



CONFERENCE NEWS FROM THE CHRISTCHURCH GROUP

Instead of appointing the usual Local Arrangements Committee, this year the Christchurch group of the Sea of Faith decided that the whole group would help. So each meeting begins with around half an hour of Conference business before turning to the theme of the evening. We have arranged the venue and organized the Saturday afternoon events. Currently we are finalizing who will fill what roles.

October 14-16

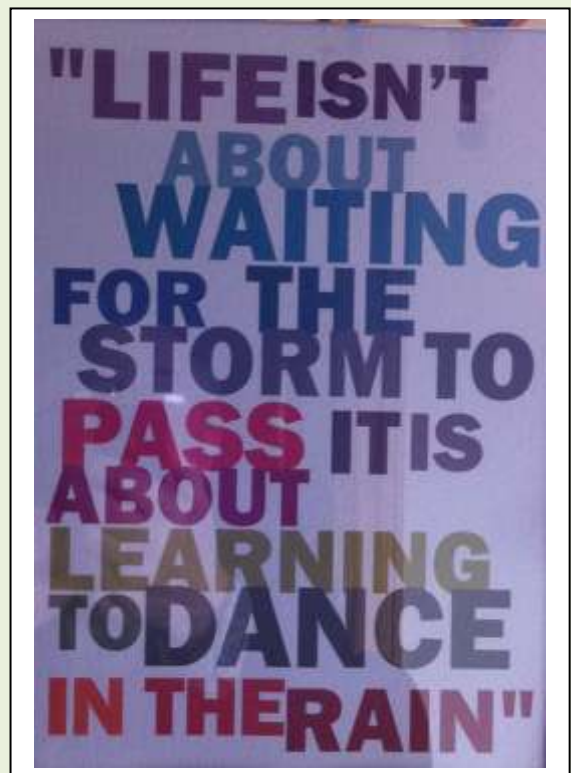
Pulling Us Back From the Brink: Economics? Science? Religion? Rangi Ruru Girls' School Christchurch

On the day of writing this, a 5.7 quake happened and I crawled under my desk at work. A colleague was at a meeting and they were all trying to get



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under a table that was not big enough to fit all of them. While we were standing around after evacuating the building, a 6.3 quake happened, the ground rippling strangely underfoot. The number and strength of the aftershocks are surprising and for some acutely distressing. Seeing more piles of silt from the liquefaction is truly disheartening. The experts say that the strength of the aftershocks will diminish but that they will go on for a long time. So there is a not insignificant chance that the Conference will give you a taste of what Christchurch residents have been experiencing for a long time. Should this cause you some concern, bear in mind that Rangi Ruru has survived all previous earthquakes well and that ultimately, nowhere, not even your place, is completely safe from them.

Accommodation at Rangi Ruru is in spacious single and double rooms. A total of 66 beds is guaranteed to us and more may be available. The dining room is light and open, with floor-to-ceiling glass giving an outlook to a pleasant courtyard. Plenary sessions will be in the theatre which has very comfortable seating and is just the right size for our purposes. The boarding house has numerous lounges which will suit core group meetings and provide spaces for informal conversations.

Saturday afternoon events are listed on the registration form and details about them are provided in the conference programme. Please clearly mark your first and second choices on the form. Transport will be a combination of car share and shuttle taxi. We have also provided the option “none” so that you can make it clear if you have other plans for the afternoon and do not want to participate.

As the date of Conference comes closer, we look forward in eager anticipation to welcoming you to our earthquake-damaged city.

*Laurie Chisholm
Local Convenor*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Chisholm on Holloway's review of Karen Armstrong

On reading Laurie Chisholm's comments on Richard Holloway's review of Karen Armstrong's *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (Newsletter 93) I am mystified at Chisholm's conclusion. He finds the thrust of Holloway's review that "the church and its official teachers must resist the claim that the resurrection is a myth . . ." and he describes Holloway's personal stance as "almost invisible". But it is clear from "I think it's a myth in the way she (Armstrong) describes", that Holloway agrees with Karen Armstrong. Further I see no suggestion in Holloway's review that the church must resist this claim, though he acknowledges that the orthodox position of the church is that the resurrection is factual.

Holloway's distinction between a wisdom church and a redemption church is interesting. Christianity would claim compassion as a distinguishing characteristic but if it came to a choice between compassion and orthodox doctrine, would the traditional Christian response not be to put correct belief first? Holloway finds that "this radically compromises the purity of their compassion agenda". I find the tone of his review one of sadness that this is the case.

Honor Hay, Tauranga

End of Cringe

When I talk to anyone about being a member The Sea of Faith Network I promptly add a disclaimer that it is not what it sounds like!

I have always been uncomfortable with the title but have only recently decided what to do about it.

I now introduce it to friends as 'The Sea of Faith Network' which is a religious and philosophical forum.

End of cringe.

Mary Johnson

Please forgive any deficiencies in layout or editing in this issue, it was composed on a small laptop while we were touring in Scotland - ed.

ASTERIODS, STARS, AND THE LOVE OF GOD: TWO ASTRONOMERS AND THEIR FAITH

We explore life, faith, and the universe with two astronomers who study the composition of meteorites and the life and death of stars. Brother Guy Consolmagno is curator of meteorites at the Vatican Observatory. Father George Coyne is director emeritus and president of the Vatican Observatory Foundation. They are both Jesuits, and both have asteroids named after them.

Participating in the Mystery of the Universe

"Misremember" is a word I often use about the history of science and religion in the West. We've forgotten or misremembered that the great classic scientists did not understand science and religion as opposed. Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton may have had their struggles with religious authorities. And they did not believe that their scientific exploration would prove or disprove the existence of God. But they believed quite fervently that their explorations and discoveries in the natural world would deepen human understanding of the nature of God, of the mind of the maker.

In George Coyne and Guy Consolmagno, I found two modern-day exemplars of this tradition. They have clear boundaries between their science and their faith. Father George even goes so far as to say that to "need" God vis-a-vis his science would be a diminishment of God and of human intelligence. They both insist, in a few different ways, that they don't see God at the end of their telescopes. Their belief in God, and their sense of the love of God, are borne out in other kinds of experience.

Yet Guy Consolmagno has also written these words: "(A)s I see the pattern of Creation unfolding, over and over...complexity from the simplest of rules, beauty from the surprising interplay of basic forces...I begin to get a closer appreciation of the personality of the Creator." And when I ask him to describe that "personality," he answers, without missing a beat, that "whoever is responsible for this universe has a great sense of humor."

His own vocation might be seen as an illustration of divine humor, or at least one of history's "jokes," as Coyne puts it. The Vatican Observatory is located in the papal summer residence in Castel Gondolfo, Italy — once the home of Urban VIII, the pope who took Galileo to task. Today the papal summer palace has telescopes on its roof

and houses one of the oldest astronomical research centers in the world.

Part of the joy of this conversation is the evident fun George Coyne and Guy Consolmagno find in this and in so much else, but most of all in the work they do. They take delight in each other, too, and it is a pleasure to hear them react to each other's ideas. And they hold good humor in a creative, faithful tension with their equally intimate knowledge of the difficulties of human life and the shadow side of the natural world they study.

Guy Consolmagno considered abandoning his scientific career at one point because he could not justify studying the stars when people were dying of hunger. He joined the Peace Corps and was sent to Kenya where he was assigned to teach astronomy at the University of Nairobi.

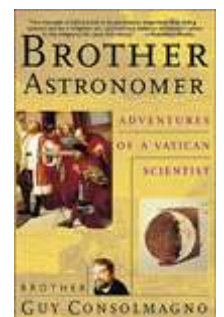
There, every time he cranked up a car-battery-powered telescope, entire villages would turn out in thrall to what he could show them about the night sky. He came to believe that the urge to look up at the stars and wonder where we come from and how we fit in is as essential to our humanity as our need for food. He joined the Jesuit order in his late 30s.

The 16th-century founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola, charged his men to "find God in all things" — in a laboratory as passionately as in a monastic cell. George Coyne puts his version of that calling this way: "Doing science to me is a search for God. And I'll never have the final answers because the universe participates in the mystery of God."

I Recommend Reading:

*Brother Astronomer:
Adventures of a Vatican Scientist*
by Brother Guy Consolmagno

Brother Astronomer is an engaging introduction to the life and mind of this Jesuit astronomer — part memoir, part introduction to the history of science, part reflection on theology and astronomy. It includes fascinating stories about his time in Kenya and Antarctica, as well an utterly captivating chapter that retells the story of Galileo in the context of what was happening in church, science, and society in Galileo's time.



Robin Lane, Wellington

WIKIPEDIA WAR OVER RELIGIOUS THINKER

Wikipedia has become the first port of call for many of my searches for information and usually I am not disappointed.

However, for a long time I have puzzled over the Wikipedia entry on **Eugen Drewermann**, the controversial German religious thinker who has been disciplined by the Catholic Church. It is a poorly integrated mix of well-formulated factual statements that ring true to me and other passages, mostly in a long “Criticism” section, that make vague, odd and discrediting statements about him.

Recently I stumbled on the discussion page for this Wikipedia entry, which referred me to even larger discussion pages in the German Wikipedia. These explained everything.

The current Wikipedia entry is the end result of a Wikipedia war. It is not so much a war between supporters and opponents of Drewermann as between opponents, who repeatedly added inaccurate portrayals designed to discredit Drewermann, and others who have attempted to reshape them to give a fairer and more factually based portrayal, as befits an encyclopedia. A determined and still partially successful attempt was made to turn the Wikipedia entry into Catholic propaganda, an article more about the views of his critics than about Drewermann himself. Content provided by a Drewermann expert has been high-handedly removed, meaning that he understandably became reluctant to put more effort into getting the entry right. At the height of the battle, a Wikipedia guardian even stepped in to freeze editing for a time. The end result is that the English Wikipedia entry is light on insight and heavy on criticism. It illustrates how the kind of doubt and questioning that is so important to us in the Sea of Faith can cause an aggressive, attacking reaction and a desire to discredit at all costs.

Ten people are called as witnesses to discredit Drewermann (even more in the German version). I have been able to find out a little about these people to help understand where they are coming from and to assess their criticisms.

Gerhard Lohfink and **Rudolf Pesch** are Catholic biblical scholars and authors of a polemical work (Depth Psychology and No Exegesis) against Drewermann’s discussion of biblical interpretation (Depth Psychology



**Eugen
Drewermann**

and Exegesis). Drewermann published a prompt rejoinder in which he accused them of gross misrepresentation of his views and of having not even read more than one book of his.

Manfred Oemig is a Protestant German Old Testament scholar, author of a book on biblical interpretation. In a TV interview, Oemig was asked about Drewermann and was supportive and appreciative of his depth-psychological approach. Oemig rejects fundamentalism, does not think that the historical-critical method is the only one, and supports a variety of types of interpretation. His favourite approach is the existentialist, actually putting him quite close to Drewermann.

Klaus Berger is an unusual, right-wing Catholic, who is fundamentally opposed to Drewermann’s depth-psychological interpretation of biblical texts. He warns of the dangers of the Enlightenment, believes that Jesus’ miracles happened literally and thinks that Protestants should subject themselves to the Pope. In a book review of Drewermann’s Commentary on John’s gospel, he made extremist criticisms of Drewermann.

Uwe Birnstein and Klaus-Peter Lehmann are authors of an extremely conservative work criticising Drewermann.

Henryk Broder is a journalist who was shocked by what he saw as the tolerant, self-critical reaction of German intellectuals to 9/11 and set out to denounce them.

Target of this polemic is German intellectual culture in general, rather than Drewermann in particular.

As far as I can see, **Josef Isensee** is not concerned with Drewermann himself at all. In an article on legal issues about state and church, he sees Drewermann merely as an illustration of the general truth that you can enhance your profile within an organization by radically criticising it, as we have seen recently with Hone Hariwera. However, this damages the organization rather than helping it.

The claims in this Wikipedia article either reflect a traditional Catholic standpoint, are taken out of context, or tell you more about the witness than about Drewermann. Fortunately, there is an excellent article on Drewermann in the *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, which you can obtain for a mere \$US549. Alternatively, search for it in Google books (enter Drewermann and Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion into Google).

Laurie Chisholm, Christchurch

ON DYING OF BOREDOM

A review of

With or Without GOD: Why the way we live is more important than what we believe

by Gretta Vosper

The Foreword, by John Shelby Spong, leaves little unsaid. “This gifted woman”, with “rare sensitivity and grace”, has “great courage”; and as always, “those who cannot deal with the message always attack the messenger.”

The Reverend Gretta Vosper visited Australia and New Zealand in 2010. Her stay was lamentably short, but the message she delivered was a bold and challenging one*. As the Minister of a United Church congregation in Toronto, Canada., she has led her people into the daring departure of abandoning the tired theological vocabulary of traditional Christian Churches, in favour of a straightforward and ethical delivery of human values, in prayer, song and rituals.

Spong, to whom the book is dedicated, declares that “organized religion will die of boredom long before it dies of controversy.” In recognizing this likelihood, Gretta Vosper drew intense criticism, and also endured an attempt to try her for heresy (in the footsteps of New Zealand’s Lloyd Geering).

Her book is an absorbing mixture of personal spiritual journey, autobiographical anecdote and theological scholarship. In using this approach, Gretta brings her message close to its readers, identifying (I believe) with the vast majority of church members, whether or not they are regular attenders at traditional liturgies.

Recalling her own mother, who was sternly dedicated to naming “the elephant in the room”, Ms Vosper traces her growing disenchantment with the contents of the Bible of Christianity, and with the abuse and wide misuse of the names “God” and “Jesus”, as well as terms such as Lord, Original Sin, Salvation, Virgin Birth, Reincarnation, and The Eucharist.

She recounts that Biblical scholarship during the last 100 years largely persuaded researchers that The Bible is a human document, and is not TAWOGFAT (The Authoritative Word Of God For All Times). These findings were often shared with students in theological collages, but these learnings were rarely,

if ever, shared in turn with congregational members in the church pews.

In consequence, the growing misgivings of church attenders were rarely expressed openly.

Although many of its myths and legends were either intended to be regarded as metaphors, or else were blatant attempts to drum “believers” into line as the Church Militant grew over the centuries, The Bible was always subject to error. There are no two manuscripts of the New Testament which are identical, and few of the sacred book’s alleged accounts of “history” find any support from other surviving records.

Now that Ms Vosper’s congregation in Toronto has led the way, a Centre for Progressive Christianity has been opened in Canada, and her book includes a Toolbox for clergy who have the will and the courage to free their own churches of outdated terms and concepts.

Advocating modern values and ethics in contemporary terms is seen as the primary role of churches, in responding to the often-hidden wishes of their congregations. Even the term “church” may, like the word “God” be found to be “beyond redemption” and have to go, the author declares.

There is still a huge amount of vital social work for Christians to do in the world, including ecological and environmental issues, Ms Vosper states. While there are perhaps some organisational lessons to be learned from evangelical congregations, hanging on to out-dated terms and concepts will turn away entire younger generations, and this may prevent the churches from carrying out their essential role in society.

This book, unfortunately, is difficult to obtain in New Zealand, and copies may have to be accessed by internet. However, it is well worth reading, and should be a library holding.

It provides rich food for thought, as well as a clear call to action and to the essential modernisation of religion in any and all faith bodies - before it is too late.

Peter Creevey, Christchurch, May 2011.

*** Gretta presented a series of lectures at St Andrew’s on The Terrace, Wellington from which a CD set was made.**

If you are interested in buying a set then look at www.standrews.org.nz/satrs



FOLLOW ME

Many religious traditions carry a story that has a sage or a holy man (always 'a man') telling his followers to distinguish between *who* he is and the *way of life* that he recommends.

The Buddha, and probably many others, have said: **"I am a finger pointing at the moon, do not look at me, look at the moon."**



Some say that the Christian tradition very early on switched from promoting Jesus' 'message' - the Kingdom (reign, rule, realm and so on) of God to promoting some aspect of Jesus himself, especially the cosmic 'Christ' status offered by the Apostle Paul.

If this were to be so, then we each need to ask first 'is/was Jesus important?' **If we get a 'yes' then we next ask 'was it because of what he said or because of who he was?'** Current developments, especially in Progressive Christianity, talk about this distinction.

Noel Cheer

WE ARE ALREADY HOME

Duane Elgin, American author, advocate of "voluntary simplicity" wrote this:

The first axial age (the emergence of the great religions) began with a view of separation and the "other."

In a world of growing individualism and differentiation, the religious emphasis on compassion served as a vital bridge between people.

Now, a second major axis with a very different orientation is opening in the world. Religions of separation are becoming religions of communion as we

realize there is no place to go where we are separate from the ever-generative womb of the living universe.

The second axial age begins with a recognition emerging from the combined wisdom of both science and spirituality; namely, that we are already home -- that the living universe already exists within us as much as we live within it.

In the words theologian, Thomas Berry, "The universe is a communion and a community. We ourselves are that communion become conscious of itself."

WHEN HOPE IS LEFT BEHIND

A review

Their Faces Were Shining

Tim Wilson

Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2010

I wasn't expecting to enjoy this book. I was expecting to read something that might be instructive in various attitudes. I got that, but I also got a really well-written novel. Tim Wilson, as most people probably know, is TVNZ's America correspondent at the moment. How long he'll retain that posting, given TVNZ's parlous situation in the face of a government apparently keen on dismantling public broadcasting is another question. But I digress.

It's becoming more common for celebrities, or people otherwise in the public eye in some capacity or another, try to build on their name-recognition (such a twenty-first century concept!) by writing books, poems or songs. Sometimes, if they're really badly advised, they even sing the songs themselves. Think of Paul Holmes. But rarely do they display any serious talent in their new vocation. Tim Wilson is an exception. He can write. He can write very well. This is his first novel, although apparently he's had short stories and other material published around the place.

Their Faces Were Shining is about the tribulations of Hope Patterson, an American fifty-something. A fervent Christian and stalwart of the First Presbyterian Church in her home town of Fairfield (the book is set in America) Hope Patterson goes through some pretty torrid adventures. And what transpires impacts very extensively on her life, her family, and her faith. The adventures revolve around the Rapture, which has just taken place, but left her, and indeed most pious churchgoers, behind.

The Rapture, as everyone conversant with the doings of American fundamentalism knows, is the opening instalment of the eagerly-awaited Second Coming of Jesus where those who have been Saved ascend to heaven. And the Unsaved are doomed to remain on Earth and suffer a lengthy period of war, famine pestilence and general brouhaha. So, it's going to be a dodgy look for a true believer to come to terms with not having been taken up. Has her faith been vindicated by the fact that the Rapture really happened? (Assuming that *is* what happened). Or has her faith been shattered by not being part of the Elect? As if this isn't bad enough, the ordeal she goes through in the weeks after the event is enough to try anyone's faith. In particular, what happens when you eventually realise that, as a person of strongly-held faith, you were also an unlovable human being, with a very poorly tuned emotional intelligence?

It's important to add that though this book raises some very interesting theological issues to chew on, it is also a good story. All the things that make a good novel are there. I cared about how the story developed. I cared about Hope Patterson. I was surprised, saddened, relieved and generally manipulated emotionally by the author as the pages turned. Wilson almost parades a range of daunting writing challenges, as if to establish his credentials as a novelist. For instance he writes in the first person, as Hope Patterson, as if to showcase his skills in this notoriously difficult area. He also writes about being dead, another very difficult thing to do convincingly.

Some people can write stimulating novels that are driven by ideas but where the story limps along. Others can produce catchy page-turners but without any substance. It makes a pleasant change when someone manages both of these qualities in the same book. Tim Wilson succeeds with *Their Faces Were Shining*.

Bill Cooke

An Auckland member of the Sea of Faith Network.

STORMS OF MY GRANDCHILDREN

A Review ...

Storms of my Grandchildren

*The Truth about the Coming Climate Catastrophe
and our last chance to save Humanity*

by James Hansen.

Published by Bloomsbury, 2009

The main thesis of this book is as crystal clear as it is frightening: that human activity over the last century has rapidly increased the greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere to the point where we are on the verge of transforming the planet into a hothouse world, with massive species depletion, sea level rise and a host of related changes. All threatening the whole biosystem with unstoppable global warming. The difference between Jim Hansen and other "end of the world" prophets, is that he is a leading planetary scientist who has spent a lifetime studying these trends. His predictions are based, not on a misreading of some ancient religious text, but on hard science. And it all points in the same direction.

Dr Hansen has worked for many years as Director of NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Studies. He has been raising his voice on the issue of global warming since the 1980s. He comes across as one who prefers the lab to the public arena, but because of the seriousness of the situation, has been moved to voice his concern publically, even join protest movements, and finally, to set forth the situation in this book. The book contains a double horror: not

only the horror of what we are doing to the atmosphere by burning fossil fuels inefficiently, but also the alarming situation where power company and “business as usual” lobbyists, with millions of dollars at their disposal, exercise such inordinate power over the lawmakers who, as a result, prevaricate and fail to address the problem. Sometimes even taking steps to muzzle the scientists who are reporting warming trends. The mainstream media is of little help, with its love of contention, whereby it casts around for some “denialists” and gives them equal weight. The public is left with the false impression that it is a fifty/fifty issue whether global warming is a reality or not – whereas in fact, the overwhelming weight of evidence shows it is an escalating and dangerous reality.

The book gives a clear and fascinating insight into how climate scientists go about their work: some studying climate changes of past eras (“Paleo-climate”), and others modelling the climate using super-computers, observing how small changes can play out in unexpected ways and often with sudden unexpected speed. Yes, there have been hot periods in the past – a well understood one was the “Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum” of fifty million years ago. But they have never been as sudden as the one now occurring. And the climate “forcings”, which caused changes, have always been hundreds of times weaker than the forcings we are applying today. Hansen is honest about those areas which are not so well understood – where scientific disagreement allows an opening for the “denialists” to minimise the problem. Nevertheless, the main thrust of climate change is overwhelmingly obvious: the world is heating up, and doing so with increasing speed.

The basic climate mechanism is simple. The Earth receives energy from the sun, and radiates energy back to space. Calculations show that the greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere are causing a build-up of heat. The estimated difference amounts to half a watt per square metre of the Earth’s surface. As the ice caps melt, even less is reflected. Other greenhouse gasses are released from the tundra and ocean floor. So “feedback loops” speed the process and threaten to trigger runaway heating.

Dr Hansen’s calculations lead him to recommend an equally simple solution. That is to stop burning

coal inefficiently. Weaning our culture off oil will take longer, he believes. But the big one is coal. It must be left in the ground unless the waste gasses can be sequestered. He points out that nuclear power, especially the proposed “fast-breeder” reactors, offer far fewer problems. But he notes the public fear of the technology, following Three Mile Island and Chernobyl accidents [and the Japan tsunami].. Coal, he points out, is responsible for many more deaths and health problems – is far more dangerous than nuclear risk.

Dr Hansen is critical of cap and trade schemes and Kyoto-type greenhouse gas reduction targets. Governments fail to meet such targets, often making little effort to do so (“green-washing” their rhetoric). And the cap and trade schemes are so open to watering down as to be useless. Only one thing will work to get the CO2 concentration stabilised at or below the 350 parts per million he considers necessary (it is now 450, and rising): that is, a steadily increasing tax on coal, the revenue from which is distributed to the citizenry. He calls it a “fee and dividend” system:

“Under fee and dividend, 100 per cent of the money collected from the fossil fuel companies at the mine or well is distributed uniformly to the public. Thus those who do better than average in reducing their carbon footprint will receive more in the dividend than they will pay in the added costs of the products they buy.” (p. 109)

Given the abysmal record of legislators in dealing with this issue, we are given a graphic scenario of how things will go if we continue with “business as usual.” Our current culture will lead, inevitably to the “Venus Syndrome:” an uninhabitable hothouse world like Venus. The route will take us through a time of massive storms, sea level rise of up to 75 metres, desertification, ocean acidification, and changes we can hardly imagine.

Where then is the hope? Not with those in current leadership, influenced by vested interests and money. It lies with the citizenry becoming informed, then picking up the issue, and so harassing our leaders that they are forced into action. Jim Hansen, a mild and peace-loving scientist and family man, has given us a lead. The question is, what are we going to do?

Ian Crumpton

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION?

An account, by Donald Feist of Dunedin,
of the argument of John Teehan's book: "In the Name of God"

"All these crimes and sins committed by
Americans are a clear declaration of War of
God".

Osama bin Laden - 23 February 1998



"In this struggle, God is not neutral"
George W. Bush - 20 September 2001

"These events have divided the entire world
into two camps, the camp of the faithful
and the camp of infidels. May God shield us
and you from them."

Osama bin Laden - 10 July 2001



"Every nation, in every region now has a
decision to make. Either you are with us or
you are with the terrorists. ... May God
grant us wisdom, and may He watch over the
United States of America".

George W. Bush - 20 September 2001

Above I have put side by side, two quotes from Osama bin Laden, and two from George Bush. A visitor to planet Earth from Mars, who knew only the powerful positions these two men held ten years ago, would surely expect any public statement from either of them to deal with either political or military matters – or possibly both together. But why, this visitor might well ask, is each of these political figures talking religion?

After reading John Teehan's book *In the Name of God* it seems to me that this question was very likely the starting point, or at least the trigger, for his writing this book. Surely, in public statements before and after that dreadful attack on the World Trade Centre on 9/11, we could have expected to hear the political language of leaders who were preparing for war, and then justifying it.

Why was it that so much of what they said was said in a context of religion?

What part did religion play in these events?

In one of the public sessions in Allen Hall [University of Otago] last year, run jointly by the Centre for Theology and Public Issues, and the Centre for Peace and Conflict studies, all the speakers on the panel were of the opinion that all the great world religions have always been firmly on the side of peace, and that any violence done in the

name of religion – in Israel / Palestine, in Northern Ireland, longer ago in the Crusades, or wherever and whenever — has always been a perversion of religion by misguided or over-enthusiastic adherents.

In the same way, Pope John Paul the second insisted that the Church cannot sin, but recognised that some sons and daughters of the Church have committed atrocities in "misguided zeal".

But Teehan, in this book, doesn't agree with this. He claims that:

"... violence done in the name of religion is not a perversion of religious belief, as many apologists would like us to believe, but flows naturally from the moral logic inherent in many religious systems, particularly monotheistic religions, and this moral logic is grounded in our evolved psychology".

So, in order to understand the relationship between violence and religion, Teehan turns to evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychology is evidently a fairly new discipline. He says about it:

"The foundational premise of evolutionary psychology is that behaviour, belief, emotions, thinking and feeling are all functions of a fully embodied brain. The brain we work with today is a collection of task-oriented, problem-

solving mental tools – tools ... that were designed to respond to an ancient environment.”

It is perhaps helpful to mention two other, different, basic assumptions about the human mind/ brain which have been the starting point for psychology:

1. That the mind is a *tabula rasa* – a blank slate – so that every new-born child starts from scratch to absorb the language, culture, moral system, and so on, of the people into whom it is born.

2. The second common view of the human mind is called the “rational actor” model. It assumes that every human being is motivated to act to maximize their own interests.

This view has long been favoured by economists, who like to think that humans act logically and consistently in always buying in the cheapest market.

Evolutionary psychology, on the other hand takes as a starting point the view that all of our

behaviour, belief, emotions, thinking and feeling are produced by a collection of task-oriented, problem-solving mental tools – that were designed to respond to an ancient environment.”

And Teehan says:

“I find the evidence and the arguments in favour of an evolutionary psychology completely persuasive”.

Evolution – I hardly need to tell you, I’m sure – asserts that those individuals, and those species which tend to reproduce most successfully, and to survive over time, are those which are best adapted to their environment.

“Survival of the fittest” means the survival of those who adapt best or fastest to cope with their surroundings. And the fundamental unit by which this adapting occurs is the gene. This is why Richard Dawkins has said:

“Any gene that behaves in such a way as to increase its own survival chances ... will tend to survive.”

In other words, it is basic to any and every gene, to look after No. 1. So Dawkins goes on to add:

“The gene is the basic unit of selfishness”.

And Teehan, having quoted all this from Dawkins, comments:

“Here is the problem for an evolutionary account of morality: If successful genes are “selfish” genes, then it seems to follow that these genes will lead to organisms and traits that are also “selfish”.

But when we move on from genes, or cells or amoeba, to more complex organisms, we find that many kinds of plants and trees look after one another to the extent of

growing close together to provide support or shelter or protection. So to this extent, the idea of selfishness needs to be modified.

And when we come to animals, it is very common to find that they have learnt to co-operate in hunting for food, in sticking together to provide protection from enemies – or in the case of Emperor penguins, to share their warm to protect all of them from the Antarctic cold. Some animals will go further than this and deny themselves food, when it is short, so that their offspring have enough to flourish. Some birds will draw attention to themselves, in order to draw a predator away from the nest – and so on.

All of this behaviour is easily explained in terms of genes which have programmed the animal to do what will help the survival of the family or the species and not just of the individual.

So, when we move on in time, and cross very blurred dividing line between other primates and early human beings, it isn’t surprising to find that these humans, too, were willing to go hungry, or to risk or sacrifice themselves for the well-being or the survival of their children.

In humans, like every other animal species each of the children shares 50 percent of the genes of each parent. In addition, each of that humans nieces and nephews shares 25 percent of their genes. So we find, from very early on – both among animals and early human beings – that the willingness to risk and to make sacrifices, extended beyond one’s immediate children to other offspring of the wider family.

So we need to understand this preferential treatment – this loyalty, or whatever we choose to call it – extended to a family group, an in-group — that is wider than the immediate nuclear family. And as humans became more and more self-aware, this behaviour became not just instinctive, but the subject of rules expressed in words.

Now let’s fast-forward, from 100,000 years ago, to one group of humans living near the Mediterranean a mere 3,000 years ago. They organised the most important and most basic of the rules for supporting and protecting the in-group into a list of Ten. And here’s the second half of the list:

You shall not kill.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

*You shall not bear false witness **against your neighbour.***

You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, nor

Notice that the word “neighbour” in last two on the list makes it quite explicit that these rules applied only among themselves – only within their own in-group. But what is explicit in those two, was just as true about the first three

They meant:

You shall not kill another Jew.

[Killing a foreigner in war was something quite different.]

You shall not have sex with the wife of another Jew.

You shall not steal from another Jew.

So these Jewish Commandments are one clear example of what Teehan claims is a universal rule about morality:

All morality, (says Teehan), is a matter of setting rules or standards for how to behave within the in-group and towards the in-group – and this often means in defence of the in-group against every out-group.

Donald Feist, Dunedin

... and, to continue the Feist, a review of ...

HOW TO BE AN AGNOSTIC

“Our spiritual predicament became pressing for me at a personal level because I used to be a priest.

... I was ordained because I was gripped by a religious imagination...”.

Mark Vernon opens his book *How to be an Agnostic* with this explanation of how much he has been, and still is, personally involved in his subject. By “spiritual” he explains,

“I mean that thread of transcendence that runs through being human, and eludes the best descriptions of biologists, psychologists and sociologists.”

This understanding of a fundamental “more” in human life underlies the whole book, and is expressed in a number of ways. For example:

“Socrates ...realised that for us humans, our own life is too small for us. We are not like other creatures who

appear to be content with their lot. We yearn for more. And yet, neither are we like the gods, who have it all.”

It follows from this awareness, that being an agnostic cannot be, for Vernon, either an assertion that God-talk is unimportant or a timid attempt to have it both ways, to side-step the difficulties of both theism and atheism.

Rather,

“the agnosticism that stirs me is not a sterile kind of uncertainty, which sits on the fence, or worse, can't be bothered to articulate what it breezily doubts. The position I want to flesh out is engaged. It senses that what we don't know is as thrilling as what we do know”.

So, a great deal of this book is given to explaining and commending the apophatic strand in theology - that is, the line of thinking to be found in many thinkers from Socrates through Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart and Soren Kierkegaard, which stresses the inadequacy of every possible assertion of what God is, and the corresponding importance of both an awed silence and statements of what God is not. This does not mean that this book is a heavy history of theology. The quotes above may make it clear that while Vernon is deeply and widely well informed about both philosophy and theology, he writes in a clear and lively style, and from deep personal commitment to a never-ending search.

The back cover is perfectly fair to the book when it says:

“The authentic spiritual quest is marked not by certainties but by questions and doubt. ... Part personal story, part spiritual search, this journey through physics and philosophy concludes that the contemporary lust for certainty is demeaning of our humanity. The key to wisdom is embracing the limits of our knowledge”.

I had never realised that an actively chosen agnostic position could be so rich and positive. I found the book stimulating, thought-provoking, encouraging and helpful.

Donald Feist, Dunedin

How to be an Agnostic by Mark Vernon was published in 2011 by Palgrave Macmillan. My copy cost me \$NZ28.86 [including P&P] from Amazon.

FROM THE CHAIR

With this Newsletter you will find the Conference Programme, Registration Form and a short report from Laurie Chisholm on preparations for the Conference in Christchurch.

His outline of the work and experience of those who are organizing our Conference gives us some insight into day to day life for them and the efforts they are making on our behalf.

We can but admire the Group's commitment to the Conference. Remember that the decision, after the September earthquake, to go ahead with Christchurch as the venue, was a way of demonstrating solidarity with them.

Since then, the devastation of the February quake and the randomness of continued shocks have increased the damage, stress and uncertainty of life in Christchurch. No one imagined that the aftershocks would persist as severely as they have, and it is difficult to imagine how wearying and ultimately exhausting this must be. However, we continue to witness the courage and hope of the people of Canterbury and the strength of the communities growing throughout the region.

Conference now gives all of us in the Sea of Faith Network the opportunity to encourage and support those in Christchurch. Sharing with them, we may realize to some small extent the effects of this experience on them.

Reports from Rangi Ruru remain positive – Engineers have again checked buildings and these remain structurally sound and so our plans remain on track.

We plan that **Jeanette Fitzsimons**, former co-leader of the Green Party, will introduce the topic on Friday afternoon, giving her thoughts on the crisis and uncertainty that the world is facing and how this could be approached and averted.

Over the next two days we then have three speakers:

Dr Geoff Bertram is currently Senior Associate at the Institute of Policy Studies and Adjunct Researcher at the Climate Change Research Institute at Victoria University. The Institute was established to develop interdisciplinary research into all aspects of climate change. Geoff will address economics in the context of the Conference theme and his particular interests.

Dr Bob Lloyd is the Director of Energy Studies and Associate Professor in the Physics Department at Otago University. His interests lie in energy conservation in residential housing, and energy management including world energy resources and peak oil. Bob will consider

the potential outcomes of science and technology in relation to the particular areas of his work.

Dr Val Webb is a well known theologian and author from Australia who has taught religious studies at universities in the United States and Australia. In addressing the question – “What role can people of faith play in pulling us back from the brink?” she will explore the reality of religion today as a creative force in both personal and global crises.

Sir Lloyd Geering will provide an initial response to each of these papers, setting the stage for the Core Groups that follow immediately afterwards.

Those who attended the Conference in Hamilton in 2009 will remember Editor **Tom Hall** at the launch of Lloyd Geering's book *Coming Back to Earth*.

Tom, a member of the New Zealand Sea of Faith Network, is a former English teacher and lay pastor from the small, rural town of Foster, Rhode Island. He will again attend our Conference, offering a discussion on parables, including one of his own, together with a poem which he considers a modern parable of considerable import. This session will be offered as a shorter, in-house alternative to the other, more energetic Saturday afternoon activities.

These activities are a real opportunity to see Christchurch city as it is at the time. While the Conference has a broad perspective, they will show us a particular region pulling back from its own crisis. The AGM has been moved to Friday evening to allow more time on Saturday afternoon for longer events and for the option of making contact with friends and family.

Conference at Christchurch this year promises a unique and positive experience as well as the opportunity to again share with others in the interesting and stimulating discussion and activities that the Sea of Faith Conference always offers.

Natali Allen
Chairperson 2010-2011

