

Celebrating 20 Years of SoF in New Zealand

Sea of Faith

Exploring Spirituality, Religion and Ethics

NEWSLETTER 101, JULY 2012

LEAVING ALEXANDRIA: AGAIN

A review by Lloyd Geering of Richard Holloway's

Leaving Alexandria: A Memoir of Faith and Doubt

published in 2012 by The Text Publishing Company, Australia

THE TITLE COULD MISLEAD; this Alexandria is not in Egypt but a little known Scottish village, north of Glasgow, where the author began his life in very humble beginnings. His first leaving of Alexandria was at the tender age of fourteen when he went to Kelham seminary to begin the long years of training for the Anglican priesthood. Thereafter he uses the name symbolically for each subsequent occasion when he left behind a familiar place to begin a venture of faith and an uncertain future.

This is more than an autobiographical record of dates and events. It is a spiritual journal, of the genre of Augustine's *Confessions*, written so honestly and frankly that the author at times bares his soul to the reader. It is not emotional, however, but a finely expressed account of his thoughts and feelings in each important segment of his life.

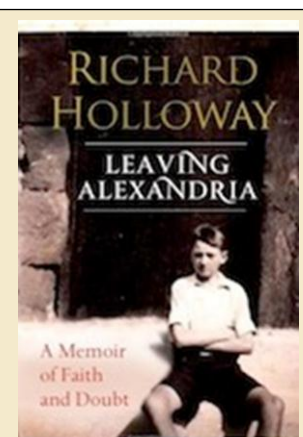
Already having nearly thirty books to his credit, Holloway has developed a poetic skill with words that makes this a delight to read. He can make a succinct theological statement in a strikingly original way, such as, "Christianity is a reverse strip-tease in which a naked figure is gradually clothed in garments of increasing splendour and is finally enthroned at the right hand of God".

Holloway's life did not proceed as the Kelham Fathers would have preferred, for he was both a thinker and one who had a passionate concern for the people around him.

While traditional Christians might judge him to be 'the bishop who lost his faith', he is one who found it necessary to surrender certainty to discover what it means to live by faith. As he writes, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty". This is reflected in the sub-title of the book.

After working in the slums of Glasgow, in Old St. Paul's in Edinburgh, and in Boston in USA, Holloway was called in 1986 to be the Anglican Bishop of Edinburgh. In 1992 he became Primus of Scotland, and this in spite of having written in 1988 *Crossfire: Faith and Doubt in an Age of Certainty*, a book that earned him the title of 'Barney Bishop' in the tabloids, and made him one of the most notorious clergymen in Britain. Yet, Holloway was simply expressing openly the doubts that many were feeling but afraid to confess. He was following in the footsteps of Bishop John Robinson of the 1960's and Bishop David Jenkins of the 1980's.

Holloway became even more of a *cause célèbre* when he championed the cause of gays and lesbians at a time when the Christian world was becoming deeply divided on the issue of homosexuality. To manifest his sorrow and disgust at what went on at the 1998 Lambeth Conference, he threw his mitre into the Thames before returning to Scotland. In 1999 he wrote a book called *Godless Morality* in which he showed



**“quite
simply
a wonderful
book”**

how necessary it now is to separate ethical issues from the religious and biblical context in which they have long been entangled. This book so upset his fellow-Anglicans that, after the Archbishop of Canterbury repudiated it in his presence within Scotland itself, and Scottish Episcopalians began to rise up against him, he decided it was time to leave Alexandria again; in 2000 he announced his resignation.

Holloway acknowledges that his undisciplined tongue was partly the reason why he got into so much strife, but this is simply the other side of the openness and honesty that makes him so attractively human and down to earth. And not to be overlooked is his playful sense of humour; this I observed personally on meeting him in New York in 2004. So I concur with the judgment of the well known writer Alexander McCall Smith when he said that this is “quite simply a wonderful book”.

Lloyd Geering

This review appeared in *The NZ Listener* on 19 May 2012

CUPITT ON HOLLOWAY

I first met Richard Holloway in about 1990 when I went up to Glasgow to be interviewed by him for a TV programme. He was very orthodox, dark, spare, and austere-looking, and gave me a hard time because I was such a notorious heretic by church standards. He has always been a good communicator, and also good at being a very senior churchman: he was the Primus of Scotland, and a natural choice to serve on the Fertilization and Human Embryology Authority which studied the moral questions raised by technical advances in assisted reproduction and such matters.

Then at the end of the Nineties came a surprise - the book *Godless Morality*, in which Holloway dissociated himself sharply from all those religious folk who think their faith qualifies them to lay down the law on matters of sex and medicine. On the contrary, he argued, his experience on the Authority had taught him that they are so intransigent and irrational about such topics that (frankly) their views deserve no consideration at all. The moral questions raised by homosexuality, abortion, stem-cell research and all the rest were best discussed in purely secular terms, such as the terms left to us by Aristotle, or by John Stuart Mill.

It was immediately obvious to me that Holloway was in the process of coming over to my point of view. If God is not the ideal unity of all moral perfections, virtues and values, and if instead morality can and should be secular, then God can't be worshipped. In a word, Holloway's rejection of divine Law as the basis of morality was, strictly

speaking, more radical than my non-realism about God's actual existence. And indeed, within a very few years Holloway had retired and 'come out' as a religious radical of the new sort - much more radical than, for example, John Selby Spong, whose ideas are those of John Robinson's generation.

Holloway is psychologically tough, much tougher than I have proved to be, and also was lucky not to be the first.

He has remained surprisingly in favour with the church, not only attending but also preaching; and, having been a bishop for so long, he has the knack of writing about his own religious history in a very accessible style, which has won him a wide readership.

He can 'do' the confessional mode in a way I can't, and I'm very glad that his new autobiographical work is proving such a success.

He is helping to normalise the kind of religious radicalism which wants to go way beyond traditional liberal theology.

Don Cupitt, Cambridge, April 2012

HOLLOWAY ON CUPITT

For many years, I was an example of a well-understood phenomenon: the person-in-denial or PID. One kind of PID, this one from Religious Central Casting, is the priest with unacknowledged doubts about the faith he has sworn to uphold against all enemies, but who refuses to face them because he secretly fears they may be right. [I warned my parishioners] against someone I refused to read because I was afraid he might change my life. **Don Cupitt was the man I was too frightened to read.** ... The frightening thing about Cupitt was that he was not an ordinary atheist ... He was a religious man, a priest of the Church of England, and there was something holy about the intensity of his pursuit of truth. The best way to understand Don Cupitt's place on the spectrum, non-Realism, is to think about his metaphor of the equator. When a **Realist** crosses the equator he'll expect to see a vivid black line across the ocean; while a **Critical Realist** will expect to see a faint grey line. The **non-Realist**, on the other hand, knows that the system of lines of latitude and longitude imposed on the Earth by us exists only in our own heads, but it helps us find our way around the globe.

The same goes for religion: it is a system of guiding myths to help us how to live. Use it. Rejoice in its poetry and spirituality. Just don't waste your time looking for that big black line in the sea. Thinking that way about religion could change your life too.

Richard Holloway, Hay-on-Wye, 3 June 2012

ALL ABOUT US

The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) is an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint. We recently clarified our purpose by rebranding ourselves as “Sea of Faith: The National Religious Discussion Network” and “Exploring Spirituality, Religion and Ethics”.

We follow similar organisations in both the UK and Australia in taking our name from the 1984 television series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

The TV 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 continuing exploration.

The Sea of Faith Network itself has no creed. We draw our members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions.

Our national **Steering Committee** publishes a Newsletter six times each year, maintains a website at www.sof.org.nz, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference. We have five **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, Ian Harris and Alan Goss.

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

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

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

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

Members may borrow books, CDs, etc. from the **Resource Centre** which is managed by **Suzi Thirlwall** susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz phone (07) 578-2775

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

CONTENTS

NEWSLETTER 101, JULY 2012

1. Leaving Alexandria: Again

Lloyd Geering reviews Richard Holloway's memoir. Followed by Cupitt and Holloway exchanging memories of each other.

3. All About Us

Who we are, what we do, how to contact us.

4. From Five Gospels to Seven Letters

Alan Goss reviews the Jesus Seminar follow-on to *The Five Gospels* with *The Authentic Letters of St Paul*.

5. SoF 'Solarity'

Exploring ways of putting Don Cupitt's 'Solar Ethics' into practice.

5. Dialogues With Atheists?

A publisher's promotion for Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists* which suggests that religious traditions and practices, shorn of supernaturalism, have some very important things to teach the secular world.

A SoF Group in Oxford is breaking out in a RASH over it.

6. More Snippets

From Newsletters of Yesteryear.

7. History and Apologetics

Bill Cooke sees challenges in attempting both in the same book – but nevertheless applauds the attempt.

10. Our Credible Contemporary Religious Story

Peter Land of Hokianga applauds SoF contributions to better religion.

11. Letters To and From The Editor

Are we fleeing from mystery, and from God? And what happened to the hyperlinks?

12. From The Chair

Chairperson Natali Allen promotes the Conference.

“Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman – a rope over an abyss”



Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche 1844-1900

FROM FIVE GOSPELS TO SEVEN LETTERS

A Review by Alan Goss of Napier

***The Authentic Letters of St Paul*
A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning
by Arthur J Dewey, Roy W Hoover, Lane C McGaughy and
Daryl D Schmidt, published by Polebridge Press.**

This book is the product of a decade of work by a small team of scholars from the Jesus Seminar in the United States.

An earlier volume from the same source, *The Five Gospels*, threw a completely new light on our understanding of the historical Jesus. This modest production, it is claimed, will do the same for Paul.

Jesus and Paul have been called the good cop, bad cop of Christianity. Jesus' message is simple and comprehensible, Paul's one emerges through the wringer of a convoluted mind and a tortured spirit. As for his views about women – more on that later.

The Authentic Letters

Only the seven letters that Paul actually wrote are dealt with in this volume.

These seven are: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians and Romans. Omitted from this list are those books either written after Paul's death or where other writers felt free to use Paul's name. Most scholars contend that 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus – called the Pastoral Letters – were written in the early second century – long after Paul. More vigorous debate surrounds 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians and Colossians which a majority consider were written by a hand other than Paul's. What is certain is that none of Paul's original letters have survived. Only copies of copies remain.

Interpolations

Though it is widely accepted that some letters are definitely not Pauline, e.g. 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, the authors also refer to a number of passages in the authentic letters which were probably inserted into Paul's original text and at a later time. These are "Interpolations". They are collected in an appendix: three in Romans, three in 1 Corinthians, and one in 2 Corinthians. The passage in 1 Cor. 14, 33-38 about women being prohibited from speaking in public gatherings is a later insertion into Paul's original text. It flies in the face of Paul's more inclusive view "There is no

longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." The Pastoral letters reflect a growing conservatism in the churches in favour of male dominance and females 'knowing their place'. **This is not the authentic Paul.** Nor is the key passage in Romans 13, 1 – 7, about obedience to the political authorities. Paul never raises nor discusses the topic in his other letters. It is almost certainly the work of a later author.

Conflicting views surround the famous love chapter in 1 Corinthians 13, "In Praise of Love". The passage is strangely silent on God – the word is never mentioned – nor is love said to be the love of God. Chapter 13 also disrupts Paul's argument begun in ch.12 and continued in ch.14. However other scholars strongly contend that 1 Corinthians 13 is genuine Paul and the authors have retained it as part of Paul's original text.

A New Translation

Paul's letters have never been fully translated into English – that is the claim made by the authors of this new version. Previous translations have been too literal, too wooden: with Greek words simply being replaced by English ones from a Greek-English dictionary. The aim of this new translation is to feel Paul's pulse, to get under his skin, "to translate Paul's *meaning* rather than just his words." Attention is paid to Paul's use of ancient rhetoric in which the speaker or writer attempted to persuade the audience to his or her point of view. Paul was a persuader and not a pontificator, he took his audiences and their experiences seriously, he allowed his audience always to have the last say.

Paul the Man

Nietzsche was scathing, describing Paul as "a very tortured, very pitiful, very unpleasant man, unpleasant even to himself." Paul readily admits that his was a torn and divided self, "I do not understand my own actions – I don't know what to do"; "What a sorry creature I am! Who will rescue me from this earthly self which is captive to death?" John Shelby Spong, in his latest book, supports the view that Paul was probably a homosexual, this was his "thorn in the flesh". It was only in Jesus that he found release from his travail, in Paul Tillich's words he accepted the fact that he was accepted. This new version also reveals a Paul who, like Jesus, was aware of a corrosive power eating into the very fabric of

people's lives and wider society. Only the blind fail to see those same corrosive powers at work in our world today.

Paul, in writing his letters, used picture language – myths and metaphors to capture his readers' imagination and get his message across. When we theologise Paul's mystical thought we not only confuse Paul's argument, we also confuse ourselves. This is evident from the later creeds, confessions and doctrines of the church, all greatly influenced by Paul, and which now must be put aside. This old warrior, who trudged the roads and crossed the oceans of Asia Minor, who challenged the power of Empire, and who, gay or not, saved Christianity from virtual oblivion, deserves a fresh hearing in public and in the pew. Let the book have the last word:

In a world verging on seeming collapse and disillusion, we come upon an older brother who has an unusual perspective. In a time when listening is not in vogue and bottom line thinking dominates, Paul delivers a different option. He takes experience seriously (both his and his communities'). He attempts to persuade not override. He risks misunderstanding. He refuses to give up on those with whom he is in solidarity. He is convinced that trust is the tissue of our life together. He speaks against those who would maintain or attempt to gain a competitive advantage over others to win the day at the expense of another. He can imagine that meaning not only can be found in the 'nobodies' of the world, but is the prism through which to understand the working of the planet.

Alan Goss, April 2012

Alan is a Life Member of SoF (NZ)



SEA OF FAITH 'SOLARITY'

The term comes from the idea spelled out in Don Cupitt's 1995 book *Solar Ethics* involving a continual outpouring of the self into the world.

'Solar living' is the art of living extrovertly, that is, 'giving it all you've got'; living out your life in an ethically defensible and justifiable way, with emphasis on concern for others and for the world rather than self-advantage. This includes support for such humanitarian movements as anti-slavery, anti-racism, anti-cruelty to living beings.

These questions are beginning to be answered through a new part of the SoF (UK) website to be launched soon called 'Solarity'. To find out why, take a look at the trial website:

www.sofsolarity.org.uk/draft001/index

DIALOGUES WITH ATHEISTS?

"The supernatural claims of religion are entirely false ... but religions still have some very important things to teach the secular world ..."

A publisher promotion piece for:

Religion for Atheists:

A non-believer's guide to the uses of religion

Alain de Botton, Hamish Hamilton 2012

The boring debate between fundamentalist believers and non-believers is finally moved on by Alain de Botton's inspiring new book, which boldly argues that the supernatural claims of religion are entirely false, and yet that religions still have some very important things to teach the secular world. *Religion for Atheists* suggests that rather than mocking religions, agnostics and atheists should instead *steal* from them, because they're packed with good ideas on how we might live and arrange our societies. Blending deep respect with total impiety, de Botton (a non-believer himself) proposes that we should look to religions for insights into, among other concerns, how to:

Build a sense of community; Make our relationships last; Overcome feelings of envy and inadequacy; Escape the twenty-four-hour media world; Go travelling; Get more out of art, architecture and music; And create new businesses designed to address our emotional needs.

For too long non-believers have faced a stark choice between either swallowing lots of peculiar doctrines or doing away with a range of consoling and beautiful rituals and ideas.

At last, in *Religion for Atheists*, Alain de Botton has fashioned a far more interesting and truly helpful alternative.

Alain de Botton was born in 1969 and is the author of non-fiction essays on themes ranging from love and travel to architecture and philosophy.

See the author's website at: www.alaindebotton.com and the TED video of his thesis (called *Atheism 2.0*) at: www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_atheism_2_0.html

HIGHER? EDUCATION

"We have implicitly charged our higher-education system with a dual and possibly contradictory mission: to teach us how to make a living and to teach us how to live. And we have left the second of these two aims recklessly vague and unattended."

Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*, p106

TALK AMONG YOURSELVES

The Sea of Faith Group in Oxford, UK, are exploring R A S H: Religion – Atheism – Secularism – Humanism and asking are they all just symptoms of a common human disease? Or perhaps the bravest, riskiest exploration we humans have ever attempted? Or merely enemies of each other? More information at:

<http://sofn-oxford.blogspot.com>

MORE SNIPPETTS

Selected from the previous 100 issues of this Newsletter

No God?

There is a wonderful Hasidic story about a rabbi who was asked whether it is ever proper to act as if God did not exist. He responded, "Yes, when you are asked to give to charity, you should give as if there were no God to help the object of the charity."

I think the same is true of morality and character: in deciding what course of action is moral, you should act as if there were no God. You should also act as if there were no threat of earthly punishment or reward. You should be a person of good character because it is right to be such a person.

Alan Dershowitz: *Letters to a Young Lawyer* (2001)
in NL 47

Theodicy

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?

Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing?

Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing?

Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing?

Then why call him God?"

Epicurus (341-271 BC) in NL89

Agnostic

"When I reached intellectual maturity, and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a freethinker, I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until at last I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last ... So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of 'agnostic'. It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the 'gnostic' of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant...

from Thomas Huxley's 1889 essay on agnosticism
which can be read in full at:
<http://alepho.clarku.edu/huxley/CE5/Agn.html>
from NL 81

Lambeth 2008

A few weeks ago, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, announced that he would step down at the end of 2012. It is widely understood that he has become disenchanted over the inability of the Anglican Communion to find compromise over issues such as women priests and

gay clergy. Each decade the worldwide communion of the Anglican Church holds the Lambeth Conference. At the 1998 Conference the issue of gay clergy was so divisive that the Conference agreed to hold-over the matter until 2008. It appears that no real progress had been made. [So bad was the atmosphere that it was part of what made Richard Holloway resign.] At that time John Spong wrote an open letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in which he asked him to show courageous leadership in the face of homophobic reactionaries. As of 2012 you can read the full letter at

www.somareview.com/openlettertorowan.cfm

Here is part of that letter:

The Bible was quoted to support the Divine Right of Kings in 1215, to oppose Galileo in the 17th century, to oppose Darwin in the 19th century, to support slavery and apartheid in the 19th and 20th centuries, to keep women from being educated, voting and being ordained in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Today it is quoted to continue the oppression and rejection of homosexual people. The Bible has lost each of those battles. It will lose the present battle and you, my friend, will end up on the wrong side of history, the wrong side of morality and the wrong side of truth. It is a genuine tragedy that you, the most intellectually-gifted Archbishop of Canterbury in almost a century, have become so miserable a failure in so short a period of time.

You were appointed to lead, Rowan, not to capitulate to the hysterical anger of those who are locked in the past. For the sake of God and this Church, the time has come for you to do so. I hope you still have that capability.

Bishop John Shelby Spong in NL74

Situation Ethics

- Only one 'thing' is intrinsically good; namely love: nothing else at all.
- The ruling norm of Christian decision is love: nothing else.
- Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed, nothing else.
- Love wills the neighbor's good whether we like him or not.
- Only the end justifies the means, nothing else.
- Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively.

Chapter themes from Joseph Fletcher's
Situation Ethics SCM Press 1966 in NL15.

Religious Language

The language of fundamentalism is empty and ranting, the language of liberal religion is soothing but empty waffle. Religious language has collapsed.

From Don Cupitt's *After All* reviewed in NL25

NEGOTIATING THE FAULTLINE

BETWEEN HISTORY AND APOLOGETICS

A review by Bill Cooke of Auckland

Shaping Godzone: Public Issues and Church Voices in New Zealand, 1840-2000

Laurie Guy

Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011

The title says it all. *Shaping Godzone: Public Issues and Church Voices in New Zealand, 1840-2000* is a very ambitious book. Laurie Guy, lecturer in church history at Carey Baptist College, has written a history of church involvement in public issues from the Treaty of Waitangi to the Hikoi of Hope. He denies the work is comprehensive, although he leaves little out in this 480 page book (plus another 120 pages of notes, bibliography and so on). The only area Guy has omitted that should not have been, in my view, is the long story of sectarianism, arguably the most significant feature of pakeha Christianity in the century after Bishop Pompallier stepped ashore in 1838. Guy doesn't avoid the issue entirely, but without a chapter of its own, sectarianism, and the Christianity that gave rise to it, escapes serious scrutiny.

The Faultline

A book this long could easily become indigestible and Guy does a good job of breaking his story into manageable portions. *Shaping Godzone* is clearly written, well researched and makes a serious and consistent effort to be scholarly and fair; no mean achievement. However, writing from a position of strong commitment to the Christian outlook is like walking along a faultline; it's fraught with challenges. On one side of the faultline lies the path of good history, which follows the evidence wherever it leads. But the other side of the faultline is religious apologetics, which often requires history to be shoe-horned into unfitting shapes already set by theology. The challenges this dangerous faultline pose are not peculiar to people with a religious commitment, although the teleological element of religious commitment adds an extra layer of difficulty that secular historians do not encounter. Anyone, whatever their personal opinions are, has to have a clear understanding of negotiating the risks. Laurie Guy, to his great credit, largely succeeds, but, with this important affirmation firmly in mind, there are some issues worth drawing attention to.

People of their time?

On several occasions Guy gives unwitting expression to a sliding scale of what constitutes the 'genuinely Christian' voice. Christians mouthing racism, sexism, militarism or whatever, are explained away by Guy as people of their time, whereas the few who dissented from the majority views are spoken of as the true Christians. This, surely, is wanting to have it both ways. It is too convenient to corral Christians whose views don't now pass muster as people of their time, while those with views the author approves of somehow escape that trap. It presumes the default position that opinion justifying the name 'Christian' should all be ahead of their time and uniformly admirable. This may well work as apologetics, but not as history.

... or just plain 'outmoded'?

Guy's sliding scale takes on an interesting new form when dealing with more recent issues. His treatment of more recent controversies, like censorship, abortion, or homosexual law reform is very good. But the reader soon notices that the evangelical churches, who led the opposition to the law reform in each of these areas, are criticised for the poverty of their biblical interpretation, but not for being people of their time. The views of the conservatives are now condemned as being 'outmoded'. Why this shift from being 'people of one's time' back then to being 'outmoded' now? I suspect he is implying that the progressive Christians, whose views he largely supports, are now the ones who are people of their time. The only difference is that this has now become a Good Thing. In this way, Guy has tried to preserve good Christianity as something essentially ahistorical, which runs counter to what proper history should do.

Racism in religious language

As another example of the difficult road being traversed here, Guy comments on the widespread racism among European settlers in the nineteenth century, which he attributes to Social Darwinism, even though such attitudes were prevalent long before that title could be ascribed to it. To his credit, he acknowledges this, but nonetheless could

be accused of letting slip the inference that the racism was a secular affair, another symptom of the age, and not a problem for Christians. Guy's account of this attitude begins with 'Thomas Robert Malthus', without mentioning he was a Reverend. Once again, Guy is trying to straddle the difficult fault-line between secular history and Christian apologetics and, in doing so, having it both ways. Either the vast majority of settlers were Christians, or they weren't. To be sure, they were Christians of many shapes, sizes and with varying levels of observance. Guy, along with other historians of a religious persuasion, claims (rightly) that the majority of the population at this time were professed Christians, to some degree or other. But if this is the case he must then be prepared to take the responsibility for many of the views such people had which no longer pass muster. The fact remains that most nineteenth-century New Zealanders were Christian, many of whom were racist, and a few of them expressed their racism using religious language.

At the risk of labouring the point, I am not saying that Christians were racists *because* they were Christian. This is the mistake John Stenhouse makes when he accused Charles Southwell of racism (which is true) but then goes on to claim his racism was an integral feature of his being a freethinker (which is not true). With respect to Guy's treatment of the issue, I am making the weaker point that most racists in nineteenth century New Zealand happened also to be Christians, and his speaking of Social Darwinism in this context tends to obscure this fact.

Well-written church history

These criticisms should not be taken as an accusation of Guy producing bad history. That is not the case at all. It has long been lamented that the quality of church history in New Zealand is low, with little insight into the wider context, little genuine objectivity, and tedious writing styles. *Shaping Godzone* is a significant departure and improvement from much previous New Zealand religious history. It is better written, has a far broader awareness of the context in which churches operated, and is quite prepared to quote prominent churchmen in a way that puts them in a

poor light when historical objectivity demands that be done. For example, some of the more extreme comments from partisans of the prohibition issue do them little credit. Even when the protagonist is a Baptist (Guy's own denomination) he doesn't shy from drawing the reader's attention to the mean-spiritedness of much of what they were saying. And he resists the temptation (as some other religious historians would not) of loudly mentioning someone's freethought or rationalist connections when they say something silly. At one point, he quotes some racist utterances from Sir Robert Stout and William Pember Reeves, without hastening to add that they were both rationalists.

The problem, however, remains that Guy is wanting to write good history while also defending a set viewpoint. This is a very difficult stand to take. This sentence, at the end of two chapters on the battle over the female franchise, illustrates the problem.

It has long been lamented that the quality of church history in New Zealand is low, with little insight into the wider context, little genuine objectivity, and tedious writing styles.

We may rightly condemn some early Christian interventions in New Zealand society as being excessively narrow and negative. We ought equally to praise this one for its positive breadth and humanity. (p 192)

At one level this is unarguably level-headed. But when a broader view is taken, the issue becomes less clear. How much praise does a church claiming unique lines of communication with the creator of all things deserve when, almost two thousand years into its run, and after a century of social and secularising pressure, some of their number stumbles toward a new social gospel? If the new-found social concern was so praiseworthy, how was it that the reactionary interpretation of scripture ruled supreme for so long? Was it not that the discovery of this social gospel vision was a response to a strongly secular-oriented Enlightenment which had spoken in these terms for more than a century? And if so, shouldn't it be them we should thank?

World War I

The difficulties of negotiating the faultline between history and apologetics are also apparent with respect to his treatment of the churches' dismal record during the First World War. To Guy's credit, his condemnation is strongly put, but is then undermined by his offering a weak excuse:

The church largely gave moral support to the [First World] war, sanctifying the sacrifice of the fallen, providing military chaplains and even, in some cases, using the pulpit as a recruiting platform for the armed forces. Arguably, this stance remains a terrible church stain in the public square, a major failure to recognise and proclaim the Christian message of peace at a time of overheated patriotic zealotry. It was hard, though, in a climate of solidarity and loyalty, for contrary voices to stand out, Christian or otherwise. (p 235)

Once again, the failure of Christian churches to provide the sort of moral leadership he thinks is their due is put down to the difficulty of the situation on the ground. He is right that the climate of the nation was toxically in favour of war. And he gives enough examples of the churches contributing toward that toxic climate. But is not the fact that the conditions on the ground were hard exactly why unique truth of an all-powerful God to be all the more shining in their righteousness? This is not an unreasonable expectation. It is, after all, only taking the churches at their own word. The truth of the churches' dismal performance here (and elsewhere) is so much easier to explain from a secular perspective, which sees churches as man-made institutions projecting man-made conceits across a cosmic backdrop. With that understanding in place, the all-too-human behaviour of the churches becomes comprehensible. By contrast, Guy's excuse is a lot less credible.

History or Apology?

Right at the end of the book, and in the face of the account he has given us, the historian stands aside and the apologist takes control. At the beginning, Guy likens the story of Christianity in New Zealand religion to a game of two halves. In the first half of the twentieth century, Christianity was considerably more powerful and influential than it was in the second half of the century. Very true. He illustrates this diminution of influence well but, crucially, gives no real explanation for it. If the influence of the churches was as pervasive as he claims, it is all the more imperative we are told why this influence has waned so spectacularly.

It is more than a casual oversight that this analysis does not happen. This is the part of the story that is the most difficult for the apologist. If Christian churches are, as they have claimed to be,

vehicles for the Word of God, then the decline of Christianity can only be seen in moral terms, as the progressive turning away of a sinful people from the Word. Guy the historian isn't prepared to actually say that, but Guy the apologist slips this in at the very end of the book. Here he says that we cannot live in a values vacuum. Few would disagree, but on the basis of that sound observation, he then makes a plea for 'religion' as the only legitimate vehicle for the provision of those values.

At its deepest, society's questions remain spiritual in nature. Even for the agnostic, there are still the questions of what it means to be a human being and how people can establish a good society. These questions are questions of religion.

Perhaps the word 'remain' provides an interesting clue. Here once again is the sliding scale we saw in the body of the book, where good and true Christian opinions somehow escape the tides of history. With this word, is Guy assuming that society once recognised that the deepest questions in society were spiritual in nature, but that now, in an age of weakened churches, we have lost that insight? That would explain why 'the agnostic' is grudgingly included in the equation, but only as the species most estranged from this vital truth. Guy is also making a lot of assumptions about the range of religion and the equation of religion with the spiritual. And then, to compound all this, in the last sentences he makes an ambiguous declaration about Jesus Christ as 'the light of the world' and as such, reason why 'the church voice must remain in the public arena.' As a lecturer in church history, Guy is going to be well aware of the thoroughly

contested nature among Christian theologians of what such a declaration might mean. Or whether it means anything.

... the historian stands aside and the apologist takes control ...

With all these caveats in place, *Shaping Godzone* is worth reading. It even 'fills a gap in the literature' – a stock item of praise I have commented on elsewhere. The observations made here are offered in the spirit of reasoned dissent within a context of gratitude for a scholarly piece of work that, for the most part, keeps the contrasting roles of historian and apologist in their proper places.

Bill Cooke is a Sea of Faith member who lives in Auckland. He is currently writing a short work on public controversies about Jesus in New Zealand. His website is www.billcooke.co.nz

OUR CREDIBLE CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS STORY

Peter Land of Hokianga

It seems to me that when all the fragments of the twelve baskets of the Sea of Faith discourse are gathered up, they may seem to be unlikely material to make an orderly repast.

Yet, properly baked, that may go to produce the whole loaf of a credible contemporary religious story. Isn't that the intended aim of the Sea of Faith: after criticism, construction? Where to I proffer these collected fragments:

The reason that church doctrine needs to be reformulated is that people no longer understand it correctly, because its expression belongs to a mind-set we no longer have. Scripture, liturgy and doctrine were formulated in the language and for a mind-set which has changed progressively over time and frozen in place, while the mind-set of the world it had created leaped ahead on a basis of a pagan science. The doctrine is not wrong, the science is not wrong; what is wrong is a mentality that cannot bridge the modes of thought to see that they each address a total cosmic picture but approach it on different grounds, the grounds Karen Armstrong distinguishes as myth and logos, myth and reason. The fault is to say one is right and the other wrong, whereas the human mind works validly in both modes.

The ultimate mystery of existence can be apprehended only in wordless silence. All that we see and experience in reality arises from that origin, and the forms it takes are susceptible of description and manipulation; yet in fact there is only one cosmic expanse, whichever way we view it. It is easy for us to see that myth is metaphor, but it is necessary to realise that logos is so also: an hypothesis is a logical myth, and mathematics is a construct as metaphorical in relation to the reality it addresses as any collection of words can be.

A word is always a metaphor. The truth is covered by, but not reached by metaphor. The

mind homes in on the origin but has to rely on poetic imagination and drama to represent it. It is the function of religion to satisfy the soul's need to breathe in the eternal while immersed in the real.

The first problem our mind encounters is with the concept in the word 'God', as well as with 'Heaven', 'Hell' ... and so on. The crudity of popular imaginings, which misconstrue metaphor for literal direct apprehension of an actuality, has driven honest minds to deny as illusory any expression of reality but the directly material, and to become hostile to religion itself. That is no solution. The beginning of a solution is to realise what language can and cannot do. Language creates in the mind a new level of pseudoreality, which can at best only point to the originating mystery. We live in it willy-nilly and know it with comfortable satisfaction by wordless

**... popular imaginings,
which misconstrue metaphor
for literal direct apprehension
of an actuality ...**

experience; but we use language to scratch the itch of wanting to know what is the secondary level of apprehension. The best that that can do is to convince us to go back to the primary

experience from which it arises.

In the Christian world, the *ekklesia* exists to effect this return in us, to create the corporate matrix in which each of us can find the atmosphere to deepen our awareness. In the larger world, the universal wisdom has been incorporated in the several major religions, each with its cultural sphere of influence. Each carries a corporate noospheric reality within the general noosphere of humanity. Each can contribute to our greater understanding

The goal of human development is the realization of a full integration of the person, and of the person with the cosmic whole. That goal, described by great teachers, has its achievement for Christians in the person of Jesus in whom dwells, and who dwells in, and who is, that mystery.

Peter Land, Hokianga

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

The writings of Don Feast will indeed be missed by Sea of Faith newsletter readers. His thoughtful article "Acknowledging Mystery" published posthumously March 2012 describes a stance often articulated today in spite of the public popularity of 'answers'. The effect of a common acceptance of not knowing could be to stifle curiosity and enquiry with complacency; a point of view that does not agree with the eternal drive of man – to discover. And who would dare to say what facts should stay mysteries, and which should be revealed?

Yesterday's mysteries have become today's knowledge, and today's mysteries will assuredly become tomorrow's knowledge, so humankind successfully probes currently unfathomed puzzles, and uncovers new horizons for our children to conquer.

It seems that some people do still wish for certain enigmas to remain mysteries. Could it be that they are really seeking an escape from having to face change? Or do the unknown complexities of the universe and of God-notions simply form a convenient and lazy excuse for a perceived flaw in our cognitive supremacy?

However, there are a number of other people who espouse a timeless adage; it says truly and succinctly: "Mystery is romantic but discovery is more satisfying".

Margaret Whitwell, Tauranga

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Dear Noel,

A letter I thought to write for the Newsletter is as follows. Yes a little critical of the Sea of Faith but I still like the openness. I just hope we are not becoming just another spiritualistic religion.

When I first joined the Sea of Faith I was excited; I had found an organisation and people like myself dissatisfied with the Church and it seemed to me seeking the truth through open debate. But I have come to question whether the S.O.F is as open minded as it claims. I have come to this conclusion, especially from the last two or three Newsletters. The heading says, "Exploring spirituality, religion and ethics". What does the S.O.F mean by "Faith" and "Spirituality"? Exploring religion and ethics, does that mean if there is a God or not? If we decide we have a God did that God instigate ethics? If not, who or what did?

It seems to me the S.O.F has founded a religion of faith and spirituality with no god. We have one writer suggesting that first plants then insects and animals have been established by evolution. Then humanity evolved over many millennia. We also have the claim that life began 3.5

million years ago. But Paul Davies points out correctly Darwinism "... cannot explain how life started in the first place." That cell just seemed to appear; the same as the miraculous creation.

I find it astonishing that Richard Dawkins can find evolution in the fact that all life begins with information but never tells us the origin of the information. That is the DNA as I write, "Who wrote the 'Genetic Script Sentences?'" Are the likes of Dawkins suggesting evolution?

I think the question is not whether there is a God but what kind of God; a theist, deist or pantheist? I favour the pantheist God; the self organising universe. No not panentheist; is not that an attempt to resurrect the theist God?

To suggest that justifying the existence of God by science on scientific grounds as unfortunate would be folly in itself. Are we suggesting that evolution can be justified by science? If the S.O.F thinks so it is reading too much of Don Cupitt and Jung along with Dawkins etc.

**R.L.("Bill") Robottom, Whanganui.**

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Sorry. I goofed in the last Newsletter by not providing details with the hyperlinks. That meant that, in the paper version, you saw (on Page 1!) an invitation to "Visit Our Website" but no details of how to do it.

The online version worked fine.

So, from here on, it is an editorial policy to

- enable all links so that, with the online version, you just need to click them to follow them
- give the details in print also so that, with the paper version, you can enter them into your web browser or email programme.

About a quarter of our Newsletters are sent by email, in each printing saving paper possibly equivalent to a block of 4-by-2 about 1.5 meters long. But it saves you \$5 a year in subs!

Noel Cheer, Editor
noel@cheer.org.nz



FROM THE CHAIR

In his book *Collapse*¹ Jared Diamond discusses values as a source of irrational behaviour – and thus one of the reasons why societies fail.

We ignore a situation because it is favoured by some deeply held value to which we cling, or we feel reluctant to abandon a policy in which we have already invested heavily. Diamond claims that religious values tend to be especially deeply held, hence frequent causes of disastrous behaviour. He gives the example of Easter Island but also notes that today the modern world provides secular examples of admirable values to which we cling when those values no longer make sense in a changing context.

Diamond also observes that it is painfully difficult to decide whether to abandon some core values when they seem to be becoming incompatible with survival, and suggests that underlying success as a society is the knowledge of which core values to hold on to, and which ones to discard or replace with new values as times change.

We can see that crucial choices throughout history have involved the courage to make painful decisions about values and to honestly answer the questions:

- Which of the values that formerly served society well can continue to be maintained under new changed circumstances?
- Which of those treasured values must instead be jettisoned and replaced with different approaches?

Our 20th Conference with the title of “**The Revaluing of All Values**” offers an opportunity for thoughtful and lively discussion. During the two days of the Conference there will be opportunity to explore a variety of questions about values and religion, the relationship between them and the responsibility which arises from an understanding of their role in the world today.

Accompanying this Newsletter (also on the web site www.sof.org.nz) is a copy of the Conference Notes (including the Programme) and the Registration Form. Please note:

- If seats are available, it may be possible to accommodate folk in individual presentations but we cannot register them for meals or accommodation.
- Partial registration does not give entry to a Core Group. To allow group discussion to develop through the two days we need to make this restriction.

The Annual General meeting will be held on Friday evening. If you have a matter you would like debated, or a remit to be considered at the next AGM please send these to the Secretary: Alan Jackson, alanjackson@xtra.co.nz or 55 Evans St. Opoho, Dunedin 9010 by the **14th of August** so that notice of these can be given in the September Newsletter. Given the lively discussion at last year's AGM, the Steering Committee has determined a procedure for remits and discussion to be used in future annual meetings. This will be distributed with the September Newsletter and at Conference.

To reiterate: there will be an election for at least five new members of the Steering Committee. If you know someone who could contribute positively to the future of the Sea of Faith, please ask him or her to consider nomination. After four years on the Steering Committee and through the ongoing discussion about our future, it seems to me that the future strength of our organisation lies with Local Groups and the strength of the Steering Committee in representing us. Nomination forms are available on the web site (with the Conference material) and should be returned to the Secretary by the **14th of August**. A short biography of the person being nominated would also assist those voting if the nominated person or nominee is unable to be present at the meeting.

This year the Saturday afternoon offers a wide range of potential activity which includes workshops, visits and opportunity to fill the time in your own way. Following the interest in last year's Archival Display, this year Alison Eng has agreed to prepare and introduce material which highlights previous conferences and activities of the past twenty years. If you have photographs or other items which show us something of these occasions then please Alison alison.eng@xtra.co.nz or 163 Rangiora-Woodend Rd, Woodend, 7610, or phone 03-312-7227. She would welcome such material for the display.

Conference 2012, celebrating 20 years of the Sea of Faith in New Zealand, promises an interesting and stimulating weekend of presentations, discussion and opportunities to catch up with others and perhaps even look forward to the next twenty years.

I do hope you can be there.

**Natali Allen
Chairperson
2011-2012**



¹ Diamond, Jared, M. (2005), *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*. Allen Lane: Science