



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

When I was a student of languages, I soon learned that the way you look at the world depends on which language you are speaking. Ask speakers of different languages how many colours there are in a rainbow and you come up with a variety of answers. The colours in the rainbow are determined by the marketplace of our mother-tongue.

The election process and its outcome should have convinced us, if we needed convincing, that we live in a relativist world. **Don Cupitt** compares modern politics to the stock market, where values depend on the interactions and constant communications between all the players.

Richard Randerson, speaking about the GE commission, argued for leaving open as wide a range as possible of options for the future. And his reason for doing so was the uncertainty of the information available.

Which brings us to "Creative Uncertainty". **Stephen Batchelor** argues that it takes faith to doubt. Life is about confrontation, not consolation. Confronting the uncertainty.

And this, says Cupitt, is where human creativity comes in. The traditional view was that there was only one Creator. Now we are all creators of our lives and of our meanings, individually but much more jointly.

And where else would you get a meeting of these three (and more) creative personalities than at the Sea of Faith Conference, Timaru, September 20, 2002?

Frank Gaze, Chairperson 2001-2002

Reducing Certainty

"Religion without God"
book by Ray Billington

"Christianity without God"
new book by Lloyd Geering

"Christianity without Absolutes"
book by Rheinold Bernhardt

"Buddhism without Beliefs"
book by Stephen Batchelor

"Humanism without Adjectives"
speech by Robert Ashby to SoFN UK Conference

— underlines added —

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From Don Cupitt's *Emptiness & Brightness*

- "The young Kierkegaard ... thinks that the only way to be cured of his fear of contingency's open sea is by a metaphysical guarantee that will anchor him firmly to the seabed. He wants to be saved by a Rock. But there is another way ... he must learn to stop clutching and let go. He must learn to love life and simply ... float". (page 71)
- "Faith, like Zen, lets the arrow shoot itself". (page 72)
- "The world is ours: we are home already". (page 112)

From Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism Without Beliefs*

"First and foremost the Buddha taught a method ("dharma practice") rather than another "-ism". **The dharma is not something to believe in but something to do.** The Buddha did not reveal an esoteric set of facts about reality, which we can choose to believe in or not. He challenged people to understand the nature of anguish, let go of its origins, realize its cessation, and bring into being a way of life.

The Buddha followed his reason as far as it would take him and did not pretend that any conclusion was certain unless it was demonstrable. [However] Dharma practice has become a creed ("Buddhism") much in the same way scientific method has degraded into the creed of "Scientism".

(pages 17—18 emphasis added)

"Learn to stop clutching and let go ..."

"Learn to love life and simply ... float"

Don Cupitt "Emptiness and Brightness" p 71

Budding Buddhists in Australia

While over one in four Australians still identify as Catholic, and one in five as Anglican, all mainstream Christian denominations continue to decline. However, the 'no-religion' category also declined marginally.

The real growth area is Buddhism: 360,000 people now call themselves Buddhist, compared with 200,000 in 1996. This means there are now around 50,000 more Buddhists in Australia than Baptists.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported the response of the Rev Tim Costello, president of the Baptist Union of Australia, to these figures:

"The Christian churches' failure to deal with sexual abuse has enormously damaged their credibility, and that's where I think Buddhism has gained the edge," Costello said.

"Buddhism is personal, not collective, it doesn't have a heavy institutional framework — at least not in Australia — so on the surface it's probably much more appealing today. And there has not been betrayal of trust, which has happened with the clergy."

Melbourne author and academic David Tacey, in an address during Cathedrals Week in June also touched on Buddhism:

"The God within' sounds like heresy to some religious ears: an excuse for narcissism, self-reflection and self-indulgence. The problem is that religion has lost its mystical dimension, because it has gone the path of dogma and doctrine: it is the mystical or spiritual dimension of religion could speak to our present need.

Many young people are therefore heading into Buddhism, the fastest-growing religion in Australia. Buddhism has many attractive features: it is intensely psychological, it understands spiritual or inner experience, it is not moralistic, and it is not weighed down by heavy burdens of metaphysics or theology. Buddha said: don't believe what I say, go and find out for yourselves.

This is the very thing that Australians respond to: we don't like church authority, we don't like to have our spirituality prescribed to us from above, we want to search for ourselves, and we want to have direct experience of the God within, and not rely on external tradition or rumours of God preached from the pulpit. People want direct experience and that is what 'spirituality' is about, or at least what it promises.

from Sea of Faith in Australia Bulletin July 2002

DOES THE CHURCH MATTER?

This is an edited version of an article by Rodney Eivers, of the Sea of Faith in Australia, in which he discusses why the church continues to be important to him.

AM I, OR AM I NOT, A RELIGIOUS PERSON?

I do not get excited by the 'happy clappy' style of worship; I find no great attraction towards trance-like meditation. And the words and mind-set of so much of traditional church liturgies have departed so far from reality, as I perceive it, that it becomes increasingly difficult to mouth the words of the hymns, readings and prayers and join in wholeheartedly with my fellow worshippers.

With such reactions, how does it happen that so much of my time and effort goes, with considerable passion, into my local Uniting Church (and into SoFiA* for that matter) and to maintaining and nurturing the growth of other congregations.

Perhaps it is that I am by nature an optimist and tend to see what a person or institution is capable of rather than judging it by mistakes of the past or being too put off by the risk of future corruption of ideals.

For I do see Christian faith as having the potential to do great things through the institutional church. Let me say at the outset that I do not wish to detract from the tremendous, often courageous contribution that Christian individuals have made to the betterment of society. They have often made such contributions despite, rather than because of, the Christian institution from which they sprang.

The chances are, however, that they would not have been inspired to make that contribution if the Jesus message of love and compassion had not been transmitted to them through the churches or writings of men and women nurtured in the church. Regrettable though it surely is, there is plenty of evidence from history and from day to day experience that the message can be greater than the messenger. But by shooting the messenger we may be no better off.

So apart from transferring the message of the blessings of goodwill from generation to generation, what is the church capable of, at its best?

These come to mind:

1. **Ongoing care for the poor and oppressed** in the midst of an impatient and busy world. Individuals can do much but for major works of charity it helps considerably to pool resources and build structures. The church can do this.

2. **Initiate responses to social welfare.** In Western societies, governments have largely taken over community welfare in health, education, infrastructure, public utilities ... but there has still been an important role for churches to 'stick their necks out' and take risks to experiment with new ventures which governments may be reluctant to do for fear, ... of offending their electorate.

3. In the area of **social justice**, churches have the opportunity to use the moral authority of a large and

wide membership to speak out against oppression and tyranny.

4. The **levelling of social hierarchies.** It is ironic perhaps that the term hierarchy is most commonly used in relation to the rulers of churches when it is the people through churches which have the power to subvert the inherited secular hierarchies of class and wealth. In a church congregation the lowliest person in the pecking order can share authority with the highest.

5. All this may be a little cerebral and impersonal. Let me conclude with this true story which I was told a month or two ago by some one we might call 'Mary':

"Some four to five years ago I was going through some massive changes in my life; changes that I couldn't really cope with. At that time I was very much alone. Twice I attempted to take my own life and I believed that only the intervention of God stopped it being successful.

During this time the only thing that did keep me alive was my belief that there was a God, who, if I prayed hard enough to, and long enough, would help me handle my difficulties. And I prayed like you couldn't imagine. I knew that even if no one else loved me, God did, and he would come to my rescue.

So how could I handle a similar situation now that I no longer believe in an interventionist God, a God floating above the clouds, ready to answer my call if only I can catch his ear? A God who can work miracles on my behalf if only I pray hard enough?

If we can no longer believe in God as a 'crutch to lean on' or as a security blanket to wrap ourselves in or even as a parent figure prepared to look after us when we are unable to help ourselves, then we shall need a community of faith to help with the "stings". I believe that there are few of us able to handle, alone, all that life throws at us."

So thank you, Mary. By coming together as a community of faith, which is all that a church is, we may not experience throes of ecstasy from exuberant worship; we may not find that day to day living requires an ongoing mystical experience of the "divine". Most of us, however, can treasure the assurance that comes from living in a community which can cushion the knocks of life. It may also give us the satisfaction that we are all on a journey together to make the world a better place or, to turn another phrase, bring about the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

* Sea of Faith in Australia

Rodney Eivers



BOOKS

Rejecting the Wrong God?

Toowoomba Sea of Faith member and one-time theist Greg Spearritt reviews A God for This World (Mowbray 2000) by Scott Cowdell. Reprinted with permission from the Bulletin of the Sea of Faith In Australia, July 2002

If we are to have a viable belief in God, says Scott Cowdell, we must face the truth about the kind of world we now inhabit. It's disappointing that

Christians have prized and in many cases tenaciously maintained images of God that positively invite religious scepticism... Priests and parents, Sunday School teachers and even theologians have bound heavy burdens of belief, hard to bear, in commending images of God which fail to resonate powerfully with experience, images of God which are remote from life in the world. (4)

Cowdell sees three major aspects of contemporary experience with which these images fail to resonate. There is, first, a new awareness of evil and suffering brought about by the myth of progress collapsing (with technology's "unreflective onward swagger" an exception) into a mood of anxiety. We're on our own, without supernatural protection: we humans must secure our own future.

Second, there's a growing perception of reality as holistic and relational. The social, physical and biological sciences have been converging on this point: life is a web and events, even (or especially) at subatomic level, are fundamentally interrelated. We have all been impressed with the notion that the fluttering of the butterfly's wings in some far-off country can affect us all. The need for something beyond the natural world causing and directing all this has faded.

The third factor is 'secularity'. God is a personal matter nowadays, even a recreational option, functionally absent or at best on the periphery of the way we live our lives.

All of this leaves no place for the remote, supernatural God of classical theism. That God was squeezed out as the gaps began to close, and even the attempt to find refuge for God in the modern Self à la Kant and Hegel was defeated by radical historicism and postmodern deconstruction.

So Cowdell begins rethinking God, finding in the mainstream Christian tradition — in people like Aquinas, Luther and Calvin — an emphasis on faith rather than speculation in which God is intimately bound up with humanity and the world. He sees also a venerable tradition of 'double agency', a non-interventionist view in which God acts in the very functioning of the natural world and in free human action.

In the end, influenced particularly by insights drawn from the modern physical and biological sciences, Cowdell argues for a species of pantheism, endorsing both 'uniform' divine action — where God works through natural

evolutionary processes and is discerned in the complex whole rather than in being useful to help explain this part or that — and 'special' divine action in the world.

'Special' divine action

I find the author's case for the 'special' action of God unconvincing. Cowdell is open, for instance, to the possibility of telepathy and to Carl Jung's 'synchronicity' (where internal events like recounting a dream can coincide with actual external events), and although he suggests these may well be cases of the natural world at work in ways we just don't understand, to my mind he isn't nearly sceptical enough of such 'miraculous' happenings.

He loves the possible theological implications of quantum physics, but does not appear to ask whether science at any level treats telepathy or synchronicity seriously. Until the evidence for these is more than merely anecdotal (with or without the authority of C.G. Jung), why should they be any more plausible than your average fundamentalist claim about God locating parking spots for the faithful?

At a psychological/mental level also, says Cowdell, we can retain the special, 'miraculous' action of God. Thus Christians praying for strength, conversion and guidance can experience this action directly, but Cowdell wants to argue for external as well as internal influence. In this connection, intercessory prayer may be effective because God might work to give us what we ask for or need simply because we ask, with the caveat that respect for natural conditions and the contradictory wishes of others would prevent God from doing many of the things that people request in prayer. (109)

Thus remission from cancer and a change in the weather "are all reasonable conjectures in faith", where legs growing back or God forcing people to act would not be. This sounds to me too much like the 'God of the gaps' Cowdell is at pains to escape.

God may well be specially active in these crevices, and it's unlikely (though who knows?) that we'll ever know enough to exclude this, but there's no obvious case in my view for asserting it at all. Admittedly, Cowdell does call it 'conjecture', but his very consideration of it begs the question of whether intercessory prayer is actually "effective". And that's another 'unprovable'. In my experience, it's just as plausible — based on the evidence of what actually happens to people in the world — that a mischievous, occasionally capricious demon has been delegated by God to answer the prayers of the faithful.

Cowdell's foray for God into quantum physics, via the likes of John Polkinghorne and Philip Clayton, is tantalizing but not, for me, convincing, though this may have more to do with my ignorance of the field than with the quality of the author's argument. Cowdell considers the positive possibility of a God of the gaps: not of epistemological gaps, but of

'ontological gaps' that would never... be closable, wedged open forever by the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, or the impenetrable randomness of chaotic regimes or the ways whole influence parts. (94)

'Uniform' divine action

I confess also to major problems with the general or 'uniform' divine action that Cowdell proposes. God may indeed be intimately involved in the functioning of the world as a whole, but I would argue we may account for the way the world goes quite adequately — indeed, more adequately — without reference to divine action. I refer to one of the main issues which led me ultimately to theological non-realism: evil and suffering.

On Cowdell's account, God strives with creation to bring good out of evil. Yet

[t]he world we know is built at a price, and can emerge as far as we know in no other way. (103)

Indeed,

[w]ithout a great deal of carnage in the realm of individual creatures and without the extinction of species there would be no human beings on the Earth... (119)

Let's put this in starker terms. Hear the words of one Catholic contributor to *The New York Times*, writing in 1996 after a proclamation by Pope John Paul II endorsing the theory of evolution:

What can one say about evolution, even a spiritual theory of evolution? Pain and suffering, mindless cruelty and terror are its means of creation. Evolution's engine is the grinding of predatory teeth upon the screaming, living flesh and bones of prey... If evolution be true, my faith has rougher seas to sail. [1].

Rough seas, indeed, as Cowdell admits. Cowdell's God, however, is a God of redemption as much as of creation, and this is in evidence for example in the fact that the extinction of the dinosaurs favored the rise of mammals and ultimately of humans. Cowdell's own existence, he acknowledges, is in part due to the fact that many Turkish infantrymen were shot or hacked to death by his grandfather in a particular battle in WW1.

I'm afraid I just can't see redemption, or the striving to bring good out of evil, at work here. Cowdell speaks of paying the price, but the analogy is flawed. We pay the price to achieve something we consider worth the sacrifice. How can the fact of my existence, well-being and relative comfort be considered 'redemptive' or worth the sacrifice if the price has been and continues to be, among other things, the dispossession and suffering of thousands of Aboriginal Australians? (Perhaps I might experience my existence as worth it all, but who else would?) Is it enough that I give to Community Aid Abroad which works to alleviate Aboriginal disadvantage? How 'redemptive', then, is the existence of those privileged Australians who have overtly bigoted, racist attitudes and actions towards Aborigines?

Indeed, who's to say the evolutionary rise of humans is a redemptive move? Surely not the many children who died in the last five minutes, having led short, miserable, diseased or violent, hunger-filled lives.

Go the whole hog, I say. The world is the way it is because there is no entity, no compassionate Power, no caring God working "in, with and under" the natural order. The only thing that is and can be caring and

striving to bring good out of evil is ... us.

I regret that I cannot, and have not, done justice to *A God for This World*. Cowdell's argument is more complex than I can demonstrate here. He is a writer with a passion for his topic, and his scholarly credentials far exceed my own. The book is positive, hopeful and well worth reading.

However, I am particularly disquieted by one aspect of it. Cowdell mentions in passing "the real Christian God"; he speaks of "Christianity rightly understood"; and he says the God some critics reject "is not what Christianity really means by God". (32, 38 and 19 respectively). He speaks of "fidelity to scripture" (110). And we must not forget, he says, that "the God of Jesus Christ is Trinitarian", as came to be established by the "full-blown orthodoxy" which had developed by the fourth century. (50)

This suggests a commitment to a singular — and 'orthodox' — understanding of Christianity and the Christian God. Doctrinal orthodoxy (liberal, to be sure, but still conforming to creedal formulae) is not surprising in one who was, until recently, Principal of St Barnabus' Anglican Theological College in Adelaide: but it's disappointing. I find the very notion of orthodoxy odious. The idea that there's one right way to think if you want to be in the Christian club runs counter to my understanding of what Jesus stood for.

The impression Cowdell gives that Christianity or the Christian God can be 'correctly' understood just one way is more puzzling, particularly since he has elsewhere acknowledged that Christianity is characterised by an "incredible diversity of belief and practice, ranging from Jim Bakker to Don Cupitt". [2].

Cowdell is concerned to turn Christian thinking, and the Church, around. He speaks of those who live disaffected Christian lives in their middle years, sustained by glimpses of a holistic spirituality in relationships and creative work, in music and the arts, in nature walks and gardening, in the fulfilment of human potential. But these impeccable catholic instincts are often not reflected back to people, celebrated, corrected and fulfilled, in the Church's preaching, teaching, life and worship. But it need not be this way. (15)

I think perhaps I see myself here. A church reformed through Cowdell's attempt to rethink God would undoubtedly be a good thing. However, it will have to be less concerned about sticking with orthodox Christian tradition than Cowdell seems to be, and more ready to cater for the kind of diversity of belief ('choice' or 'heresy') that the church exhibited pre-Nicea to have any hope of attracting me.

Greg Spearritt

[1]. Quoted in Stephen Jay Gould Leonardo's *Mountain of Clams and the Diet of Worms* (Vintage, 1999) 283.

[2]. 'Buddhism and Christianity' *Asia Journal of Theology IV* (1990) 190.

**"Every '-ism'
becomes a wasm"**
Anon

FAITH IN CYBERSPACE

Theological Editions

In-depth religious news, views, reviews and features for the thinking person. Links to articles in many periodicals

www.theologicaleditions.com

BBC Religious Programmes

Hear audio excerpts

www.bbc.co.uk/religion/tv_radio/sunday/index.shtml

Peace Be Upon Them

The Combat Kit against Bible-Thumpers seems to have been put together to help Muslims answer back to Christian missionaries, hence the frequent use of "pbuh" (peace be upon him).

<http://home.swipnet.se/~w-20479/Combat.htm>

Islam in Dialogue

Answering Islam: A Christian Muslim Dialog. Appears to have low or no polemics.

<http://www.answering-islam.org/>

Global Ethic

The Principles of a Global Ethic
www.conjure.com/CTS/principles.html

Interview With God

Beaut pictures. Some may find the words a trifle twee

<http://168.143.173.209/IWGnet.swf>

About URLs

- URL is the technical term for the website address.
- Most, though not all, URLs start with "WWW" (currently pronounced dub-dub-dub).
- Sometimes a long URL is simply cut and continued on the next line. You will, of course, need to join it up when using it.
- Omit punctuation such as the comma here: www.abc.com,
- Spaces *never* appear within a URL.
- An underline is sometimes used instead of a space and may appear to be a space if the URL has itself been underlined.

BOOK PREVIEW

Sea of Faith (NZ) Life Member Lloyd Geering's latest book will be launched in Wellington in September.

Christianity without God

Copies will be available in bookshops (e.g. Unity Books, Wellington, phone (04) 499-4245) and also at the SoF Conference. It costs \$34.95.

The publisher, Bridget Williams Books, provides us with this introduction:

"Belief in God has been a cornerstone of Christian faith. The idea of a supernatural spiritual being who created and sustains the universe was thought fundamental to Christianity, as it was to the other two great monotheistic religions. But just as the Bible ceased, in the nineteenth century, to be convincing as the source of divinely revealed knowledge, so the twentieth century has witnessed the failure of the conventional idea of God.

"Does this 'death of God' spell the end of the whole Christian tradition? Or does it simply mean the end of conventional Christian doctrine? *Christianity without God* affirms the latter, treating Christian culture as a living and evolving stream.

"Lloyd Geering sees the modern secular form of Christian culture as the logical consequence of the basic doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. He links modern humanism with the neglected Wisdom stream of

the Old Testament. Even the recoverable voiceprints of Jesus are found to be linked to the long succession of Jewish sages.

Christianity without God looks forward to a world with faith, not a world lacking God. For, as Lloyd Geering cogently argues, it is the cultivation of the wisdom of Christianity that the world now needs, not a supernatural saviour.

Once again, Lloyd Geering responds to some of the pressing concerns of contemporary religion, with a clarity that belies the depth of knowledge he draws on. Readers will welcome these deeply considered words from an international scholar."

At about the time of the book launch, Lloyd gave a series of four talks at St Andrew's on The Terrace, Wellington under the title *The Journey of Wisdom*. Because the talks contain material from the book, the St Andrews Trust ("SATRS" — see the panel on page 10) decided not to issue the talks in a book form.

But they will be available as audio tapes. For further details either refer to their website

<http://satrs.wellington.net.nz> or phone the St Andrew's office at (04) 472-9211.

Medieval and Modern Evils

PETER DONOVAN, WHO WAS FORMERLY ASSOCIATE LECTURER in Religious Studies at Massey University, gave this presentation to the Nelson Sea of Faith Group on May 16, 2002. He introduced the members to four Medieval thinkers who tried to answer the question **"Why did God, the all-powerful Creator who made all things good, allow there to be evil at all?"**

Boethius (c. 470-524), a Roman statesman, scholar, and Christian philosopher, eventually served as Minister of Justice under the Ostrogothic King Theoderic but fell out of favour with political rivals and was unjustly accused of treason. In his prison cell, facing torture and execution, he reflected on the question why God allowed good people to suffer and evil people to prosper. His short treatise titled *The Consolation of Philosophy* became a classic work in medieval and early Renaissance Christianity.

His treatise provides two perspectives of the world: the human and the divine. The former perspective gives us the idea of **"fortune,"** the latter the idea of **"Providence."** From a human viewpoint, fortune may seem unfair and unjust in its consequences for individual human lives. But from the perspective of divine Providence, God weaves into a perfect whole, or blends into a sublime harmony, all life's good and bad, blessings and disasters. Thus, the task for humans is to find peace of mind by rising above the evils and limitations of our earthly existence, through prayer and goodness, and learning to share in God's timeless perfection.

Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite is the name given to the writer of an essay *On The Divine Names* which appeared around 500 AD from an unknown author, mistakenly identified with the Dionysius of Acts 17. Though writing as a Christian, the author follows the Neoplatonist view that evil has no positive existence, but it is merely a lack or an absence of good, just as darkness is an absence of light. Evil thus being a "nothing", with no reality in its own right, God cannot be held responsible for creating it.

This author encourages the seeker to escape the effects of life's evils by following a path to direct experience of God. The work has been widely influential in mystical traditions, but the view of evil as unreal has generally been felt to do less than justice to the obvious facts of suffering and misery in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

Augustine (354-430) lived at a time when the classical world began to disintegrate as the Roman empire fragmented into separate states. He began his career as a promising student of rhetoric, but soon was attracted to Manicheism, a mystical religion teaching a system of ultimate dualism in which Good and Evil, God and Satan, were in eternal conflict. Tiring of contradictions within that faith he began to explore Platonic philosophy before eventually being converted to Christianity (through his mother's influence, and his own personal experience of guilt, forgiveness, and conversion.) He soon became Bishop of Hippo in Roman Africa, a position he occupied for the rest of his life.

In his scholarly writings, notable his *Confessions* and *City of God*, he reshaped the Western intellectual tradition, using his interpretation of Christianity as a base (with some lingering Manichean and Platonist elements). It is from Augustine that

medieval and later Christianity inherited much of its ideology of sexuality and original sin, ecclesiastical and political theory, and its sense of the meaning and trajectory of individual lives, later reflected in novels and in sciences such as psychology.

In offering an explanation of the problem of Evil, Augustine turns not to philosophy but to religious history. Evil is in the world, in all its forms, simply as a result of sin. The essence of sin is a wilful turning away from the highest good, God himself, for the sake of some lesser good — one's own desires. This is what took place on the part of the first humans, Adam and Eve. Following St Paul's argument in Romans chapter 5, Augustine holds that all people are involved in Adam's guilt and in its punishment. This involvement is transmitted as "original sin", through the process of human procreation itself. Thus God cannot be held responsible for the existence of evil; it is the fault of Adam and Eve and their successors, the penalty we must all pay for our inherited sinfulness. From that premise, the view follows logically that all humans are in need of salvation through faith in the sacrificial death of a virgin born and sinless Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Augustine fails to explain how Adam and Eve, themselves created good and in God's image, should choose rebellion and punishment rather than obedience. His explanation for their fall is "pride, which is the beginning of sin". But how could perfectly good creatures, *before* the Fall, be motivated by sinful pride? Augustine himself can only deal with this inconsistency by turning to a notion of predestination, according to which God creates people whom he foresees will freely sin, and foreordains a universe which contains evil as the necessary penalty for that sin. The problem of God's responsibility seems to remain unsolved in Augustine's theology, despite the lasting impact of his rhetorical skills and impressive personal piety.

Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274) was born into a wealthy Italian family and entered the Dominican order and studied in Naples, Cologne and Paris. He ranks with Augustine as one of the two great fathers of the church. His *Summa Theologica* is one of the most important writings of the Middle Ages. It provided a comprehensive summary of early Christian tradition and incorporates Platonic teachings, Aristotelian philosophy, Roman law, the Bible, and the writings of the great theologians of the church. Many popes declared his teachings to be the authoritative guide to Christian doctrine and faith.

Like Augustine, Aquinas makes humans entirely responsible for their own sin. "The devil made me do it", is no excuse. The devil can only lead into evil those who are already set on sin. And in fact, Aquinas gives a surprisingly limited role to the devil, allowing him only a few modest paragraphs in the *Summa*. The devil is a created spirit who, like Adam, was expelled from God's presence because of his pride, and remains unable to exercise any power that is not divinely conceded to him, and ultimately used by God for higher purposes.

Aquinas was no doubt well aware of the allegations of satan-worship, sorcery and witchcraft beginning to spread throughout Europe in the middle ages, and his teachings were no obstacle to the very heavy-handed measures the Church would take against anyone (particular women and Jews) accused of such heresies. But for Aquinas, intellectually at least, evil and the Devil were to pose no major challenge to theological affirmations of the supremacy and perfection of God.

Peter Donovan

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The following letter was originally printed in the May Newsletter but with a significant error in the second paragraph — the author did not intend to say that "Nature is God". The author and the editor have exchanged apologies for, respectively, poor handwriting and poor eyesight!

**Re: God v. Darwin,
March Newsletter**

Dear Sir,

To say that Nature is Beneficent is religious sentimentality or religiosity, perhaps.

But I don't see why religious sentiment cannot simply say "Nature is Good" — without being blind to death, pain, blood etc. Religion requires a little rigour after all, not rosy lenses.

yours, Joanna Paul, Wanganui

In a followup letter, the author added: "'benevolent', 'malevolent' and even 'amoral' sentimentalize and even anthropomorphise natural processes. It is sufficient to say that Nature is 'good'.

Joanna will be co-presenting a Workshop in this theme at the Conference.

Dear Sir,

Sadly I am unable to attend this year's Conference which promises to be the best ever. [*We say that every year — ed!*]

However, I am alarmed at the Workshop "Taking Positions" (for SoFN to stand for) [8:30am Saturday].

An official stated position would immediately negate the basic SoFN affirmation that it has no creeds.

It would quash the free "quest for meaning: and discussion under the weight of the resultant bias.

Is it that some would like to see SoFN become a lobby voice? Shame on them if this is so,

No. Let's keep the openness, the interchange, and diversity, that are SoFNs main strengths, intact.

*Yours faithfully
M. Whitwell, Te Puke.*

IN BRIEF

A Request from the Conference Arrangements Committee

Their Chairperson, Ian Fleming, writes:

Just two points:

a) With rooms having to be cleaned after the girls leave, bedroom occupation will be a little delayed so please be patient.

b) Also, for those arriving by car, there may be a temporary parking problem in adjacent streets brought about by girls leaving and us arriving at much the same time. However we will have rooms set aside for checking in, and with your cooperation we will be starting on time at 4 o'clock.

Apart from that, matters are well in hand for a great Conference. Roll on the day!

"Socrates told us that the unexamined life is not worth living. [But] Huxley (... like Orwell) pictures a world in which the unexamined life is the only one available."

*The Fortunes of Permanence
by Roger Kimball in The New Criterion: Web
special, Summer 2002*

"We do not receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness, which no one else can make for us, which no one can spare us, for our wisdom is the point of view from which we come at last to regard the world."

*Marcel Proust: quoted on the flyleaf of
Buddhism Without Beliefs by Stephen Batchelor*

LOCAL GROUPS

Nelson Sea of Faith Committee

- Lindsay and Elizabeth Duncan would welcome other members onto the organising committee
- Programme ideas and newsletter contributions are welcome
- Let Lindsay (03-548-4778) know if you change your postal or e-mail address

Christchurch

Meetings are held at 5.00 pm at St Ninian's Presbyterian Church parish hall, Puriri Street, unless otherwise indicated.

For 13 September they plan **Crumbling Certainties, Widening Horizons, Deepening Experience** in which Laurie Chisholm reflects on how we deal with the loss of the old religious certainties. Can we achieve the 'creative uncertainty' that is the theme of this year's Conference?

Chairman: Ian Crumpton (03) 342-5375

Auckland Central

The papers from their One Day Conference of May 11 are available from Owen Lewis (09-630-2933) at a charge of \$3 (postage included) of copies of both lectures.

Jim Feist presented 'Psychology and the Soul' at their July meeting. A video ('Wisdom of the Dream') set them on a Jungian course and pointed up the importance of the contribution made by our unconscious mind. "... the video suggested that an encounter with God is (in part) and encounter with the unconscious." They also reviewed Jung's division of personality types into introvert and extrovert. Jim planned a followup study group on this subject.

Contact: Jim Feist 09-5793-225
jfeist@clear.net.nz

Hamilton

On July 5 your editor addressed this group on what he takes to be the inevitability of religious conflict. This presentation will be repeated at this year's Conference.

Their August meeting plans to deal with **The Comparative Study of Religions**.

Contact: Peter Timmins 07-856-8170

Dunedin

Their July meeting dealt with **The Truth About God** — metaphorical and literal.

This month's topic is **Uncreative Certainty**. It will be led by Mike Riddell and be a fitting prelude to the Conference.

Contact: Marjorie Spittle 03-481-1418

POSTSCRIPTS

On Gnosticism

Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch provided the following in response to questions at a recent group meeting.

Gnosticism describes the way the cosmos came to be. There were two different traditions; one dualistic and the other monistic. In the dualistic type, the world comes into existence through the mixing of a (male) divine being with a (female) reality, thought of as matter, chaos, or an active power that entrapped the divine. Humans have a corresponding origin; this world is a prison, but secret knowledge can free them from bondage. (I really do wonder what this would have meant for female believers; it seems to imply that they must deny and reject their deepest being in order to find the divine.)

Fortunately, there was a quite different tradition. According to it, the world comes into being through a crisis within the fullness of the divine itself. There is no anti-divine reality, but the crisis has excluded humans from the divine, and they need deliverance through gnosis (the secret knowledge) to return them to their origin.

A Sobering Thought

"Our command of information is staggering. And yet with that command comes a great temptation. Partly, it is the temptation to confuse an excellent means of communication with communications that are excellent."

*from The Fortunes of Permanence, by Roger Kimball in
The New Criterion: Web special, Summer 2002*



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. We draw our members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions.

Our home page is at
<http://sof.wellington.net.nz>

Our Steering Committee publishes a regular Newsletter, assists in setting up of local discussion groups, and organises an annual Conference.

The current **Chairperson** is Frank Gaze, 2 Telford Tce, Oakura (New Plymouth) 4650, Phone 06-752-7447

Members may obtain tapes, books etc from the **SoF Resource Centre** at 34 Briarley St, Tauranga (catalogue on the website).

For membership details and for the address of your nearest local group, contact the **Membership Secretary**, 133 Orangi Kaupapa Road, Northland, Wellington.

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

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.

In addition

"**SoF**" is 28 page A4, six-times-a-year magazine produced by the UK Sea of Faith Network. They offer it to New Zealand Sea Faith members currently at \$NZ65 for a year's subscription.

To subscribe for a year, send \$65 to "The Membership Secretary, SoF, 133 Orangi Kaupapa Road, Wellington". Write your cheque to "SoF (NZ)".

Many of the study booklets referred to throughout this Newsletter are available from The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society:
<http://satsr.wellington.net.nz>

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

Who is our enemy
and what can we fight him with?
Where are our allies? Where was God
on September the Eleventh?
He was begging in old clothes
in the subway beneath the World Trade Centre.
He was homeless in Gaza,
imprisoned in Afghanistan,
running the gauntlet to her school
in the Ardoyne.
starving in Somalia,
dying of Aids in an Angolan slum,
suffering everywhere in this fast-shrinking world:
and boarding a plane unwittingly in Boston,
heading for an appointment on the 100th floor.

When the time came
he stretched out his arms once more
to take the dreadful impact
that would pierce his side.
His last message on his fading cell phone
once more to ask forgiveness for them all,
before his body fell under the weight of so much
evil.

We bring our cameras to his massive tomb
for any chance of resurrection,
now we know the kind of story that it really is —
united by this common enemy,
sin's terrorism, that we never dreamed
could bring such devastation.

This is war.
We line our weapons up:
faith, hope, obedience,
prayer, forgiveness, mercy;
the explosive power of love.

The above is the concluding portion of a reflection titled "What Kind of Story is This?" and was written by Godfrey Rust, an American poet and musician. It was reproduced in the (NZ) Churches Agency on Social Issues (CASI) "Reflections of War & Terrorism, 2002"