



Marion Dodd A Tribute



Marion Dodd died on 1st July after a debilitating illness.

In 1992 Marion and George were among founding members of the SoF in Auckland. Marion was a deep and perceptive thinker and contributed her own individual, imaginative and spiritual insights. Over the last twenty years our discussions have been enriched by her intellectual honesty and her ability to respond with sensitivity and respect for other's points of view.

In recent years Marion and George shared the local SoF secretariat, and in her quiet, capable way she was the backbone to the functioning of our branch during this time.

She also served on the national executive for four years and took on the job of secretary during this term.

Marion was a warm, calm person, she was ready to listen, tolerant and compassionate, yet also retiring and private.

She was a much-loved G.P. and an esteemed senior doctor in the Family Planning Association.

Marion and George spent several sabbaticals living in France and in recent years she was enjoying their grandchildren.

It is with deep sadness that we say "Thank you" to Marion, for who she was and her contribution to SoF.

To George and the family we extend our loving sympathy.

At her funeral Joy Lewis presented a tribute on behalf of SoF.

Marjorie Cox

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Agenda

**Annual General Meeting of Sea of Faith Network (Inc.)
to be held at Rangī Ruru Girls' School Christchurch,
on Friday 14th October 2011 at 7p.m.**

1. Welcome
2. Apologies
3. Minutes of the 2010 AGM
4. Matters Arising
5. Chairperson's Report – Natali Allen
6. Financial Report – Peter Cowley
7. Other Reports:
 - Archivist - Alison Eng
 - Resource Officer – Suzi Thirlwall
 - Webmaster and Newsletter Editor – Noel Cheer
 - Local groups – Bev. Smith
8. Election of Officers (minimum of eight required)
9. Other Business

REMITTS

Remit 1:

That the name be changed from: "Sea of Faith Network (NZ) (Inc)" to: "Sea of Faith".

Remit 2:

That a second part be added to the name: "The National Religious Discussion Network."

Remit 3:

That the second object be changed to "To provide supportive, encouraging and stimulating opportunities to explore and discuss religious ideas, spirituality and ethical issues."

Remit 4:

That the following object be added: "To promote these activities and their outcomes as a contribution to the good of Aotearoa-New Zealand and the wider world."

Please forward in writing: nominations for the Steering Committee, Remits or proposed amendments to the Secretary **Alan Jackson**, 55 Evans Street, Opoho, DUNEDIN 9010 or alanjackson@xtra.co.nz by 5 p.m. Friday 30th September .

Background to the Remits

OUR NAME

Currently written in the Constitution is: **SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (N.Z.) (INCORPORATED)**

The Christchurch Remit proposes:

The name of the Society shall be SEA OF FAITH: The National Religious Discussion Network.

An Otago Amendment proposes:

The name of the Society shall be SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (N.Z.) (INC). Exploring spirituality, religion and ethics.

OUR OBJECTS

Currently the objects for which the Society is established are:

- a. To facilitate the exploration of religious thought and expression from a nondogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.
- b. To provide encouragement, stimulation and support in fellowship with all persons engaged in this exploration.

The Christchurch Remit proposes that these become :

- a. as a. above (To facilitate the exploration of religious thought and expression from a nondogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.)
- b. To provide supportive, encouraging and stimulating opportunities to explore and discuss religious ideas, spirituality and ethical issues.

And with the addition of

- c. To promote these activities and their outcomes as a contribution to the good of Aotearoa-New Zealand and the wider world.

Natali Allen, Chairperson

CONFERENCE NEWS FROM CHRISTCHURCH

As we reported earlier, the Rangi Ruru Girls' School buildings we will use for the Conference are unscathed by the recent earthquakes: the boarding house, the drama theatre, the dance studio where we will have the bookstall, and the church (St. Andrew's at Rangi Ruru).

But at my most recent visit, there was a hive of building activity. Some buildings, which were safe and usable, have been demolished because it would be more expensive to repair them than to rebuild. We already have a new map of the school, reflecting the new layout.

Rangi Ruru have agreed that we can have one person in a 2-bed room. The 4-bed rooms are also available to us. This greatly increases the amount of single accommodation that we can offer. We also have sufficient comfortable lounges to accommodate all the core groups, so our conversations will be in comfortable and pleasant surroundings.

Here are some tips for your conference visit:

- When you arrive, come to the back entrance, 50 Rhodes Street. Don't be put off by the absence of a school sign. You are at the right place! The registration area is just inside the main door of the boarding house. Rhodes Street is just off Rossall Street, which can be busy and needs care when entering and exiting. We direct you to the back entrance because it's quite a long walk from the front entrance in Hewitt's Road to the boarding house.

- The bookstall is staffed by Christchurch group volunteers, not by a bookshop. This is why EFTPOS is not available, so bring cash for your purchases, or be ready to walk the short distance to an EFTPOS machine on Papanui Road. It won't be open for the whole conference, so look out for a notice telling you the opening hours. We expect books by Val Webb to be available.

- The school is strictly NON-SMOKING. Any offender will be liable for the horrendous costs if the fire brigade needs to be called out because smoking triggers a fire alarm.

- Bring your own towel. Sheets are provided.

Laurie Chisholm, Local Convenor 2011

FROM THE CHAIR

In this last Newsletter before the October Conference in Christchurch, we are able to let you know that planning is well in hand thanks to Laurie Chisholm and the Christchurch Group

Conference 2011 promises to be at least as interesting and informative as all previous conferences, with speakers with a wide range of interests, providing insights and ideas to stimulate thought and discussion. Again Core Groups will provide the opportunity to share with others and gain ideas for further exploration over the months to come. With a film on Friday evening, the range of interesting Saturday activities and an evening concert, there is plenty of time for relaxation, and time to meet old, and make new, friends. The Church of St Andrew's at Rangi Ruru will also be available to Conference participants for quiet times and meditation.

With the additional accommodation we are able to provide comfortable rooms for everyone and the accommodation block is in the same building as the dining room and lounges where core groups are to meet. However the theatre requires a walk outside, so, as usual, an umbrella and a torch, just in case, might be useful.

This year the Annual General Meeting will be held on Friday night to allow greater time for visits and recreation on Saturday afternoon. The Agenda appears in this Newsletter and, as you will know from the Group Letter and pieces in the Newsletter, there have been a series of remits about the presentation of the Sea of Faith Network in New Zealand. These are summarized elsewhere with a further amendment. It is envisaged that groups will have had opportunity to discuss these before Conference and time allotted at the Annual General Meeting will be limited. If there is no clear direction from the membership at the meeting – alternatives such as a subcommittee to work through options and/or postal voting may be considered.

To ensure that the discussion of the remits is as effective as possible, I request that any individual or Local Group wishing to propose an amendment to any of the four remits, notifies the Secretary of this in writing by 5pm on 23rd September. (Alan Jackson: alanjackson@xtra.co.nz or 55 Evans Street, Opoho, DUNEDIN 9010). Any proposed further amendment necessarily requires the name and e-mail address or phone number of the proposer. It is anticipated that the proposer or a group representative will be at the AGM to present the amendment, and be able to do this in no more than three minutes. A seconder will be sought from the floor at the meeting. Please remember that while both members and non-members are entitled to speak at the AGM, only financial members are entitled to move a resolution or vote.

There is still time to register for Conference and so to enjoy what promises to be a memorable weekend of sharing thought and ideas with others and experiencing a few days of Spring in Christchurch.

Looking forward to seeing you there --

Natali Allen, Chairperson 2010-2011

ALBERT MOORE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A Review by Lloyd Geering

**More Than You Know, An autobiography
Albert Moore
2010, 314 pp.**

When I first met Albert Moore he was still a student, but in subsequent years I knew him as a fellow-minister, an academic colleague, a fellow-parishioner and, finally, a fellow-retiree. Several of us knew him as “Albie”, an intellectually able, friendly, loveable man, who always saw the best in people and in new ideas. (Only quite recently did I discover that we shared the same birthday, though I was eight years senior.)

Although we lived in the same city for no more than six or seven years I felt I knew Albie quite well; yet the reading of his autobiography was a revelation to me. Albert had a wealth of experience overseas, of which I had only the vaguest knowledge. He was not only well travelled but he had made the most of every opportunity to see and experience for himself the people, the sites, the buildings and the paintings that were of interest to him.

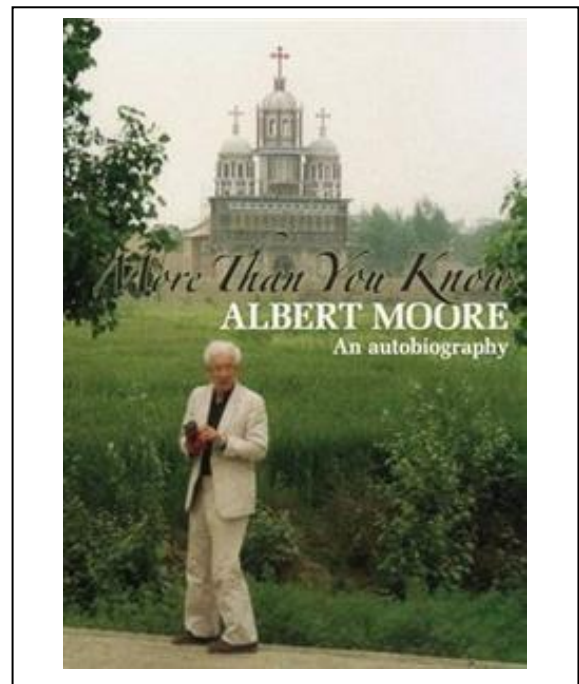
As Albert realized when he began to record his story (finished just before his death) he had spent his nearly eighty years continually extending the horizons of his interests and they were quite varied – history, theology, jazz, art, architecture, and every aspect of the manifestation of religion that he could find. His story is packed with detailed information, made possible because of his habit of frequent note-taking.

Along with his widening interests, his career also broadened and developed, from historian to teacher, to parish minister and finally to an academic. Reared in Wellington, Invercargill and Masterton, Albert took a history degree at Victoria University and trained as a teacher before deciding to study for the Presbyterian ministry at Knox College Theological Hall. There he won the Begg Travelling Scholarship that enabled him to study for his Ph.D. under T.W. Manson, the celebrated New Testament Scholar of Manchester. From there he spent an extra year at Göttingen in Germany to catch up with celebrated New Testament scholars, such as Ernst Käsemann and Rudolf Bultmann. During these three

years overseas Albert explored much of the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy, often by hitch-hiking.

On his return to New Zealand he became the parish minister of Tapanui in South Otago, where he served for some eight years. At first he shared the Manse with two male friends and it became known as ‘the monastery’, but four years later he married Alexa, a Karitane nurse and parishioner, who had recently returned home from overseas. In spite of entering into his pastoral duties with great enthusiasm, Albert still pursued his academic interests, even publishing an introduction to the thought of Bultmann for New Zealand readers, for which he received an appreciative response from Bultmann himself.

When Albert heard of the intention to set up a lectureship in Religious Studies at the University of Otago, he was so stirred by it that he decided to prepare for the post by resigning from his parish and, with his wife and two young children, go to the United States for further study. This was an extraordinary venture of faith, since there was no guarantee at all that he would be the successful applicant for the anticipated post. As it turned out nothing could have served his purpose better than the year he spent at Chicago with Mircea Eliade and Paul Tillich, followed by a year of teaching in Indiana. All in all, Albert had quickly become the most qualified applicant for the Otago lectureship in the Phenomenology of Religion.



Yet it was quite a creative task that lay ahead of Albert for in the '60's the academic study of religion (as distinct from the study of theology) was only just beginning in New Zealand Universities. From quite a small start, in which he was also asked to provide lectures within the BD curriculum at Knox College, Albert built up courses and slowly gained additional staff to create a viable Department of Religious Studies, in which he rose to the position of Associate Professor. Albert became highly regarded by his Religious Studies colleagues in the other universities.

This entire story Albert unfolds with his customary modesty, along with the accounts of his interesting travels when on study leave. Not least in value are the short vignettes Albert provides of some of the internationally known scholars that he knew personally, such as Ernst Käsemann, Helmut Rex, Mircea Eliade, Paul Tillich and Ninian Smart.

The magnum opus that crowned Albert's published work was undoubtedly his *Iconography of Religions*. This was a pioneering piece of work that he undertook because of his personal interest in art. This was the first attempt to provide for students a comprehensive survey of the icons, images, symbols used throughout human history to express religious belief and experience. Yet, mixed with his specifically religious interests, and along with his knowledge of art generally, Albert pursued throughout his whole life a great passion for jazz music and played the clarinet himself.

We may count it fortunate that Albert not only took the trouble to write down his story but also had the time to complete it before he died. Of great value and interest is the way in which he intersperses in the story of his life an account of his theological thought and the way it was developing in response to his increasing knowledge and very wide experience. This account of his life and thought will not only be of great personal interest to his friends and students (of whom there were many) but it is a useful contribution to the documentation of the study of religion in our fast changing world.

Lloyd Geering

Copies of the autobiography may be obtained from his daughter, Rachel Ovens, 64 Cannington Road, Maori Hill Dunedin. \$45, post free.

SPEAKING CHRISTIAN:

Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power and How They Can Be Restored

A Review by Fred Marshall

**Marcus J. Borg,
Harper One, NY, 2011**

In this book, which Bob Allbrook has kindly lent me, Marcus Borg develops the thesis that the words in which the Christian faith is expressed and the concepts that underlie the words have changed in their significance over the centuries and particularly over the last 200 years and no longer represent what the founding fathers of the Church believed. He is addressing the unease of those who wish to stay in the community of faith but are embarrassed by some of the implications of traditional liturgies, as expressed for example in the creeds. He is clearly criticising the literalist interpretations of fundamentalist sects who hold that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. Word by word and concept by concept, he reviews the language of Christianity in the light of historical meanings. There is little in the areas of *belief* and *faith* which will surprise Sofers; we have been hammering them for years. *Belief* signifies *commitment* and *faith* is *trust*. But if these concepts are to have any currency in liturgy it is not enough to describe what they used to represent or to call on archaic terms like *to believe* to carry them. They must be re-expressed in the liturgy in current words that now bear these old meanings if they are to have any effect on the validity of worship.

Borg's treatment of the area of *salvation, sin, repentance, forgiveness* and the *afterlife* is more fruitful. He points out how recent is the idea of living this life with a view to getting into heaven when you die. *Salvation* traditionally refers primarily to this present life not the hereafter. For ancient Israel it evoked the liberation from bondage (Exodus), the return from exile in Babylon and, in the Psalms, rescue from peril and healing from harm. These are powerful metaphors when applied to individual lives or to society as a whole. Liberation from the bondage of poverty or discrimination equates with a search for social justice; liberation from personal guilts and hangups leads to healing of heart, peace of mind and love for others. The terms in this category are reusable in liturgy: *salvation, sin, repentance, forgiveness* envisage the transformation of the individual and of society into a richer humanity.

This book is a rehabilitation of orthodoxy rather than a new theology in the mode of Geering, Cupitt and Spong. *God* is anthropomorphic, exhibiting human passions and emotions and Jesus is God's only son, preserving unquestioned the divisive absurdity of the Trinity. The concept of the divine potentially incarnate in us all is beyond its compass. Nevertheless, this is a very useful book for those who wish to remain in a church community but are uneasy at and embarrassed by the implications of the Christian-speak of the liturgy.

Fred Marshall, Hamilton

CHRISTIANITY STRIPPED OF OTHERWORLDLY BAGGAGE

A Review by Alan Goss

A Great New Story

Don Cupitt

Polebridge Press

Readers of Don Cupitt's numerous publications who think that he has surely said the last word will not be altogether surprised - there is yet another book!

In this slim volume Cupitt's purpose is to give us a new story about how we humans have gotten to be where we are now. It ends like a great symphony with a resounding hallelujah - Jesus is the top, the Summum Bonum, the Highest Good, the Mount Everest of man's religious quest. But it is not the Jesus that the early church dressed up in ornate clothing - not the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the resurrected and ascended Jesus who will come again. Rather it is Jesus the man, the sage of Galilee, whose teaching is recorded in his parables and pithy sayings and which waits to be rediscovered and applied in our modern secular age. So while Jesus' message was at first distorted and misunderstood it was never wholly lost. Cries for a more moral, humanitarian world are still heard. Maybe the world is now ready to hear, more than ever before, the Galilean message with a new ear and clearer eye.

In his book Cupitt confronts a number of problems which are common to many people today. The word "Christian" is one of them as it is more likely to be associated with those holding more conservative, even fundamentalist views. Also the titles "Messiah" and "Christ", Cupitt has dropped both of them. They have supernatural overtones and were labels pinned on Jesus by his early followers. Cupitt wants to give us a Christianity stripped of other-worldly baggage, which is more open, more outgoing, wholly directed towards our life in this world. That life is all that we have. The author goes over ground that in his various publications he has stressed before - life is short and it is passing away, when it is all over that is all, we have finished the race. There are no rewards or prizes waiting for us in the Great Beyond. There is no little bit (soul) inside us that is indestructible and that goes on forever. As Cupitt puts it, we burn for a short while and then we burn out. That is what happened to Jesus and it will happen to us. Our task, religion's task, is to "rediscover that way of living [that] Jesus happened to be the first to discover and teach."

How did we get to this point? Cupitt maintains that religion set us on the path "it is our mother, our old nurse and we should respect it." The Bible story shows how God gradually engineered his own exit from the earthly scene and handed the reins over to us. We have come into our inheritance, to live our life in this world. As we confront the big environmental, social, political and ethnical challenges of our age we should not get too starry-eyed about our future survival, nor should we lose hope.

Cupitt regrets that Protestantism has lost its old intellectual diversity. It has been hijacked by Conservative Evangelicalism. "It is becoming fossilized, sentimental and kitschy." Its best creative thinkers are no longer in the church or are at a safe distance on the margins. Where communities look for compassion and unity - as in earthquake-shattered Christchurch - denominational divisions still prevail. Critical thinking along with modern scientific and rapid social change "is leaving the Church stranded in a world it can no longer understand."

Is Cupitt's *Great New Story* too bare, too bleak? Is there no beautiful day beyond the blue horizon? Would we not be better off to accept Ecclesiastes advice and enjoy ourselves, a sort of perpetual Party Central a la the World Cup? There is, I feel, an unwritten addendum to Cupitt's book which brings us back to Jesus and his message about the Kingdom of God. This was a call to live a new way of life in which our baser instincts like greed and prejudice were overcome by love. Today this means acting globally as well as locally. It also means acting fast. Now we must act on our inheritance, now we must Play God. New technologies must be invented and used so that our planet will not be irreparably damaged and destroyed. We humans are milking the earth's resources willy nilly beyond its capacity to sustain us. So we need to build a community spirit at all levels which will constrain our worst excesses and guarantee a better future for the generations to come.

Jesus' message of the Kingdom also means that we must find new ways of "doing Church". This is already happening. Groups are emerging that share a radically different view of what is usually meant by church. They have adopted names that express this: Explorers, Sea of Faith, Cutting Edge, Groove, Learning and Discovery, Ephesus, Xploration N.Z. Many of their members are still church-goers or were so in the past. Maybe this is Cupitt's unwritten addendum; maybe it's not.

Let Richard Holloway, with these fine last words in one of his books, sum it up: "some among the living will miss us for a while, but the earth will go on without us. Its day is longer than ours, though we now know that it too will die. Our brief finitude is but a beautiful spark in the vast darkness of space. So we should live the fleeting day with passion and, when the night comes, depart from it with grace."

Acknowledgments

- (i) "Such Is Life" by Lloyd Geering (Steele Roberts), esp. the Afterword.
- (ii) Article in "Dominion Post" - 14 July 2011 re book by Mark Lynas, "The God Species".
- (iii) Column by Ian Harris, "Otago Daily Times" 25 February 2011.

Alan Goss, Napier

JOURNEY OF FAITH

Julie Jeffrey was the recipient of the Sea of Faith Scholarship in 2010. This is what she wrote:

It was with great excitement, and a little bit of nervous apprehension, that I set off from Palmerston North to attend the Sea of Faith Conference in Silverstream, in January of 2010. However, all apprehension soon dispersed, as I was welcomed with such warmth and introduced to my buddy, Margaret Gwynne, who so willingly and wonderfully, looked after me during the duration of the Conference.

The Conference theme was *Compassion*. The calibre of the presenters and speakers was exceptional and I particularly enjoyed the more formal presentations, which were packed with valuable information and a great deal of wisdom. These speakers gave freely of themselves and their expertise. The discussion groups after each presentation, I found most interesting. Having been brought up a strict Catholic, and having discarded the Catholic dogma at eighteen, after the death of my parents, it was rather insightful to be involved in a group, whose views were so different from my own beliefs, which are more Eastern and Spiritual in nature. And yet in some ways we were not so different, as Sea of Faith members have also discarded the dogma of organised religion and seek a different way to express their inner callings. I enjoyed the talks on Friday by the different denominations and it was uplifting to hear from a

Humanist, who gave a passionate and excellent talk from his perspective.

Meals were a time of fellowship and I met some wonderful people from all walks of life, who shared so openly. The trip out to the Buddhist Monastery was a real highlight. All in all it was a most enjoyable, valuable and worthwhile Conference and I thank all the awesome people of Sea of Faith, who made it possible and pleasurable for me.

*Love and Light
Julie Jeffrey*

JUNG, THE UNCONSCIOUS AND US

An excerpt from a newspaper article by Ian Harris describing a recent lecture series by Lloyd Geering.

"[Our] external world evolves towards the one who holds it all together. The archetypes for the self and for God are the same." [Geering quoted Jung as saying].

Jung's understanding of the creativity of the unconscious led him to put forward a natural explanation of religious experience instead of a supernatural one. His approach throws light on the voices heard by the Hebrew prophets, Jesus' appearances after his crucifixion, and the revelation of the Qur'an to Mohammed.

Jung concluded that all religions had arisen out of the human unconscious, operating to help the psyche find renewal, health, wholeness and unity.

"The origin of religion in the unconscious doesn't make religions false," said Geering. "They are symbolic systems of meaning that help the unconscious reach fullness."

"Religious experience is therefore not to be dismissed, but understood as resulting from the needs of the psyche to find meaning and achieve wholeness. Each religion has helped people find meaning in life – when it has been working properly."

Recent research into consciousness is casting new light on what one researcher calls "the ultimate undeniable fact: our own experience". A packed church for these lectures suggests a strong and continuing interest in what Jung offers.

■ Lloyd Geering's four-part lecture series *Jung, the Unconscious and Us* on DVD can be ordered from St Andrew's Trust, Box 5023, Wellington 6145; \$41 posted.

A POST-CHRISTIAN GOD?

A Review by Bill Cooke

The God Revolution: How Ideas About God Radically Changed During the Modern Era

Keith Hill

Auckland: Attar Books, 2011

Think about what a former Presbyterian might say about the God he can no longer honestly subscribe to. What might such a person say? Well, the Sea of Faith has been very largely driven by just such a prospect. Lloyd Geering can fairly be described as a former Presbyterian who has written books about how and why the beliefs he once subscribed to no longer work, and how they might be re-envisioned. But while this process of re-visioning has proceeded, an unanticipated problem has arisen. Is the next generation interested? Largely the answer has been in the negative. The next generation has been either indifferently secular or aggressively evangelical. But every now and then, someone from this next generation has taken up the mantle of asking these questions about God. One of these new voices, coming from outside the Sea of Faith, is Keith Hill, an Auckland-based lapsed Presbyterian whose book is called *The God Revolution: How Ideas about God Radically Changed During the Modern Era*.

While Hill is asking similar questions to Geering, it's worth noting the subtle but important differences of emphasis between them. Probably the most important of them is that Hill is entirely unconcerned with the ecclesiastical and theological elements of Christian thought. Hill is not concerned, as Geering was for the earlier part of his career, with dragging the church along with him. Rather, Hill begins from a more genuinely post-Christian perspective of not caring that much about the church but of looking at conceiving God anew. Where that new setting is – whether in a church or not – is a matter of indifference to Hill. If anything, he seems to prefer a future away from the churches. So Hill has little to say about changing theological understandings of God unless they form part of the larger intellectual history-style account he puts together.

The book gets more interesting as it goes along. Part One is a capable account of the death of God over the past few centuries, covering most of the people one would expect to encounter. The only thinkers not discussed much are the atheists. Hill is content with a

general dig at Richard Dawkins, but leaves most of the other atheists unexamined. This is a shame, and inevitably skews the story he presents. But with this caveat noted, Part One is an intelligent outline of a complex transition. Part Two looks at the more turbulent ride God had in the twentieth century and runs broadly along the theme of God (a rather attenuated God) bouncing back. He explores this along the parallel lines of pantheism and panentheism. Finally, Part Three finishes the book with Hill's account of what can meaningfully be said about God in the twenty-first century.

Probably the main weakness of the book is its scholarly fairness. Hill does a good job of outlining the various ideas and intellectual trajectories in a dispassionate, scholarly-yet-accessible way, but at the cost of sometimes reading like a textbook. He needs to handle his material with more confidence and impose his will on it more. Only in Part Three, where Hill makes a case for the God-idea he thinks the most credible for the twenty-first century, does this happen. His re-visioning of the God idea will work for some and not for others. For me, it has the same problem all progressive religious re-evaluations have. The question of 'why bother?' is not explored in any depth. Why try to give new meaning to old words, so burdened with old meanings and old associations? Wouldn't it be more honest to start again without these old words and their associated lumber? The old God, the one we think of as dead, is still loved by millions, who are warmed and lulled by its anthropocentric cocoon against the colder truth of our cosmic irrelevance. Strip God of those attributes and, to me at any rate, he's of little use. Erudite formulae can't console us in the way a personal God does. For those more favourably inclined to this project, Hill's book will be a valuable pointer.

Another interesting feature of this book lies as much in what happens outside its covers as inside them. At one point Hill discusses the current trend towards what is being called grassroots spirituality. He cites research which estimates that upwards of seventy million Americans are participating in about three million local spiritual groups, which may or may not be connected to churches. All these groups, like the so-called postmodern churches which meet in garages, cafes or people's houses (which Hill does not mention) tend to operate beneath the radar. They come and go, in the way fashions do, and the governing impulse is not 'this is how it is' but 'let's see what works'. This trend towards a pragmatic pluralism

mirrors what some commentators have noticed is taking place in the world of business. We tend to be fixated by the power of multi-national corporations but Robert Reich is one economist who sees their days as numbered, to be replaced by smaller, more flexible business operations which fill a micro-niche for a while, then either grow large (and therefore inflexible) or fade out, to be replaced by new, small operations. What's happening in business is also happening in matters spiritual. In a way, the clearest illustration of this is Keith Hill himself. Hill is not an insider. He's not an academic in the sense of holding a university position and the book is not published by a university press. Once upon a time, not too long ago, this would have been admitted apologetically, or noted scornfully. But not anymore. In this respect *The God Revolution* is part of the future. It's as much a sign of grassroots spirituality as some of the trends he analyses. And it's a good thing. The only time when one would demur on this point is when having to ignore the frequent typos, the most grating of which being 'principal', which is repeatedly spelt as 'principle'.

***The God Revolution* deserves to be read because it is an honest and intelligent account of the death of the old God and as good an attempt as any to give the old idea new credibility. Sea of Faith readers, in particular, need to support this book, because it suggests there is a future for the ideas and concerns that brought us together in the first place.**

Bill Cooke is an Auckland member of the Sea of Faith. His latest book, *A Wealth of Insights: Humanist Thought Since the Enlightenment*, has just been published by Prometheus Books and will be reviewed in a future Newsletter.

THINKING MEAT

In a 1991 science-fiction story by Terry Bisson, we listen in on a conversation between the robotic commander of an interplanetary expedition and his equally electronic leader, reporting with astonishment that the human inhabitants of Earth are "made out of meat":

"Meat?"

"There's no doubt about it. ... "

"That's impossible. ... How can meat make a machine? You're asking me to believe in sentient meat."

"I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. These creatures are the only sentient race in the sector, and they're made out of meat." ...

"Spare me. Okay, maybe they're only part meat. ... "

"Nope, we thought of that, since they do have meat heads. ... But ... they're meat all the way through."

"No brain?"

"Oh, there is a brain all right. It's just that the brain is made out of meat!"

"So ... what does the thinking?"

"You're not understanding, are you? The brain does the thinking. The meat."

"Thinking meat! You're asking me to believe in thinking meat?"

"Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Dreaming meat! The meat is the whole deal! Are you getting the picture?"

* * * * *

We intuitively feel that, like Pinocchio, we are a body that was sprinkled with the 'fairy dust' that infused a soul into us. This is similar to the classical Christian view, with a detachable soul with a post-mortem destiny. The view that science gives us is nearer to the 'Frankenstein' model in which the body gives rise to the mind.

Francis Crick wrote in his book, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*:

"You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules."

Noel Cheer

From a workshop delivered at the 2011 UK SoF Conference

ATHEIST CONVENTION

The recent Atheist Convention in Melbourne attracted over 2,500 people. A DVD has been produced with extracts including:

Richard Dawkins: *On gratitude for Evolution and the Evolution of Gratitude*;

AC Grayling: Professor of Philosophy at University of London, Atheism, Secularism, Humanism. *Three Zones of Argument*;

PZ Myers: US biology professor, zoologist and long time critic of Creationism, *The inescapable Conflict between Science and Religion*;

Peter Singer: Australian philosopher and Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University, *Ethics without Religion*.

The DVD can be purchased for AUS\$29.95 and shipping (Air Mail Zone B-Asia Pacific) is AUS\$13.40 giving a total cost of AUS\$43.35. More at www.sirenvisual.com.au

from Humanist Association of New Zealand

THE RICHNESS OF ACTIVELY CHOOSING AGNOSTICISM

A Review By Don Feist of Dunedin

“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”.

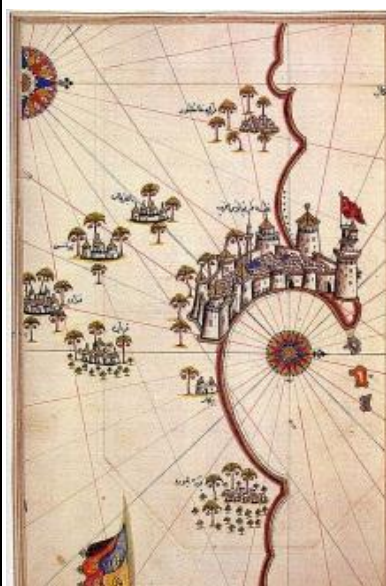
I had never realised that an actively chosen agnostic position could be so rich and positive. I found the book stimulating, thought-provoking, encouraging and helpful.

Don 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.

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A NOTE ON LIBYA



A century ago, in October 1911,

Italian forces landed in Tripoli and Benghazi, thus occupying the last part of North Africa that was still part of the Ottoman Turkish Empire.

This event signalled the culmination of the European colonization of Africa.

THE COMING FAMINE

A Review by Louise Elvey

The Coming Famine

The Global Food Crisis and What We Can Do to Avoid It
Julian Cribb Publisher: CSIRO PUBLISHING

Many books published in the past ten years have been very disturbing, with their revelations about climate change and the inevitability of its effect on humankind in the near future.

Among these is *The Coming Famine* by Julian Cribb in which we have his forecast of imminent shortages in the world's production of even basic foodstuffs, not just for the remote parts of Africa and Asia; and not just in forty years' time. **We are frighteningly near to running short of food for our own grandchildren.**

The Coming Famine appeared in 2010, so the author is well aware of recent droughts, floods, and crop failures. It is easy for us to relate to TV newsclips of starving babies and gaunt parents.

The author, Julian Cribb, is a fellow of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering. He edits Australian R&D Review and ScienceAlert.com.au, the nation's leading scientific news site.

His awards for journalism include the Order of Australia Association Media Prize, the inaugural Eureka Prize for environmental journalism; he was national foundation president of the Australian Science Communicators (ASC), president of the National Rural and Resources Press Club and a member of CSIRO advisory committees for agriculture, fisheries and entomology. He teaches science communication at ANU.

The set-up is not a dauntingly large volume, only 200 pages of text uncomplicated by the references which are listed at the back; thirteen easily understood graphs (or tables) added to my grasp of the points, pages uncluttered in appearance, all in print which, though a little small, was easy to read.

As I read the book, each chapter seemed to become more important than the one before. **Peak Land** was a revealing look at the way good farmland gets absorbed into the edges of cities, worldwide; deserts are enlarging on every continent; there is the horror of enormous tracts of land used for growing bio-fuel crops; immense acreage is used to feed beef cattle .

Nutrients, the New Oil begins with 'we act towards food and land in ways that would utterly appal and horrify our ancestors, accustomed as they were to husbanding ...every precious form of "waste..."'

In **Acidic Oceans**, Cribb states that 'half of all CO₂ emitted ends in the sea. It will take tens of thousands of years for

oceans to return to the chemical balance of 200 years ago,' (the beginning of the industrial age).

And 'If fishing around the world continues at its present pace, more and more species will vanish ... there will be global collapse of all species currently fished ... by the early 21st century, 29 percent of the world's fish stocks [have] been pounded so heavily by fishing, pollution, or loss of habitat that they [have] collapsed ...'

The chapter **Losing our Brains** gave an unbiased overview of the controversy about GM. We are re-assured that biotechnology has much to offer in dealing with shortages of water, land, nutrients, plant diseases—all are necessary when the situation is as it now presents itself. But that said, following the success of the Green Revolution, the tendency in the past twenty years has been to relax about contributing resources to R&D about crop improvement. Six of the countries named, USA, Germany, France, Japan, Canada and Australia, have instead "discovered other technological eldorado."

I found comfort in the list of 'Things we can do'

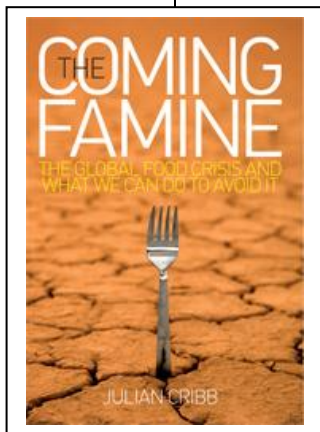
accompanying each chapter. Despair crept in at the realisation that among the six billion inhabitants of this plundered planet, maybe only a few thousand will get the message.

Moves to avert the disaster need to be made soon. They will be costly. Those in power need to know how near our world is to irreversible change: failure of fresh water resources; loss of arable land through salination, flooding, desertification, under-use of restorative nutrients; atmospheric pollution through yearly increases in CO₂ emissions; degradation of ocean fisheries; due to climate variations, the

change of suitability of particular areas of land for crops historically raised. Acting now will be immensely disturbing economically. However, hesitation will cost millions of lives, social and political chaos, invasions by starving populations (read Gwynn Dyer's *Climate Wars*), and an end to the relative plenty and comfort enjoyed by our present generation. Action now by every country with an interest in preserving what is worth saving, is the only conceivable course open to our politicians.

Cribb points out that during the history of humanity on this planet, we have overcome threats to our survival using common sense and consensus. But a wake-up call is needed, and Julian Cribb has issued it in this book. His message is clear: **'Never has urban civilisation as a whole been so at risk of catastrophe'**.

Read it, then talk about it to all who will listen!



Louise Elvey

THE NOT-SO-GOOD BOOK

The Good Book: a Secular Bible

A.C. Grayling

Bloomsbury \$59.99

Reviewed by Lloyd Geering in *New Zealand Listener*

June 27, 2011

This alternative “bible” does the humanist movement a disservice.

By accident, I recently heard A.C. Grayling being interviewed on Radio New Zealand National’s Saturday Morning with Kim Hill. Grayling holds a chair of philosophy at Birkbeck College in London and is president of the British Humanist Association. I warmed to what he said because I agree with his assertion that the humanist tradition has a long, widespread and noble history. To demonstrate this, he has scoured more than a thousand texts from the past, representing both Western and Eastern traditions, and distilled their insights into an anthology he calls *The Good Book: A Secular Bible*.

Having already been asked to review the book, I all the more eagerly looked forward to receiving it. But on its arrival my heart sank as I skimmed through its pages. Was there any need to ape the Bible right down to its double columns and numbered verses? Unfortunately, these two features of most versions of the English Bible impede the flow of the text and thus frustrate the reader. After all, the now familiar versification of the Bible is a very late intrusion that was introduced for study purposes. Grayling should have known from his diligent search for humanist wisdom that “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery”.

The Good Book is presented in 14 parts, some with titles intended to echo or evoke biblical counterparts: we find, for example, “Genesis”, “Lamentations”, “Songs”, “Histories”, “Proverbs”, “Acts” and “Epistles”. Although “Histories” (which amounts to a third of the book) is readily recognisable as a heavily edited version of *The Histories* of the Greek historian Herodotus, Grayling never acknowledges his sources – except for, on the very last page, a list of 124 names from Aeschylus to Xenophon (including Grayling!).

If Grayling’s intent was to show that humanist thinking was present among the ancients, he would have done better to reveal his sources. For many wise sayings, in order to appreciate them, we need to know both who said them and the context in which they originated. When bundled together (as they are here), they often lose their sharp edge and even, occasionally, their significance. The result is that most of *The Good Book* reads like a

surprisingly uniform succession of one-liners that too often strike one as bland or even trite.

Perhaps the best of *The Good Book* is the last and shortest section – the one called simply “The Good”. Some of the observations about life collected here manifest such a freshness of expression that one cannot help but wonder whether they were composed by the author himself.

Grayling’s prejudice against anything traditionally religious has prevented him from using the humanist elements in the Bible. Discerning readers will find its “Proverbs” and “Ecclesiastes” superior to most of what we have in *The Good Book*.

As I tried to show in my recent book *Such is Life! A Close Encounter with Ecclesiastes*, the thoughts of that ancient thinker are remarkably like those of humanists in the 21st century.

Although I happen to share much of Grayling’s humanist standpoint, I long ago learnt to read the Bible for what it is. It is not a set of divine revelations from a superhuman source, but a diverse collection of legends, myths, historical stories, prophetic oracles and letters – all written by fallible and sometimes prejudiced people.

Yet even when the Bible is read as the words of men rather than the Word of God, it still remains a much richer compendium of wisdom than this rigidly secular anthology. Indeed, Grayling may have done the humanist movement a real disservice by assembling a “bible” that makes humanism appear drab, uninteresting and even boring. When set alongside *The Good Book*, the Bible can be interesting and even inspiring. Even more important, of course, is the Bible’s value as an irreplaceable resource for understanding our cultural origins.

Lloyd Geering

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9/11

TEN YEARS ON

Is the world any safer now, after a decade of ‘war on terror’?

**Why?
Why not?**

Can you send 300-500 words by October 15 please?

[ed]

