

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

A recovered old Newsletter

Conference Keynote Speakers

For the 1998 Conference the keynote speakers come from diverse backgrounds to provide their own particular aspect of **Inventing Reality**.

John Bishop is Professor and Head of Department of Philosophy at the University of Auckland. He currently teaches in Ethics and Philosophy of Religion. His main interests are in the Argument from Evil and the possibility of defending Judaeo-Christian belief in the context of alternative understandings of the concept of God.

Our second speaker has a medical background. **Thakshan Fernando** was born and raised in Sri Lanka in a liberal Buddhist family. He qualified as a doctor in Sri Lanka where he spent 15 years in General Practice before emigrating with his wife and children to New Zealand. He trained as a Psychiatrist in New Zealand and has worked in Wellington as a Consultant Psychiatrist, as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Otago and between 1990-1993 as Director of Mental Health at the Department of Health.

In total contrast is our third speaker: **Patti Whaley**. Patti was brought up in the Methodist church in the United States of America. She gained a Bachelor of Music and a Master of Arts in Musicology before qualifying as a public accountant. Moving to England in 1990 she has worked with Amnesty International from that time and is currently their Deputy Secretary General. Patti is a member of the Steering Committee of the U.K. Sea of Faith Network. She will speak on "'Intelligible and Untranslatable': Reality and Meaning in Absolute Music"

From these brief synopses of the three keynote speakers you can gauge that the Conference this year is likely to develop some interesting themes which will be further expanded by the range of elective lectures and workshops being offered. So if you have not already done so, do consider planning to be at the Central Institute of Technology in Upper Hutt for the Conference. *The dates to book in your diary are 9-11 October.* Look forward to seeing you there.

Jane Griffith, Chairperson.

A Personal Meditation

Rob Harris of Wellington finds that he is not attracted to the self-centredness of either the new age or the new right. The archbishop didn't get it right, either.

Last year when [the then] Anglican archbishop [Brian Davies] included SOF in his definition of new age heresies, most of our group laughed uproariously and drew word pictures of all the endearing weirdities we had that could possibly fit us into new age cults. He did however, target an interesting point for me, which was the gravitating of many people to mystical things, the pace accelerating as the mainstream faiths grow older (and less mainstream). The reason I see is insecurity and loss, the same sort of insecurity and loss that led people to cults and magic in the later classical world.

continued

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A Personal Meditation, continued ...

That was the world that grew Christianity, a faith that assisted 'Romans' to explain that the crumbling City of Man was underlain by a comforting City of God. Christianity came from the margins of empire when 'the centre did not hold'. Like others, I believe we are in a similar period of major transformation, (shades of the age of Aquarius). I also believe, like Ferdinand Braudel in his *History of Civilisation*, that these are periods when more strands of a culture/civilisation are unwound and more are woven in than is usual.

When the world is stressful, and by definition uncontrollable and changing, its inhabitants seek after reassurance. In the third world, survival is foremost and the stress is more basic. It is therefore not surprising that when faith appears in 'poor' cultures it is wholehearted, simple in its images; more passionate and revolutionary in its actions. In our world, our insecurity is the insecurity of passing institutions and certainties, the potential for unemployment, the loneliness of a media-haunted society, and the stress of moving without support. Our responses to faith or its loss are therefore less obvious, but just as significant.

In a period of basic change, history and evolutionary theory teaches us that new solutions are granted more credence than will happen in periods of growth and stability. I use the metaphor of a river of time/change. Some parts of the river are more disturbed and when the vessels of journeying come apart we seek new ones on the contemporary strand.

For some ... , personal angels and guides now give reassurance that we are not alone. For others it is the security of an active evangelical community mimicking an early Christian companionship. It can also be the security of a mother goddess and an alternative sisterhood. The solidity of absolute knowledge can salve the wounds of doubt about who and what you are and is equally fundamentalist in the ordinary sense, whether it is Christian, feminist or new right libertarian neo-Platonist. Fortune telling, alternative medicines and mystical systems of universal relationships are other options in the drive for a state of psychological health that is the most obvious goal of faith.

All this gives rise to positive and negative forms. Most, but not all pathways are inherently both good and bad, the more dependent you are, the more the bad, although dependence is sometimes the necessity of the times.

To me, however, many 'new age' manifestations are self centred. Even though I am sometimes drawn to bits, I can't for the life of me envisage a universe that can respond to all of my desires, or one that I can

necessarily control through positive thinking, although being positive is necessary for living. Also, in my western world, when I compare the musical structure of Bach and Schubert and the meditations and vibrancy of the best of Jazz/Rock/Blues with the soothing and unchallenging spinelessness of new age music, I have little choice but to accept the more interesting and difficult stories of faith and being.

The prayers [and] meditations for something to be reinforced or granted also seem to balance between sense and hubris, the self pride; that most difficult of traditional 'sins'. The hubris that the world is there for you, although a reality check should tell us, kicking and screaming that the world is actually there for every particle of it and we just happen to share it in small degree.

As a follower and practitioner of history, planning and ecology I can accept that the world has a need for reassurance and all animals and plants need a form of physical security and love according to their nature. But, like the archbishop, the forms sometimes get to me. My own form of scientifically based mysticism seeks the transcendence in the normal rather than the normal in the transcendent. I am also reluctantly prepared to accept the unknown. After living over 40 years I can accept that knowledge of any sort is movable, although I believe that some knowledge should be taken more seriously than others, simply because it has a wider utility and isn't just there to make you feel good, however nice that is.

The central question that I responded to in the archbishop's condemnation of 'seething anti-Christian doubts and strange beliefs', is the question of how to comfort and criticise, be part of the world in which we grew, greet the 'new world,' be safe, and take enough risks to grow.

Like him, I am discontented with that excessive focus on self, that spirit of our age, which significantly exists both in the new right philosophies, and in new age mysticism. But I am also disenchanted with anachronistic interpretations of the creed in 'mainline' churches. I cannot retreat to past simplicities of often misunderstood scriptures, but neither can I throw the symbols away, to be at the mercy of whatever panacea appears to us in the pacifying, largely contextless, and illiterate media.

Like many I wish to resurrect and grow the symbols rather than bury them. Old structures are often not adequate to do that in without assistance from the margins, and even new age simplicities can illuminate. The church therefore both attracts and repels, is useful and difficult and gives and takes away according to ones

perspective. The balance in our society for most of us is the repelling, the difficulty, the taking away of a role.

In attempting my personal journey of resurrection I confront some fundamental truths. I dislike the direction of a world that commodifies faith and social responsibilities and over-emphasises some political and financial duties at the expense of social duties to others. This is a Christian issue as well, but so is it a Buddhist and Gaia issue. Economics and politics are part of the natural world, but they ultimately serve the society, not vice versa. The market and political systems are means and not ends, although current orthodoxy treats them as ends.

It is a source of irony to me, that those who most criticise the socialist dream repeat the central conceptual flaw of marxism by deifying the inevitability of good outcomes, through the medium of 'markets' instead of 'means of production'. This is a fine example of misplaced faith, (the golden calf syndrome). It is more irrational than any sacrifice because it is less a symbol of transcendence and transmutation and more an abdication of responsibility for ourselves by those who have the most advantages and power, but apparently not the vision to do better. Historically, the breeds of Christianity which dominated the western world also tended towards such earthly abdication rather than renunciation, which is a more subtle and positive concept.

I also fear the potential for disaster in ecological collapse and disease and in the trash culture that we build with the dust of stars. The Roman world that came to be dominated by Christianity presided over the degradation of North Africa, whereas we are incrementally mismanaging a world to desertification, with all the capability of our technology and factually unfounded belief in the stability, relevance and capability of unfettered financial institutions.

In all this, while I try to be a creator as well as an acceptor, I find myself as a participator in the passing of the old; good and bad. This leads me to identity in a funny way with the spirit, if not the direction, of some early Christians and late pagans, i.e., looking towards a 'rainbow' or the arc/ark, a sign that it is all for the best in an unfriendly world. I share their weakness and fears. In that sense I am probably no different to contemporary believers in personal angels, a traditional churchman like the archbishop, a Marian centred Christian, or a 'deep ecologist'. We seem to share the problem and the potentials despite our differences over structures and the value and experience of particular symbols.

Rob Harris

Editorial

Now that we have broken all the myths, where do we go from here?

It seems to me that we SOFers are very clever at the kind of reductionism that spots a myth a thirty paces and in a moment has it grovelling at our feet, reduced to a mere anthropologist's account of what made it.

But, if I understand what our SOFN scholars are saying (Geering and Cupitt and Spong especially), there is simply no way to deal with expressions of faith except by using the language of myth: its vocabulary, its syntax, its metaphors, parables, puns, images and allusions.

For evidence we might look at the ongoing attraction to secular European society of the great Gothic cathedrals with their invocation of heavenly light. So too the rococo churches of southern Germany. The shape and decorations of such buildings makes no attempt to impress the intellect but instead aims for the image-hungry subconscious and talks directly to it.

Although the world-view that these buildings ostensibly point to has long gone and although the theological motifs that are etched into the stonework are nowadays subscribed to by only a small percentage of the population, the underlying myths still steal in under our rational carapace and talk to our soft inner selves.

When regimes hostile to traditional religious practices try to eradicate them they often end up with an iconography and an approach to architecture that is every bit as mythologically rich as that which they oppose. Often it is a barely-disguised parody.

Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell showed us that we are creatures whose inner workings (call it "soul" if the word works for you) talk the language of myth. Remember too that Joseph Campbell collaborated with the makers of the movie trilogy *Star Wars* and consciously injected mythical motifs into the story, especially into the characters and inter-actions of Darth Vader and Obi-wan Kenobi and Luke Skywalker.

If all this is so, then we live in a desiccated age. To re-phrase Yeats: "the best have abandoned mythopoeisis while the worst are full of passionate infomercials".

Is the SOFN complicit in this sapping of the soul of western culture? Or do we only appear to do so?

Noel Cheer

Letters To The Editor close on July 15th.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Sir

I found your column 'Left Brain v. Right Brain' perplexing and take this opportunity to comment.

In my opinion, ... many of those quoted confuse life's uplifting and unusual experiences with what I would define as "soulfood". I can identify with the examples cited for they are similar to my "Sunrise over the river Ganges at Banares" photograph. Stirring stuff but too sporadic, too infrequent, too expensive to truly satisfy the soul; to nourish that essential mysterious non-physical component of our very being.

The journey to the centre of myself and exploring what sustains the inner me has been erratic and lifelong. I was taught that the Church tended and nurtured the soul, but after forty some years I left, angry and disillusioned. To be out was refreshing; sloughing off the baggage to make way for my own thinking took time.

I explored myself; I thought about life and about living; I considered my role as a reasoning, remembering component of the biosphere. I focused anew on the sights and sounds of textures of life and of people about me, and I did a lot of cooking. I do a lot of cooking still, for there is no end to this quest. But by interacting thus with creation, I now find myself much closer and better attuned to it; I am a note in "the music of what happens"; a child of the earth; truly alive. My heart sings with joy as it should in all of us.

Now I endeavour to share these insights with my children. As they reach twenty-one, I give them a thing I have on my wall, written over 3000 years ago my some very wise and perceptive person which begins:

**"Look to this day,
For it is life, the very life of life".**

Lyle Miller, Waimana

Dear Sir,

Our local group studies "myths". Our national network invites contributions on "spirituality" as does our P.M.

Would the earth stand still if we stopped going round in circles, looked in the dictionary and found that the Romans handed down a Latin word which explains that "spirituality", "spiritus sanctus" and "inspiration" have a common root?

Spirituality has very little to do with virgins births, doubtful composition of wine or resurrections.

It does have a lot to do with "Christianity" as originally taught. It does have a lot to do with life lived with consideration for others. The brutality which surrounds the end of Christ's life has been accentuated by medieval minds. Why so? Now? We want reform.

Unless somebody takes a stand on that issue, we, [that is the] people looking for some truth-based inspirational thoughts *from established churches* ... will find [our]selves extremely "at sea".

The name of the SOF is transitional, as were other reformation attempts in past centuries. That's not the important issue. What does count is this: are you or are we a "discussion group" or a "spirit of tomorrow?". [see the box on the last page - ed.] You don't need the Internet, you need a more public profile in order to help along a spiritual tomorrow.

Lack of guts, or lack of charity in thought-sharing gets us nowhere.

Barbara Williams, Tauranga

In The Beginning – Sin

This is the second and final part of a talk delivered by Fred Marshall.

Sin and Evolution

It is time to take an overview of evolution. Where did we come from and where are we heading? The Garden of Eden represents the animal state in which all behaviour is governed by our instincts. That instinctual state strongly influences our behaviour still. But humans are pack animals and have succeeded in the evolutionary competition by collaborative action.

The inherent selfishness of the gene-driven instincts must therefore be modified within the group – family, race or sect – so that collective action is possible. It is the nature of our evolution as a species that the grouping in which we see ourselves, family, clan, nation, has grown larger and larger until in our day it potentially embraces not only all the races and creeds of our species, but the whole fabric of nature as well. This is the difference between Jesus' time and our own and defines the special tensions of the 20th century as nations merge and blend, as tribalisms assert themselves, blaze up and hopefully die out, as supranational organisations superimpose themselves on races and creeds. This shift in human perspective has necessitated a huge shift in attitudes. The instinctual drives are still strong in us: you could regard them as original sin. The course of evolution has been marked by the progressive mastery of them and their transformation into what we might call spiritual human as opposed to material human.

The imperative of evolution has been the transformation of the instinctual into the spiritual. And the driving mechanism of this transformation has been the apple – the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of right and wrong.

The perception of sin is not a human handicap but rather the precious well-spring of our unique role in the evolution of the universe, or as I would put it, in the Becoming of God. This catalyst of change is part of us all individually, and it acts in each of us at every moment of every day.

The future of the universe depends not on what America or China or Shell Oil or the Hamilton City Council decide to do, but on the choices that you and I make in the course of our daily life, on our free-will.

That perception makes one realise what we owe to Jesus. A man for his time and for ours, he avoided crowds and spoke to individuals: "Let him who has not sinned cast the first stone." He laid the foundation for the attitudes of spiritual humanity: not fear, but love; not domination, but service; not a God-Tyrant, but a Father; not conformity with an oppressive religious authority, but a heart open directly to the inspiration of the divine.

The Voice:

As we have seen, sin and the picture we make of God are two sides of the same medallion. What sort of a God do we make for ourselves in our age? A more fundamental question for the 21st century is "Is there a God at all?" since all the Gods of past ages turn out to be human inventions. In the Garden God spoke. God spoke to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob, to all the heroes of the bible and to many of the villains as well. Most supremely Jesus was perfectly obedient to the divine voice. From the beginnings of humanity until now the human race has had as a constant the experience of divine guidance. Was that just a human fabrication too? For myself, the pattern of evolution from slime to creature, from creature to mammal and from mammal to homo sapiens stamps the progression of creation with purpose. The constant sense of a divine presence in history which personal experience confirms makes me assert the reality of the inner voice which is the testimony of the existence of the divine. God *is* and we are back to the first definition which the bible gives us: I AM. In our age a picture is no longer necessary; it is enough to acknowledge the Presence and listen to the voice, which is none other than that awareness which convicts us of sin. As has already been said, this is the spirit of God within us and among us; this is the driving force of evolution; this makes humanity the leading shoot of God's becoming in the universe.

Listening is not as easy as it sounds. We are each the battleground between the instinctual and the spiritual; unless we are aware of the process and in tune with the VOICE there are many things to distract us. The surge of passion – lust or hatred; self-interest (money, influence, dominance); mob dynamics; the most insidious of all is self-righteousness, the one-eyed attachment to a creed or cause. It is this that Jesus was hardest on. Time and again, though our will is set to do what is right, we fall by the way (*paraptōmata*), we come short of the mark (*hamartia*), we fail to fulfil our obligations (*opheilēmata*). In a sense we, each of us, carry round with us a personal Armageddon the results of which, victory or defeat, bring closer the transformation into our true spiritual end, which in traditional language is the kingdom of heaven. We have defined original sin as the permanence of our instinctual nature. We can now put a definition to the unforgiveable sin. It is that state of mind which makes us impervious to the voice of God. It is a heart so hardened in its attachment to wealth and power, so indifferent to the welfare of others, so

self-righteously convinced of its own rightness, that it is incapable of listening. Its sin is unforgiveable because it has closed itself to forgiveness. The voice of God works best in the humble, open, loving heart.

I have suggested that, while it is clear that in the past our images of God are clearly our creation, and have no inherent validity, that is not a reason for denying the existence of the divine. That brings me to the Church and the question of what we do about it. There is no doubt that the church as we know it is founded on stultifying and untenable doctrines built on guilt, that it is relatively ineffective, that it is the gathering place of nutters and petty tyrants, that it is seamed with factions and exudes self-righteousness like an unholy sweat. But those are the characteristics of the people within it. Are they reasons to throw it over?

And if we do, what do we put in its place?

To get a perspective on this question it would be helpful to go back to the laws of the Old Testament which Jesus appears to attack. If they are allowed to become an end in themselves they breed self-righteousness, as we see in the Pharisees of the New Testament, and they block out the Spirit's voice. But if they serve to remind the Jew of God's presence in every action of every day, then they further the work of the Spirit in the life. It is not the tool, in this case the Law, which is good or bad, but the use that is made of it. So it is with the traditional Christian church. Like its members it is full of inadequacies, of errors and downright wrong-doing. But worship every Sunday, communion (whatever meaning you attach to it) every day, or every week, or month or even three times a year, grace before every meal and the other disciplines of the faith serve as punctuation marks in the passage of life, a little pause to give significance to its elements, to bring us face to face with the reality of the Kingdom of heaven, the human evolution into spiritual being. This is the value of the simple ritual Jesus gave us. "Whenever you break bread and drink wine together, remember me".

For the fact is we do fall by the way, we do come short of our ideals and aspirations. We sometimes do terrible things, even to those we love. We need to be transformed from the world of instinct and fear to the spiritual world of love and forgiveness. For some the transformation is slow and imperceptible, for some it comes like the flames of Pentecost but for all it must be maintained by whatever means are available, the traditional church for want of better, until it becomes as total in us as it was in Jesus.

Fred Marshall

Conference 1998: Extra Help Welcomed

This is a message from your dedicated conference arrangements committee.

"Our little group is in full swing setting up a venue where comfort and enjoyment will be the keynotes.

Registration forms will be posted to all members at the end of July.

Remember that numbers will be restricted to 200 -- so register early.

We would love some extra help from mid September on. Any members in the Wellington area who are willing and able to join an extended arrangements/ hospitality group a few weeks out from conference please get in touch with:

Janet Lambie, Conference Coordinator,
Phone/Fax 04 388 7090
email s.j.lambie@clear.net.nz.

Conference 1998: Looking for More Workshop Leaders

We need more workshop leaders. We need more workshop ideas.

The Conference theme -- **Inventing Reality** -- offers opportunities for a wide range of approaches.

Have you a question that would lend itself to consideration by a lively and sympathetic group? Have you an idea that would help us to explore another aspect of reality?

Remember that, in a workshop, all members contribute to the discussion and share in the outcome.

If you are interested in leading a workshop at this year's Conference, there is still time to arrange it.

Contact

Joy and Owen Lewis, 80B Onslow Avenue, Epsom 3, Auckland.
Phone/Fax 09-630-2933

Jesus for a New Age

A summary of the epilogue to Honest To Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium, Robert Funk, Hodder Headline Australia 1966, pages 297 to 314. See also "Inserts" on page 8.

Definitions and Evidence

The "new age" is the end of the Christianized era. Biblical scholarship has passed out of ecclesiastical control.

Since Christian symbolism lives on in the West only in ghettos, "the times call for a wholly secular account of the Christian faith".

We are in a time when all creeds are up for grabs, as it was in the first century. "Everything is on the table".

Christian institutions have shown themselves to be untrustworthy: examples: Inquisition, slavery, Auschwitz.

Nowadays there is much open and intelligent dialogue going on about Christianity.

A Quest Designed for a New Age

We must set Jesus free especially from creedal formulations. A more "robust and real" Jesus would emerge, although scholars are not particularly looking for such.

We must seek a revamped understanding of Christian origins. "Must the decisions of Constantine and the voting that took place at Nicea and other councils be taken as final?"

We must seek a renewed understanding of the Christian life: switching from "creedal" to "ethical".

Jesus was not "religious": he spoke of the Kingdom of God in profane terms.

Breaking The Easter Barrier

"Creedalism is a religion that supercedes Jesus, replaces him ... with a mythology that depends on nothing Jesus said, or did, with the possible exception of his death."

"We can no longer rest our faith on the faith of Peter or the faith of Paul".

"Jesus is not the proper object of faith". God's "domain" is.

We must be aware and act in accordance with the awareness that **Jesus spoke in aphorisms and parables** which were not detailed prescriptions.

Recovering The Roots

"... Christianity is a tradition worth reforming and saving ... [but] ... it is not possible to foresee the complete shape of a reinvented Christianity."

Jesus must be demoted from "divine son of God, coeternal with the Father, pending cosmic judge ..." to become available to us.

Better myth criticism would encourage us to stop thinking of Jesus as an **external redeemer** in the style of *Superman*, *The Lone Ranger* or *Shane* and adopt myths of leave-taking and home-coming in the style of *Prometheus*, *Odyssey*, *King Arthur*, Tolkien and *The Return of the Jedi*.

Jesus was "called", but not to be the Christ.

Christian Practice

The **eucharistic table** should be inclusivistic, not exclusivistic.

"One is forgiven to the degree that one forgives".

"Piety should be practiced out of earshot of one's own voice."

"The inauguration of a priesthood and clergy ... appears to be inimical to Jesus' wishes." "... the canonical gospels endeavour to authenticate the leadership of the Church then in power."

Nobody, not even Christians, is privileged: "saved" or "redeemed".

"... all rewards and punishments are intrinsic."

Nicea Revisited

"It is probably time to substitute orthopraxis -- **right behaviour** -- for **right doctrine** -- orthodoxy."

Abandon blood atonement; reconstrue resurrection as glimpsing what Jesus saw; redeem sex by discarding the virgin birth; discard apocalypticism as "world-denying and vindictive".

"... the authority of an iconic Bible is gone forever. It cannot be restored. Recognise that fact and attempt to devise a new canon of scriptures that accurately reflects the diversity in Christian origins and that promotes literacy in religion."

summarised by Noel Cheer

Why Christianity Must Change or Die

A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile

by John Shelby Spong, HarperSanFrancisco, 1998*

Reviewed by Lloyd Geering

This is the book Bishop Spong promised when he visited New Zealand in 1997. Two or three chapters, including the first, are substantially the lectures he gave here. Now we are able to appreciate them in their full context, for the book is a unity and reads well. I found to my surprise that I had misunderstood the frequent use he made, when here, of the term "believer in exile". I thought he was referring to himself and others like him, who feel somewhat exiled from the church because of their radical views. What he meant is this; he had chosen the image of the Jews in the Babylonian Exile, as a metaphorical description of the state of the Christian faith in the post-modern world. Those who are still Christians find themselves now exiled from the kind of the world in which traditional Christian images and beliefs were wholly convincing and, consequently, they do not how to sing the Lord's Song in this strange new world, so foreign to their inherited tradition.

As an illustration he writes, "The understanding of God as a theistic supernatural parent figure in the sky has now been rendered inoperative". In a later chapter he deals more fully with what he calls the end of traditional theism. It is a pity he had not given that chapter at our SOF Conference instead of the one he did (namely, the first chapter -- "On Saying the Christian Creed with Honesty", which many people judged to be rather old hat).

Four chapters of the book are devoted to exploring the significance of Jesus for the new cultural situation we are in. These partly draw upon and extends what was already in his earlier books. The image of Jesus as the divine rescuer has died: but Jesus as the spirit person is more convincing and makes God real, not as a personal being but as a presence. There is a chapter on the meaning of prayer if there is no external deity, one on the basis of ethics in the new age and two on the changes necessary in the church.

Bishop Spong writes with the same kind of passion as when he speaks, and his words do not always stand up to critical examination. The only

chapter I find quite unsatisfactory is the last, "Eternal Life apart from Heaven and Hell". In summarising this he says, "I do believe there is an eternity that lies beyond the limits of my human finitude and in which I can participate", although he goes on to distance himself from the traditional belief in life after death by saying "the content of this reality of life is so radically different from anything previously proposed that it is all but unrecognizable".

This kind of declaration means very little, for unless one can give at least some positive description of this supposed life after death, there is no way of distinguishing it from there being no life at all and it merely becomes an empty pious wish.

Bishop Spong rightly dismisses the reality of any kind of post-mortem heaven and hell but in rejecting these places of reward and punishment he seems to miss the moral significance of the myth of the Last Judgment. Its continuing value as a myth is that, in a vivid and symbolic way, it is affirming that, in this life, every decision we make, and every act we perform, do have lasting moral significance. In other words it does matter how we live our lives. This is well illustrated by the Book of Job. Job was not interested in living another life after death; rather he wanted to be assured, for his own spiritual satisfaction, that he had not been wrongly judged immoral in this life. The myth of the Last Judgment, even as a myth, attempts to give that satisfaction.

Most people, whether on the theological right or left of Bishop Spong, will find this book well worth reading and discussing. Those to the right will feel he has gone too far. Those to the left will feel he is still hanging on to things, even if by a thread, which he must be prepared to let go. But this is the dilemma which Christianity itself faces.

Lloyd Geering

*NZ price unknown, but US\$24 in USA

Book Reviews

Music in the Air: Issue 5 (Summer 1998)

This is a 36-page A4-size magazine on glossy paper with an impressive cover photograph of the New Zealand Youth Choir. It is a "bi-annual journal exploring song and spirituality in Aotearoa New Zealand" covering "a wide range of music, some from church heartlands, some from the world of popular music".

The editor and publisher describes himself as "John Thornley, Songpoetry -- community worker, teacher, parish steward, poet, occasional broadcaster sharing with Kim Hill and Felix Donnelly, current President of ACEA -- Adult and Community Education Association".

The magazine's title comes from a spiritual: "Over my head/I hear music in the air/There must be a God somewhere".

This reviewer, an "editor" himself (albeit of the humble Newsletter that you are now reading) was immediately struck at the amount of work that must have gone in to writing, editing and setting this magazine.

The content is solid. This issue has an 8-page item on the NZ Youth Choir; a 6-page article on the songwriter Paul Simon; five pages on Christian music in Tonga; a five page interview with "hymnwriter extraordinaire" Colin Gibson; five pages on John Tavener (whose anthem ended the funeral service for Princess Diana); and four pages on feminist writers-and-performers "Brazen Hussies" who have caricatured the 50's song "Living Doll" as "I'm going to be a tinting, bleaching, shaving, waxing Barbie Doll".

The writing style is informative and, in the case of "celebrities" avoids gushing adoration. Paul Simon, we learn, started with a Jewish background and has travelled towards an agnostic and humanist stance -- and is just under five feet tall.

Hymnwriters even step into the realm of controversy: Colin Gibson's "Rainbow People" picks up on the Noah's Ark story as a metaphor for the attitude of inclusiveness that is needed to handle "the Methodist Church's current struggle to admit homosexual and lesbian people to the full ministry and leadership of the church."

All this for \$24 a year from 'Music in the Air', 15 Oriana Place, Plamerston North

Noel Cheer

The Unholy in Holy Scripture

The Unholy in Holy Scripture - The Dark Side of the Bible by Gerd Lüdemann (SCM Press)

In this book Gerd Lüdemann, Professor of New Testament at Gottingen University, approaches the bible from its dark, unknown, ugly suppressed side. In the Old Testament he analyses texts which reflect a quite different picture ... from the view that the Old Testament [as a whole] contains: the good news of God's mercy communicated to all men and women. The command to exterminate the Canaanites -- the slaughter of infants, children, indeed the whole population -- is extremely offensive, and how such acts can still have anything to do with the mercy of God (and indeed passed over so quickly by biblical

theologians) must be seriously questioned.

In the New Testament the author follows individual investigations of texts which similarly indicate little of God's mercy. They relate to those passages which describe the unbelieving Jews of the time as enemies of God and exclude them from God's mercy on the spot.

Under the title 'Jesus and the Mercy of God', another chapter discusses how in view of this dark other side of the bible, it can be possible for us to go on being christians today. It commends resolute reflection on a reconstructed historical Jesus of Nazareth. To summarize:

i) Jesus' picture of God is not the figure of a vengeful jealous God, but one of a God who turns to men and women in mercy.

ii) Jesus' preaching is oriented on non-violence and on love of enemy. In so doing Jesus often deliberately became a law-breaker and had the courage to criticize openly.

iii) In his behaviour Jesus distances himself from the ruling classes and turns towards those who have no religious status: tax collector, prostitutes etc. -- those without any kind of claim.

iv) Jesus' fate, the cross, resulted from his unpopularity, his firm convictions, his unconventional behaviour.

(v) Jesus' expectation that God's kingdom would arrive in the foreseeable future came to grief. To this degree he failed. Church circles falsified his message by preaching the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He lives on in the sense that his friends handed down his message.

(vi) Jesus is the criterion for any idea of God: even atheists can identify with him.

Jesus, understood in this way, is a purely human being -- he is not sinless, that is part of the christology of the early church. The churches must respect Jesus for what he really was and recognize the ... over-paintings of his preaching and person as later additions; these include around 85% of all the sayings of Jesus which have been handed down.

Lüdemann concludes that there are thousands of Christs, i.e. human pictures of a super-earthly Son of God, but only one Jesus. What has largely governed the preaching of the church in the last 2000 years has not been what this Jesus thought, wanted and did, but what was thought about him after his death and done in his name. But the divinized Christ has little to do with Jesus. Many christians increasingly suspect that this is true today, when they see churches internally evacuated of all substance and externally without any credibility.

John Bowden of the SCM, a friend of the author, provides an appendix to the book. His last two sentences provide both a rebuke and a challenge.

"The Christian tradition to which I belong has, among other things, a long and honourable history of engaging boldly with the current scientific, historical, philosophical, intellectual developments of the day, and once it ceases to do that, surely it becomes something other than it has been. But that may be happening."

Alan Goss

News from the Groups

Wairarapa

They meet at 7:30pm on the third Thursday of the month. Their May meeting dealt with "Theories of Atonement". In June they are due to discuss "What impact on your life experience have your travels made?". On July 4th they will join with the Mana group for their annual joint all-day seminar.

In September they will hear about the ways in which people celebrate a death. In October the focus will be on prisons and November will deal with "Gnostics or something".

Auckland Central

In March they dealt with the question "If Jesus was 'just' a sage, how does this affect our idea of salvation?".

Their April meeting dealt with "Withdrawing and withholding medical treatment".

May's meeting dealt with "Jewish-Christian relationships".

Let Me Know

If you put me on your mailing list for your local Group Newsletters then I can publicise what you are doing. In this way we can share ideas.

Noel Cheer

In Brief

Sea of Faith in the UK

There are over thirty local groups in the UK. At last count New Zealand had exactly thirty. These some of the subjects that local groups in the UK have recently grappled with:

- Faith without Facts is Faith Indeed
- Is Nothing Sacred? Myth, Meaning and Spirituality
- Feminism, Ethics and Spirituality

Sea of Faith in Australia

"As of Easter Sunday, the Sea of Faith in Australia (SoFA or SoFNA or SoFIA, we haven't decided yet!) is a going, though small, concern. We are Brisbane-based and will hold our first discussion meeting on May 17, tackling the topic 'God -- A Necessary Evil?'.

We would urge any NZ SoF members passing through Brisbane to get in touch (if only to offer encouragement), and any Australians reading this (especially if you're in Brisbane) to consider joining us. We can be reached by email (greg.s@131.aone.net.au), post (PO Box 30 Wilston 4051) or phone (Neville Buch in Brisbane: work 07 38755480,

home 07 32745005 or Greg Spearitt in Toowoomba home 07 46352239).

Don's "Inconclusion"

One of Don Cupitt's latest books *The Religion of Being* ends with an "Inconclusion" in which Don reviews his theological and philosophical journey:

"For twenty years now I have been trying to suggest that innovative and experimental religious thinking and practice are possible, can be democratized, and are intensely exciting and valuable. Indeed, the books were intended to be themselves specimens of the new kind of post-dogmatic thinking that they commend. Old thinking will not do any longer; new ways of thinking need to be invented. I wanted to suggest that a good world would be a world in which everyone is religiously productive. We need to invent a vocabulary for such a world."

"Portholes" SOFN UK

Faith in Capitalism

Massey Research Paper 35.339 by Barbara Vincent concludes that "... in the NZBR [NZ Business Roundtable] documents, individuals are portrayed as always acting out of their own best interests, although what is actually included in this is difficult to define" "In my view the NZBR beliefs are built on false premises, the most fundamentally flawed of which is that the only things of value in society are the individual, their own interests and their satisfaction. In this view, the community is merely a collection of individuals. This view is as inaccurate as its mirror image, communism. For the 'created' world is one of relationship, the basic unit being the individual-in-community."

Submitted by Irvine Roxburgh

Papers

In addition to providing books and video tapes on loan and copies of audio tapes, the New Zealand SOFN Resource Centre offers photocopies of papers for \$2 per paper. Typically these have been presented at SOFN Conferences. A catalogue of tapes and papers was included with the March Newsletter. You should add a reference to the following paper to that catalogue:

P14 Tomorrow's Spirituality, Lloyd Geering SOFN Conference 1994

Inserts

We've enclosed two copies of the SOFN NZ brochure -- one for yourself and one to give away.

You may also find the Jesus

Seminar brochure interesting.

If you are able, check out the website at:

<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/conted/tjs/>

Next Newsletter

August, copy deadline July 15.

Tailpiece: Reality

"Our unconscious existence is the real one and our conscious world a kind of illusion

This state of affairs resembles very closely the Oriental conception of Maya."

Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* p300 Random House NY 1963

The Sea of Faith Network (NZ)

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.

The Sea of Faith Network itself has no creed. It draws its members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions.

It publishes a regular newsletter, assists in setting up of local discussion groups, and holds an annual conference. The WWW home page is at www.futuresgroup.org.nz

For membership details and for the address of your nearest local group, contact the Membership Secretary, Roy Griffith, 82 Kinghorne St., Strathmore Park, Wellington, Phone 04-388-1885.

The only copy appearing in this Newsletter that may be construed as reflecting Sea of Faith policy is that which is written by a member of the Steering Committee in their official capacity.

To offer a comment on any 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, Fax 04-236-7534, noel.chear@ibm.net