

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

[www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)

Newsletter 126, September 2016

## With or Without God: Community in a Post-Theistic Age

Reflections on the Conference Theme

By Laurie Chisholm

In recent times, religious concepts – sin, grace, forgiveness, salvation – have become increasingly empty and meaningless. Even the most fundamental concept, God, is under threat. Cosmology has no need of a first cause, psychology no need of a soul, morality no need of a divine command to establish right and wrong. The new atheists attack and deride religion, desiring its abolition.

Your Steering Committee is pleased and proud to have secured for this year's Conference two overseas keynote speakers each with the highest international reputation. *Gretta Vosper* is a parish minister who has come out as an atheist, standing in solidarity with those who deny the existence of an interventionist God. *Michael Benedikt* is the author of "*God is the Good We Do*" in which he argues for evolving and rethinking the concept of God. These speakers are joined by our own *Lloyd Geering* and by *Geoff Troughton*, who is a senior lecturer in religious studies at Victoria University.

**In past times, a shared religious faith and practice have served to build community, linking often very disparate individuals. How will community be fostered in a new world in which traditional religion is collapsing?**

**Sir Lloyd Geering:** "What Constitutes Human Community, From Family to Global?"

**Prof. Michael Benedikt:** Theopraxy means "the practice of God." The word follows from the thesis that God is the good we do—and only the good we do.

**Rev. Gretta Vosper:** "Building a World Beyond Beliefs that Divide"

**Dr. Geoff Troughton**

"The Religious State we are in". New Zealand's religious landscape is changing rapidly.

**Workshops:** *Scott Kearns*, "Songs for Anyone"    *Tom Hall*, "The Tao of Jesus, The Way of the Way"

**Panel Discussion**

Keynote Speakers on stage together for an interactive discussion moderated by Noel Cheer.

**You can still attend – see page 2.**

**Full Details on the website at <http://www.sof.org.nz>**

## MISCELLANY

### *Registration, yes – Accommodation, sorry ....*

Why are we advertising the Conference after the close-off date for Registration? Although all available accommodation has been booked, we sense that there are people who would like to attend and could use either nearby motels or accommodation with friends. We will still accept your registration on that basis. This promises to be a stimulating Conference – don't miss it!

### *Workshops*

Tom Hall asks us to remind those who will attend his workshop to come with a Bible in hand in order to refer to gospel passages that he will suggest have echoes in the Tao Te Ching.

The workshops do not compete in their scheduling – why not attend both? You can adjust your fee payment on the day.

### *The Conference Bookstall*

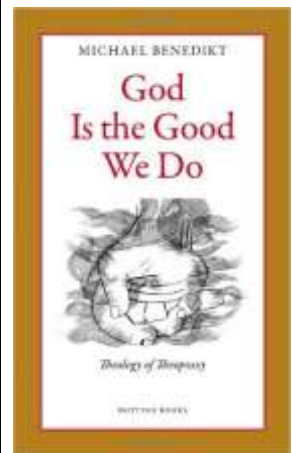
As time goes on and the Internet gnaws away at the way we used to do things, the provision of a Conference Bookstall is becoming more difficult. The commercial cost of setting up shop in a temporary location is more challenging to retailers than it once was.

The following is what we have been able to arrange for this year.

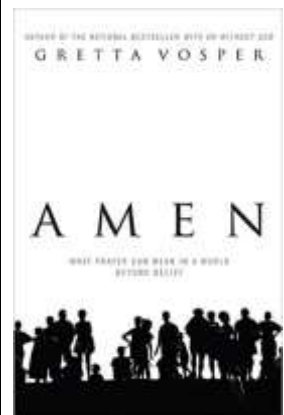
We will setup a bookstall in one corner of the main events venue – The Pillars -- and have it open for business over Saturday lunch and in the Friday and Saturday Happy Hours. We will offer a selection of books from Unity Books at a slight, but noticeable, discount. At this time it looks as though there will be books available from other sources.

Books written by the speakers themselves are best obtained by Internet order from Fishpond or Amazon or both.

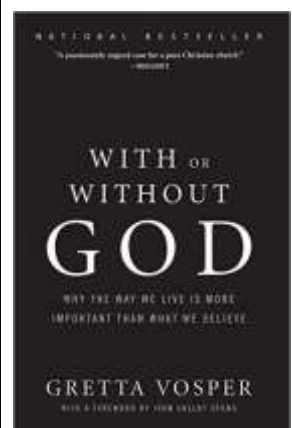
- Michael Benedikt, ***God is the Good We Do: Theology of Theopraxy***, Bottino Books NY



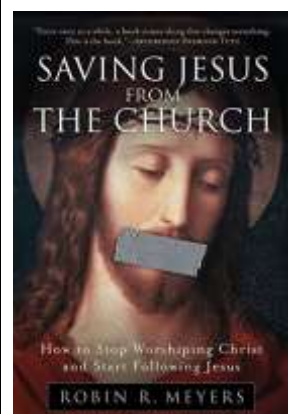
- Greta Vosper ***Amen: What prayer can mean in a world beyond belief*** HarperCollins Publishers Ltd



- Greta Vosper ***With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe***



- Robin Myers, ***Saving Jesus from the Church: How to stop worshipping Christ and start following Jesus***



"The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between the way nature works and the way people think."  
~ Gregory Bateson

"We exist in a bizarre combination of Stone Age emotions, medieval beliefs, and god-like technology."  
~ Edward O. Wilson

# ALL ABOUT US

## SEA OF FAITH: EXPLORING VALUES, SPIRITUALITY AND MEANING

We are an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.

**Our formal name is The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Inc.**

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

“Sea of Faith” 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, Sea of Faith provides a forum for the continued 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](http://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 Fred Marshall. (The late Alan Goss was, for a time, a Life Member).

**Chairperson: Laurie Chisholm**, 117 Collins Rd, RD4, Christchurch 7674, (03) 325-2141, 021-201-0302, [laurie.chisholm@ihug.co.nz](mailto:laurie.chisholm@ihug.co.nz)

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To offer a comment on material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact **The Editor, 26 Clipper St., Titahi Bay, Porirua 5022**, (04) 236-7533 or 0274-483-805 or email to [noel@cheer.org.nz](mailto:noel@cheer.org.nz)

Publication deadlines for submitted Newsletter copy for the rest of 2016 are: 21/10/2016, 21/12/2016.

**Members may borrow books, CDs, and DVDs** from the Resource Centre which is managed by Suzi Thirlwall phone (07) 578-2775 email [susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz](mailto:susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz) Refer to the catalogue on the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz).

**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 and not on paper.

**Bonus:** If you already receive the paper version, then you can receive the email version in addition, *at no charge*. Send an email requesting that to [pcowley@paradise.net.nz](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz)

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*At this year's AGM, Laurie completes his 4-year term as the Chair of the Steering Committee and stands down. He writes,*

“It took quite a bit of patient listening to my doubts and questions, especially by the previous Chairperson, Natali Allen, before I was ready to become chairperson. But I greatly appreciate my year as secretary and three years as chairperson. We have always found deciding on a theme and title for Conference difficult, but I believe we have addressed important questions in recent Conferences: modern brain science (Exploring Inner Space – Can Spirit, Soul and Free-will survive the scrutiny? 2014), climate change and our plundering of the planet (Micawber or Cassandra? Responding to an increasingly uncertain future 2015), and now God-talk itself (With or Without God: Community in a Post-theistic Age 2016).

This year, unusually, four of us are stepping down from the Steering Committee, meaning that there is a much greater than usual need for others to step up. The Steering Committee's main role is deciding the Conference theme and title, and organising speakers for it. It is also responsible for the general direction of the Sea of Faith. Membership is not especially onerous; we have two face-to-face meetings each year (after the AGM, and in February typically in Wellington with travel expenses paid by SoF). In each remaining month we meet for a Committee Meeting on Skype – again, at no cost to the SC member. We also meet briefly twice during Conference. We have made increasing use of email to progress issues outside of the monthly meeting. The Steering Committee is supported by an enthusiastic and energetic Conference Committee that handles detailed conference arrangements. Please give some thought to whether you, or someone you know, is willing to be nominated for election to the Committee at this year's AGM.”



*Laurie Chisholm: Subversive Scripture 2*

# EASTER

**“There have been very few sermons preached on that text.”** This comment, with its wry humour, came from Dietrich Ritschl, a Swiss-German:

*And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his [Jesus'] resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.*

In traditional theology, Jesus is the first (and, so far, the only) human to be raised from the dead, something that required a unique, one-off miracle. But this text has a whole lot of random good people, not even Christians, being resurrected. What happened to them no-one knows. Another awkwardness is that they apparently came alive again at the moment of Jesus' death, but had to hang around in their tombs for three days until Jesus was resurrected before being allowed to appear to others.

The passage begins to make some sort of sense when you realise that many at that time believed that at the end of time, there would be a general resurrection, along with an end to the evil and injustice of present-day reality and the establishment of God's Kingdom. That feverish expectation gave rise to rumours at the height of the tragedy that was Jesus' crucifixion, that a general resurrection was already beginning. Paul's description of Jesus' resurrection as “the first fruits of them that sleep”(1 Cor 15:20), meaning the first of the dead to be resurrected, reflects this understanding. Matthew's gospel has this awkward passage because the oral tradition passed on the rumours of a general resurrection having already begun, and the gospel writer faithfully wrote down the tradition.

This passage is only the beginning of the difficulties around Easter, if you take scripture seriously. The gospels do not agree with one another about who Jesus appeared to and in what order. St. Paul lists the appearances and adds himself at the end of the list, even though that

appearance was visionary and spiritual – of quite a different nature. John's gospel places the story of the miraculous haul of fish (John 21) after the resurrection, while Luke 5 tells a very similar story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when he called the first disciples. It seems that the first Christians did not carefully distinguish between Jesus' actions before and after his death.

Things went from bad to worse when the Christians came to the attention of educated philosophers in the Roman Empire. “Nothing new here” they retorted, “stories of the death and resurrection of a god are commonplace.” So the Apologists resorted to a dubious argument that Jesus' resurrection was factual and real, while the pagan traditions were the result of demons distorting the truth, so as to confuse the faithful.

In New Zealand, Lloyd Geering put the cat among the pigeons merely by quoting words from Ronald Gregor Smith to the effect that the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine, triggering the Geering controversy. But theologians have been working for some time to express the contemporary significance of Easter, though they have done this in

rather different ways. Before moving to them, I need to establish some basic facts.

**“... stories of the death and resurrection of a god are commonplace.”**

- 1. For most of its life, the religion of Israel, in contrast to other religions and especially to ancient Egyptian religion, did not have any hope in life after death. Humans that died did have a shadowy existence in Sheol (the underworld), but this was not the source of any comfort.**
- 2. The Pharisees believed in resurrection, but this is quite different from the immortality of the soul, which thinks of the soul as an indestructible substance. Immortality of the soul is something that goes back to the Greek philosopher Plato and is not a biblical concept.**

**3. When the early Christians moved out into the non-Jewish world, notions of resurrection of the body made no sense. The Hellenistic world was attracted to the mystery religions, which had as their ritual centre the mystical participation in the death and resurrection of the god. So we have St Paul talking about dying and rising again with Christ.**

**Paul Tillich** looked at various theories to explain the emergence of belief in Jesus' resurrection: the physical, the spiritualistic and the psychological, before postulating his own view, in which Jesus is restituted as the Christ.

**Karl Barth**, often thought of as a conservative theologian, was emphatic that what dies is the whole person. We humans as such have no beyond, God is our beyond, as our partner in life and in death. In death we participate in the eternal life of God. It's not correct to think of us in death as being succeeded by a never-ending, immortal version of ourselves. The whole of our mortal life is as it were taken up into God. He concedes that there is only the thinnest biblical basis for this idea.

**Jurgen Moltmann**, following the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, interpreted resurrection as an expression of hope. Religion should not focus on a heavenly, transcendent 'above' but on a temporal 'ahead.' Hope should be seen as a 'horizontal' rather than a 'vertical' matter. Jesus' death on the cross was seen as godforsakenness, as curse and his resurrection is correspondingly a conquest of that godforsakenness, of the deadliness of death. Resurrection is the beginning and source of our abolition of the godforsakenness of the world.

**Eugen Drewermann** rejects the widespread assumption that resurrection is something that originated with Christianity. In an extended meditation on death, he claims that the bible adds nothing to the concepts that ancient Egypt already had: resurrection, ascension and eternal life. Indeed, it is only through an understanding of ancient Egyptian religion that the biblical concepts begin to make sense. He approaches the Easter tradition, especially that of St. John's gospel, through an understanding of ancient Egyptian religion, giving a poetic interpretation of Easter, and countering any tendency to give it an external, objective, quasi-scientific reality.

In another major work, he provides a humanity-wide foundation for this poetic interpretation:

*The history of culture gives numerous indications that in the course of the human spirit becoming aware, the senses were more and more fervently called upon to contradict their own witness to the transitoriness of human existence and to form symbols, that, as in the Easter night ritual of the Catholic church, make the prison walls of the world transparent for the light of eternity. The secret of the moon, which after three days of death is resurrected to new beauty, the birth of the sun at the end of the night in the rising of the morning, the blossoming of flowers and corn out of the depths of the earth, the spraying of sparks from the coldness of stone, the lighting of fire from dead wood, the breathing of the wind over the water – everything served as a sign and a witness to the immortality of human life.*

*What would human life be otherwise, if not an inescapable trap? Without faith in the resurrection our whole existence would remain stuck to earth until there is no more distinction between flesh and dust, and in contrast to the animals, which only suffer death, but don't experience it, we would have to deploy our life against death, in a more and more deadly way.*

*But the spirit, our awareness, teaches us to assert that individuality is the essence of being human and to understand earthly existence as a path to heaven. In all cultures, religion practises in sacred images and rituals the dissolution of the boundaries of existence, the elevation of the soul, the gathering of festive hours, in which time stands still and eternity begins. Again and again the human soul is represented as something that belongs to the realm of air, as bird, or butterfly, that separates itself in death from its mortal covering, in order to return to a realm of peace and happiness.*

**Eugen Drewermann**  
*Tiefenpsychologie und Exegese II 505-6*



Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*

# WAS PAUL GUILTY?

## Did The Apostle Paul Contribute To "THE CLOSING OF THE WESTERN MIND"

*In 2002 the classicist author, Paul Freeman, wrote a book that attracted much controversy: **The Closing of the Western Mind: The Rise of Faith and the Fall of Reason**. In the Introduction he claims that "this book deals with a significant turning point in western cultural and intellectual history, when the tradition of rational thought established by the Greeks was stifled in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D." On page xviii, the author "... finds a combination of factors behind the closing of the Western mind": the attack on Greek philosophy by [the Apostle] Paul, the adoption of Platonism by Christian theologians and the enforcement of orthodoxy by emperors desperate to keep good order.... By the fifth century, not only had rational thought been suppressed, but there had been a substitution for it of 'mystery, magic and authority'."*

*Amongst those today who are actively interested in Christian origins and the present-day day legacy of those origins, the Apostle Paul looms large. It is widely held that, without Paul, Christianity would be very different today – if, indeed, it still existed. What follows is the Pauline part of Freeman's thesis presented as verbatim quotations from pp119-127, of that book and contained in the rhetorically-named chapter "**Paul, 'the Founder of Christianity'?**"*

"Many passages of Paul suggest that having faith is in itself sufficient to ensure salvation in Christ. This is the important concept of "justification" by which God accepts the believer as righteous simply because of his or her faith. In other passages, on the other hand, Paul stresses the importance of charity, as in the famous passage of I Corinthians 13, where it is the greatest of "faith, hope and charity," and in Galatians 5:6, where "what matters is faith that makes its power felt through love." This leaves open the question of whether "good works" are necessary for salvation. For Paul this may not have been a major issue because, like the Christian community in Jerusalem, he believed in the imminence of the second coming. There is an urgency in the need to adopt faith. So short is the time before Christ returns that there is not even a chance to make major changes in one's behaviour. ....

### THE PLACE OF FAITH

While the rewards for those with faith are great, the corollary dimension of Paul's teaching, the fate of those without faith, has had an equally powerful and enduring influence. ... The idea of being open to 'faith' is a powerful one; the longing to surrender the self to another who can provide certainty is an enduring part of the human psyche. However, for those who believe in the importance of using reason to define the truth, this surrender must raise concerns. Plato, for instance, specifically condemned 'faith' as a means of finding the truth; for him the only secure way of understanding the immaterial world was through the use of reason. .... Although there is no evidence that Paul knew of Plato's thought, we can assume that he realized that his concept of "faith" was vulnerable when set against the mainstream of the Greek intellectual tradition. As we have seen, he may have been unsettled by his confrontation with the pagan philosophers in Athens. His response was to hit back with highly emotional rhetoric, the only weapon to hand. **So for Paul it is not only the**

**"... it became a mark of the committed Christian to be able to reject rational thought"**

**Law that has been superseded by the coming of Christ, it is the concept of rational argument, the core of the Greek intellectual achievement itself.** "The more they [non-Christians] called themselves philosophers," he tells the Romans (1:2,1-22.), "the more stupid they grew . . . they made nonsense out of logic and their empty minds were darkened." In his first letter to the Corinthians (1:15) he writes, "The wisdom of the world is foolishness to God." There is something of the mystic in Paul's disregard of logic ... This disregard had unfortunate consequences. As Paul's writings came to be seen as authoritative, it became a mark of the committed Christian to be able to reject rational thought, and even the evidence of empirical experience. Christians would often pride themselves on their lack of education, **associating independent philosophical thinking with the sin of pride.** Even educated Christians such as Gregory the Great (pope 590-604) followed Paul. Drawing directly on the Corinthians verse quoted above, Gregory commented, "The wisdom of this world is concealing



the heart with stratagems, veiling meaning with verbiage, proving false to be right, and true to be false," and, as we will see, the Greek intellectual tradition was to be increasingly stifled by the churches. **So here are the roots of the conflict between religion and science that still pervades debates on Christianity to this day.** By proposing that Christian faith (which exists in the world of *muthos*) might contain 'truths' superior to those achieved by rational argument (*logoi*), it was Paul, perhaps unwittingly in that he appears to have known virtually nothing of the Greek philosophical tradition he condemned, who declared the war and prepared the battlefield.

## EVERYDAY CONDUCT

In elaborating his views on everyday conduct Paul had two particular preoccupations. Paul was true to his Jewish inheritance in deploring idols, and he denounced their worship. ...

Secondly, Paul appears preoccupied with the evils of sexuality. In Romans he fulminated against "filthy enjoyments and the practices with which they [non-Christians] dishonour their own bodies" and "degrading passions," which cause both sexes to commit homosexual acts (Romans 1:24-32). The Greek world was constrained by deeply held conventions. There were those Greeks who valued celibacy in so far as it allowed the mind to concentrate on philosophy, but a positive acceptance of celibacy was seldom accompanied by passionate rejection of the desires of the body. Most Greeks accepted sexual desire as a natural part of being human, which could be sublimated, temporarily or permanently, in the service of other values. The body as such was neutral. Paul introduced a very different view of sexuality (although one can see analogies in Plato's approach to sensual desire). As Peter Brown puts it, for Paul "the body was not a neutral thing, placed between nature and the city. Paul set it firmly in place as a temple of the Holy Spirit, subject to limits that it was sacrilegious to overstep." ...

The idea of the body as a "temple" that can be desecrated by sexual activity has been extraordinarily influential in Christianity, as can be seen in the enormous energy still devoted to debates on sexuality within the churches.

## THE COSMIC DRAMA

Central to Paul's teachings ...is the condemnation of a variety of activities: idol worship, sexuality and—implicitly—the practice of philosophy....

No one reading Paul can ignore the powerful emotional force of this message: human beings live at the centre of a cosmic drama that reaches to the core of each personality as the forces of good and evil battle within the individual. ...

Not least of Paul's legacies was his providing of an institutional framework for the church. By fixing on a comprehensible symbol, the death and resurrection of Christ, and by proclaiming the enormous and imminent rewards of Christian faith (and the awful consequences of rejection of "the cross of Christ"), Paul had created a focus for community worship. ...

His first letter to the Corinthians insists on the importance of all, whether rich or poor, sharing a communal meal at which bread is eaten and wine is drunk in commemoration of Christ's death (I Corinthians 11:17-34). This letter dates from about A.D. 55, and some scholars suggest that it was Paul who, drawing on what he had heard from the Apostles of the Last Supper, established the Eucharist as a repeatable ritual. ...

## INSTITUTIONAL CHRISTIANITY

Paul's influence has been immense—E. P. Sanders is surely right to call the Epistle to the Romans, which treats most of Paul's theological themes, "one of the most influential documents of western history." It takes considerable imagination to conceive what form Christianity would have taken without his highly original and utterly distinctive formulations of

Christian belief: institutionally, Christianity might have faltered without him. The richness and evocative power of his language still inspires.

**"... the enormous energy still devoted [today] to debates on sexuality within the churches."**

**Paul's theology, however, is confined in that it is shaped by his personal isolation, his acute insecurity about his authority and his ambivalence about his Jewish roots.** The difficult circumstances in which he wrote can explain much of the incoherence and contradiction in his letters, which have taxed theologians ever since. He seems to have failed to absorb, or at least express in his letters, any real awareness of Jesus as a human being, or to reflect his teachings, other than, significantly, the prohibition on divorce. It has always to be remembered that Paul is the only major Christian theologian never to have read the Gospels, and one cannot be sure that he interpreted Jesus' teachings, on the Law, for instance, with accuracy. Can one assume that Paul preached what Jesus would have wanted him to preach? It is worth reiterating that his theology was conditioned by his belief in the imminence of the second coming. Had Paul known that the second coming was to be delayed indefinitely, his theology may well have taken a

different direction and would certainly have lost much of its sense of urgency (although a sense of urgency in general seems to have been an intrinsic part of Paul's personality). Furthermore, although his theology appears to be radically new, conceptually it is still rooted deeply in the Jewish (and perhaps to some extent the Essene) tradition. The paradox of Paul is that while he created a Christianity for the Greco-Roman world, he also confirmed or implanted within Christian theology elements that set it in conflict with Greco-Roman society and traditions, over sexuality, art and philosophy. Greeks were asked either to turn their backs on significant aspects of their traditional culture or to risk eternal condemnation. This aspect of Paul's teachings is often neglected in surveys of his theology, but the history of Christianity, in particular the relationship between Christians and the pagan world in the



El Greco: *St Paul*

fourth century, a period when Paul's influence was very powerful, cannot be fully understood without it.

## GENTILE CHRISTIANITY DELIVERED THROUGH PAUL

With the destruction of the Temple at the hands of the Romans in A.D. 70, however, Jewish Christianity began to wither. Peter, Paul and James were all, if tradition is sound, martyred in the 60s, and in the intense passions raised by the Jewish revolt it appears that the loyalty of even those Christians who continued to follow Jewish Law and rituals was suspect. The future was to lie with the Gentile churches. While the earliest Jewish Christians had been able to make some, if uneasy, accommodation with the society in which they lived, **Gentile Christianity, through Paul, had declared war on the Greco-Roman world, its gods, its idols and its mores.** So we must see the early Christian communities as introspective and exclusive, even dysfunctional, in relation to their surroundings. Paul himself recognized their isolation (I Corinthians 1:23): "While the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom here are we preaching a crucified Christ; to the Jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans madness." The Greeks or Romans could not be expected to offer any support or particular tolerance for a movement that rejected such significant aspects of

their culture. The isolation of the Christian communities was to be further deepened by their increasing rejection of their connection with Judaism. Christians desperately needed to find coherence in their beliefs and unity in their communities if they were to survive at all. This is the context within which the fledgling Christian churches developed; it does much to explain the search for authority which was to preoccupy them from the earliest times and help make Christianity so distinctive among rival spiritual movements.

Compiled by Noel Cheer

## BIBLICAL LITERALISM: A GENTILE HERESY

*A Journey into a New Christianity Through the  
Doorway of Matthew's Gospel*

John Shelby Spong, HarperOne 2016

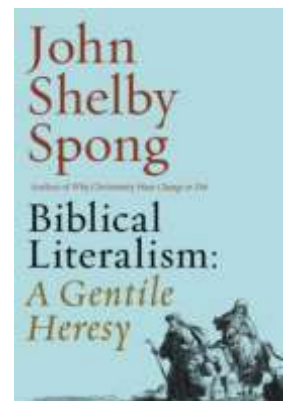
In this new book, Spong dissects the Gospel of Matthew to uncover what the Jewish writers were really trying to do in their gospel narrative, and oddly enough, building megachurches and promising safety and security in exchange for right belief isn't anywhere to be found. What is there, however, is a powerful message that runs counter to the idea that faith offers nothing but a sweet and secure life. Instead, the biblical writers are inviting readers into the mystery of a life that is frequently messy and often downright brutal. That, Spong says, is the real Good News.

### Website of an interview:

<http://religiondispatches.org/why-it-is-heresy-to-read-the-bible-literally-an-interview-with-john-shelby-spong/>

### Quote by Spong:

"Galileo rendered God homeless and Isaac Newton rendered God unemployed so wherever we thought God was and whatever we thought God did, we can no longer think that way. To say nothing of moving on to Charles Darwin when we used to think we were a little lower than the angels and now we have to face the fact we're a little higher than the apes..."





## **BITS AND PIECES**

### **Book Promo**

#### **WHEN PROGRESSIVES GATHER TOGETHER**

**Liturgy, Lectionary, Landscape... And other explorations**

**Rex Hunt**

[www.rexahuntprogressive.com](http://www.rexahuntprogressive.com)

Publisher : Morning Star Publishing

Liturgy has lost its living roots in the soil of the world and become a pot-plant in the sanctuary of the Church, so claimed John ‘Honest to God’ Robinson 50 years ago. Now that claim is being repeated by Australian liturgist and religious naturalist Rex A. E. Hunt. In this eagerly awaited collection of reflective chapters and liturgical resources, Rex Hunt offers broad insights into the shaping of progressive liturgy and worship. Drawing on more than forty years of ordained ministry, he peels back some of the traditions behind Liturgy, Holy Communion, Baptism, the Lord’s Prayer, and Preaching, and suggests when these are and continue to be, reshaped and reconstructed by both progressive theology and critical biblical studies. Then he offers a wide collection of actual liturgies and liturgical resources. Progressive orthopraxy rather than traditional orthodoxy!

Rex Hunt is a retired minister of the Uniting Church in Australia, where he served in several congregational settings, as well as nine years as Director of Communications with the National Assembly of the Church. His commitment to the progressive religion movements in Australia and New Zealand has been expressed in his being Founding Chair of the Planning Team of Common Dreams Conference of Religious Progressives, Australia/South Pacific for seven years, and as an Associate of the Westar Institute, when for three years (2005-08) he was a member of its Literacy & Liturgy Seminar.

He is the author and co-author/editor of several books including *New Green Shoots and Other Story Sermons* (1993), *Against the Stream* (2012), *Why Weren’t We Told?* (2012) – with John W H Smith, *Cards, Carols, and Claus* (2013), and *Wisdom and Imagination* (2014) – with Gregory Jenks.

### **Part of the Ephesus Liturgy**

#### **AT THE “CROSS CREEK” EVENT 31 JULY 2016**

Adapted by Jeanette Brunton and Adrienne Nicholson from a more formal prayer, it becomes aspirational rather than devotional.

*May we be blessed with restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may seek truth boldly and love deep within our heart.*

*May we be blessed with holy anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that we may tirelessly work for justice, freedom and peace among all people.*

*May we be blessed with the gift of tears, to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that we may reach out our hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.*

*May we be blessed with enough foolishness to believe that we really can make a difference in this world, so that we are able, with grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.*  
**May it be so.**

### **Letter to the Editor**

#### **WHO WANTS TO GET RID OF ‘GOD’?**

The word ‘God’ is not about to disappear. However, there are already three main uses of the word. In the west our major religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are ‘monotheistic’, although many people would claim to be ‘atheistic’. In the east Hinduism, Buddhism and Daoism are ‘pantheistic’, meaning all is God. Figures from the Pew Research Centre USA indicate that of the world population in 2012 approximately 54% are monotheists, 16% atheists and 30% pantheists. An element of pantheism is in all religions. The Bible quotes John 10:30 *I and my Father are One*; and Paul in Galatians 3:28.... *all are One in Christ Jesus*. All are One in the one spirit. Obviously there are 7 billion body/minds and, ‘experientially’, one awareness. Everybody is conscious or aware of everything – awareness is infinite – limitless – no edges, there can only be one awareness. I suggest that the problems of the world would disappear if we all ‘realised’ our oneness, and that there can only be one awareness – and we are ‘that’.

**Graham Shearer, August 2016.**

# ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the Sea of Faith Network NZ (Inc) will be held at Silverstream Retreat and Conference Centre, 3 Reynolds Bach Drive, Silverstream, Upper Hutt, on Friday 7 October at 7:30 pm.

Notices of motion must be submitted to the secretary ([jockcrawford@actrix.co.nz](mailto:jockcrawford@actrix.co.nz)) at least 10 days before the AGM.

## AGENDA

- **Welcome**
- **Apologies**
- **Minutes of the 2015 AGM.**  
You can view them here:  
<http://www.sof.org.nz/2015%20AGM%20Minutes.pdf>
- **Matters Arising**
- **Reports:**  
Our aim is to circulate reports in advance so that they don't need to be read in full at the AGM.
  - **Chairperson:** Laurie Chisholm
  - **Treasurer:** Norm Ely
  - **Local Groups Coordinator:** Gretchen Kivell
  - **Archivist:** Alison Eng
  - **Resource Centre Manager:** Suzi Thirlwall
  - **Webmaster/Newsletter Editor:** Noel Cheer
- **Notices of Motion**  
THAT the annual membership fee for the Sea of Faith be increased from \$20 to \$25, beginning at the 2017 financial year.

[see the the case for it on page 11]

- **Election of Steering Committee Members**  
Existing members, Laurie Chisholm, Jock Crawford, Peter Cowley, and Bernadette Krassoi, must step down from the time of Conference, as they have served their 4-year term. We need several people (to a minimum of 8 and maximum of 12) to be elected to the Steering Committee. Please give this serious consideration and submit nominations to the secretary Jock Crawford on the form that you can print from the Website [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)  
  
These existing members offer themselves for re-election: Adrian Skelton, Gretchen Kivell, Norm Ely, Bruce Tasker.  
  
Note: Noel Cheer is a member of the Steering Committee, not by election but because he is the Editor of the Newsletter.
- **Discussion ..**  
.. on holding Annual Conferences at the same location year on year. This is your opportunity to air the pros and cons of the Steering Committee's proposal. A summary of this issue appears on page 11 of this Newsletter and a detailed analysis in Newsletter 125. A vote of the full financial membership will not be taken until after Conference.
- **Other Business / Close**

# SUPPORT FOR THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

## Remit to the Sea of Faith AGM October 07 October 2016

Norman Ely, Treasurer moves:

That the SoF (NZ) membership, which includes subscription to six Sea of Faith Newsletters per annum, be altered as follows:

- For Newsletters delivered by email: to be increased to \$20 p.a.
- For Newsletters printed on paper and mailed: to be increased to \$25 p.a.
- Newsletters printed on paper and mailed and with optional extra of the email version: to be increased to \$25 p.a.

**Seconded:** tba

### Argument.

The Sea of Faith's income is solely from membership fees.

Sea of Faith has a membership of approximately 330 households containing approximately 455 members.

- Approximately  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the members receive the Newsletter on paper and mailed.
- Approximately  $\frac{1}{3}$  receive the Newsletter solely by email.
- A few receive the Newsletter in both formats.

Our budget for the Newsletter for the coming year is \$4,000 for the printing and \$2,000 for the envelopes and postage – a total of \$6,000.

On our current membership of 330 households and at an average subscription of \$16.50 per household, our income will be \$5445. This represents a shortfall merely to cover the production and distribution of the Newsletter.

The cost of postage has increased dramatically over the last two years as fewer people use the postal service and switch to email. This is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

With the proposed increase, our income will be approximately \$5,000 from the people who pay \$25

per annum and approximately \$2,000 from people paying the \$20 per annum. A total of approximately \$7,000

The more people who move to receiving the Newsletter by email only, the more our financial situation will improve to the point where we may be able to hold it at the \$25 level for a much longer period.

This has the support of the outgoing Steering Committee.

**N.R. Ely**  
**Treasurer**

## The Venue of the SoF Annual Conference

As Norm Ely set out in the article that he wrote for Newsletter 125, we seem to be getting to the point where rotating the venue of the annual Conference around a lot of centres (the current formula is "top of the North Island, bottom of the North Island, South Island"), is becoming less and less sustainable. The reasons are several – age and cost-of-travel are two, but the suggestion is that we fix the venue centre on Wellington (it is only a suggestion, so far) and modify the Registration Fee to compensate.

If the single-venue idea gets voted for, the entire currently-financial membership – which includes Life Members – will be asked to vote in about November/December.

If we get a 'Yes' vote we will invite money-competent people to make suggestions as to how we can come up with a differential Registration Fee to, as much as possible, make (Registration+Travel) more or less equal for everyone.

When we booked **The Retreat** for this year we booked it also for next year because, by the time we have got a membership vote on this matter (probably this December), we will be too late to book. In short, the venue for 2017 will also be **The Retreat** but it might (or might not) be subject to a different Registration Fee structure.

**Noel Cheer**  
**wearing the hat of Convenor of the  
Conference Committee**



# LAURIE'S LAST WORD, SEPTEMBER 2016

**There's no doubt about it; humans are social animals.** Evolution has designed us for community. This is really an accident. Some animals (tigers, turtles, eagles) live essentially solitary lives as adults. Others (monkeys, prairie dogs, lions) live in groups and work together. If evolution had played out just a little differently, we might be one of those solitary animals. It could well be that a major factor in the large size of human brains is this need to be in community. Just think of the visual processing power needed to correctly interpret facial impressions and the memory required to store this information for all the members of your tribe, so that you know what to expect from them and don't have nasty surprises. Learning to see things from another's perspective is also a major cognitive achievement that requires a sophisticated brain.

My first experience of community was in the Roslyn Baptist Bible Class. We sang evangelical choruses together to guitar accompaniment, went to our own camps, joined with the wider Baptist church at Easter, went for long walks together up the Taieri River from Outram and even spent a night out in the open on top of Flagstaff with a view of the city. We worked assembling picture frames as a fundraiser for a new church and held concerts at which we sang songs and played humorous sketches to an audience that didn't yet have TV.

My next experience of community was with the Student Christian Movement. It was great to be part of a group (many older than me) who were all interested in exploring ideas and questioning tradition. We took turns running a weekly lunchtime service at the Student Union, the leader sitting at the back rather than in front of the group, helping us to focus on the thoughts rather than the person. The highlight of the year was a week-long camp at Iona, just out of Herbert in North Otago. The students organised everything and the first task on arrival was to take mattresses from the bunks and arrange them in a rectangle around the fire in the lounge. There we lay around together in a pile, listening to the speakers. I remember mysticism, French existentialism and theology as some of the topics. A number of rituals and ceremonies helped build community. We created skits for a concert, stole each other's jerseys and embroidered them with words to fit the person they came from, and even went glow-worm hunting. Of course

there were no glow-worms (there used to be when our camps were held at Owaka), but a community cuddle to examine the non-existent worms at the end of the hunt made it all worthwhile. Such experiences of belonging to a peer group are very important in developing an adult identity.

As a minister of religion, I saw my role as building up and deepening community, through personal contacts and through modern and relevant worship. When this career collapsed, I naturally questioned whether there was any need for a religious community at all. Wouldn't the family and the work communities suffice? Aren't religious communities, far from being the core of things, just one among an increasing number of special-interest groups? The traditions recorded in the Tanakh (Old Testament) reflect at least three quite different concepts of community, only the last of which was really based on religion. The patriarchal era was one of extended families, not necessarily bound together by religion, as shown by the story of Rachel's theft of Laban's household gods (Genesis 31). The time of kingship had a temple and formal worship centralised in Jerusalem, but this was more like a royal cult and it was the King who was the real centre of community. It was only after the exile, when Israel was an occupied power, that a priestly theocracy without political power emerged in which community was structured as a synagogue and based on a religious identity. The church is a Christian variant of the synagogue.

Community is the theme of this year's Conference. I am very grateful for my experiences of community; they have made me the person I am. But becoming an individual necessarily also involves standing against the community and growing beyond the world view that the community embodies. I can't help but admire Greta Vosper's courage in 'coming out' as an atheist, standing with those who cannot make sense of God-talk and trying to develop a post-theistic Christian community, but I suspect that a lot of what has been crystallised in that God-talk is in danger of being lost. It's going to be an interesting Conference...

**Laurie Chisholm,  
Chairperson 2015-2016**

