

Celebrating 20 Years in New Zealand and 100 Newsletters

Sea of Faith

Exploring Spirituality, Religion and Ethics

NEWSLETTER 100, MAY 2012

BELIEF CLINGS, FAITH LETS GO

Once, there lived a village of creatures along the bottom of a great crystal river. The current of the river swept silently over them all, young and old, rich and poor, good and evil, the current going its own way knowing its own crystal self.

Each creature, in its own manner, clung tightly to the twigs and rocks of the river bottom, for clinging was their way of life and resisting the current what each had learned from birth.

But one creature said at last. "I'm tired of clinging. Though I cannot see it with my eyes I trust that the current knows where it is going. I shall let go and let it take me where it will. Clinging, I shall die of boredom."

The other creatures laughed and said, "Fool, let go and that current you worship will throw you, tumbled and smashed across the rocks and you will die quicker than from boredom."

But the one heeded them not and, taking a breath, did let go and at once was tumbled and smashed by the current across the rocks.

Yet, in time, as the creature refused to cling again, the current lifted him free from the bottom and he was bruised and hurt no more. And the creatures downstream, to whom he was a stranger, cried, "See, a miracle, a creature like ourselves yet he flies, see the Messiah come to save us all!"

And the one carried in the current said, "I am no more Messiah than you, the river delights to lift us free if only we dare let go. Our true work is this voyage, this adventure."

But they cried the more, "Saviour!", all the while clinging to the rocks. And when they looked again, he was gone.

And they were left alone, making legends of the Saviour.

From *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* by Richard Bach.
First published in Newsletter 36, May 2000

[Visit our website.](#)

THOUGHTS ON THE CLERGY PROJECT

The **Clergy Project** [Newsletter 98, January 2012 p.4] sounds like a great idea: a confidential online community for clergy who are moving beyond the official teaching of their church. This can be a lonely and distressing experience, and one where the church itself tends not to offer any “pastoral care” at all. However, when I checked out the Clergy Project website (www.clergyproject.org) I was surprised to discover that the project is made possible through a donation from the Richard Dawkins foundation and if you register to join the forum, you receive a welcome letter from Richard Dawkins, Mr. “God Delusion” himself. It is the brainchild of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Linda LaScola and Dan Barker, a former evangelical preacher who is now co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

It seems that the new atheists have discovered a new focus of attention: clergy who have “lost their faith,” who lead a double life, preaching one thing to their congregation and believing something else, or who have left the employ of the church and taken up a secular role. Daniel Dennett interviewed five such clergy and wrote the results up in an article in *Evolutionary Psychology* entitled “Preachers Who Are Not Believers”

<http://www.epjournal.net/wp-content/uploads/EP08122150.pdf>

Such clergy have great propaganda value. It’s hard to imagine a thought more subversive to the faithful than that the leaders in the faith secretly do not themselves believe. Accordingly, the *Clergy Project* website has links to radio interviews with and books by former clergy.

However, the more such clergy are mined for their propaganda value, the greater my doubts about the value of the *Clergy Project*’s online community. To become a member, you have to commit to non-faith: you must “no longer hold supernatural beliefs and choose to identify as non-believers for instance humanists, freethinkers, agnostics and/or atheists or other type of non-theist.” But belief/non-belief is not the black and white matter that the new atheists make it out to be. Community members need freedom to explore and find their own path, which could be a mix of letting some beliefs go and finding other areas where faith deepens. The new atheists consistently portray religion of a supernaturalist and fundamentalist sort, and do not see a pathway to a more enlightened type of religion. How supportive would the Clergy Project be to Karen Armstrong as she left her order, became a non-believer and then re-discovered religion?

Laurie Chisholm, Christchurch

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

According to Rabbi Eli Cohen in his book *Kosher Jesus*, the Sermon on the Mount is a reformulation of Hebrew scriptures which Jesus (or whoever might have written later in the ‘voice’ of Jesus*) would have studied and been committed to. The following parallelisms illustrate that:

Jesus: (Matt 5:5) Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Hebrew Bible: (Psalm 37) The meek shall inherit the earth, and delight themselves in the abundance of peace.

Jesus: (Matt 5:8) Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Hebrew Bible: (Psalm 24) Who shall ascend the mount of the Lord the pure-hearted.

Jesus: (Matt 5:39) But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Hebrew Bible: (Lamentations 3:30) Let him offer his cheek to him who smites him....

Jesus: (Matt 6:33) But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Hebrew Bible: (Psalm 37:4) Delight yourself in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.

Jesus: (Matt 7:7) Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

Hebrew Bible: (Jer 29:13) When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.

Jesus: (Matt 7:23) Then I will declare to them, I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.

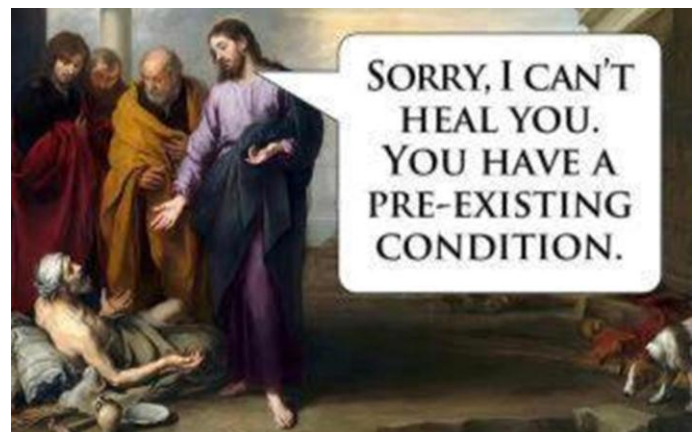
Hebrew Bible: (Psalm 6:9) Depart from me, all you workers of evil...

The OT sources of these central quotations from Jesus (or, if you prefer, ‘Jesus’) should not be seen to undermine their value. A good line is a good line, no matter who says it, or when.

Noel Cheer

**ipsissima verba* = the actual words

ipsissima vox = the actual voice, though not literal wording.



HORS D'OEUVRES

Conference CDs

The CDs of the 2011 Conference will no longer be on sale after June 1st. We intend to offer CDs of the 2012 Conference, provided that the quality is adequate.

Sea of Faith in Australia 2012 Conference

Fri 31 Aug — Sun 2 Sept 2012

Twin Towns Resort, Coolangatta

The Conference focuses on our Shared Humanity and the place of Religion, Faith and Meaning as expressions of the human spirit. The Global Village, once simply an idea, is now a present reality. So, too, is a heightened consciousness of our Shared Humanity. Are there implications in this for the way we live as individuals and in community?

More at: www.sof-in-australia.org

Secular Buddhism

Paralleling what is going on in Progressive- and Post-Christian circles, Secular Buddhism is making itself felt. As with Christianity, matters of historicity, development of scripture and current relevance are being dealt with. The panel discussion between Lloyd Geering and the Buddhist teacher Stephen Batchelor in Wellington in November 2010 brought up some striking parallels, as is likely to occur when Don Cupitt and Stephen Batchelor meet on May 20th in a similar discussion in London.

The discussion is advertised at

www.londoninsight.org/dialogue, the NZ Secular Buddhism site is at secularbuddhism.org.nz

Who Owns Your Conscience?

"Unlike their quiet descendants in later generations, the early Quakers were subversives who strove to turn the world upside down. And the most subversive thing about them was their message that neither Church, nor State, nor Bible, could command an individual's conscience. The message is still unsettling to those who believe that they have authority over others."

From David Boulton's small book A Thousand Ages which is about the Church in Dentdale, Cumbria, near his home.)

Trash Future

"Looking ahead in a bad mood, I have sometimes summed up the prospect for humanity in three words: technology, entertainment, fundamentalism. A trash future. All the world's great religions are in decline, and the mainline Christian churches in particular are simply melting away. They are too defensive to allow a truly free internal debate amongst their own members about what's wrong and how it should be put right."

Don Cupitt: quoted, but the source not cited, in SoF In Australia Bulletin May 2000



The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) follows similar organisations in both the UK and Australia in taking its name from the 1984 television series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt. The series both traces the decline of traditional Christian influence in the West in the past 250 years and invites the viewer to consider what might replace it. In New Zealand, the Sea of Faith Network provides a forum for the continued exploration.

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SUPPLEMENT

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CONFERENCE 2012

From Friday 5th October To Sunday 7th October

The Revaluing of All Values

Venue: St. Cuthbert's College in Epsom, Auckland

Theme: The Revaluing of All Values – What values do we need to survive?

Keynote Speakers:

- **Andrew Bradstock** who holds the Howard Paterson Chair in Theology and Public Issues at University of Otago.
- **Valerie Grant**, Senior Lecturer, Psychological Medicine School of Medicine Auckland
- **Dr John Peet**, retired Senior Lecturer Chemical & Process Engineering. Chairman of Sustainable Aotearoa.
- **Our own Sir Lloyd Geering.**

Workshops: Tom Hall, Ralph Pannett, Christiane Silva

The Definitive Programme and the Registration

Form will accompany the July Newsletter and will appear on the Website.

Nietzsche's Contribution

In the early stages of planning the Conference, the Steering Committee accepted a suggestion from Lloyd Geering to look at the subject of re-valuing current values. Lloyd had written extensively about this in his treatment of Friedrich Nietzsche ("Prophet of the New Age") in his 1980 book Faith's New Age. The following are extracts from pages 300 and 310-313.

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) may be described as the prophet *par excellence* of the new age. Martin Buber has referred to him as 'the first path-finder of the new culture', 'the awakener and creator of new life-values and a new world-feeling'. R. J. Hollingdale, a translator of some of Nietzsche's works into English, said: 'The twentieth century came to birth in the mind of Friedrich Nietzsche during the 1880's; and it is his particular and undying distinction that when he saw the blood-red dawn of our day he did not turn from it in distress and leave the future to fend for itself, but wearied himself to find a means whereby this new and more terrible day could be endured, welcomed and enjoyed'.

Nietzsche believed that the traditional Christian concern with the supposed spiritual realities of the other-world, far from leading to human fulfilment, had the effect of falsifying all the real human problems of politics, of social organization and of education and of causing men* to despise the basic concerns of life itself.

He believed the concepts of 'God', 'soul', 'virtue', 'sin', 'beyond', 'truth', 'eternal life' are not to be considered true realities, but are mere imaginings.

He claimed the concept of 'God' was invented as a counterconcept of life. It synthesized everything harmful, poisonous, slanderous, the whole hostility unto death against life in a gruesome unity!

The modern growth of this-worldly concerns ... meant, for Nietzsche, that mankind* was entering on an entirely new era, one pregnant with both hope and disaster on the grand scale. He spoke of his fellow-Europeans as the 'first-born of the twentieth century'.

In the transition to modernity, a transition in values is taking place. Nietzsche believed this to be more radical than all previous transitions in that it was not simply a replacement of one set of values ... by another set of values ... [rather] it was the transition to the state of affairs where it must be recognized that there are no absolute moral values but that man himself is seen to be the creator of values.

This transition he called 'the revaluation of all values'. ... 'There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena'.

Nietzsche's doctrine of the revaluation of all values is all of a piece with the dissolution of the other-world, the recognition of the death of God and the awareness of the absence of any eternal moral absolutes.

The new age called upon men to revalue and reverse the former 'eternal values', for in the past these had fostered what Nietzsche called the 'slave morality'. What Nietzsche hoped to see develop by the revaluation of all values was what he called 'the master morality'. This has nothing whatever to do ... with a morality of mastering it over others. It is the morality of the noble type of man who 'feels *himself* to be the determiner of values, he does not need to be approved of ... he *creates values* ... '.

Instead of becoming the slave of values, falsely *believed to be absolute* ... he has become the master of the moral component of his own *human condition*. The exponent of master morality is the morally mature man*, the man who is morally well-balanced, who, because of what he is, must perform certain actions and instinctively shrink from other actions. Instead of finding happiness by conforming to certain virtues imposed from without, 'his virtue is the consequence of his happiness'.

** This was written over 30 years ago when, before the feminist protest, it was still acceptable to use the word 'man(kind)' generically to mean all humankind.*

CONFERENCE 2012

From Friday 5th October To Sunday 7th October

From The Chair

Reflecting Friedrich Nietzsche's dictum, this year's Conference has been titled "The Revaluing of All Values". As this is to be the twentieth conference of the Sea of Faith in New Zealand it seems appropriate that we use the opportunity to consider not only the past twenty years of our organisation, but also our place in a society and in the world. Many see, as Nietzsche did in the later nineteenth century, today's world as one in which humanity is entering an entirely new era, an era with the potential for both hope and disaster on a grand scale, and with this, the human responsibility for the creation of new values and new ways of living.

In 1993, the first National Conference, organized by John and Gillian Denny and held in Bryant Hall at the University of Waikato was, the then current Newsletter reports, attended by 211 people. It was there that the first statement about the nature of the Sea of Faith in New Zealand was discussed and drafted, and the first Steering Committee, was set up.

While Lloyd Geering was the speaker, the 1993 Conference appears to have been mainly made up of workshops with titles such as **Science and the Search for Meaning, Are Gods less Real Than Trees?, The Chief Religious Issues for Today, Do We Experience a God-shaped Hole?** The short reviews of these suggest that the focus of the Conference perhaps became 'loss' – the loss of relationship with and within an undefined Church, the loss of absolute certainties and credible authority, and the loss of the meaning and relevance of God.

Since 1997, which was the first Conference to be given a title: **Faith on the Margins**, successive Conference titles suggest that our concerns have widened to include a focus on the future of the planet Earth and all life upon it. Last year we were issued a challenge similar to Nietzsche's ... a challenge to reconsider dominant beliefs and values. Today's questions focus on our humanity and relationships with all life, and on the activities which our beliefs and values engender.

Thus we can reflect that Conference 1993 provided the beginning of a context and confidence in which we could continue to explore, reevaluate and redefine, often quite radically, the structure of our belief and faith. Now in 2012 we face the challenge of a similar evaluation of the paradigms which predominate, and by which we live in the world. Rather than a focus on possible alternatives to traditional belief, that challenge appears to be one of defining values by which we, as individuals and members of the human species, can live and accept responsibility for the future of life on Earth.

To introduce discussion this year, Lloyd Geering, Valerie Grant, Andrew Bradstock, and John Peet, will consider aspects of our current value systems, their source, evolution, definition, and previous and current challenges to them.

Conference will be held at St Cuthberts' College in Auckland beginning at 1pm on the 5th and ending at 2 pm on the 7th of October. And here, a further reminder that we are governed by our contract with St Cuthbert's to provide all Conference material and bookings by the 18th September. This means that all registrations must be received by 5pm on Friday 14th September so, given the potential for early discount fares, it is not too early to begin planning to attend.

We hope to begin Conference with a short review of the past twenty years of the Sea of Faith in New Zealand and to display interesting historical material from the Archives. This year core groups will again offer opportunities to build upon ideas presented in the papers and on Saturday afternoon, there will be a choice of visits, workshops and/or free time.

The AGM will be held on Friday evening. In preparation for this, and given the alternative models that are available, the Steering Committee will determine and distribute beforehand, the rules for discussion that we will adopt. At the meeting this year, five of the elected current Steering Committee members will complete their terms and the remaining four will follow in 2013 or 2014. Thus there will be an election of new members at Conference and, in July, there will be a call for nominations from local groups and individuals. As you receive this please take a moment or two to think about approaching those you know who could contribute to the future of the Network in this role.

Again we can anticipate an enjoyable weekend with interesting and stimulating presentations thought and discussion, and time to catch up with old, and to make new friends within the Network.

Looking forward to seeing you there.

Natali Allen
Chairperson
2011-2012



SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

Radical Religion in Cromwell's England

A review by Frank Regan

Andrew Bradstock

Radical Religion in Cromwell's England

Tauris 2011, 189 pages, £12.99

Hustin Smith used to tell the story of the Lord God who called upon all Christian leaders to form the One True Church of Christ by next Monday. Obediently they answered the Lord's call. On Monday the One True Church of Christ was formed. By Tuesday there were two One True Churches of Christ! The Chinese philosopher who minted the prayer, "may you live in interesting times", would have had a lot of food for thought in 17th century England.

Andrew Bradstock, Professor of Theology and Public Issues at the

University of Otago, New Zealand, has written a very fine book on the few years before the Restoration – Cromwell's Commonwealth – in which various groups of Christian rebels sprung up, each making its claim to be the way forward. They had marvellous names (epithets?): the Dippers, the Ranters, the Diggers, the Quakers, the Levellers, the Fifth Monarchists and the Muggletonians. For them Dissidence was a way of life. They were against the institutional church, the predominance of the corrupt clergy and, especially, they were against tithing. Very few of the groups survived – only the Quakers and the Baptists (Dippers) from whom most of the groups stemmed from. The last Muggletonian died in 1979.

It is difficult to imagine a time in this country in which religion was the hot topic of the day. It was a time in which it was dangerous to be a dissident. One could lose life, limb and property for one's beliefs. It was a time fecund of all sorts of religious literature, especially pamphlets, which debated, denigrated, denounced and dammed all and sundry who did not agree. It was an exciting time to have lived, if also perilous.

Most, if not all of those groups, had their beginnings, in, or very near, the Baptists. The 'Dippers', as they were known, practised full immersion for Baptism. They asserted the right to withdraw from established religion and form their own independent churches. There was only one New Testament model of church: believers voluntarily gathering together. The church was 'a company of visible saints'. Thus the church could not comprise all who lived in the parish because there lived

the saved *and* the reprobate. The church was of the committed, with adults baptised in their majority years. Infant baptism was forbidden.

One can appreciate how feared they were by the established church. By the terms of the Elizabethan Settlement, baptism for the newly born meant both membership of the church and citizenship of the country. The Baptists were seen as dedicated to the tearing of a very frail social fabric and so were highly suspect.

Archbishop Laud was dedicated to the erasure of all Puritanism, by violence if necessary. Soon there arose an awareness of the necessity of becoming more politically active. Thus were born the Levellers, reputed by some as being the political wing of the

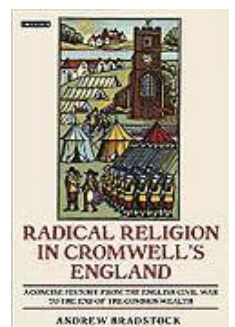
For them, Dissidence was a way of life. They were against the institutional church, the predominance of the corrupt clergy and, especially, they were against tithing.

Baptists. The Baptists welcomed Oliver Cromwell. But the Fifth Monarchy Movement criticised him for usurping Jesus in making himself sole ruler.

The 1640s and 1650s formed a maelstrom of religious creativity, action, clashes and fierce debate. From these groups emanated the first glimmers of ideas like freedom of worship, democratic participation in the life of the church, religious toleration, equality of laity and clergy, and other ideas which, honed and refined throughout the 18th century, became the foundational assumptions of the American and French Revolutions. In the heat of debate and persecution, clandestinity and exile, Modernity was born.

I very much enjoyed this book. I had read many years ago Christopher Hill's seminal, *The World Turned Upside Down*. I was glad of the opportunity to revisit a fascinating era of our religious history. The seventeenth was the century of the late Shakespeare, of Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Milton, Herrick and Traherne. It was the time of Laud and of Winstanley, of the Gunpowder and other plots, of the stripping of the altars, of recusancy and martyrdom. What a time to have lived and what a time for the confrontation of faith, life, politics, bigotry and all colours and shades of religious opinion. Is such an entity as the one, true church of Christ possible?

Andrew Bradstock will be a Keynote Speaker at this year's Conference.



A BIOETHICAL CREED FOR INDIVIDUALS

A set of commitments based on beliefs and biological realities

Submitted by Natali Allen

The Belief		The Commitment
I accept the need for prompt remedial action in a world beset with crises.	1	I will work with others to improve the formulation of my beliefs, to evolve additional credos, and unite in a worldwide movement that will make possible the survival and improved development of the human species in harmony with the natural environment.
I accept the fact that the future survival and development of mankind, both culturally and biologically, is strongly conditioned by man's present activities and plans.	2	I will try to love my own life and to influence the lives of others so as to promote the evolution of a better world for future generations of mankind, and I will try to avoid actions that would jeopardize their future.
I accept the uniqueness of each individual and his instinctive need to contribute to the betterment of some larger unit of society in a way that is compatible with the long-range needs of society.	3	I will try to listen to the reasoned viewpoint of others whether from a minority or a majority, and I will recognise the role of emotional commitment in producing effective action.
I accept the inevitability of human suffering that must result from the natural disorder in biological creatures and in the physical world, but I do not passively accept the suffering that results from man's inhumanity to man.	4	I will try to face my own problems with dignity and courage. I will try to assist my fellow man when they are afflicted, and I will work toward a goal of eliminating needless suffering among mankind as a whole.
I accept the finality of death as a necessary part of life. I affirm my veneration for life, my belief in the brotherhood of man, and my belief that I have an obligation to future generations of man.	5	I will try to live in a way that will benefit the lives of my fellow men now and in time to come and be remembered favorably by those who survive me.

From: Van Rensselaer Potter, (1971): *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future*, Prentice Hall. Engelwood Cliffs.
[This table appears on page 196 but was re-formatted here for easier reading – ed]

Footnote: Operation Noah

For Biblically- and theistically-oriented readers *Operation Noah* expresses concern at the human contribution to climate change in a fairly mainstream style. One way that they characterise their position is this: "Climate change for all people of faith, learning from science - through the eye of the sacred - to walk more lightly on the Earth." More at www.operationnoah.org

TO CATCH A BUTTERFLY

Clarity of thought blended with compassion

Promotional copy for:

To Catch a Butterfly
by Barrie Allom

This is a book to linger over; it affords vivid portrayals of a fundamental part of human life – family relationships. Barrie Allom

has again written from the heart, as he did in his previous book, *Beyond Belief* (Fraser Books, 2002). Yet, although it comes from the heart, there is nothing mushy in these pages. The author distils his material through his professional training as priest, hospital chaplain and more recently as civil funeral celebrant. The result is clarity of thought blended with compassion.

What he writes about is not bizarre or over the top – it is the very ordinary but challenging subject of parents and their offspring. Here are traced the complex steps of the dance between parent and maturing child, of love and control, power and independence. Here are scenarios and puzzles which don't have ready-made answers, but repay time spent to think them through. That is the challenge – to linger and to think.

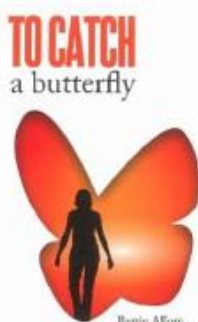
How many parents have exclaimed, "What did we do to have a child like this?" *To Catch a Butterfly* is a book based on this question. Equally it could be viewed as a book which explores the relationship from the maturing child's point of view: "How come I got parents like this?" In this book Allom writes candidly of a much loved but not always understood daughter, one who walked outside the frame of conventionality leaving a trail of heart-searching questions. It is a beautifully presented book, distilling the poignancy of growth from teenage girl to young womanhood. The content ranges from light-hearted hilarity to stark tragedy, but always with sensitivity and honesty.

The book is written as a memoir, in a warm and whimsical style. It flows as a story – hard to put down. But in the final analysis it is a study. It is placed before the reader not just for entertainment but for thoughtful reflection. As well as on a bookshelf at home it has a place in the resource libraries of educational establishments, conference centres, clinics, counselling centres and social service agencies, for staff and clients. It makes an excellent work for group study.

In the words of Auckland writing critic Graeme Fisher who critiqued earlier drafts of the book, "It has emerged as a book without pretensions, sincere, thoughtful and beautifully written."

Published by Fraser Books, Masterton.
Paper-back – 123 pages.

Retail: Available through independent booksellers in New Zealand
Wholesale: Available from Nationwide Book Distributors, PO Box 65, Oxford, North Canterbury
or direct from the author, alloms@extra.co.nz (phone 06 377 5777).
Complimentary copies for media review available from the author.



YOU WHO DELIGHT ME

Words of Spirit and Faith

by Bronwyn Angela White
published by Steele Roberts,
Wellington, 2012
reviewed by Shirley Dixon

Bronwyn writes from her inner experience of life, love and faith; her poems are joyful, quirky and intense reflections on her life and loves.

Bronwyn's volume of poems is divided into two parts: poems of love, and of spirit and faith.

Love, as Bronwyn expresses it in her poems, is for her daughter and her husband, for friends and the socially marginalised, for this land, for the remarkable and the ordinary, and for a love of life that sees the sacred in the everyday.

Bronwyn is a member of the Wellington Ephesus Group and her writing is expressive of her faith position as a 'Presbyterian Lay Preacher of the Progressive Christian kind'. The affirmations, thanksgivings and blessings in the second half of the book, are intended for liturgical use.

As Sir Lloyd Geering says in recommendation: "In this rapidly changing world where the century-old liturgies have become tired and lifeless, Bronwyn has used her poetical skill to create new expressions of thanksgiving and spiritual nurture that are inspiringly fresh."

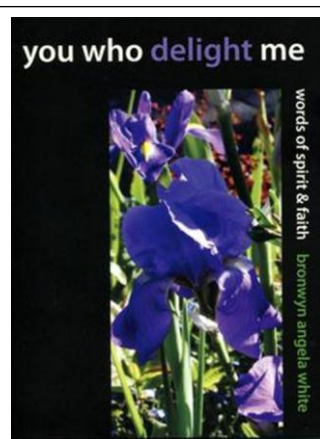
Bronwyn's poems are contemporary reflections, speaking to the realities of today's world. Her liturgical poem 'Thanks for storytellers and the media' includes thanks:

for radio and television, paperbacks and websites
for the pulpit and the theatre, for libraries and archives,
lectures and concerts,
for words of power in sermon and song.

Whether you simply enjoy reading these poems to yourself – they are intended for reading out loud – or to a friend or a group, they will give much pleasure, considerable insight, and provide much grist to one's thought-mill.

The book is available for \$25 from Epworth books in Wellington www.epworthbooks.org.nz/

Shirley Dixon, Titahi Bay



Blessing for winter meal

When winter seems darkest
and all is laid bare
the whole of creation is ours

We gather for comfort, for courage, for change
this abundance is ours to share

We prune and shape, and let the new buds form
we open our arms and turn our face to the light

The fruit of our labours,
the bounty of earth is ours

We share it, and bless each other

Supplement to
Sea of Faith Sea of Faith Network (NZ)
Newsletter 100 — May 2012

WE CELEBRATE 20 YEARS OF EXISTENCE AND 100 NEWSLETTERS

THIS YEAR, 2012, MARKS THE 20TH YEAR OF THE SEA OF FAITH (NZ), BUT HOW DID IT BEGIN?

Don Cupitt's books had begun to make an impact on some in NZ since at least 1980 when he published *Taking Leave of God*. [St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society](#) invited him to give a series of lectures at [St. Andrew's on the Terrace](#) in Wellington in 1991. On this visit he told us how the Sea of Faith Network had become established in UK in response to his BBC documentary series entitled *The Sea of Faith*, and had begun to hold an

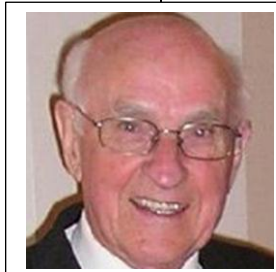
The first conference was surprisingly successful. News of the coming conference was sent out, not only to recipients of the Newsletter but also to a big mailing list held by the University of Waikato. From memory I think there were about 220 attendees, making it the largest conference we have had. Many of the attendees found this conference a very liberating experience for at last they were in a community atmosphere where they felt free to air the theological doubts that they had hesitated to bring out in the open before. This meant that there was keen and vigorous discussion in the workgroups. At one

THE ORIGIN OF SEA OF FAITH IN NEW ZEALAND

A reminiscence by our first Life Member, Sir Lloyd Geering

annual conference. Subsequently, I found myself invited to the UK 1992 Conference to give two lectures. While there I picked up a copy of a thirty-minute video documentary that the BBC had made of the emerging Sea of Faith movement.

On my return to NZ, at the various seminars I used to conduct throughout NZ, I took the opportunity to speak about the Sea of Faith movement in UK and I collected a list of names of those interested. By the end of 1992 I had about 100 names and to them I sent out the first Newsletter. It described briefly what had happened to date and indicated what plans were being made. It seemed important to stress that this was not a new denomination or religious movement but simply a network of people who were interested in exploring together the issues which Cupitt's original documentary had opened up. For this purpose I invited Ian Harris, David Simmers, Marion Blackbourn, and Ian Crabtree, to form, along with me and my wife Elaine, a temporary Steering Committee. It was this committee that planned the first Conference, held at a University Hall of Residence in Hamilton September 3-5, 1993.



of the plenary sessions a BBC documentary was screened, showing an Oxford University debate about God, in which Karen Armstrong (then not so well-known as now) was one of the key contributors.

In response to the widespread desire to continue what had now been started, a permanent Steering Committee was elected (meeting for some years in Wellington) and instructed to draw up a constitution and plan the next Conference. At the second Conference in 1994 (also in Hamilton) the constitution and simple structure of the New Zealand Sea of Faith Network were approved. We then simply adopted the name "Sea of Faith" used by UK without much discussion. Suzie Thirlwell kindly offered to set up a resource centre to make material available for the various local groups that began to form. I continued the simple Xeroxed Newsletter until Noel Cheer finally took it over to make it the splendid publication that it is today. The rest, as they say, is history!

Lloyd Geering

DON CUPITT

It All Started With Him

Don Looks Back

A contribution commissioned for this special edition of the Newsletter

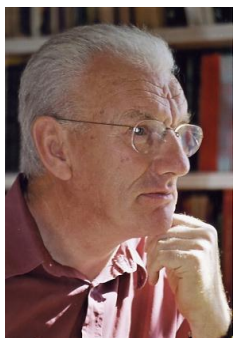
It's strange to think that almost thirty years have passed since the period (1982-1984) when I was busy with Peter Armstrong making *The Sea of Faith* documentary films. Just over twenty years have passed since our memorable first trip to New Zealand in 1991. Today the three national networks (UK, NZ, OZ) still flourish, and I have seen them referred to in histories of the modern church. We have almost won a little respectability: some dioceses in England have helped their younger clergy to attend our conferences, and it is now possible for a young cleric to admit openly to Sea of Faith sympathies without being immediately in serious trouble.

Most striking of all is the fact that a Friends' Non-theist Network has lately held its inaugural conference in the big Quaker study centre in Birmingham, UK. There have been multi-faith 'Universalist' Quakers for some years, but now we have the first open and recognized non-theistic organization within one of the historic English denominations. David Boulton has played a big part in establishing it.

This is a major shift. Till now, it has seemed quite natural for people who have grown up within the 'Abrahamic' group of faiths to have a theocentric psychology. If they are religious, they spontaneously find themselves praying to a personal God 'within'. If they lose their faith they feel orphaned, and speak of a 'god-shaped blank' in their hearts. But more recently, the influence of Buddhism and other non-theistic traditions seems to have changed many of us, so that when we feel a need for religion we may find ourselves quite spontaneously turning to silent meditation rather than to prayer. This religious change has been compared with the change from figurative to abstract painting in the twentieth century. At first horrifying, abstract art gradually comes to seem cool and even friendly. Similarly, abstract religion at first seems strange, but in the end becomes calm and friendly.

Over the past thirty years the churches, in their continuing decline, have become steadily less liberal. Certainly the market for liberal theology has shrunk so

much that eventually the choice may be between a fundamentalist remnant in the church and ourselves. It is important that we try to keep up our witness to our own distinctive position.



Don Cupitt, April 2012

About Don

from his website www.doncupitt.com

Don Cupitt was born in 1934 in Lancashire, England, and educated at Charterhouse, Trinity Hall Cambridge, and Westcott House Cambridge. He studied, successively, Natural Sciences, Theology and the Philosophy of Religion. In 1959 he was ordained deacon in the Church of England, becoming a priest in 1960. In the early 1990s he stopped officiating at public worship, and in 2008 he finally ceased to be a communicant member of the church.

After short periods as a curate in the North of England, and as Vice-Principal of Westcott House, Cupitt was elected to a fellowship and appointed Dean at Emmanuel College late in 1965. Since then he has remained at the College. In 1968 he was appointed to a University teaching post in the Philosophy of Religion, a job in which he continued until his retirement for health reasons in 1996. At that time he proceeded to a Life Fellowship at Emmanuel College, which remains his base today. He is married, with three children who all now live and work in London, and five grandchildren.

Don Cupitt's books began to appear in the early 1970s, without attracting much public attention. He first provoked hostile notice by his participation in the symposium *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), and then became nationally known for his media work — especially the three BBC Television projects *Open to Question* (1973), *Who was Jesus?* (1977), and *The Sea of Faith* (1984). This is in our [Resource Centre](#).

Cupitt's notoriety peaked in the these years of the early 1980s, his most important book of that period being *Taking Leave of God* (1980), which shut down his career and made him in the eyes of the Press an atheist and perhaps 'the most radical theologian in the world'. He survived, partly because the then Archbishop of Canterbury and the then Master of Emmanuel defended his right to put forward his views. Since that time he has devoted his energies to developing his ideas in a long line of books.

In his writing, and in the various societies he has tried to foster, Don Cupitt attempts to develop new thinking for a new epoch: a new philosophy, a new ethics, and a new religious thought. His thinking develops continuously and is not easy to summarize, but the best introduction to it has been given by the Australian Nigel Leaves in his recent two-volume study. *The Sea of Faith* TV series can be sampled on YouTube, and obtained on DVD from Sea of Faith UK; and the book is still in print. It is accessible to beginners in philosophy and theology. Readers with more time and energy should simply read Cupitt's recent books in the order in which they were written — beginning with *Impossible Loves* (2007).

20 YEARS OF CONFERENCES

Year, Location, Principal Speakers

1993 Hamilton

Lloyd Geering, others

1994 Hamilton

Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering

1995 Wellington

Lloyd Geering, Don Cupitt

1996 Dunedin

Charles Birch, Don Cupitt, Penny Jamieson, Lloyd Geering, Joy Cowley

1997 Auckland "Faith on the Margins"

John Spong, Charmaine Pountney, Lloyd Geering,

1998 Wellington "Inventing Reality"

Patti Whaley, Thakshan Fernando, John Bishop

1999 Christchurch "Mother Earth v. Father God?"

Jane Kelsey, John Peet, Lloyd Geering

2000 Havelock North "Beyond Belief"

Don Cupitt, Martin Prozesky, Michael King, Ruth Smith

2001 Auckland "You Make Community Makes You"

Alison Cotes, Lloyd Geering, Merepeka Raukawa-Tait

2002 Timaru "Creative Uncertainty"

Don Cupitt, Richard Randerson, Stephen Batchelor

2003 Inglewood (New Plymouth) "Making War — Making Peace"

Derek Evans, Te Miringa Hohahia, David Williams

2004 Cambridge "20 Years On — Faith Evolving"

David Boulton, Lloyd Geering, Ghazala Anwar

2005 Christchurch "What Makes Us Human — Dialogues With Art, Religion and Science"

Lloyd Geering, Rachel Kohn, Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, Richard Hall, Keith Morrison

2006 Marton "After Religion, What? — Is Nothing Sacred Anymore?"

Don Cupitt, David Tacey, Bill Cooke, Lloyd Geering, Ian Harris

2007 Auckland "Retelling The Story"

Colin Gibson, John Shelby Spong, Jill Harris, Raymond Bradley, Fred Marshall

2008 Blenheim "The Ecological Imperative: Is Tomorrow's God Gaia?"

Lloyd Geering, Carolyn King, Craig Potton, Juliet Batten, Derek McCullough

2009 Hamilton "Who Needs Jesus? Life in the 21st Century"

Lloyd Geering, David Boulton, Greg Jenks, Margaret Mayman, Doug Sellman

2010 Wellington "Compassion and Crisis: Our Human Dilemma"

Valerie Grant, Kevin Clements, Ian Pool,

2011 Christchurch "Pulling Us Back From The Brink: Economics? Science? Religion?"

Jeanette Fitzsimons, Geoff Bertram, Bob Lloyd, Valerie Webb

Conference Papers may be viewed [here](#).



What SoF Hath Wrought

1984	"Sea of Faith" TV Series on BBC
1987	Sea of Faith Network set up in the UK
1992	Sea of Faith Network set up in NZ. First Newsletter in NZ.
1993	First NZ Conference.
2012	100 th Newsletter 20 th Conference

THE VIEWS FROM THE CHAIRS

Reflections by Past Chairpersons of the Steering Committee

Ian Harris 1993-1996

Twenty years ago Lloyd Geering said: “Let a Sea of Faith be formed in Godzone,” and in 1993 he called together Marion Blackbourn, Ian Crabtree, Ian Harris and David Simmers to help plan a conference to get it under way. All except Lloyd were members of Ephesus in Wellington, already running on parallel lines to what was proposed for the SoF. In Hamilton, John and Gill Denny offered Waikato University as a venue for September that year, and there the network was formally launched.

Essentially the same committee served the network for the first four years, supplemented in 1994 by Jane Griffith and Jill Harris, in 1995 by Yvonne Chisholm (replacing Jill) and Roy Griffith, and in 1996 by Noel Cheer and Janet Lambie.

Our agenda centred mainly on organising the annual conferences – in Hamilton again in 1994, a chilly Central Institute of Technology in Upper Hutt in 1995, and at Knox College, Dunedin, in 1996, always with the invaluable contribution of local arrangements committees.

Conference attendance in the early years averaged 222. Besides the appeal of keynote speakers, workshops were a prominent feature, with a choice of between 17 and 35 at those conferences. Network membership rose from 196 in 1993 to 654 in 1995, then eased to 604 in 1996. By 1996 about 30 local groups were meeting around the country.

An early focus was the statement of identity prepared by Lloyd Geering. Along with his leadership, this was one of the key features attracting people to the SoF, and it was formally adopted, with only minor modifications, at Hamilton in 1994. Lloyd also compiled the network newsletter.

Although early sentiment favoured a loose and flexible network structure, this carried a financial risk, especially for the steering committee. So in 1995 work began on preparing a constitution so that the network could be registered as an incorporated society. After wide consultation with members, the constitution was adopted at the Dunedin conference.

Meanwhile, Suzi Thirlwall had offered to run a resource centre from Te Puke, and this was set in place in 1995. The bedding-in phase was now complete.

When after four years I relinquished the chair, I reflected briefly on where SoF had got to, asking: “Are we content to be ageing observers of religious thought and practice, when we could become discoverers and agents of creative new expressions of meaning and awe and wonder? Do we have a life beyond talking about ideas? Are we finding ways, in the words of our statement of identity, to ‘celebrate key social and spiritual values’, and actually doing so together?”

I think they’re still good questions.

Jane Griffith 1996-2000

Jane sent her best wishes and apologies that she has no records of her Chairpersonship and is reluctant to rely on her memory.

Nevertheless, Jane is remembered by others as an energetic and effective Chairperson – and also the longest-serving at four years. In this respect she contrasts with the next incumbency!

Barrie Allom, 2000-2001

A reflection, by Barrie Allom, on the shortest Chairpersonship ever!

It was at the 2000 Conference that I was elected to chair the Steering Committee. By February of 2001 I was laying the office down as a wave of depression and anxiety flooded me. Memories of that time are therefore brief.

One of the major duties of the committee each year has been to create a conference theme and locate speakers to give it flesh. The hardest to find are keynote speakers who are available, affordable, and focussed on the theme. Desirable speakers who were exceptionally hard to catch at that time were Richard Holloway, Rupert Sheldrake and Karen Armstrong, all from the U.K. Looking back now, all three are still in circulation and each has continued to write and speak on vital areas of interest and engagement for SOF members.

Rupert seems to have his horns eternally locked with Richard Dawkins, not that Dawkins allows that to deter or daunt him. Their conversation about a totally non-supernatural scientific stance versus one which allows for the possibility of ‘supernature’ is not always polite. My cousin in London, a close friend of Rupert at Hampstead Parish Church, regales me with accounts of his valiant attempts to fly the flag of religious belief and at the same time retain his integrity as a ‘real’ scientist.

Karen Armstrong has written a series of profound books. She challenges the very roots of traditional religious orthodoxy with her meticulous examination of sources and evidence for religious beliefs and practices. This may sound dull, but her book *A History of God* was billed by A.N. Wilson as, “The most fascinating and learned survey of the biggest wild goose chase in history – the quest for God.”

And then there is Richard Holloway who, at the time we pursued him was weathering a personal and traumatic crisis of faith in the Church. He has continued to write a stream of challenging books, but his Episcopal experience has resulted in him leaving the Church, a story chronicled in his newly published autobiography, *Leaving Alexandria – A Memoir of Faith and Doubt*.

My own tenure as chairperson of the NZSOF Steering Committee was brief and un-notable, but the subsequent completion of an autobiography, *Beyond Belief*, launched at the 2002 SOF Conference, was deep therapy for me. I hope it is so for Holloway too, albeit on a much bigger scale. The ‘doubt and faith’ struggle is mandatory for those who would grow to maturity before they die.

Frank Gaze 2001-2003

Our first experience of Sea of Faith was a regional conference held in Wanganui about 1994. I say “our” because Sea of Faith has been something Margaret and I have always shared, discussed, argued over and collaborated on. It has been important to keep reasonably close in step.

This regional conference was held at the Quaker Settlement in Wanganui, and was clearly, looking back, the initiative of Ian Harris, our first Chairperson. We did have a Session or two in the United Church, but the really interesting workshops and discussions were held amongst the

Quaker community. We really admired Ian for his work in getting this whole network up and running.

Of course there were others as well, and we met more of them at our first National Conference in 1995 at the CIT. It was a very cold weekend and the heating at CIT was off. We survived the arctic conditions wrapped in blankets listening to a panel discussion chaired by Geoff Robinson, with Lloyd Geering spreading his shafts of wisdom around the gymnasium. We got to know Lloyd well at that conference, because Margaret and Lloyd were partners in an exploration exercise and discovered their backgrounds had much in common. We remember the relief of finding so many others who, in Lloyd's words at that Conference: "have become dissatisfied with various aspects of the religious tradition in which we were nurtured and which is today being eroded by the acids of modernity. This dissatisfaction is often also accompanied by acknowledgement that we also value much of what we have received from the past. We wish to keep drawing from it but in ways more relevant to the age in which we live."

We had a wonderful positive conference at Kings College in 1997, partly because several of our friends were there, but also because of inspiring contributions by John Spong and Charmaine Pountney. And I remember particularly clearly another Kings College Conference where the sky seemed dark because of the World Trade Centre tragedy a few days before.

After a long and exhaustive process we have decided the best conference of all was Timaru 2002. The weather was superb, the company delightful and we heard marvellous contributions from three keynote speakers: Richard Randerson, Stephen Batchelor and Don Cupitt, each in their own way opening up the horizons of our life, and in particular, expanding on Lloyd's quote from the 97 Conference: "What enables us to grow to maturity is the capacity to doubt."

Noel Cheer 2000-2001 and 2003-2006

It was my role as deputy to Barrie Allom that led to my promotion to Chairperson when Barrie's ill-health led to his stepping down. I was voted into the role in my own right in 2003. I co-ordinated the talents and energies of the Committees (Arrangements- and Steering-) that gave us Conferences at Auckland, Cambridge, Christchurch and Marton. Meanwhile, my other hand was editing the Newsletter!

The privilege of serving on the Steering Committee, let alone chairing it, has to be experienced to be appreciated. We deal with hundreds of people, thousands of dollars, and (probably) millions of spoken and written words in providing a minimal structure in which like-minded people can come together. This we do in Local Groups (ranging in size from about 3 to about 50 people) or at the annual Conference which has attracted between just over 100 attendees to well over 200. The readership of the Newsletter – whose 100th issue this appears in – forms a sort of community too.

I have been outspoken in resisting changing the nature of the Network to one which is more overtly creedal or activist. Right from the start, and based on both my own experience and on the comments of many others, I have seen the greatest contribution that we can make is to offer a forum for open, speculative and non-dogmatic debate. It is with this "talk-shop" model in mind that I edit the bi-monthly Newsletter and, as has been my privilege for the last 15 years, to chair the panel discussion that brings the Conference to an exciting climax. Surely we would be the

poorer if we did discover a common creed or an agreed plan by which we would set about reforming the world. Life is just too complex to allow such regimentation.

At heart we are a bunch of people (perhaps 600-strong in New Zealand, about 1000-strong in the UK, and somewhat fewer in Australia) whose claim is that the formal churches have, in some important ways, lost the plot. But the plot remains important. It was a pleasure and a privilege being on the bridge for those four years enjoying my cruise on the Sea of Faith.

Norm Ely 2006-2009

My recollections of my time as Chair of Sea of Faith NZ are predominantly of people. I was very fortunate in having strong, thoughtful people prepared to put in time and effort to make the Steering Committee and the Conferences very successful.

During the time I was Chair, we were able to strengthen membership despite the average age of our members meaning a steady drop-off in numbers. We were also able to add to, and maintain, our financial position giving us security for the future and the ability to underwrite the cost of some of our conferences.

The numbers of people working behind the scenes over that time was quite large and we all owe them a strong vote of thanks. Members of the Steering Committee have a maximum time that they can serve and it is surprising how many serve the full term and then continue to assist in other ways. In my opinion the unsung 'heroes' remain those involved in local groups and the Resource Areas of the Group.

My thanks go very much to those "unsung Heroes" who supported Sea of Faith during my tenure.

However, some names come to mind who were significant in making my term as successful as it turned out to be.

Mary Boekman. Mary was secretary for much of my term and was always able to plug gaps for me, make the extra phone call, assist with the conference work and at times keep me on track (and sane).

Betty Manning. Betty took up my request for stronger contact and dialogue with our Local Groups many of whom were small and often struggling with low numbers and limited resources. Betty wrote; emailed; visited; hosted and arranged for me to meet Local group members at conferences.

Ralph Pannett. The Steering Committee decided to survey all Sea of Faith Members 'In Depth' to ascertain needs; conference suitability/options; newsletter suitability/options; direction and many other issues. Ralph stepped up and put together a really complex but highly informative survey. (To the point that it took two years for Ralph, Mary and others to break down into a really informative report).

John Irwin, Fred Marshall and John Craighead. The local co-ordinators of three of the conferences we ran during my term. Without these three people "On the Ground" these conferences would not have succeeded. In each case they provided highly efficient communication; clear and concise information; worked long hours (phone calls late at night were very common); pulled together good local teams; were all very straight and honest with me; they were all able to chase me along to get done what they needed. The result was that in each case we had very successful conferences in Auckland, Hamilton and Blenheim.

These six people stand out for me but in no way take away from the work, effort and support given by dozens of other people over my term.

Thank you all and thank you to those that continue to drive Sea of Faith forward.

SNIPPETS FROM PAST NEWSLETTERS

This is where SoF (NZ) all started, with Lloyd Geering as Editor

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NEW ZEALAND)

Newsletter No 1.

November 1992

This comes to you because you placed your name recently on a list indicating your interest in the formation of a Network of people in New Zealand, who have similar interests to the Sea of Faith Network in UK. The latter was formed in response to the BBC Television documentary, The Sea of Faith, written and presented by Don Cupitt, an Anglican priest, then Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and Lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion.

The TV series drew its title from Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover

The SOF Network has no creed. It draws its members from most of the major Christian churches and embraces men and women from other faiths and from those with no attachment whatever to religious institutions. It accommodates a similarly rich and diverse spread in the expression of spirituality. Many streams run into the Sea of Faith.

The Network is run by a Steering Committee elected by the membership. It holds an annual conference, open to all members, and publishes a regular Newsletter as well as the Magazine. Regional groups have

Network and Steering Committee

The use of the term Network was chosen deliberately in UK to avoid giving the impression that this is a new movement or organization. It simply links together people who have similar interests which they would like to pursue together in whatever way proves to be practicable. The name "Sea of Faith Network (N.Z.)" has been adopted temporarily until people are convened to make decisions for themselves as to what would be the most appropriate title and as to the kind of activity they wish to promote.

Newsletter 1 November 1992

A small self-appointed steering committee is now operating to guide the next steps; it consists of Ian Crabtree, Lloyd Geering, Ian Harris and David Simmers. Its main task has been to plan the first national conference (see below). Steps will be taken at this conference to set the SOFN on an official basis with elected officers and steering committee.

Newsletter 3 May 1993

Workshops

Workshops [at the first Conference in September 1993] will include: "Reclaiming Worth-ship", led by Jill Harris and Helen Wright. It will provide the basis for the Sunday

celebration. On arrival at Conference members will elect which discussion group to join from such topics as: "Why are we here?", "What are the real religious issues facing us today?", "Can the Church be Redeemed?", "Has the novel become the modern Bible?", "What social issues should chiefly engage us?", "How far do modern people experience a God-shaped hole?"

Newsletter 4 July 1993

First Conference

The Conference anticipated in our last Newsletter was so successful that it far exceeded all our expectations, being attended by 211 people. All the feedback has been very positive.

During the Conference the Sea of Faith Network (SOFN) was officially formed by a general meeting chaired by Ian Harris.

It was agreed that organization should be kept as simple as possible, that only individual, and not corporate, membership should be envisaged, and that membership fee should stand at \$10 per annum,

Newsletter 5 Dec 1993

Spong's First Coming

Bishop Spong spent a very busy ten days in N.Z. lecturing to crowded auditoriums in Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua,

Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. His own Anglican communion appears to have supported his visit in some centres and been quite critical of it in others.

Newsletter 8 August 1994

Second Annual Conference

Marion Blackbourn reports as follows: "This very successful Conference was attended by 240 people, plus a few locals who attended individual sessions. At the close of the Conference a questionnaire was given to participants, which was eventually completed by 172 people (71.7%) - a very useful response.

Overall the responses bear out the general impression that the Conference had been stimulating and enjoyable. Respondents also provided many suggestions for even better conferences in future.

Newsletter 9 November 1994

Sea of Faith Resource Centre

Suzi Thirlwell ... has kindly offered to manage a resource centre of books, tapes (audio and visual) and any other material of interest to SOFN members and groups. The

Steering Committee will shortly be sending her such tapes and material which have accumulated. Then discussion groups may apply to her for material that may help them in their programmes. It is hoped that later in the year it will be possible to include with the Newsletter the first list of what is available. [Suzi still manages the Resource Centre in 2012 – ed]

Newsletter 10 March 1995

Religion as a Human Creation

Traditionalists maintain that Christianity stands or falls with belief in God understood as a personal, supreme and supernatural being; they are incensed at the suggestion that religion is a human creation. But, as John Challenor, an SoF member and former Catholic priest, observes, "The idea of man-made religion isn't new. Christians always thought that Hindus and Buddhists had made up their religions. We just assumed that our own religion was an exception to the rule".

Thus the transition from traditional Christianity to that embraced by Anthony Freeman [his controversial book *God In Us: A Case for Christian Humanism* SCM

Press 1993 had cost him his job as an Anglican priest] and others may be interpreted as the abandonment of the exclusiveness, or religious chauvinism, which has long characterized traditional Christian claims.

Newsletter 7, May 1994

Non-Realism

"Suppose we become acutely aware of our own human limits: we realise that we are always inside human language, and only ever see the world through our human eyes. All that is ever accessible to us is the relative god, my god. As I see this, metaphysics dies and I am left knowing only my god, my guiding religious ideal. And this is the non-realist philosophy of religion in a nutshell."

from the Introduction to Is Nothing Sacred? The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion by Don Cupitt in

Newsletter 51 May 2003

Exploring Their Faith

[The Christian Research Association of Aotearoa New Zealand circulated a questionnaire at the first SoF NZ Conference. Of the 211 attendees, 130 responded.] More

than 80% of participants were 50 years of age and over and this raises, but does not solve, the question of why those under 50 are relatively few, both in the SOFN and in the churches (except the Pentecostal type of church). Though females slightly outnumbered males, they were much more in balance than in the churches, where females often outnumber males by three to one. Ninety per cent claimed they have been exploring their faith for

more than five years, but while 42% saw the SOFN as an alternative to the church community of faith a larger number did not see it that way. Less than 20% conceive God in anything like the traditional image of a divine person. Although 95% have been actively involved in church life in the past, only 18% claim high involvement now, 20 % have no involvement at all and the rest vary between these extremes. Asked whether the Bible helped to make sense of life, 75% answered in the affirmative and 22% in the negative.

Newsletter 8 August 1994

Aspiring Angels

"We are not angels, we are merely sophisticated apes. Yet we feel like angels trapped inside the bodies of beasts, craving transcendence and all the time trying to spread our wings and fly off, and it's really a very odd predicament to be in, if you think about it."

BBC Reith Lectures 2003 in NL53 Sept 2003

The Deity and the Deep Blue Sea

(Extracts from an article by Christopher Mordaunt in the *Manchester Guardian*, July 1994.

The organisation Sea of Faith does a great service by bringing together people with a wide range of 'non-realistic' views about God. But the sea of faith is a broad one....

We have to start on dry land with the atheists who say that the whole idea of God is meaningless. But there is a more sympathetic sort of atheism. It involves saying, like sacked vicar Anthony Freeman, that "God" stands for our values.

There is a related view, very popular, which is purely pragmatic. A large number simply think the church is a good thing but do not have any particular beliefs about God. If questioned, they might express their beliefs in traditional terms but at bottom they are sympathetic atheists.

The difference between the broadly realistic believers on our right and the broadly atheistic on our left is obvious. For those on the right "Jesus is the son of God" is literally true, while "God is love" is a metaphor. For those on the left it is the other way round.

Beliefs in the depths of the middle allow for some uncertainty. Beliefs in the shallows on either the right or the left have this in common: they treat religious statements as either true or false. Beliefs in the middle are more inclined to say that the position is ambiguous or that a proposition may be true for me but not necessarily for everyone.

Few of us are entirely consistent but shift about from one view to another. A priest like Anthony Freeman, who shows that he is still passionately interested in these matters and sufficiently concerned about his flock to talk about them, is worth ten who are simply going through the motions. If we are not open to those of differing views within the sea of the Christian faith, how can we possibly be open to the ocean beyond?

Newsletter 9 November 1994

Realistic Evangelist

Ian Cairns wrote an excellent response to an article rather critical of the Sea of Faith, which appeared in *Candour*, a journal for Presbyterian ministers. He concluded on a personal note thus:

My God

"You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

Anne Lamott Newsletter 61

My background and personality type predispose me to the evangelical mode of religious faith and expression. Throughout my life I have thought of myself as evangelical. This for me meant two things:

A passionate urge to discover relevant words and means for communicating faith;

A responsiveness to the mystical experience which derives its dynamic from the person of Jesus.

Implicit in this mode is an openness to 'peak' or 'conversion' experiences, of which I have known several.

The most recent of these, and one of the most profound, was the one day seminar at Christchurch in August 1991, led by Don Cupitt. That for me was a powerfully integrating and life-giving occasion, affording release from uneasy and narrowing

dualisms: of God and humanity, of the divine and the human in Jesus, of the bible and literature, of reason and faith.

As a result, I now see myself as non-realist evangelical! As such I believe I am in good company.

Newsletter 10 March 1995

God

"If the concept of God has any validity or use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving.

If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him."

James Baldwin The Fire Next Time Newsletter 17 July 1996

God(s)?

"The Buddha put spirituality above theology by exalting Dharma above the Gods. The Way comes first, get the Way right and talk of the Gods can be allowed to make its own kind of sense as best it can."

Quoted from Don Cupitt's Taking Leave of God in Newsletter 13, October 1995

More

There will be more Snippets in forthcoming Newsletters



Calvin and Hobbes, by Bill Watterson