



Sea of Faith
NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

32

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1999 Conference Keynote Speakers

Ursula Goodenough, Professor of Biology, Washington University, USA. Author of "The Sacred Depths of Nature"

Jeanette Fitzsimons, MP, co-leader of the Green Party, NZ

Lloyd Geering, foundation Professor of Religious Studies, Victoria University of Wellington

From the Steering Committee

Since the last Newsletter much of the work of the Steering Committee has been focused on preparation for the Christchurch Conference in November. With this edition you will have received registration forms for the conference—for those who are definitely planning to come to Conference we would encourage you to register early, taking advantage of the "early bird" discount. Early registration is of great assistance to the Arrangements Committee as they plan the finer details of the week-end. For those who might be undecided, we can assure you that this Conference will provide plenty of intellectual stimulation on the theme of ecotheology; the opportunity to meet with others who are voyaging on the sea of faith, with all the unpredictability of the ocean, and to be in the Garden City in late Spring.

At its last meeting the Steering Committee approved an increase of the Network annual subscription from \$10 to \$15 per household. This increase is the first since the inception of the Network and is necessary to enable the quality and quantity of the Newsletter to be sustained; to continue with a national Steering Committee and provide finance to bring overseas speakers to conferences.

Do remember the Resource Centre has a very good range of books and tapes that are available for loan. Winter is the ideal time to sit with an interesting book or listen to a tape while the rain pours down outside or snow engulfs the landscape.

I hope the winter treats you kindly.

Jane Griffith, Chairperson

Conference 1999

Update

Along with this Newsletter, you will receive the registration flyer and form for this year's Conference, to be held in Christchurch, 26-28 November. Arrangements are coming together nicely, and we can assure you of a warm welcome and a great time in the Garden City.

Elsewhere in this Newsletter you will find details of keynote speakers, elective lectures, and workshops, as far as these are confirmed to date. Your committee are working to ensure an excellent programme, and the venue will match this. The Christchurch College of Education is ideal for our conference, and although the costs are a little higher, the standard of facilities, accommodation and catering will be well worth it.

Accommodation has been arranged in the Sonoda campus (on-site, within 200 metres of the main areas), which comprises sixteen suites of five very nice single rooms sharing bathroom and common-room, all bedding and linen supplied, adjacent to the Japanese styled garden. Additional accommodation has been arranged at College House (500 metres down the road on the University campus), which is of an equivalent standard, with breakfast facilities there. Those not wanting or unable to walk to/from College House should register early specifying Sonoda.

A new feature of the conference will be a workshop which is a 5-hour field trip to Hinewai, a native bush reserve near Akaroa, hosted by Hugh Wilson a noted conservationist, for which there will be a charge for bus hire of around \$20. This will be available to only a limited number of registrants, so be in early! As after dinner speaker on Saturday evening we have been fortunate to engage Dr. Denis Dutton, of the Skeptics Society, who is interested in an exchange of views with us, which is sure to be entertaining and provocative.

We have issued the registration forms now, to enable early registrations, which will qualify for preferential selection of workshops and electives, and the "early-bird" discounted fee.

In August, we will mail out full details of speakers and workshops, along with your acknowledgement and receipt, and ask you to signal your choices for workshops and electives, which will be filled on a first-come basis.

Sufficient copies of the registration form are provided, for your household, and for you to keep a copy of your application.

Now, to ensure your preferred selections of conference activities, return your registration form and cheque without delay. We look forward to your participation.

Enquiries may be directed to me at 76A Puriri St., Christchurch 4, tel/fax 04-348-3479, email goffinjp@netaccess.co.nz.

John Goffin, Convenor, Arrangements Committee.

Elective Lectures

Six speakers have confirmed their acceptance to give presentations. While there will be more in-depth information before you need to make a choice, this is a brief outline to confirm that our elective speakers are, as always, interesting and varied.

On Friday **Annette Lees** from Auckland will be talking about ecology with a Solomon Islands perspective. There will also be lectures by **Jim Kebbell** and **Bob Eyles**. Jim, who has moved from philosophy to theology and on to organic produce, is chairperson of the Bio-grow board and will give a lecture entitled "Values underpinning the Environmental Movement". Bob Eyles, an ex-geographer from Victoria University, is strong on eco-theology and is known to be an excellent speaker.

On Sunday, **Andrew Dakers** from NRE Consultancy (and who is an engineer) will be presenting "Making Peace with Nature" explaining "what ecological engineering has to offer an ecologically stressed globe, the challenges it presents to the engineering profession." At the same time Barbara Vincent will be presenting a talk touching on the Business Round Table.

Dr John Peet is also scheduled to talk—he is a senior lecturer at Canterbury University with a strong interest in matters environmental and ecological.

Noreen Penny, author of the booklet "Women's Rites—an Alternative to Patriarchal Religion (1994) will speak on Sunday morning.

One other speaker is yet to be engaged.

Suzi Thirlwall

Workshops

These workshops have already been arranged, others are still in the pipeline:

Other Worlds: Discoveries and Issues—the implications of moving off the planet and encountering other life.

What Can We Do?—how to act with ecological responsibility.

A Full Stop At The End of the Sentience—coming to grips with what it means to be a component of the universe as well as a human observer. When does awareness cease?

Doing Good; Virtue or Instinct? Human altruism and evolutionary biology.

Values and Greens—an integrated view of humans and their environment.

Is Eco-Ethics Enough? Fitting ecology with humanistic concepts in theology.

Living a Spiritual Life—living true to our religious ideals within or without a church framework.

Aotearoa New Zealand: Re-examining our Past—a new perspective on the patterns of human settlement in NZ.

Visit to Hinewai Reserve, Banks Peninsula—visit a conservation reserve which aims with minimal interference to restore and protect native vegetation and fauna.

Owen Lewis

Editorial

"Something for everybody"? I hope so. In order of importance we cover in this issue details about the Conference that should get you salivating over eco-theology (did you ever think you would? well we think you will now!); then there's quite extensive information about what the Local Groups are up to (ideas to steal and use in your Group!); then there's the "think pieces" or "discussion pieces" most of which are written by SOFN members both in NZ and overseas.

I particularly like "Nature, Red in Tooth and Claw": it goes some way to balancing the soggy sentimentality that sometimes accompanies talk of the environment in its several guises: ecotheology, ecojustice, eco-feminism and many more!

Noel Cheer, Newsletter Editor

Letters to Editor

Lois Wells of Christchurch writes: "I am delighted to read of the Auckland Central Group's thinking in Spongs My Mother Never Taught Me [\[Newsletter 31\]](#) — a great and valuable effort.

. I am also pleased with the article on Buddhism, because [the] Buddha abandoned gurus and thought things out for himself, which is what I believe we should be doing. Following anyone else's ideas is to depreciate oneself and is out of line with equality as in the Auckland Group's Point 12.

I believe [the] Buddha rediscovered the Hermetic principles which are claimed to underpin all religions and are also the laws of Energy. Hermetism is re-surfacing and I see it as the only hope for world peace. God personifies Universal principles while Jesus could well be a Hermetic adept and symbol of truth, wholeness and freedom.

I agree with Don Cupitt that life is a process, but disagree that "there is no ready-made objective and unchanging Truth to be discovered". One is either in tune with Universal Principles or not; there is no in-between. Also, we each have our own personal truth, which expands with insight.

Viewed as theology, the Bible makes no sense to me, but as a book about relationships, it is a priceless treasure."

Lois Wells

Note: The Hermetic writings ... present a fusion of Eastern religious elements with Platonic, Stoic, and Neo-Pythagorean philosophies. Hermetism was extensively cultivated by the Arabs, and through them it reached and influenced the West. There are frequent allusions to Hermes Trismegistos in late medieval and in Renaissance literature. [From the Encyclopaedia Britannica - ed]

Judith Lee of Tapanui writes: "I've just read—then immediately re-read—a book that I think other SOFers could find as stimulating and enlightening as I did. The Templar Revelation, Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ by Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince (Bantam Press 1977, £17.99) shows that a) Christianity has grossly misinterpreted Jesus' aims and aspirations, and b) that "heretics" and myth-makers over the centuries have a case worth making, when the Christian Church has always denied its true roots. With today's age of greater tolerance the authors ask why the so-called Secret Tradition should remain secret.

The material discussed certainly makes present SOF concerns look rather narrow.

Judith Lee, Tapanui

The Sacred Depths of Nature

This is not so much a book review as an introduction to our overseas Keynote Speaker for this year's conference—Professor Ursula Goodenough.—by way of her recently-published book The Sacred Depths of Nature (Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1998).

She starts her book with a fairly standard exposition:

"Everything in our universe, including the Earth and its living creatures, obeys the laws of physics, laws that became manifest in the first moments of time. Much of what we know to be true about the physical universe, like the curvature of spacetime and the fact that electrons are both particles and waves, is very difficult to visualize, even for people who spend their lives thinking about such topics. Moreover, as physicists and mathematicians probe ever more deeply, they present us with ever more mind-boggling concepts, like the idea that sub-atomic particles may in fact be minute, vibrating "superstrings" of space, that our four-dimensional universe may actually be ten-dimensional, that the observable universe may be much smaller than the true universe, and that there may be many other universes besides our own. Fascinating as these known and speculative manifestations of physics may be, they prove not to be central to our story of life. Why? Because when Earth life was coming into being,

some ten billion years after the universe had come into being, the laws of physics were a given. Life had no choice but to evolve in the context of quantum indeterminacy and gravitational fields and quarks held together by gluons. Therefore, while these facts underlie all of life, and constrain what can and cannot occur during biological evolution, we can describe how life works without referring to them, in much the same way that we can describe what a painting looks like without referring to the absorption spectra of its pigments. What is central to the origin of Earth life is the history of the universe—the cosmic dynamics that yielded our star, our planet, and the atoms that form living things. We can tell the story sparingly, without pausing to define terminology, allowing the flow of events to suggest the enormous times and distances involved."

After going into how **big** it really all is (what Carl Sagan referred to as "billions and billions") she tells of an experience that many of us have had:

"I've had a lot of trouble with the universe. It began soon after I was told about it in physics class. I was perhaps twenty, and I went on a camping trip, where I found myself in a sleeping bag looking up into the crisp Colorado night. Before I could look around for Orion and the Big Dipper, I was overwhelmed with terror. The panic became so acute that I had to roll over and bury my face in my pillow. The night sky was ruined. I would never be able to look at it again. I wept into my pillow, the long slow tears of adolescent despair. And when I later encountered the famous quote from physicist Steven Weinberg—"The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless"—I wallowed in its poignant nihilism. A bleak emptiness overtook me whenever I thought about what was really going on out in the cosmos or deep in the atom. So I did my best not to think about such things.

But she didn't, as so many have done, leave the problem in the "too-hard" basket:

"But, since then, I have found a way to defeat the nihilism that lurks in the infinite and the infinitesimal. I have come to understand that I can deflect the apparent pointlessness of it all by realizing that I don't have to seek a point. In any of it. Instead, I can see it as the locus of Mystery. The Mystery of why there is anything at all, rather than nothing. The Mystery of where the laws of physics came from. The Mystery of why the universe seems so strange. Mystery. Inherently pointless, inherently shrouded in its own absence of category. The clouds passing across the face of the deity in the stained-glass images of Heaven."

But, not for her the scientific safe haven of Deism because:

"... Deism spoils my covenant with Mystery. To assign attributes to Mystery is to disenchant it, to take away its luminance."

Mystery gives her comfort:

"The realization that I needn't have answers to the Big Questions, needn't seek answers to the Big Questions, has served as an epiphany. I lie on my back under the stars and the unseen galaxies and I let their enormity wash over me. I assimilate the vastness of the distances, the impermanence, the fact of it all. Mystery generates wonder, and wonder generates awe. The gasp can terrify or the gasp can emancipate."

Her sense of mystery, of the Sacred Depths of Nature, she tells us, were spoken long ago by Lao Tzu in the first chapter of the Tao Te Ching:

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
Ever desiring, one sees the manifestations.
These two spring from the same source but differ in name; this appears as darkness.
Darkness within darkness.
The gate to all mystery.

Quite a confession for a scientist—and that's just the first chapter!

Reported by Noel Cheer

Cupitt and Tillich on Being

Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch takes issue with Don Cupitt and suggests that we consider, instead, Paul Tillich's suggested relationship between God and Being.

What better place to look for courageous contemporary religious thinking than in a new book by Don Cupitt? What more likely source for the future direction of the Sea of Faith? So I bought his new book The Religion of Being and started to come to grips with it. After numerous critiques of traditional Christianity and after deconstructing the concept of God, Cupitt now wants to settle in to a more peaceful religion of Being, freed from the oppression of the theistic God. He quotes Heidegger with approval:

We are too late for the gods
and too early for Being.
Being's poem, just begun, is man.

The epoch of God is coming to an end. The new epoch will be an epoch of Being. But what is this 'Being' that is supposed to be the contemporary object of religion? Why has Cupitt's thinking taken this new turn? He tells us that he has recently become aware of a gap in his thinking. In his focus on language, he has not paid adequate attention to non-language (what ordinary people would call the world, or reality). Perhaps this is a response to recent criticisms of his emphasis on the primacy of language and claims that he misrepresents the postmodernist French philosophers he marshalls in support of his views. In giving an account of Being, he wants to fill the gap and deal with that which is not language.

What is Being?

'Being' is the most fundamental concept in the philosophy of the German Martin Heidegger. Cupitt tells us how close he has come to Heidegger, and that his exposition of Being builds on him. On the face of it, this is an astonishing turn. When I studied philosophy in the 1960s, Heidegger represented everything that is wrong with Continental philosophy: complex, obscure, and bothered by pseudo-problems. I gather that philosophy has moved on, and that there is a great interest in Heidegger, sparked off perhaps by the fact that many European postmodernist philosophers say that they are greatly indebted to him. I suspect that Cupitt has come to Heidegger through these postmodernists; while older theologians such as John McQuarrie have come to him through German theologians such as Bultmann, Tillich, and Rahner.

After telling us that language is all that there is, that there is no such thing as 'reality' outside of language, that words are only explicable using other words, he now begins to talk about non-language. 'Being' seems to have a unique status; unlike all other words it does refer to something non-linguistic. It alone has managed to escape the web of cross-references within the dictionary, the necessity of using other words to explain what our words mean. But Being escapes only with qualifications. 'Being is a non-word for a non-thing prior to language.' (p52) Why not grant this status to other words, for example 'reality', 'world', 'universe'? Maybe because 'Being' is the most all-encompassing, the most abstract, the most colourless of concepts. Using it doesn't commit you in advance to any particular view of reality.

Cupitt's book The Religion of Being is an attempt to fill this concept 'Being' with content. 'What is Being? No-one can say, but this book is meant to be a sort of poem in praise of it.' As Geering says, this book does not make easy reading. Sometimes I have the impression that he is way out ahead of most of us and that we need to do quite a bit of work to catch up. At other times I wonder whether he is merely trying desperately to get himself out of the box that he has shut himself up in with his radically language-centred philosophy.

Tillich on Being

Being was also a central concept in the thought of Paul Tillich, but he is not mentioned in Cupitt's book. Indeed, there is scarcely a hint that any other religious thinkers have been on a similar journey. Tillich was a colleague of Heidegger at Marburg University, just like Bultmann. (Bultmann said that the concepts of Existential philosophy were the only ones appropriate for expressing the mythologically clothed Christian message in terms that people today could understand. By existential philosophy, he meant Heidegger's concepts for describing *Dasein* — human existence.) Unlike Tillich however, Bultmann did not use the concept of Being.

In the 1960s, I was greatly influenced by Tillich. Like many others, I found the concept of God as 'Ground of Being' helpful. He defined God as Being-itself, and said that this was the only literal statement that could be made about God. All other statements are symbolic. While I was sympathetic to this, I didn't really understand it. After reading Cupitt, it is becoming clearer. Tillich is trying to give what John Bishop would call an alternative theory of God, within the framework of Heidegger's philosophy.

Tillich grew up in a European academic culture that was at home talking about Being. Being was the newer, plainer word for ontology, which is something like philosophical fundamentals. The subject-object structure of being is a good example of such a fundamental. Being just has such a structure; in every scientific experiment, in every poetic expression, in every feeling we have, in all of reality there is subject and object, observer and observed. Heidegger's question of Being is a quest for such fundamentals, getting underneath the accretions of culture and linguistic convention and the side-tracks of the Western philosophical tradition. He wanted to reflect philosophically on given experience and to express in a fresh language what the fundamentals of reality are.

Tillich didn't stop treating Being as a central concept, even after decades of teaching in the USA, which no doubt had great trouble comprehending him. In Part II of his Systematic Theology, Tillich carried out his own reflection on Being in order to lay the foundations for his alternative theory of God. Cupitt is more contemporary, more philosophically avant-garde in his treatment of Being, but is his choice of term a little bit arbitrary? Is Being merely the jumping off point for some pretty heady reflections on non-language?

The Religion of Being

Heidegger hinted at a religion of Being. Cupitt wants to develop this hint. He is trying to create a body of religious thought that is thoroughly appropriate for the postmodern age. This thought has little in common with traditional Christian or Western religion. Almost nothing is left of the great diverse body of (Christian, Western) religious thought and tradition.

Tillich's thought is fascinatingly similar and stimulatingly different. Philosophy is fundamentally about Being, but Being is the subject of religion too: '..religion deals existentially with the meaning of being; philosophy deals theoretically with the structure of being.' Being is a concept that comes up all the time. Faith is to be understood, not as a merely intellectual assent to a religious truth, but as the courage to be, affirming being in the face of non-being. For him all religion is about being and all reflection on being has a religious aspect. The religious tradition is a rich tapestry, to be examined for the insights it can offer us into the nature of Being. While Cupitt deconstructs concepts like spirit, god, and God, Tillich gives a phenomenological and typological analysis that tries to get at the experience expressed in these concepts and to uncover the 'ultimate concerns' of different ages and cultures. (Compare Cupitt's After God: The Future of Religion with Part II of Tillich's Systematic Theology.) Tillich, too, wants a Religion of Being, but for him this is not a new journey into uncharted territory, but rather a broadening awareness of what religious traditions have to offer, if we understand them in an appropriate (nontheistic? nonrealist?) way.

God and Being

Heidegger talked about Being in ways that were rather like the way that other people talked about God. Generally speaking, Cupitt is opposed to any identification of God and Being:

And this radical, systematic elusiveness of Being should warn us not to make the gross mistake of projecting quasi-human attributes upon it and turning it into some kind of relaunch of the old God. (p67-8)

His comparisons between Being and God are sympathetic to Being but critical of God:

God is the supreme determiner, whereas Being is gentle, plastic, continually-emergent receptivity to form ... Monotheists tend to see divinity always in terms of Power, but Being is divinely plastic, polymorphous and iridescent (p39) ... whereas God is a transcendent super-Male who insists on controlling everything and laying down the Law, ... (being) is a matrix of possibilities. She creates, not by imposing her will, but by self-giving. (p53)

Cupitt doesn't quite close the door on God-talk:

Provided that we put metaphysical nontheism first, the religion of Being may permit a certain reinstatement of language about God. (p 124)

The reinstatement of language about God that Cupitt acknowledges as a possibility but doesn't really pursue, is something that I believe Tillich was working towards. He set out ground rules firmly and plainly for understanding and interpreting God-talk.

1. God is being-itself and not a being.

"The being of God is being-itself. The being of God cannot be understood as the existence of a being alongside others or above others (Systematic Theology I, p 261).

The statement that God is being-itself is a non-symbolic statement. Other assertions about God can only be made on this basis. Nothing else can be said about God as God which is not symbolic. God as being-itself is the ground of the ontological structure of being, without being subject to this structure himself' (ibid, p 261)

The conventional interpretation that God-talk is talk about a divine being who is like other beings, only more so, does violence to our religious traditions and is itself at least as much a conceptual and philosophical interpretation of those traditions. It is an important task to expose the flaws in that interpretation.

2. It doesn't make sense to ask whether God exists.

The question of the existence of God can be neither asked nor answered. If asked, it is a question about that which by its very nature is above existence, and therefore the answer—whether negative or affirmative—implicitly denies the nature of God. It is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it. God is being-itself, not a being. (ibid, p 263).

Ordinary theism has made God a heavenly, completely perfect person who resides above the world and mankind. The protest of atheism against such a highest person is correct. There is no evidence for his existence, nor is he a matter of ultimate concern. God is not God without universal participation.

"Personal God" is a confusing symbol (ibid, p 271)

3. The personal symbolism that is so common in theistic religious traditions needs to be protected against literalistic misunderstanding, and given a counter-balance in non-personal symbolism (for example 'in Him we live and move and have our being'.

'Personal God' does not mean that God is a person. It means that God is the ground of everything personal. (ibid, p 271)

The Underlying Experience of Reality

Heidegger was interested in getting behind philosophical abstractions to the experience of reality that underlies it. This fitted in well with the phenomenological approach of his teacher Edmund Husserl. His early philosophical work was aimed at getting behind the abstractions and the philosophical framework of medieval thinkers to the underlying experience of reality. The same intention was behind his study of early Christianity. (It is interesting, and highly unusual, that he attended theological courses run by Bultmann.) Cupitt's language-centred philosophical position tends to get locked into the concepts themselves. Let me quote from a Tillich sermon, which I think tries to open up the experience of reality underlying God-talk.

The wisdom of all ages and of all continents speaks about the road to our depth. It has been described in innumerable different ways. But all those who have been concerned ... with that road ... have witnessed to the same experience. They have found that they were not what they believed themselves to be, even after a deeper level had appeared to them below the vanishing surface. That deeper level itself became surface, when a still deeper level was discovered, this happening again and again, as long as their very lives, as long as they kept on the road to their depth.

... (depth psychology) can help us to find the way into our depth, although ... it cannot guide us to the deepest ground of our being and of all being, the depth of life itself.

The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about Him. (*The Shaking of the Foundations*, p 63-64)

I admire Cupitt's boldness in trying to think his own thoughts and to discover what is true for us today. This includes his attempts to free himself from theistic models. But the very effort to get away from the dominant thought-models of the past can lead us to do injustice to them. I am unsure about how viable God-talk is as we move into the new millennium, but I do believe that Cupitt caricatures it and is one-sided in his criticism of it. There is insight and truth, not in God-talk as a bloodless philosophical abstraction, but in once-living religious tradition. Religions (religious ideas, and not just religious institutions do oppress). We need help from the experts to free ourselves from that oppression. But even more, we need help from them to recover insight into the truth in our religious traditions that modernity has lost.

Laurie Chisholm

"Nature, Red in Tooth and Claw"

Tennyson

Lest you get too sentimental about "Nature", consider the following excerpt from the opening pages of Jay McDaniel's book, Of God and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life.

"If God watches the sparrow fall, God must do so from a very great distance". This observation made by Holmes Rolston III, a North American environmental philosopher and Christian who wrestles with the fact that so many sentient creatures die violent and painful deaths before reaching maturity. How, he asks, is God related to such

creatures and their suffering? Does God share in their suffering, or does God watch from a distance. Is God empathic, or cool and distant?"

"As a case in point, Rolston considers the plight of newborn white pelicans. Female pelicans generally lay two eggs, the second two days after the first. Because few parents can raise two young, "the earlier hatched chick, more aggressive in grabbing food from its parent's pouch, becomes progressively larger, attacking the smaller sibling" The second chick ... is often driven out of his nest by the first chick. His return to the nest is prevented by the parents, lest they accidentally adopt an alien chick and waste precious parental energy. Nine times out of ten, he thrashes about in search of food and then dies of abuse and starvation."

"Rolston points out that this mode of parenting has been very successful from an evolutionary perspective. It has led to the survival of generations of white pelicans for almost thirty million years. The second chick is an insurance policy in case the first chick runs into trouble. He is a "backup chick." Neither the parents nor the first chick should be condemned for their behavior. Both are genetically conditioned to behave as they do, and they have little if any capacity for moral responsibility in relation to the second chick. The treatment of the hapless chick is a "subroutine in a larger evolutionary process," a means to species continuation."

"From the backup chick's own perspective, however, this evolutionary analysis misses something. The analysis presents him from the outside rather than from the inside. Viewed externally, he is indeed a cog in the evolutionary process: a mere backup. But from the inside, in terms of his own point of view, he is a sentient creature who suffers pain and enjoys pleasure, and who desires his own well-being, however trivial that well-being might be compared to our standards. "

"As cognitive ethologists such as Donald Griffin point out, the recognition of sentience and internal needs in nonhuman organisms with nervous systems is not mere human projection. It is a sound inference from biological evidence. Analysis shows that birds such as pelicans have the nervous systems and the biochemical endowments to enjoy pleasure, to suffer pain, and to have interests in avoiding pain and preferring pleasure. Moreover, evolution itself posits a continuity between human mentality and nonhuman psychic life. As Bernard Rollin explains, "given that evolutionary theory is the cornerstone of all modern biology, and evolutionary theory postulates continuity of all life," it is unlikely "that a creature that has a nervous system displaying biochemical processes that in us regulate consciousness, or that withdraws from the same noxious stimuli as we do, or from other dangers, and that has sense organs, does not enjoy a mental life."

"And herein lies the problem, at least for the chick. Because the chick is the second or backup chick, his yearning for satisfaction is frustrated and his life ends in pain. While the chick's brief existence may serve larger evolutionary ends, this fact is of no consolation to him. From his perspective, his life matters for its own sake. He is an end in himself."

"How about from God's perspective? From the divine point of view, does the pelican chick matter for his own sake? Does God envision him as an end in himself, or merely as a means to other ends?"

This is the question that Rolston raises and one that any Christian interested in the relation between God and nature must address."

Sexual Orientation and the Judeo-Christian Tradition

This item was written by Jedd Perkins, a member of Sea of Faith in Australia, for their Newsletter. Jedd ministers in the Uniting Church. The article is reproduced by permission and is appropriate at this time of turmoil in NZ about such matters. There has been much agony among many members of the Christian Churches over human

relationships. This is especially apparent in the debate in the Uniting Church over the ordination of gay people into the Ministry of the Church. More heat than light has been produced in this debate.

Most of us come out of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We may rebel against it, feel guilty because of it, deny it is part of us, or more or less accept it, but it is part of our heritage and shapes our thoughts and feelings.

Most of us have at some time in our lives felt, if we still do not feel, that sexual expression outside traditional marriage is wrong. It is condemned in the Old Testament. But the question should be asked, "Why?"

I for one do not believe that the Old Testament rules of sexual conduct can be seen clearly except in the context of Israel's view of its relationship to God. Abraham was called by God to be the father of a great nation, Holy unto God (Gen. 12ff). His children of the flesh carried on the relationship. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant between Israel and God.

In other words, sexual orientation played a central part in carrying on the covenant. A man whose testicles were crushed could not be part of the people of Israel (Deut. 23:1). He could not continue the covenant by siring children. Homosexual relationships were prohibited (Lev. 18:22). Two males could not produce children of the covenant. An emission of semen or menstrual emission were ritually impure (Lev. 15:16-23) because children of the covenant were not produced.

The sexual prohibitions of the Old Testament also served to keep the people of Israel separate from others. Sexual practices were tied to the Canaanite religion (Lev. 18:19-30). By refusing these practices the people showed they were separate unto God.

If in the Old Testament the relationship to God is conditional on birth and carried on sexually, in the New Testament it is a gift of the Spirit. The Spirit is not for a special group but for all flesh. The children of God are "not born of any human stock, or by the fleshly desire of a human father" but by the Spirit (Jn 1:13). The true worshippers of God do not worship at a particular place but "in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4ff). There are no longer "Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female, for you are all one person in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 4:28).

. Here, I believe, we are beginning to see people accepted for what they are, not because of their national birth, race, creedal views, or sex, or could I add sexual orientation. Our relationship to God is based on the Spiritual Presence, on love, and on truth.

Now may I pose some questions? We do not abstain from the flesh of pork, or keep the Sabbath. We do not keep slaves or approve polygamy, both accepted in Scripture. We do not wage holy wars (at least not Quakers), killing our enemies off completely. Yet why do we wish to still keep to the Old Testament sexual standard?

The New Testament condemns certain sexual practices, but in every instance we can make a case for the fact that this condemnation is connected with the sexual practices involved in idol worship (see Romans 1:19f). Looking back at the Judeo-Christian tradition for thought forms to deal concretely with modern questions of human relationships is a bad method. It reminds me of a man who after studying all his life about apples, speaks dogmatically about oranges.

I believe that the central meaning of Jesus was universal love. In the actions of Jesus we see the love of God for all people. In the Old Testament God was at first a tribal deity, then a national God, later the God of all nations. In most of the Old Testament God was seen only as Israel's God. Of course Jonah saw a God who cared for others. In Jesus we see a God who cares for all – rich or poor, black or white, male or female, sexually conforming or non-conforming. I don't see Jesus saying, "Look, I'd love you if you weren't you." Of course the New Testament didn't see this clearly. We don't either. But it began to see.

We don't believe that the light went out with the last of the New Testament writings. Certainly there was and is more light. I believe our relationship with God is based on the Spiritual Presence, love and truth. If so, it seems

that the real question before us is: Can there be real loving relationships between people outside of the traditional marriage bond that can be expressed sexually? I think there can.

Local Groups

Auckland Central

According to their June Newsletter they are studying Does Society Need Religion? (Lloyd Geering's most recent series for the St Andrew's Trust) and have already reached some conclusions, based on the first three chapters. They had six groups working on it and their conclusions were:

1. Religion is a conscientious concern for what really matters, a total mode of interpreting and living life. [*A direct "steal" from page 6, and which is a quotation from Carlo Della Casa -- ed.*]
2. We wish to promote an education system which could foster improved civic responsibility and respect for the Law.
3. We are sure that we need an open society, but we are mindful of the chaos it could lead to.
4. The traditional form of Christianity cannot be reconciled with the needs of the new open society. We don't wish to go back to the past, we wish to retain our freedom, and hope that chapter four has the answer!
5. We cannot operate without commitment to something. The something may not be the most important issue in life. [*How does that square with 1.? — ed*]
6. Without a crisis it would be difficult for a small society to reach agreement and harmony so as to create a viable society.

Contact Beverley Smith phone 09-630-7473.

South Auckland

Elsie Montgomery writes: "The South Auckland group was established 2½ years ago and is growing steadily. We meet at Friendship House in Manukau on the second Sunday afternoon of each month to listen to a variety of interesting speakers, and for group discussion of different subjects.

This year we have enjoyed a report on Conference, an address on New Physics and another on A Woman's Perception on Today's Theology, plus discussion groups on the theses of Spong and Funk, which we plan to return to again later.

We plan to hear something about Maori Spirituality and hopefully to find someone to address us on Eco-Theology prior to this year's Conference.

Everyone appears to enjoy the stimulus of group discussion on a variety of subjects in a very disparate but searching community: and we all travel hopefully even if we never arrive!

Contact: Elsie Montgomery 09-278-5517

Te Puke and Tauranga

Ivan Frost writes that a working party made up of members from both Groups followed-up the workshop on astronomy lead by Frank Andrews at the 1998 Conference by inviting him to address a combined meeting in Tauranga. So well did the arrangements go (the audience numbered 146) that they even made a profit, which will provide seed money for future ventures. Ivan's recipe for success in this kind of venture is 1) Join forces if your Group is small 2) Select a small team, 4 or 5, and communicate regularly 3) Do your homework: check, check,

check. 4) Give yourselves plenty of lead time 5) Do a thorough budget and get the subscriptions up front 6) Always have a "Plan B" 7) Be bold and pray hard [*he doesn't say to whom or to what!—ed*]

Contacts:

Whangamata: Val Bailey, Phone 07-865-7232

Katikati: Kath Kenyon, Phone 07-549-0586

Tauranga: Mary and Brian Davies, Phone 07-576-0305

Te Puke: Ivan Frost, Phone 07-573-8164

Dunedin

They have a specialist group (a subset of their membership) working on "What Is God Made Of?" under the leadership of Don Feist. And they recently took another look at their understanding of death.

Contact Andrew Meek Phone 03-471-0698

In Brief

... and for Dessert

For those readers within easy distance of Wellington, you will be pleased to know that the St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society has procured Henryk Skolimowski as the Geering Lecturer for March 2000. His books [The Participatory Mind](#) and [A Sacred Place To Dwell](#) were [reviewed](#) in Newsletter 15. He is likely to prove a worthwhile extension to our 1999 Conference.

Subscriptions for 1999/2000

The financial year for SOFn(NZ) ends on 30th June. This means that subscriptions for the new year are now due.

The Steering Committee, having reviewed the finances of the network, has resolved that the subscription for the coming year shall be \$15 per household (or \$NZ22 for members residing out of New Zealand). This decision to increase the subscription was not taken lightly—it had remained unchanged since the inception of the Network—but the committee was faced with the option of agreeing to the increase or of reducing expenditure in some way. It was felt that \$15 per household is still a very modest cost and that very little saving could be made without reducing what the Network offers to its members.

Some members are already paid up for 1999/2000; it will be possible for those coming to conference to pay at the same time as paying the conference fee otherwise please send your subscription to: SOFN (NZ) Membership Secretary, 249 Te Moana Road, Waikanae.

Resource Centre Additions

Book

- Vedanta set of 7 booklets. (Reference B.67)

Audio Tapes:

- Was Jesus Married?, John Spong (A.59)
- The Gay Issue (A.60)
- The Bible and Its Meaning for Society (Parts 1 and 2) Spong and Rankin (A.61)

- The 10 Commandments and The Definition of Women John Spong (A.62).

Over The Tasman

At the S.E Queensland regional meeting they talked about the findings of the Jesus Seminar; Spirituality and Cyberspace and "God: A Necessary Evil?" To contact the Sea of Faith in Australia, either phone Greg Spearritt at 07 46352239 or email him at greg.st@t131.aone.net.au

What's Going On In The UK

At about the time you read this, the SOFN in the UK will be having their annual Conference on the theme "What is Religion For?".

In seeking input from other than Judeo-Christian sources they have invited Dr. C. Ramprasad to expand on the theme from a Hindu perspective. Don Cupitt will be their other keynote speaker.

Some of their local groups having been discussing subjects as diverse as: Don Cupitt; human happiness; New Age spirituality; William Blake; pragmatism and postmodernism.

The Lloyd To Come

Lloyd Geering will address the subject of the new millennium in his August lecture series for The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society in Wellington.

He will draw on material from his forthcoming book [The World To Come](#) to be published in September by Bridget Williams Books.