

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

## Newsletter

### Sea of Faith and the Future

NZ churches haven't been very interested in theological questions, particularly ones that involved questioning traditional thinking. The ecumenical movement was driven more by pragmatic and practical questions as it aimed to bring the churches together. It was not concerned with resolving the theological issues that led to separate denominations in the first place. During the Geering controversy, the Presbyterian Church was more concerned to maintain the peace and unity of the church than to explore questions about the resurrection and the immortality of the soul or to face up to the implications of modernity.

### The Rise of Sea of Faith

Consequently, it was very important that the Sea of Faith came into being. It provided a forum where people could openly explore and question in a way that the mainline churches were not offering. Indeed, it seems to me that the mainline churches have on the whole become more vague, woolly and content-free after the Geering controversy. Don Cupitt's BBC Series Sea of Faith came as a breath of fresh air, as it portrayed a series of philosophical thinkers who all undermined the assumptions of traditional Christianity.

### Telling the Enlightenment Story

During those early days, we mainly told each other an Enlightenment-style story in which traditional Christianity was confronted by a rational modernity. We described how the world, once populated with heaven, hell, purgatory, saints, the risen Jesus, and God, has gradually emptied, with even God turning into something like the disappearing smile on the Cheshire cat. We reinterpreted the Incarnation to mean that God has disappeared into the world, ending dualism and making the world modern and secular. We looked to thinkers like Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Nietzsche to give us a clue about where religion is heading. You might call the people attracted by this thinking our first constituency.

### A "Second Constituency?"

In 2004, Noel Cheer speculated about the emergence of a "second constituency."

I am confident that we are seeing the emergence of what might be called our second constituency. Increasingly I meet people who have not previously had any specific religious component in their lives. They wouldn't be seen dead near a church.

We need to be looking to such people as potential SoFers but this implies a fundamental rethinking of our role. Rather than challenging traditional Christianity in the name of the modern secular world and

continually orienting our thinking about religion towards the traditional Christianity of the past, we should simply begin as modern, 'secular' people. Our usual approach is centred on the head rather than the heart; it is overly rationalistic and intellectual, involving arguments about concepts that have little or no existential meaning to modern secular people. Now of course the world wasn't created in six days; ancients simply had no concept of the enormous extension of space and time that we have from modern cosmology. And Jesus' ascension makes some sort of sense in an old three-decker universe but no sense at all in a heliocentric solar system. We might love arguing over whether St Paul got to the heart of Jesus' message or whether he irrevocably distorted it, but this cuts no ice for those who have grown up with little idea of what either was on about.

What might a second constituency look like? How can we encourage people to join it? We will need to give renewed emphasis to our byline. "Values, Meaning and Spirituality" was the end-result of a long debate about changing our name, but we haven't paid much attention to it since. But this byline marks out the territory we need to be working in. **Values** are something that almost all of us regard as important (a few neoliberals might argue against values in the name of a free and unfettered market and a society that doesn't pick winners, but dig a little deeper and you will find they very definitely have their own values that derive from a questionable worldview). **Meaning** is something that we all strive to give to our lives. If 'religion' is on the decline, many today feel that '**spirituality**' is important to them. Spirituality is something much broader and more open-ended and flexible than 'religion.' It is unfortunate that its origin reflects a dualism (spiritual versus material) that we no longer share. Many also feel that it is an unacceptably vague and woolly concept, but this just means that it is up to us to fill it with appropriate content.

Mark Gibson (see his 'sermon' on page 8 and the review of his book on page 11). points the way to one possible direction. His thinking still lies squarely within the

Christian tradition, but is poetic and experiential rather than dogmatic and conceptual. He also strikes an attractive balance between meditative reflection and political and social action.

To the extent that 'religion,' broadly understood, will have a future in the Sea of Faith, we need to embrace the whole human religious past and seek to explore religion in a way that does not privilege any one tradition – in short, we need to pursue what Cantwell Smith called a World Theology. In this case, we will be looking for constructive convictions and picking up wisdom, no matter which tradition it comes from.

Religion does not need to be a divisive issue in the Sea of Faith. There are relatively religious and relatively secular ways of exploring values, meaning and spirituality. However, if we do use 'religious' words, we need to be able to translate their meaning into other, secular terms.

We need to support ways in which exploring values, meaning and spirituality can become important to people. Many will hardly be using religious words at all to describe such exploration. For example, in mid-life, people might become aware of how they have been seduced by the omnipresent pressure to consume. After buying most of the necessities of life, they realise that goods alone do not bring happiness and that there needs to be more to life than consumption. Negatively, they become aware of the enormous pressures that a capitalist economy generates, pressures to buy and consume. Positively, they realise that other matters – loving relationships, the family, simple enjoyments – have been crowded out by consumerism.

Another might work hard at their job, helping to make some multi-national corporation competitive on the world market, buying a house and starting a family of their own. Then, in the second part of their life they come to realise that this agenda is empty and unsatisfying. They need to begin again, engaging in a more introspective process to discover what their calling is in life, how to make their house a home and how to deepen the love in their relationships.

*The Editor*

## All about us

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.

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” 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 via Conference and Newsletter, 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 any religious institution.

## Committee

Our national Committee publishes a newsletter, maintains a website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz), assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

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## Life Members

Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK) and Ian Harris. Also Suzi Thirwell, Yvonne Curtis and Peter Cowley (appointed at the 2017 AGM).

**Publication deadline** for the next Newsletter is 1 August 2019.

## Contents

Sea of Faith and the Future.....	1
All about us.....	3
Conference 2019.....	4
Turning the Tide (on the Sea of Faith) - #4 .....	6
Reflection: “The Essential Desert” .....	8
Religion Classics .....	10
Honest to God .....	10
Book Review .....	11
The In-Between Land: Psalms, Poems and Haiku ...	11



## Conference 2019

### **Transforming Communities: Finding Meaning in a Consumption-driven World**

Midday Friday 1 November – 16.30 Saturday 2 November

All Souls' Church Complex 30 Church Lane, Merivale, Christchurch

**Inaugural Lloyd Geering Lecture:** Bronwyn Hayward

**Evolving Awareness Systems and Levels of Meaning:** Merv Dickinson

**A Father and Daughter Reflect On Making Meaning and Finding Community:** David Hanna/Hana Olds

Accommodation: See page 7 for options. Now is a good time to book.

### **Bronwyn Hayward**

Bronwyn is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations and Director of The Sustainable Citizenship and Civic Imagination Research group. Her research focuses on the intersection of sustainable development, youth, climate change and citizenship.



Bronwyn is a Coordinating Lead Author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change AR6 report (cities & infrastructure) and was a lead author for the 2018 Special Report on 1.5 (Sustainable development & Poverty eradication). She is co-primary investigator with University of Surrey's ESRC funded CUSP: Centre for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity, she leads the CYCLES Children and Youth in Cities lifestyle Evaluation study in 7 world cities.

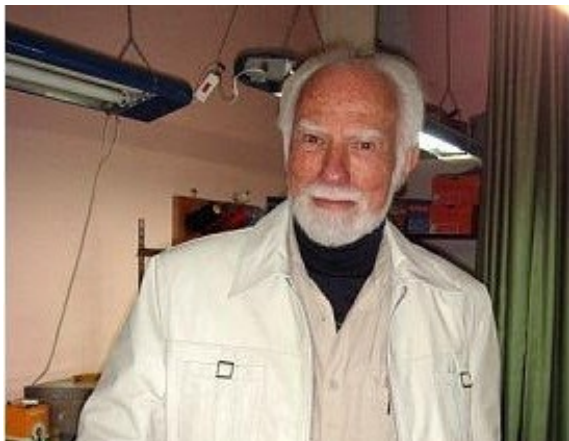
She was an Erskine Fellow with University College, Oxford, UK 2017. Recent books are *Sea Change: Climate politics and New Zealand* (BWB, 2017) and *Children, Citizenship and Environment* (Routledge, 2012).

She served on the International Social Sciences Council steering committee - Transformative Research, as a co-researcher with University of Oslo, Voices of the Future project, a lead author on UNEP's global survey of 18-35 year olds lifestyles and sustainability, and as a trustee for the UK Foundation for Democracy and Sustainability. Outside academia Bronwyn worked for children's TV, as a Ministerial appointment to the NZ Broadcasting Standards Authority & as a trustee for the SPARK Foundation & Give A Little. She was inaugural joint winner of UC Arts Conscience & Critic of Society Research Award 2014 and a Kiwibank NZer of the year Local Hero 2019.

### **Merv Dickinson**

Canadian-born, Merv completed his formal education in Canada and the United States, receiving a BA (Philosophy) and BD (Theology) from Victoria University in Toronto, a PhD (Counseling Psychology) from Boston University, and a post-doctoral Diploma in Theology and Psychiatric Theory from the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas. Ordained to the ministry in the United Church of Canada and recognized as a presbyter in the Methodist Church of New

Zealand, Merv served parishes in Massachusetts and Taranaki.



The greater portion of his career has been spent as a Registered Psychologist – working as a psychotherapist, training clergy and other helping professionals in the art of counselling, lecturing in psychology at universities in Toronto, and serving as a leadership consultant to public and private sector organisations in the United States and New Zealand.

The consistent theme running through his life has been his intensely personal search to understand and realise, if possible, what it means to be fully human. A year spent as resident members of the Findhorn community and eco-village in the north of Scotland was a turning point for both Merv and his wife Bella, leading them to emigrate to New Zealand in 1981.

Merv has written and posted online a number of academic papers, mostly around the theme of our deeply human need to find meaning in life. Last year, following Bella's death in 2015, he published a grief memoir titled *Conversations with Bella: A love story, a spiritual odyssey, and the gift of a broken heart*. It is available online from Amazon and the Book Depository.

Merv's three sons and assorted grandchildren are scattered throughout the world. He now lives with his partner Gayle in a retirement village in Christchurch.

## David Hanna and Hana Olds

David is a fourth generation Tangata Tiriti - Pakeha, a partner and father of four children. A central strand of his working life has been supporting people to develop and maintain healthy relationships that sustain vibrant human communities. His roles have

included time as a National Youth Director Methodist Church, a policy manager in Central Government, a consultant on positive child / youth development, consultant for World Bank, and now as the director of Wesley Community Action and member of the Inspiring Communities team.



Projects he has led include; In Our Hands - NZ Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa, championing community led development in local communities across NZ and partnering with the Mongrel Mob and Black Power to run leadership development programmes.

Hana is a fifth generation Tangata Tiriti, the pōtiki of a family of six. Hana attended a full-immersion Reo Māori School and is now in her second year at Victoria University studying Te Reo Maori, Māori Studies and Cultural Anthropology. She is a member of her local Time Bank and works part-time in hospitality. Since she was little, Hana has always focussed on creating change through her words and actions. She was a self-published author at the age of 12 and through her book she raised \$40,000 dollars for research into alternative cancer treatments. At 14 she was both a finalist in the Inaugural Women of Influence Awards and finalist in the youth section of Wellingtonian of the Year awards. Speaking at over 20+ local, national and international conferences including being the youth speaker at the opening of He Tohu exhibition National Library she has a wide scope of public speaking experience that informs how she articulates her thoughts and experiences. At the heart of her passions lie kaupapa Māori and indigenous knowledge frameworks, community-led development and art. In an age defined by powers that divide, she seeks to promote interconnectedness and intersectionality in the collective consciousness.

## Turning the Tide (on the Sea of Faith) - #4

The Committee is continuing to deliberate about how to reverse what appears to be a worrying decline of the Sea of Faith in New Zealand. Four aspects of our organisation being focused on in order to attract new (younger) members are: holding a shorter, more outward-looking conference; strengthening the relationship between local groups and the national organization; reviewing the name Sea of Faith; and improving communications within and beyond the organisation. Here is the latest progress on these aspects.

### 1. Changing the nature of Conference

The theme of the 2019 Christchurch Conference is: *“Transforming Communities: Finding meaning in a consumption-driven world”* and conference organisation is well underway. The bios of the three keynote speakers – Bronwyn Hayward, David Hanna, Merv Dickinson – appear elsewhere in this newsletter along with the titles of their presentations. Bronwyn will be delivering the inaugural Lloyd Geering Lecture on the Friday evening of the conference which will be open to the public. David and Merv will be giving their presentations on the Saturday morning. In the place of a fourth keynote speaker because of the shorter 2-day format, we are trying out something new with three additional speakers giving brief 5 minute presentations before Core Groups at the outset of the conference. We are very pleased to announce the names – Amelia Dewhurst, Catherine McFedries, and Jim Consedine – each of whom is well-known in Christchurch and beyond. The conference will run from midday Friday to 4.30pm Saturday at the All Souls’ Church Complex, 30 Church Lane, Merivale, Christchurch. Discounted accommodation in nearby motels has been negotiated – see details in this newsletter. There is growing optimism this year’s conference is going to be a great success, and some initial planning for Conference 2020 is now beginning.

### 2. Strengthening the connection between local groups and the national network

A second successful ZOOM meeting between most of the facilitators of local groups has been recently held. This new technology is powerful in bringing facilitators and leaders together to discuss the various issues affecting the Sea of Faith network as a whole. Jan Calvert is Local Group coordinator on the Committee this year and continuing to bring about a feeling of greater connection between local groups, the Committee and therefore the overall national network. It is interesting that many local groups have held meetings that feature Islam in some way in recent months and many have reached out to their local Muslim community.

### 3. Reviewing the name Sea of Faith

Not much progress has been made since the last newsletter on this review of the name despite further deliberations.

The current top four alternative names under consideration remain:

#### **Quest**

#### **Reimagining Religion**

#### **SOFIA (Sea of Faith in Aotearoa)**

#### **The Lloyd Geering Network**

As we reflect on these alternative names, we seem to be drawn to thinking about the limitations of each rather than experience any particular name standing out that we all feel excited about. Here are some of the main concerns for these alternatives. The name Quest could feasibly be the subject of legal challenge from Quest apartments, a well-known accommodation business. Reimagining Religion has the R word in the title and although this is softened by the word “reimagining” nevertheless “religion” probably still stands out like a sore thumb. Sea of Faith in Aotearoa (SOFIA) is virtually the same as Sea of Faith NZ, although the

acronym does hide the F word; and not everyone thinks that having Lloyd's name in the title is appropriate or a good marketing strategy for the future.

We will continue to deliberate about potential alternative names and welcome suggestions. We have also now made contact with colleagues in Australia with whom we will be having dialogue over this next few months and will report back in the next newsletter.

Retaining the by-line - **Exploring Values, Meaning, and Spirituality** – seems to be the one point of positive agreement both within the Committee and the national network.

## 4. Improving communications

There is nothing particularly new to report on this item once again. We have made a strategic decision to hold off on major publicity outside of the organisation this year while the review of the name is being undertaken. Publicity about the conference is being worked on.

We continue to welcome comments and suggestions on any of these four strategic areas or any other matters that relate to the thriving and survival of the Sea of Faith in Aotearoa New Zealand.

### Committee 2019

**Doug Sellman – Christchurch (Chair)**

**Steve Collard – Auckland (Secretary)**

**Phil Grimmatt – Wellington (Treasurer)**

**Jan Calvert – Hamilton (Local Groups)**

**Ian Crumpton – Christchurch**

**Brian Ellis – Auckland**

**Andrew Calvert – Hamilton (co-opted)**

**Natali Allen – Wellington (co-opted)**

**Pete Cowley – Gisborne (ex-officio)**

**Laurie Chisholm – Christchurch (ex-officio)**

## Accommodation Deals for Sea of Faith Members

Christchurch Conference

Midday Friday 1 November– 16.30 Saturday 2

November 2019

### 5 Star

Randolph Motel Apartments

79 Papanui Rd

4 minute walk

10% discount (mention SOF conference)

Phone: 03-355 0942

### 4 Star

Merivale Manor

122 Papanui Rd

2 minute walk

Spa Studios = \$169 per night / 2 guests

Manor Studios = \$189 - \$229 per night / 2 guests

Three Bedroom Apartments = \$280 per night / 4 guests (extra guests up to six additional \$50 pp)

Use SOF2019 code when booking

Toll Free: 0800 355 775

Milano Motor Lodge

87 Papanui Rd

4 minute walk

A range of units – studios, one bedroom, two bedroom – ranging \$140-\$240/night

Phone: 03-355 2800

Heartland Hotel Cotswald

88/96 Papanui Rd

4 minute walk

One-bedroom \$225 and two-bedroom \$275 rooms available

Phone: 03-355 3535

Casino Court Motor Lodge

76 Papanui Rd

5 minute walk

Four units left at \$125/night for SOF conference delegates

Phone: 03-355 6863

De Lago Motel/Apartments

31 Papanui Rd

8 minute walk

A range of units

Discounted from \$149 to \$129/night for SOF conference delegates for cheapest units, with more expensive options available

Phone: 03-355 3840

### 3 Star

Colonial Inn Hotel

43 Papanui Rd

7 minute walk

10% discount of the lowest online rate to SOF delegates

Phone: 03-355 9139

## Reflection: “The Essential Desert”

Mark Gibson served the New Brighton Union Church during the post-earthquake period and it has clearly shaped his recent ministry. He has a poetic turn of phrase. He prefers to use "kindom" instead of "Kingdom". For him 'royal' metaphors for the divine are a hindrance to faith rather than an aid! In the 21st century we need fresh and vital new metaphors for our spiritual landscape. As a metaphor 'kindom' reflects faith that finds God in the midst of, rather than over, community and relationship. It is also more inclusive than the traditional word. When people use Kingdom they are less likely to include other-than-human life.

Luke is short on detail. So, when he tells us that Jesus was led by the Spirit from the Jordan into the desert for forty days and forty nights, much is left to our imagination. He says that he prayed and fasted and not much else.

So, let's take a stab at it. This isn't a holiday break. It is not a short, enjoyable retreat from “normal” life.

In a harsh wilderness place, where during the day it is seriously hot, and nights are cold, and he has no protection from wild creatures. He goes:

Without food

Without shelter

Without a bed

Without any means of transport (except his legs and feet)

Without human company

It's a long time to go without. It's exactly the period from today to Good Friday. The silence would have been profound.

These days they'd probably make a movie about it,

or turn it into a reality TV show.

In terms of mainstream western life it is “extreme”. I can just hear the talkback hosts that infect our airways calling Jesus a “nutjob”, a “total idiot” and worse.

In a consumerist culture this kind of behaviour is simply bizarre. We have all been affected by this culture. Even indoctrinated. Many see it as the Promised Land. That this is what life is all about.

So, could Jesus have carried out his mission without the desert? I doubt it. I doubt it, very much.

It was essential to his mission.

It was not an optional extra.

Whether it was precisely forty days and forty nights we don't know.

We do know that it was a profoundly symbolic action, yet more, much more. What do I mean it was a symbolic action?

Well, it was designed intentionally by Jesus to follow in the footsteps of his forbears. It was designed to reawaken his people to their origins, to remind them of the forty years that they lived in the desert.

- That their identity and mission was forged in the desert.
- That the desert is a place where the liberated discover what liberation means, and how it shapes their identity as a people.
- That, as their faith journey had begun in the desert, so would his.

So, there is an intended connection and continuity with the past, and the desert story and tradition of his people.

It is interesting that the Deuteronomy reading that instructs the importance of establishing a tradition of thanksgiving in the Promised Land completely ignores the desert years. It calls for a bringing of first fruits of crops in gratitude for their deliverance from Egypt and slavery, and the gifting of the new land but it makes it sound like they simply went from the old life to the new.

I think we do something similar. When we anticipate change we only look for easy options. We are on auto-pilot for what is going to be comfortable and convenient and at minimum cost to us. The desert is something we constantly try to avoid.

This of course is the other reason why Jesus began his ministry and mission in the desert. Without a desert, intensive deep change is impossible. Before he could call people into the Kindom of God he needed this time of letting go and testing. The depth,



resolve and focus needed for his mission could only be found in the desert.

When he finally returned from the desert his whole life orientation had changed profoundly, and he was now ready to set his people free.

From the narrative we know that in the desert Jesus learnt to live without three things, he was liberated from three things that block our pathway to living in the Kindom of God:

Materialistic values, power over all other people and living things, and theologies that emphasize gods who are compliant to our requirements.

I think it is critical that we don't see the desert just as something Jesus did. Throughout his mission, and that means now as much as then, he asks us to follow him. Following him includes the desert. Without it our faith will be seriously lacking. It will be weak, timid and shallow, and we will still be hitched to those things which enslave us.

So, can the church be missional without the desert? No, I don't think it can! We have followed Jesus to the river, and we baptise with water. Why don't we follow Jesus into the desert, and baptise with the Spirit? Without virtually everything in the desert, except water, all Jesus had was the Spirit. If we embrace the desert, we will also discover the profound presence of the Spirit. The Spirit will lead us to where we need to be.

I think the challenge is not to be 'desert deserters'.

Without the desert we cannot be transformational in the world, we cannot live or call others to live the Kindom of God. Without the desert we will remain heavily conformed to the world as it is.

If we look at the world today we see the shocking cost of shunning the desert. The paradox is that without the desert it leads to desert.

Because we are unwilling to be diminished by the desert, all of life is being diminished. The planet is being diminished. We now live in times of mass extinctions. The bio-diversity of the earth is being stripped at an alarming rate. The growth of

deserts is happening at an alarming rate. Our unwillingness to deal with climate change is turning more and more of the planet into deserts both on the land and in the oceans.

The lives of billions are being diminished by unjust economic systems, insatiable corporations, and the rich's sense of entitlement.

We are seriously running out of time. Huge change is needed and very quickly. The time for complacency is well and truly over. And believe you me we have been wilfully complacent. It now needs to be all hands to the pump.

This is why it was so uplifting this week interviewing the three school students who are organising the Schools for the Climate strike this coming Friday in Christchurch.

This is exactly how Jesus sounded after he came out of the desert. It was urgent. It was truthful. It was courageous.

It is in the desert that we can learn to live differently with the support and guidance of the Spirit. It is in the desert that we can become real people of hope and faith. People who are truly free. It is from the desert that we can offer a Jesus kind of leadership.

The classic Lenten question is always "what are you giving up for Lent?" It is a desert kind of question, but is often fobbed off with humour, or taken too literally.

We are all being asked by the Spirit what are we willing to relinquish? What are we willing to make space for? What are we willing to give up? In an ongoing way. Not just for six weeks but for always.

So that deep change, transformation can happen. These are desert questions, and they don't go away. *Mark Gibson*

# Religion Classics

## Honest to God

I still remember purchasing this book in 1963. I knew about it but waited until Friday night to go to the Presbyterian Bookroom (then in the Octagon) and buy it. Theological books were in the basement (the ground floor was almost indistinguishable from other bookshops) so I went down there, bought it, took it home and began reading it immediately. By Sunday afternoon, I had read the whole book.

Honest to God has sold over a million copies and been translated into 17 languages. Even before the book's publication, Bishop Robinson had achieved notoriety by defending the publication of D H Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in court. The media helped publicity of the book with article headlines like "Our Image of God Must Go."

The book revolutionised my concept of God. I hadn't thought of God as dwelling in a physical heaven, but still assumed that God, though not 'up there,' was still, in some metaphorical sense 'out there,' transcending our ordinary human reality. Robinson challenged this and proposed instead, Paul Tillich's idea of God as the ground of being. This idea became very popular in the Student Christian Movement, to which I belonged, even though we struggled to understand what he meant by it.

As a result, the question of the existence of God became a non-issue for me. A circle has a centre and it doesn't make sense to argue whether a circle's centre exists. All that exists has a ground, a basis of its existence and it similarly does not make sense to question whether there is a ground.

Traditionally, bishops are supposed to be model believers. They should have no doubts and through their rock-solid conviction model faith to us. Bishop Robinson broke with this convention. The book was largely his reflections on the things that he was questioning at the time, based on his reading of Tillich, Bonhoeffer (Jesus as the

Man for Others) and Bultmann (demythologising the New Testament).

The chapter on 'The New Morality' introduced the idea of contextual ethics, based largely on Joseph Fletcher's thinking (His book *Situation Ethics* was yet to appear.). I remember Alan Quigley shocking the staid ladies of the Association of Presbyterian Women with the example of a prisoner of the Nazi regime committing adultery to get herself pregnant, which would result in her release from prison so that she could join her husband. Right and wrong are not absolutes, but depend on the situation.

The publication of this book, which became a best-seller, was one of the main markers in the 1960s that indicated we were at a turning point in history.

Largely as a result of this book, I became a fan of Paul Tillich. He had interesting and new words for all the traditional Christian words, and I enthusiastically adopted them all:

<b>Traditional Concept</b>	<b>Tillich's Terminology</b>
God	Ground of being or being-itself
Sin	Existential estrangement
Salvation	The new being
Faith	Ultimate concern

Based on *Honest to God*, you might think that Bishop Robinson would turn out to be a leading radical thinker. Unfortunately, he went back to academic work as a New Testament scholar and his later works seem to be quite traditional. He advocated for quite early dates for the books of the New Testament and even argued that the disciple John was the author of the Gospel of John.

Lloyd Geering gave an excellent paper on *Honest to God* at our 2013 Conference: [sof.org.nz/2013geeringkeynote.pdf](http://sof.org.nz/2013geeringkeynote.pdf)

Susan Howatch has written a novel that captures the atmosphere of the time: *Scandalous Risks* Fontana London 1991

*The Editor*

## Book Review

### The In-Between Land: Psalms, Poems and Haiku

By Mark Gibson. Published by Philip Garside Publishing 2015

This is a resource for church and community groups seeking reflections grounded in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The author is a sixth generation Cantabrian and Methodist parish minister serving the east Christchurch area, where the 2010/2011 earthquakes inflicted severe damage.

The kaupapa of this book is clearly stated in the opening paragraph of the back-cover blurb:

‘Severe earthquakes struck Christchurch in 2010-2011 and caused obvious damage to buildings, the land and waterways. The emotional impact of these events on the people who lived through them is harder to see. For many people, the city and life they knew has gone, but they are not yet able to move forward – they are stuck *in-between*. In this moving collection, Mark Gibson tells their story.’

The collection contains 15 Psalms, 54 poems, and 60 haiku.

The language and imagery of the writings move between the colloquial and the rhetorical, reflecting the conversational idioms of the streets and the visionary declamations from the pulpit:

the Avon  
crapped!

Your earth has spoken  
and is speaking, Creative Spirit,  
but are we listening?  
Attune us to your life-givingness  
in the wounded ground of this place  
in the desolation may we hear  
a new song.

another day  
another year  
what the heck  
I wake with stiff neck!

Holy One,  
what a joy it is  
to worship you with friends  
in this flimsy, tagged,  
gaping tent of grace  
here in the heart  
of the buckled,  
but brave communities  
of the east.

The writings convey a vivid sense of place, not flashing past the car window, but experienced daily by walking or biking, and climbing the hills above the seaside suburbs.

The native birds and fish, the fauna and flora of ground plants and tree life are icons to the presence of the divine in every day and ordinary life.

Equally vivid are the people, whose fears and hopes, frustrations and grim humour are heard in the voices of the poetry:

OMG, this is a BIG one!  
Not AGAIN! Not another one!  
Look at the trees, and the fence,  
and the house swaying!  
I can only just stay standing!  
Bloody hell!

#### **The day the letterbox danced**

Save us from religious charlatans  
who declare our calamity is the will of God!  
Save us from talkback callers  
who always have an opinion, but offer us nothing!  
Save us from judgmental outsiders  
who crucify us in social media!  
Save us from rubber neckers  
who drive through our crisis with no intention to stop!  
Save us from spin-doctors!

#### **Psalm 11**

a new state religion  
key to success  
laid back kiwi  
thing of the past  
‘pull up our sleeves  
nose to the grind!’  
real world pithy proverbs  
to stick to the mast.

no more farting around  
on your timetable,  
inefficient!

writing poems  
inefficient!

contemplation  
inefficient!

you get the picture!  
**Inefficient**

The bicultural journey is present in the use of Maori words. There is also an awareness of a pervading indigenous spirituality that predates the coming of the European. Some examples from the haiku:

birdsong cracks open  
the lasting vigil of night  
to karanga dawn

cabbage tree  
resting whispers  
'slow down!'

enter the grove  
of towering kahikatea  
ancient prayer meeting

**Waitangi Day** tells of gathering kutai/mussels at Ballon Rock, in the Abel Tasman national park, for a shared hangi on the beach, a rich sensual experience of water, rock pool, handling the flesh of the kutai, and finally, the tasting. In this ritual of hospitality, the poet as priest, invokes a blessing:

a few minutes after the water boils  
and the shells have opened  
I deftly remove the fleshy mussel  
then nestle them one by one  
into a small bowl, and cover them  
with a marinade of raw garlic  
and freshly squeezed lemon juice

as we gather around the wooden table  
I offer a karakia, bless the kai  
give thanks for the gifts  
of the ocean and land  
the sense of whanau  
that is bigger than our own.

Mark's writings arose from his active involvement in community-based pilgrimages combining education and conservation work to restore the health of estuaries, rivers and lakes. In 2007 he led a Lenten pilgrimage from Rakiura Stewart Island to Wellington, to raise awareness of climate change and environmental degradation in the South Island. The Seven Rivers, Seven Weeks journey along Canterbury rivers culminated in the video feature documentary **Seven Rivers Walking**. This year, 2019, he launched a new book **Two Lakes Healing**, arising out of a journey made along the shores of lakes Wairewa/Forsyth and Te Waihora/Ellesmere. Five creative workshop sessions were held on marae and by each lake, where participants used the arts of poetry, photography and drawing to express their inner journey and conversation.

If the future of religion and spiritual life lie in the rediscovery of the mystic and meditative experiences, then the ministry of Mark Gibson is a key guide for church and community. It is a positive and hopeful journey, leaving behind the outworn and dangerous language of sin and atonement teachings. Central to the new journey is the inclusive church and community with partnerships between men and women, Pakeha and Maori, old and young, past and future, settlers and migrants, people and nature, hearts and minds, and the individual and the collective – all at work together in the present time and space.

**Purchase of Mark Gibson books:** Philip Garside/Epworth Books website: [pgpl.co.nz](http://pgpl.co.nz)  
Email: [books@pgpl.co.nz](mailto:books@pgpl.co.nz)

*Reviewed by John Thornley*