us opportunities to explore the potential in present day, science and technology, processes, values and religion to avert environmental and other crises that face the world today.

Our question is clearly one being considered widely. Some may have noted the reference in the Bishop of London’s contribution to the debate at the recent Royal wedding: He suggested:

“We stand looking forward to a century which is full of promise and full of peril. Human beings are confronting the question of how to use wisely the power that has been given to us through the discoveries of the last century. We shall not be converted to the promise of the future by more knowledge, but rather by an increase of loving wisdom and reverence. For life, for the earth and for one another”

At the Conference will have five people willing to spend time to inform, and raise and respond to questions with us.

On Friday Jeanette Fitzsimmons will introduce the theme, followed on Saturday by Geoff Bertram, Senior Lecturer in Economics from the Institute of Policy Studies at Victoria University, Bob Lloyd, Director of Energy Studies, at Otago University and on Sunday Val Webb, an Australian theologian, teacher and author.

Tom Hall, a fellow of The Jesus Seminar, will provide a paper as an option for Saturday afternoon.

The venue this year is Rangī Ruru Girls’ School in Christchurch. Rangī Ruru has survived the earthquake well and although some classes had to shift to other rooms, the theatre, dining room and boarding house which we will use are largely undamaged. For those that know Rangī Ruru, presentations will be in the theatre and we will have opportunities throughout the weekend to enjoy the

beautiful setting of the school. Sixty six beds in spacious single and double rooms are available to us with nine motels within 10-15 minutes walk.

The Christchurch group is now well underway with planning, and we appreciate and admire their efforts in this and in demonstrating the resilience of their city for us. We offer our support in their continued efforts towards the recovery of the City and look forward to spending time and sharing with them.

Laurie Chisholm tells us that the group has been busy exploring options for Saturday afternoon excursions and is confident of being able to offer a variety of choices that connect us with nature, demonstrate ways of pulling us back from the brink or are of more general interest.

Again core groups will enable us to explore and extend the presentations and then contribute questions to extend the debate in the final panel discussion. These with the visits, and the informal times mean that again we will have opportunity to meet others and to share thoughts, experiences and ideas.

The full programme and registration form will accompany the next Newsletter in July. Meantime information will appear on the website as it becomes available.

Natali Allen, Chairperson 2010-2011



HEAVEN AND HELL

A Vietnamese Buddhist Parable

Imagine two tables laden with food. Diners at both tables are provided with extra long chopsticks.

At one table diners are trying to feed themselves, but the chopstick length prevents the food reaching their mouths.

This is Hell.

Those at the other table have learnt to cooperate with each other and feed each other across the table.

This is Heaven.

