



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

From The Chairperson

As I write this letter it is a real autumn day—beautiful oranges and browns of leaves on the trees, a scattering of leaves on the ground where just yesterday I swept and the smells of fires in the air.

The tuis have obviously found a feast of berries as they swoop through the garden and there is an abundance of fantails—many of whom delight in tormenting our young cat!

It has been good to hear news of some of the local groups in the past couple of months. There are certainly some very interesting programmes planned for this year and the Bay of Islands group in March experienced a real treat when Frank Andrews of the Carter Observatory travelled north to be with them. Do provide Noel Cheer with details of your activities as local groups are always keen to hear ideas from others and for those who travel around the country there may be opportunity to join a group for a particular programme. Since the March Newsletter Noel Cheer has been busy updating the web site—the URL is at the bottom of each page of this Newsletter.

With this Newsletter you will receive a poster about the forthcoming conference in Havelock North from 6-8 October. If you haven't already marked the dates in your calendar may I encourage you to do so as we have managed to secure three superb speakers to lecture on the theme of Beyond Belief. These are **Dr. Ruth Smithies** of the Catholic Justice, Peace and Development Committee; **Dr. Michael King**, an author whom many of you will be familiar with and **Professor Martin Prozesky** who is Director of the Uniliver Centre for Comparative and Applied Ethics at the University of Natal, South Africa.

As I mentioned in the March Newsletter the theme of **Beyond Belief** will be developed in two strands—social responsibility and culture. Our keynote speakers are representing these strands and electives will also give people an opportunity to explore further one or both of the strands.

If you yourself have an interest in either of the strands and would like to offer to run a workshop then Joy and Owen Lewis would be delighted to hear from you. (see page 5). Registration forms will be included in the next Newsletter.

In the meantime I hope the winter treats you kindly and you have plenty of opportunity to curl up with a good book, listen to challenging and interesting speakers, have chance for stimulating discussion or in other ways prepare yourself for what promises to be a most exciting Conference. Look forward to seeing you there.

Jane Griffith, Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Chairperson

Editorial

"Travellers, there is no path ... paths are made by walking" *Antonio Mockad*

I'm not sure who Antonio Mockad is nor even where I found the quote, but his notion that paths are not pre-surveyed but rather are made by those who walk them ties in neatly with this issue of the Newsletter.

Donald Feist has been reporting back to his Galactic University about the path of faith that earthlings call "Christianity": I have written a piece on the place of the labyrinth in pilgrimages as well as an extended book review of the Journal of the Wellington Christian Apologetics Society—a sort of labyrinthine Biblical literalism!

Elsewhere Alan Goss introduces us to his "Creed of a Radical" as well as reviewing Don Cupitt's **The Meaning of It All**.

Henryk Skolimowski is gone but eco-philosophy (or eco-theology if you prefer) is not forgotten: there's to be a conference in Christchurch in July: details below.

We report on the goings-on of those Local Groups who have a) planned their goings-on and b) let me know about them.

All-in-all a Newsletter packed with information and stimulation and well worth the subscription!

Noel Cheer, Editor

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Faith in Cyberspace

Christian Apologetics

See your favourite writers savaged! See also the Book Reviews in this Newsletter.

www.christian-apologetics.org

Religious Humanists

Those who study religious dispositions and affiliations tend to classify the Sea of Faith Network as an example of "religious humanism". You might like to visit the website of "The Friends of Religious Humanism" and see if you agree.

humanist.net/frh/
(note, no "www")

Who Belongs?

This website contains a growing collection of statistics for over 4,000 religions, churches, denominations, religious bodies, faith groups, tribes, cultures, movements, ultimate concerns, etc. Happy shopping!

adherents.com
(note, no "www")

The Other SOF

Ship of Fools is a fast-growing Christian website, specializing in humour, satire and popular theology.

ship-of-fools.com
(note, no "www")

Notes About URLs

Most browsers will automatically insert both the "http://" and the "www" portions of the URL (the website "address") if you key in the rest. However, with the current state of the WWW and current browser technology, nothing is certain. Take care that you use the correct "punctuation" characters: sometimes a "dot", sometimes a "hyphen", sometimes an "underscore". Sometimes an underscore in a URL is obscured by a browser-supplied underscore that runs under the entire URL leaving what appears to be a space or gap within the URL.

There are never gaps **within** URLs.

Study Leave Report submitted to the University of the Magellanic Galaxy.

An up-date on the Christian religion in Western culture on planet "Earth".

A great deal has happened on Earth since my last study visit seven years ago. To appreciate just how much, I must remind you that one year on our planet equals almost 71 Earth years.

Thus my last visit was 497 Earth years ago. Cultural change on Earth in that time has probably been even more than 70 times as rapid as here. But I must emphasise that I can speak with authority only of what Earthbeings call "Western" culture. There appear to be substantial differences in Christianity in the continents of Asia and Africa especially, about which I am not qualified to speak.

At my last visit (it was the year 1502 in the Earthbeings' European calendar), Christianity was a very interesting phenomenon. On one hand it was a dominant force and had very great influence in their concept of reality, way of knowing, religious practice, art, literature, and social and political life. It provided a unifying framework which worked for many, if not all, Earthbeings of their Western world, and made it possible for most of them to structure their lives and knowledge around faith in a "God" who was unquestioned and highly significant - the focal point of all reality. At the same time, it was clear to an outside observer that this highly organised, all-pervasive religious system had, for a long time, been holding back cultural evolution, and there were signs in plenty that it could not maintain its grip much longer. At the end of my previous report, I forecast that the inevitable evolution of thought would soon sweep away both the institution they called "the Church" and the whole thought-system it both represented and tenaciously (and often brutally) defended.

I must admit that the changes on Earth in these seven (Magellanic) years, have not been entirely as I expected. Movements or revolutions which Earthbeings call "The Reformation", "The Enlightenment", "the Rise of Science", "the Industrial Revolution" and numerous political revolutions and wide-spread wars, have brought about major changes in Western

culture and living conditions. And yet both Christianity and the Church continue to exist, somewhat changed certainly, but changed to a lesser extent than I had predicted.

The "Rise of Science" in particular has meant that the nature and structure of all systematic knowledge, although still primitive, is now closer to that of knowledge in this galaxy.

However, their knowledge is excessively subdivided into "disciplines". There is a quite incredible number of more or less discrete disciplines each concerned with one narrow field. These divisions show some signs of beginning to crumble, but they continue to be a major factor in scholars being quite unable to develop any satisfactory model of reality. While the quantity of systematised information has increased enormously, in one way in particular, their understanding of reality has actually lost ground.

At the time of my last visit, even though knowledge was then regularly expressed in the form of analogy, and not scientifically, there was a holistic, integrated quality about knowledge which has since been lost. When knowledge of the Earth and life-forms was analogical, it did not matter that their conception of the depths of reality was highly personal and anthropomorphic. There was a coherence between their talk of "God" and their talk about the universe, Earth and life, that made this conception quite workable.

But the developments of the "Rise of Science" have not been matched by any corresponding development in their concept of "God". Within the Church and among Christians, the almost universal use of such personalising terms as "Lord", "Father" and "Creator" in referring to the deepest level of reality, means that public worship, private devotion and academic theology are, all alike, unable to retain any credible links with scientific knowledge. This is in stark contrast to the viable and coherent (even though quaint and primitive) links that existed in the pre-scientific days of 500 Earth-years ago.

Continued ...

The results of this are not surprising. Both the Church as an institution and Christianity as a religion have lost the support and the respect of the majority of those who have embraced the new knowledge. Within Christianity in "the West", few Earthbeings realise to what an extent the words and concepts they still use, which were adequate and appropriate 500 years ago, now carry a quite different significance, and have become a serious liability. I shall give just one example.

The central figure of their religion, Jesus, was said to have been born as an Earthbeing, by way of a virgin being impregnated by the Spirit of God. In pre-scientific times, this myth vividly and meaningfully supported their teaching that this Jesus was at the same time authentically human and authentically divine. However, once biology was structured in a scientific way, this myth could only convey the idea that Jesus was a hybrid being, half Earthbeing, half divine. Christianity however, has simply turned a blind eye to this change. Some ignore or soft-pedal the myth as far as possible; a much greater number insist, more and more shrilly, on the absurdity that the myth is historical fact.

Another, related change, since my first visit is in the activity known as "worship" - a community activity which professes to be honouring God, speaking to God and listening for God speaking to those assembled. Before, I found that much worship had real credibility, and could be very moving. The reality and relevance of God were so completely taken for granted, and the perception of the worshipper of having no existence apart from the community - the community in which all their work, their family life and their social life occurred - was so strong, that worship had an unmistakable vitality. For many of the worshippers, it was clearly as necessary to their lives as food and drink.

On this visit, by contrast, I found that even those who were most vocal about belief in God, and the importance and relevance of God, would never suggest that God belongs within material reality. Rather, it is taken for granted that God belongs in a supernatural realm. He (the personal language seems to them quite appropriate) may occasionally visit, or interfere in material reality, but this reality is essentially independent of

God. Alongside this viewpoint, there is the remarkable phenomenon of "individualism". Each Earthbeing now sees himself or herself as fundamentally independent of all other Earthbeings, so that society or community is essentially optional. These two points of view, "individualism" and "supernaturalism" together quite clearly make it impossible for worship to hold the place in life which it used to have. Worship has become entirely optional, something a minority choose to do, when the majority quite obviously function perfectly adequately without it. I could detect no sense that worship has as its centre a sense of the over-whelming greatness of God; rather it is now seen simply as being useful for personal development.

I became aware, on Earth, of a very few voices suggesting that the context within which each Earthbeing lives - the "environment" in their terms - is in fact the embodiment of the depths of all reality. But this is not self-evident to the vast majority of Western Christians. On the contrary, they actively reject and oppose this insight on the paradoxical ground that it deprives "God" of His (sic) proper place as "Lord" and "Creator". These Christian Earthbeings are either incapable of grasping, or desperately determined not to see, that such personalising language creates an uncrossable abyss between their Christian language and the language about reality they are using all the time - except when they are being self-consciously Christian. They are blind to the fact that their "God" is now totally excluded from "reality" - partly by being identified as the "creator" of reality, and partly because they insist that "God" is "super"-natural.

The study of the Christian religion of Earthbeings of "the West" at the close of their 20th Century, presents many surprises and paradoxes such as this, which make it extremely difficult for anyone on a more rational culture to understand it, or to grasp how it functions for an Earthbeing.

I am aware that my previous prediction about the future of the Church and Christianity on planet Earth was premature, but the conclusion seems inescapable that if the University in its generosity allows me to visit Earth again in another seven years, I shall find that neither the Church nor the Christian religion still exist in anything like their present form.

Donald Feist, reporting from Dunedin.

Beware of the Substitutes!

".. those deep things for which religion stands: the feeling of the inexhaustible mystery of life, the grip of an ultimate meaning of existence, and the invincible power of an unconditional devotion.

These things cannot be excluded.

If we try to expel them in their divine images, they re-emerge in daemonic images."

Paul Tillich

*The Shaking of the Foundations
p181*

Year 2000 Conference Update

Alan Goss chairs the Arrangements Committee for this year's Conference. His address is 4 McDonald Street, Napier and his phone number is 06-835-9594. He writes:

**Sea of Faith Conference 2000
6 - 8 October
Woodford House,
Havelock North**

Those intending to register for the 2000 Conference can be assured of an excellent venue.

Woodford House is one of New Zealand's leading independent schools. It is situated in Havelock North (opposite Iona College), on 27 hectares of undulating landscaped grounds.

There is sleeping accommodation for up to 180 people, the rooms are mainly single though there is adequate provision for those requiring a double room. Being a girls' college, the rooms are not large but are comfortable and close to tea and coffee facilities. The beds are of the bunk variety, with most accommodation blocks having two bathrooms on each floor and cubicles for showers. In general, registrants will enjoy high standard college

accommodation with enough privacy to make your stay a pleasant one.

The dining hall accommodates 250 seated and the catering manager and staff are well versed in serving large numbers without resorting to long queues.

The lecture facilities comprise a level floor assembly hall which seats 250 maximum (no desks) and is in the same building as the dining hall and other rooms suitable for socialising, registration, bar etc. Other rooms are available for elective lectures, core groups and

workshops.

Woodford House has a heating system, car parking, a chapel and cordless phones. The needs of those with disabilities can be met, mainly by providing ground floor accommodation and bathroom facilities. The property is hilly but manageable—and if you want to take the plunge in early October there is a swimming pool. Hawke's Bay's renowned climate can deliver ... mostly, anyway.

The theme of the the Conference is **Beyond Belief — Putting Faith Into Practice** and information

about the programme will appear in the next issue of the Newsletter. The Sea of Faith Steering Committee has decided to limit the Conference to around 200 people so you should register early when forms are made available with the August Newsletter.

Alan Goss

[Aren't you glad you renewed your subscription! - ed]



Pilgrimage: Linear and Circular

"Pilgrim" comes from Latin, per agrum : one who leaves the security of village and road and walks "through the fields". The tradition of Christian pilgrimage began to grow in the fourth century. It was of Greek origin while the cult of relics often associated with it was rooted in pagan custom. Each main stopover was a holy place in itself, where the human remains of a saint—or bits of material sanctified through contact with the saint's body—could be seen and revered, and where their power could be felt first-hand. Around these human remains were built altars, shrines, churches and cathedrals. The end of the journey promised the forgiveness of pilgrim's sins or the intercession of their favourite saint.

Pilgrimage was promulgated as a form of penance and the way to salvation, the proximity of the relics purifying the sinner.



In a sense, medieval life was thought to be one long pilgrimage from this life to the next. Since the ultimate pilgrimage to the Holy Land was not only risky but also expensive, many pilgrims elected to journey through Western Europe, visiting the churches of holy saints. In the twelfth century the main pilgrim routes across Europe bound the continent together, at a time when not much else did. The most famous surviving pilgrim route starts in France (optionally Paris, Vezelay, Le Puy or Arles) and ends at Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain. They overlapped with trade routes. Well-to-do pilgrims travelled on horseback; everyone else walked. The pilgrimage was intended to be a microcosm of the journey through life; it was a penance, an adventure, a party—and often a dangerous way to travel.

As an alternative to trudging across Europe or visiting the Holy Land (which was in the hands of Muslims: a galling fact that inspired the Crusades) a pilgrim could "tread the labyrinth" in a cathedral such as Chartres, Saint-Quentin or Guingamp. The labyrinth is a single path to and from the centre which is arranged in a spiral fashion. It is not to be confused with a "maze", which is designed to confuse. The labyrinth represented the pilgrim's path to the Holy Land. **This symbolism was taken so seriously that, according to the beliefs of the time, the same grace and indulgences could be obtained from the labyrinth as from the pilgrimage itself.** Some of the faithful piously worked their way through the labyrinth on their knees until they reached the symbolic centre stone.

Grace Episcopal Church in San Francisco today uses a cloth replica of the labyrinth in Chartres to offer the same opportunity for latter day pilgrims to walk the labyrinth, as a token for their own spiritual journey.

What is probably the first labyrinth in Australia has recently been established at the Brookfield Centre at 139 Brookfield Rd, Kenmore Hills, Brisbane.

A concrete-and-mosaic-tiles replica (almost full-size) of the Chartres labyrinth has been made at Frederic Wallis House in Lower Hutt, near Wellington, New Zealand. With a path half-a-kilometer long wrapped in a circle 12.5 metres across, it is outdoors in the site of a tree-ringed former sunken garden. You can get further details by writing to them at 12 Military Road, Lower Hutt or by phoning them on 04-939-3000, or fax 04-939-3002 or by emailing fwallis@paradise.net.nz

Noel Cheer: from multiple sources.

Did you enjoy the Workshops at Conference?

Is it time for YOU to take the lead?

We are now making plans for this year's Conference. As you are already aware the theme is

Beyond Belief—

Putting Faith Into Practice

This will be a chance to discuss ways in which religious faith can be expressed in practice, rather than as a statement or creed.

In particular we will be talking about faith and social responsibility, and the ways in which our faith affects our dealings with other people. The other strand of the theme is the ways in which our beliefs might be informed by and expressed in creative modes such as music, art, dance, architecture, etc.

We are now looking for leaders for workshops to explore these ideas through discussion or some creative activity.

Workshops are not seen as lectures, but rather as a chance for all members to share ideas, and to deepen our common understanding.

Workshops should be related to the Conference theme. They will last for up to an hour-and-a-half, which should give the leader time to present information, and the group time to develop the topic.

If you would like your workshop suggestion to be considered then write to **Joy and Owen Lewis**, 80B Onslow Avenue, Epsom, Auckland, or phone 09-630-2933 or email lewisoj@xtra.co.nz

Owen Lewis

Local Groups

Waikato

In the first meeting of the year The Waikato Branch explored its Pakeha prejudices about Maori culture. John Denny, who with his wife Gill, founded the Branch, put a number of cultural questions to

us and had us debate our answers together. (We were lucky to have the University Chaplain, Sonny Melbourne on hand as consultant. Sonny is a Tuhoe.)

- "Would you be comfortable on a marae to address the wharehau as a person?"
- You have what seems to be good title to a piece of land; you go to build on it and are told it is **wahi tapu**; do you go ahead?
- You are chairperson of a community board; do you ask a Maori member to open proceedings with a **karakia**?

John then presented us with some case studies. An academic in the Commerce Department of the Victoria University of Wellington refused to turn up to bless a new commerce building on campus, dismissing the ceremony as "a culturally offensive act of animist superstition". Parikura Horomia, Associate Minister of Education described this attitude as "dogmatic and ignorant". Who was right?

The debate on some points was hot; respect for the traditions of Maori conflicted with personal belief, particularly on topics like **maakutu** [roughly "evil spell" - ed]; what building bicultural collaboration requires of us; what the limits of tolerance are; what the real motivation for cultural claims is; where tokenism starts and so on.

There was no attempt to reach finality on any topic. As a result of the discussion some attitudes were defined or refined for each of us. But in many instances we discovered how ambivalent our attitudes were and how dependent on the actual situation.

Fred Marshall

Group Contact: Peter Timmins, Phone 07-856-8170

Dunedin

In April they will start studying Robert Funk's **Honest To Jesus**.

In May John Shallcross will talk on "Thinking About The Bible Today" and, in June, John will be running a series of house

meetings on "Thinking About The Gospels Today".

**Contact: Marjorie Spittle
Phone 03-476-4322**

Auckland Central

Professor Tim Hazeldine was their guest speaker in February. He spoke on "The Morality of Economics and Economic Reality".

Their April/May Newsletter recorded their feeling of privilege that Henryk Skolimowski had addressed them in March.

For April they plan an address by Associate Professor Pat Alley on the "hazards of the medical life".

In May they plan to discuss Don Cupitt's article "Democratic Christian Humanism" from the Autumn 1999 edition of the UK "Sea of Faith" Magazine. The article concludes: "This picture of a world that has become all communication, and that is radically humanist, derives from familiar biblical texts such as Revelation 21 ['Behold, I am making all things new.'] and Jeremiah 31:31-34 ['I will set my law within them and write it in their hearts.']"

And this is the world-picture of postmodern, posthistorical society. The time has come. We should seize the day."

Wairarapa

In May, Alan Fricker will speak on "Genetic Engineering in Agriculture". In June Dr. Matt Mills will speak on the spiritual dimension of medical practice. There will be no meeting in July and on August 5th members are encouraged to attend the one-day seminar in Wellington at which Lloyd Geering will speak on "The Christian Legacy for the New Millennium?".

In August Adam Floyd will present the video **Inherit The Wind**. In September they will discuss an episode from the TV series **The Planets** and in October they will be addressed by Father Eddie Condra.

Their year ends on November 16th with a pot-luck tea.

Contact: Kate and Barrie Allom, phone 06-377-577

Wellington (SOF)

In May, Alan Fricker will address them on the effects of science on nature. In June, Jim Stuart will speak on his book **Making Meaning, Finding Health**. In July they will discuss Lloyd Geering's **The World To Come** and Vladimir Loncar will tell them about Theosophy in August. In September they will have a "sharing evening by the fireside" with music, books, and poetry. They're taking a mini-bus to the Conference in October and will review the Conference at their November meeting. Their year will end with a barbeque on December 1st.

Contact: Merran Kuiper
04-478-3720

Book Reviews

Faith Seeking Understanding

Your editor tries his hand at reviewing an anti-Veitch polemic.

Apologia: The Journal of the Wellington Christian Apologetics Society (Inc.) Volume 1-2000.

Apologia is the journal of the Wellington [New Zealand] Christian Apologetics Society (Inc). No issues were published in either 1998 or 1999 but this comprehensive issue was published early in the year 2000 with the overall title "Focus on James Veitch". The President of the Society and also the Journal editor, David Lane, may be known to readers as the scourge of John Spong during his 1997 visit. The next issue of the Journal will "focus of John Spong". Their website is at www.christian-apologetics.org

It is perhaps significant that the motto "*Fides quarens intellectum*" [faith seeking understanding] appears on the cover. It is usually attributed to Anselm (1033-1109) and may be justifiably applied to the writings of Jim Veitch—particularly his **The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth?** (St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society 1997) which is specifically attacked in this issue of the Journal. But, to be fair, we should also apply it to the overall motive of the

Belief Clings, Faith Lets Go

Once, there lived a village of creatures along the bottom of a great crystal river. The current of the river swept silently over them all, young and old, rich and poor, good and evil, the current going its own way knowing its own crystal self.

Each creature, in its own manner, clung tightly to the twigs and rocks of the river bottom, for clinging was their way of life and resisting the current what each had learned from birth.

But one creature said at last. "I'm tired of clinging. Though I cannot see it with my eyes I trust that the current knows where it is going. I shall let go and let it take me where it will. Clinging, I shall die of boredom."

The other creatures laughed and said, "Fool, let go and that current you worship will throw you, tumbled and smashed across the rocks and you will die quicker than boredom."

But the one heeded them not and, taking a breath, did let go and at once was tumbled and smashed by the current across the rocks.

Yet, in time, as the creature refused to cling again, the current lifted him free from the bottom and he was bruised and hurt no more. And the creatures downstream, to whom he was a stranger, cried, "See, a miracle, a creature like ourselves yet he flies, see the Messiah come to save us all!"

And the one carried in the current said, "I am no more Messiah than you, the river delights to lift us free if only we dare let go. Our true work is this voyage, this adventure."

But they cried the more, "Saviour!", all the while clinging to the rocks. And when they looked again, he was gone.

And they were left alone, making legends of the Saviour.

From "Illusions:
The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah"
by Richard Bach.

attackers. So different are the "understandings" of Veitch and his critics that we can observe that Christian faith looks no nearer finding consensus.

Editorial

The Editorial takes the opportunity to lash out at the "so-called" Jesus Seminar, of which Jim Veitch is a Fellow. The epithet, "so-called", characterises the Editor's dislike of The Jesus Seminar. But, at this point his main target is Veitch's approval of a novel (**Two Thousand Years Later: A Novel** by Peter Longley) which supports Veitch's theory of Jesus' being the result of Mary having been raped by a Roman soldier. Veitch is criticised, not so much for this sordid speculation but for his rejection of the literal "Virginal conception of Christ as taught in the Scriptures and by the Church".

A glance at the Society's **Statement of Belief** inside the front cover shows their acceptance of, *inter alia*, "inerrancy of the Bible"; "the full divinity and humanity of the Son"; "the universal guilt [note that this is not just a propensity for sin—you're guilty!] of mankind since the Fall"; "the sacrificial death on the Cross (as Representative, Substitute, Victor etc.) of the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God"; "the bodily ... resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead understood to be an actual event ...". So, it is easy to displease the Society, as indeed Veitch "and his mentor Lloyd Geering" have done ... and often.

The Editorial touches on what this reviewer takes to be a central problem of traditional Christianity—but from the opposite pole from which Veitch, and members of the Sea of Faith, might approach it.

How can ordained clergy (of whom Veitch is one) continue to preach and draw a stipend while departing from "the faith once delivered to the saints"?

Their Editor observes: "Financially suckled by their churches, such ministers, hucksters of so-called "modernity" [post-Modernity would be more appropriate!] lack the

backbone to abandon the Church and its teachings and go and join the Skeptics Society ..."

It is perhaps a measure of his lack of appreciation of the views of Veitch and members of the SoF that the Editor cannot credit them with a sincere attempt to develop Christianity in directions that embody new understandings resulting from, not only Biblical scholarship but also from the human sciences such as psychology, sociology and anthropology.

The remainder of the Editorial is given over to explaining that "our purpose in putting together this issue ... dealing with Rev. Dr. Jim Veitch's booklet is to address some of the many errors of fact, faulty presuppositions, flawed reasoning and unscholarly conclusions [which] it contains."

Biography

A biographical article about Jim Veitch follows. Apart from the odd sniping comment (the reference again to Lloyd Geering as Veitch's "mentor" seems to be offered in that spirit) it is a useful background piece.

Fruchtenbaum

Criticism, in the academic sense, starts with the article **In Critique of "The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth?"** by James Veitch by Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum Th.M., Ph.D., President, Ariel Ministries, Tustin, California.

In his first paragraph he raises a criticism that re-appears several times in this Journal; that Veitch's footnotes quote the writings of "other liberal theologians" rather than "actual historical documents". There are 71 footnote (actually endnotes) which account for 11 of

the 28 pages. Given their smaller typeface they would account for more than 40% of the text of booklet. It must be left to the reader to decide whether this is a fair criticism, given that the purpose of a footnote is only sometimes to demonstrate that the main text is "true". Often a footnote is an amplification of the main text or is an interesting tangent.

More to the point, the second paragraph notes that Veitch "writes his article with certain presuppositions that he accepts as fact", as though Veitch were the only one who did. The Journal's "presuppositions" as set out in their **Statement of Belief** and, as one would expect, Veitch's do not coincide.

Fruchtenbaum grapples with the distinction between "myth" and "history" with "myth" coming out the loser ("only myths"). This is similar to the way that myth, as a category of expression, loses out badly in the hands of the tabloid press. One would hope that a "Th.M" and "Ph.D" had a more sensitive appreciation of the inter-relationship of myth and history. He rightly discerns though, that in Veitch's account of myth, a story involving supernatural agents or events automatically consigns it to "myth". Of course that doesn't always preclude an historical substrate—only its evaluation need be mythical.

The remaining disagreements that Fruchtenbaum has with Veitch can be, perhaps simplistically, accounted for by his accepting the Gospels at face value: that they are accurate, objective accounts of what happened. It is, of course,

the thesis of The Jesus Seminar, Jim Veitch and many others that this has been adequately demonstrated not to be the case. Whatever value the Gospels have, it does not lie in their historical authenticity.

Duggan

There follows a critique by Rev. Dr. George Duggan S.M. After teaching philosophy and acting as rector of a university hall and Marist tertianship, Dr. Duggan is living in retirement at St. Patrick's College, Wellington from where he frequently writes Letters to the Editor of Wellington's "Evening Post" newspaper.

He is unimpressed, almost explosively so, by Veitch's booklet. "Although the text is buttressed by footnotes to give the semblance of a scholarly work, [the lack of footnotes might also have been a ground for disapproval!] it is incredibly shoddy." Dr. Duggan himself adopts the practice that Jim Veitch was accused of by the Editor. Duggan too quotes his favourite sources (Stanley Jaki; Martin Gengel; B. F. Westcott; Ricciotti; W.M. Ramsay; E. Meyer; A.N. Sherwin-White; W.H.C. Frend; William Barclay; John Chapman; W.R. Farmer; A.H.N. Green-Armytage; Renan; C.H. Dodd; Peter F. Ellis; John A.T. Robinson; J. W. Wenham; C.C. Torrey; ... and more). Argument must surely consist in more than stacking quotations and paraphrases.

Like Fruchtenbaum's dismissal of "myth", Duggan disvalues "metaphor" and will not let Veitch get away with "God is the metaphor ...". To Duggan, "metaphor" appears as "no more than a figure

A Trash Future?

"Looking ahead in a bad mood, I have sometimes summed up the prospect for humanity in three words: **technology, entertainment, fundamentalism**. A trash future.

All the world's great religions are in decline, and the mainline Christian churches in particular are simply melting away.

They are too defensive to allow a truly free internal debate amongst their own members about what's wrong and how it should be put right."

*Don Cupitt, quoted but the source not cited in
SoF In Australia Bulletin May 2000*

of speech": not what Veitch meant by metaphor at all. It was therefore inevitable that Duggan would insist on miracles (as God's intervention) over against Veitch's requirement to put aside the miraculous elements of the Gospel stories. Central to much of The Jesus Seminar's tentative conclusions (their methodology precludes setting things in concrete) is that Jesus neither claimed Messiahship nor set up an ongoing church organisation. They (and Veitch) derive that from their scholarship, the details of which are beyond the scope of this review. Duggan's response is to quote the Gospels, accepting them at face value. This is, of course, consistent with the **Statement of Beliefs** of the Society but it is the end of any dialogue between the Society and anybody who doubts the face-value authenticity of the NT material. In passing, one has to wonder how many Christians would identify with the sternly literalistic apologetics of this Society. According to Duggan, "rationalist exegesis of the New Testament ... is a parasitic growth ..."

Neither does Duggan separate out the contribution made by the Apostle Paul to the growing Jesus Christ story. It all goes in one supposedly

homogenous and coherent story—Epistles and Gospels—ignoring the scholarship that shows the spin-doctoring of the Gospel writers and the Cosmic Christ fantasy of Paul. And, of course, Veitch and Duggan could not agree on the literalness of the virgin birth, or even on which Gospel came first: Mark (Veitch) or Matthew (Duggan), or on the dating of NT books. Duggan ends with a tasteless assertion that such scholarship as Veitch, and many others are engaged in, is a form of corruption.

Tovey

By contrast, Dr. Derek Tovey's "response" is of much milder tone. He sees the book as suffering from its provenance—it was a lecture with footnotes added later—leading, he says, to some over-simplification.

In developing his argument, Tovey observes "we cannot read back into the New Testament later Chalcedonian formulations". This reviewer's discomfort with the Journal arises mostly from that quarter. It does seem that **Apologia's** standpoint is that of a matured view of Jesus—his teachings and his times—that would not have been available in the first century. It like reading the last page of the novel first, then starting on page one with a headful of

developed outcomes.

But Tovey's "style" is mid-way between that of Veitch and that of the Society—at least he admits of the possibility of debate over the gospel "records". He argues persuasively that not only is arriving at the historical truth difficult because of the paucity of material but that, on the way, our own preference guide us is what evidence seems more or less credible. But this is, mercifully, a far cry from Dr. Duggan's biblical literalism.

Marshall

A very short response follows, by Chris Marshall, PhD, Head of NT Studies, Bible College of New Zealand. He accuses Veitch of unreasonable optimism over the objectivity of "history" and suggests that his (Veitch's) reading "is itself driven by an ideological agenda—to meet the intellectual needs of modern skeptical Europeans."

Trebilco

Rev. Dr. Paul Trebilco, Associate Professor of NT Studies at the University of Otago is the last contributor directly addressing Veitch's book. He finds much of the booklet "interesting and helpful". He comes nearest to agreeing with Veitch: "if belief in Jesus' divinity involved

Want Some More Ecotheology?

Then consider the **ANZATS Conference 2000** from July 3rd to 7th, 2000.

Its the Joint Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Associations of Theological Schools and the Australian and New Zealand Society of Theological Studies.

The venue is Bishop Julius Hall, Christchurch.

"The conference aims to clarify the relationship between theology and ecology and propose outcomes for just and environmentally sound teaching and practice in faith communities" according to Rev Dr Keith Carley, St John's College, Auckland.

A highlight of the Conference will be a series of four public lectures on ecotheology by internationally recognised keynote speaker, **Dr Ruth Page**, author of **God and the Web of Creation** (London, SCM, 1996).

Other speakers:

Ted Abraham, Peter Allan, Nancy Ault, Sue Boorer, David Bromell, Tui Cadigan, Christine Cargill, Keith Carley, Neil Darragh, Richard Davis, Josie Dolan, David Drury, Kelvin Duncan, Keith Dyer, Denis Edwards, Anne Elvey, Howard J. Fisher & Edmund A. Parker, Lloyd Geering, David Given, Michael Grimshaw, Norman Habel, John Hunt, David Hunter, Dr C.M. King, Patricia Kopstein & Jim Salinger, Ross Langmead, Geoffrey Lilburne, Robyn McPhail, Peter Marshall, Tim Meadowcroft, Albert Moore, Richard K. Moore, Keith Morrison, Gregory Moses, Graeme Nicholas, Clive Pearson, Doug Pratt, Douglas Purnell, Bob Robinson, Rosemary Russell, Marjorie Smart, Neil Vaney, Nancy Victorin-Vangerud Barbara Vincent, Kevin Ward, Jim Williams, Mark Worthing.

More Information: at their website

<http://www.nzats.godzone.net.nz/anzats.html>

or from College House Institute of Theology phone 03-355-6140

completely overlaying the historical Jesus with something that was totally alien to him, then Veitch has a point."

This is Spong's point too, when he talks of the "interpretive framework of the first century" and The Jesus Seminar's distinction between the religion **of** Jesus and the religion **about** Jesus. Trebilco puts the debate into the correct arena—not, as with Duggan, simple conformity with the NT record, but to what degree the NT writers were (in their own minds) being *literal* and to what degree they were expressing in reverential terms their admiration for the man who had changed their lives. Or, more accurately if you allow Veitch's point than none of the Gospel's was written by the disciples whose names they bear, for the man who had inspired 40 to 70 years of fruitful reflection before his story came to be written down for a series of specialised readerships.

Conclusion

Another supporting item, not in the section dealing with Veitch, is what this reviewer can only describe as a defiantly literalistic account of **The Bodily Resurrection and Ascension of their Lord Jesus Christ** by Dr. Stephen J. Scott-Pearson. The atmosphere is a long way from the carefully considered phraseology of Tovey and Trebilco.

This contrast, not to be mistaken for genuine debate, is a good example of the disarray that "main-line" Christians find themselves in. Do they, with Lane, Duggan and Scott-Pearson, bid the Rock of Ages cleave for them so that they can have an assured toe-hold on eternity, or do they, with Tovey and Trebilco (even if timidly in comparison with Veitch, Geering, Cupitt, Funk and Spong) engage their intellects and seek understanding for their faith—even at the cost of uncertainty?

Noel Cheer

Footnote:

You can order books (including

The Creed of a Radical

This is the title of a paper submitted by Alan Goss of Napier. The Sea of Faith Network encourages such thinking but does not, as an organisation, promote any creed or any other formulations. What follows are extracts from Alan's paper. The full paper is available on the website and also from the Resource Centre. It would provide a stimulating focus to a Local Group meeting. Alan acknowledges influences from the various writings of Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering especially, and related resources.

"The theory of evolution, in spite of acknowledged gaps, makes sense to me; creationism does not"

"The universe exists simply for it's own sake. It's just there, in all its vastness, complexity, and mystery, and in itself has no meaning. It is we human beings who give to it meaning, by the way that we live. Our best response to the universe is simply to marvel that it exists at all."

"Life, or Being, is all around us and is pure gift. Like Old Man River it emerges, flows, changes course, is calm or turbulent, chancey or predictable, and passes on - it just keeps rolling along."

"God, as I now use the term, is a unifying word-symbol which helps me to get my life together as best I can. It's an internal trig point on which I focus to get my bearings - with myself, with other people, with the world ("all creatures great and small"), and the universe. God is also a symbol of wonder and awe."

"I believe that the historical Jesus was a man and no more than a man. Jesus was a Jew of poor peasant stock who taught about the Kingdom (or domain) of God, using parables and short, pithy sayings. He was also a healer. Jesus was not a religious professional, he didn't found a church and was often scathing about the religious establishment, its law and tradition. He paid the price by being crucified as a troublemaker."

"The Bible ... does not provide a final and infallible answer to all of life's deepest questions, hence it is not to be regarded as an idol. To describe the Bible as the "Word of God" is a misnomer, turning it into a sacred cow."

"It is our individual human responsibility to create truth and values which make life worth living. There is no sacred realm in heaven above or on earth below where absolute truth exists, packaged for discovery and delivery."

"All religions are human creations, the products of human history, human culture and human language."

"When I die I shall be "recycled" back into the universe - earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Memories of me may surface from time to time, but eventually I shall be forgotten."

"Orthodox, or conventional Christianity, is coming to an end, and new ways of being Christian are emerging. Christianity, in its more conservative or fundamentalist forms, will become a sect and may even disappear altogether."

Alan Goss, 1999

The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth? directly from The St. Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, (mercifully abbreviated to SATRS):
www.futuresgroup.org.nz/satrs.html

The Meaning of It All

This review is by Alan Goss of Napier.

This small book, **The Meaning of It All** by Don Cupitt, (SCM Press) is the second in an original and provocative trilogy. The first, **The Religion of Life in Everyday Speech** [reviewed in Newsletter 31, May 1999] looked at how the word "life" is rapidly becoming the ordinary person's word "God". The trilogy concludes with what may be Cupitt's last book, **Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech**, also from SCM Press. All three volumes show how our religious thinking has shifted from a supposed world "out there" to that of the "here-and-now". That's life!

In this second book Cupitt looks at 450 "it" idioms and shows how they are pregnant with meaning, including religious meaning. He argues, and rightly I believe, that philosophy and theology now play a squeaky second fiddle to science and technology and that all forms of religious belief now appear to be an intellectual mess. In everyday speech, God-talk has become very impoverished, whereas Life-talk is rich and growing. It is in the realm of ordinary language, often denigrated by academics, that we get a vision of who and what we are and where we might be going. That is to say, the human condition.

Ordinary language is our way of

networking with each other, expressing our feelings, holding the human world together. We talk about "gossiping the gospel", sharing the good news in gossip rather than high falutin' ways. Ordinary language is concerned with gut-feelings (Shortland Street, The Soaps), it is focussed mainly on this purely human world, and is anything but elitist. Many words which formerly had religious overtones are now being assimilated into secular, everyday speech, e.g. "icon" (Colin Meads), "charisma" (pop star), "ecstasy" (sex, drugs), and also "revelation", "miracle" and "grace". All do their duty in *this* world, their original theological use forgotten.

The neutered "it" is much older than the word "life", but it too has religious overtones. People say: **it** has got me beat (mystery); **it** was awesome (transcendence); that this is **it** (eschatological); that she's got **it** (charisma); don't let **it** get you down (comfort); **it** has all been worthwhile (redeeming it); learn from **it** (suffering); take **it** as it comes (acceptance).

Cupitt conceded that the "it" word can also refer to an alien extra-human realm which perhaps will continue to trouble us—like necessity, fate, destiny, chance—but maybe this is all a bad dream left over from our past. In his view that sort of **it** is on the way out.

Cupitt, the radical humanist, expresses the hope that Christianity may one day become the radical humanist religion.

"The word, the flesh, and the human world: that is all there is, and that is enough for us. This is a minority

view ... But one day it (ordinary language) will go with me all the way, I hope."

However one responds to Cupitt, his plea that we examine ordinary language to find out what people do believe, rather than telling them what to believe, is worth a hearing. The customer is nearly always right. And that's it!

Alan Goss, Good Friday 2000

In Brief

Skolimowski Fragments

"Tired of the staleness of the religious mode of life, the seventeenth century rediscovered the physical. Tired of the triviality of the material mode of life, we are rediscovering the spiritual."

The Participatory Mind p.xiv

"... spirituality is not accidental but [is] **essential** to the human condition, [it] is one of the **defining characteristics** of the human condition. Without it the human condition cannot be truly human."

A Sacred Place to Dwell p.1

Looking Beyond

"Keith King, celebrant, priest and spiritual companion, **Looking Beyond Ltd**, Ceremonies and Ritual Making, Auckland, Phone/Fax (09)826-0669"

A Card

Patti Republished

Patti Whaley's address on "Exploring Reality and Meaning in Absolute Music", given at our 1998 Conference, is published in the Summer 2000 issue of *Music in the Air*, the local journal exploring song and spirituality. Also included are articles on hymnwriter Shirley Murray and Woody Guthrie. Copies cost \$12 each. Contact John Thornley, 15 Oriana Place, Palmerston North.

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. Its home page is at www.futuresgroup.org.nz/sof.html

For membership details and for the address of your nearest local group, contact the Membership Secretary, Roy Griffith, 249 Te Moana Rd, Waikanae, Phone 04-904-1954. Members may obtain tapes, books etc from the Resource Centre managed by Suzi Thirlwall, 34 Briarley St, Tauranga, phone 07-578-2775. **The only copy appearing in this Newsletter that may be construed as reflecting Sea of Faith policy is that which is accompanied by a by-line of a member of the Steering Committee.**

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, email: noel.chear@attglobal.net