

Faith and Reason,  
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Psychology and neuroscience have for years been throwing up wave after wave of new knowledge about human life – but where does that leave religious experience? What about spirituality? Notions of the soul?

Those questions will be explored over the first weekend in October as Dunedin plays host to the annual conference of the Sea of Faith Network in New Zealand.

Essentially, this is a network whose groups across the country offer a space where people can discuss religious thought and expression without the constraint of creeds and dogmas.

Members have found it a safe place to discuss unsafe things. Among them are Christians who attend a church and others who don't, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics – anyone who thinks religion is worth exploring for what it still may offer, even though they may differ on what that might be.

The New Zealand network was formed in 1993, four years after a similar movement began in Britain. The spark was a six-part BBC documentary series called *The Sea of Faith*, [subs: ital] broadcast in Britain in 1984. In it Cambridge theologian and philosopher Don Cupitt, an Anglican priest, looked back over 400 years of pivotal changes in western science, philosophy and religion – changes which help to explain why the churches no longer appeal to so many people in the West today.

The title comes from the poem *Dover Beach*, which Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold wrote after watching the tide going out below the cliffs on the coast of Kent:

*The sea of faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.*

The series aroused much interest in Britain. TVNZ rejected requests to screen it here, though eventually it went to air via Massey University's former Educational TV service.

People drawn to Cupitt's approach began meeting in groups in Britain to discuss the ideas, then held a national conference. New Zealand theologian Sir Lloyd Geering initiated a parallel network here.

The Sea of Faith is not a mass movement and the network does not proselytise. In New Zealand it comprises around 500 members and participants, who meet in 18 groups around the country. It is valued by people, lay and clergy alike, who value the freedom to question and explore ideas, including some that would discomfort, even shock people in local churches.

Accordingly, the Sea of Faith makes no attempt to define what members are expected to believe. The focus of the British network is "exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation". The New Zealand network describes itself as "exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint".

It also affirms the continuing importance of religious thought and practice “as a vehicle for awe and wonder and for the celebration of key social and spiritual values”, drawing freely on the Judaeo-Christian heritage without being bound by it.

Twelve years ago the Australian Broadcasting Commission found this of sufficient interest to send a television crew to the network’s conference in Timaru, attracted by the presence of Cupitt, Geering and British Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor. It afforded an excellent opportunity to get a fix on the Sea of Faith at a time when a similar network was getting off the ground in Australia.

In the resulting Compass programme, Cupitt cut to the chase. “I think the traditional world religions are coming to the end of their historical life,” he said. “The question is what should take their place.

“Some people would say a globalised eco-humanism, a kind of environmental humanism. I’d have a stronger element of philosophy and spirituality than that. I want religion to break with ideas of power and tradition. I want it to become more a matter of freedom, of spirituality, of the way people relate to each other in the here and now. I believe religion has a future, but it will be very different from the past.”

This points not to religion turning its back on modern life, as some urge in all religions, but to engaging contemporary thinking across a wide front, reassessing its own traditions, and reinventing itself in the light of both.

The church has done this more than once during its 2000-year history, and it marked a new beginning. The tide came back in.

□ Information about the Sea of Faith Network is available at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz).