



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

Local Groups

See www.sof.org.nz/groups for details

Nelson

In May, Dr Peter Donovan spoke on "Respect for icons: the logic of tolerance". This report appeared in their Newsletter.

The lack of tolerance towards the icons of other religions in the Bible and Qur'an was compared with the generally tolerant and flexible attitudes to other faiths found in Buddhism and Hinduism.

But is tolerance a good thing? Recent controversy about the publication of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad and of the Virgin Mary raise many questions.

What reasons can be given for tolerating things we may not in fact like or agree with?

Is intolerance rather than tolerance the sign of true devotion? Peter described various types of tolerance:

- mechanical tolerance (room to move);
- pragmatic tolerance (room to coexist);
- strategic tolerance (room to manoeuvre);
- epistemic tolerance (room to learn);
- ethical tolerance (room to grow);
- and spiritual tolerance (room to meet that of God in others).

It was noted that discussions about tolerance need to pay attention to context.

Tolerance simply for its own sake is too vague to mean very much.

Dunedin

In August, Andrew Meek wrote:

A few years ago I invited Lloyd Geering to be a keynote speaker at a Rotary district conference here in Dunedin. The conference started on Friday night and finished Sunday midday and although Lloyd was not scheduled to speak until the Sunday morning, he attended every session to get a feel for what the organization was about.

Over dinner on the Saturday night he suggested that perhaps Rotary was fulfilling for many people the role that the church once played in their lives. I have thought on this a number of times since then and was reminded again at our last meeting when Bruce Spittle introduced the evening's discussion with similar thoughts.

Certainly in Rotary there are elements of community, continuity, challenging projects, working together for a common good, encouraging high ethical standards etc all of which mirror the characteristics of many church communities.

Things however which Rotary does not provide for me, at least at regular club meeting level, are such things as inspiring choral music, periods of quiet meditation, communal singing or touches of drama and theatre.

Many of these things are of course made available to us from time to time by different groups around the city but there is something appealing, at least to me, in the regular Sunday event.

Its just a pity that the truths of ancient stories and metaphors were so often confused with literal reality! I also like the sound of bells.

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Post-Conference
Issue

December
2006

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Conference Supplement

Accompanying this Newsletter is a 10-page Supplement which gives a flavour of what we all enjoyed at the Conference.

All of the papers which appear there in abbreviated form appear in full on the Website.

Conference CDs

Until about mid-2007 we are offering the Conference audio sessions on CD.

Subscribers who receive this letter on paper will find an enclosed order form.

Subscribers who receive this Newsletter by email should look for a printable order form on the website at www.sof.org.nz

Orders received by December 10 will be mailed by December 15.

'After Religion - Haiku!'

This workshop at the 2006 Conference was lead by Ralph Pannett who posed the question, 'how can poetry, particularly haiku, help us to express the sacred in the everyday of time, space and human experience?'

Haiku is a word-sparse poetic form that juxtaposes images to arrest and surprise us; engages the experience

of the reader; and allows mystery to infiltrate the space between words. Haiku speak of small things or incidents, with layers of suggestion and implication that encourage us to look for depth of meaning in the images that words convey.

Writing and reading haiku leads us into a reflective or contemplative mode, but the verses may be spiked with humour and compassion for the human condition.

The Tradition

Haiku evolved over 1000 years of Japanese literature. Matsuo Bashō perfected the Haiku form in the 17th century. Before his time, verses called *hokku* were placed at the beginning of *renga*, i.e. linked verses composed by a group of poets under the guidance of a master. The content of *hokku* was often light and playful.

Bashō developed elements of *hokku* encapsulated in four ideas:

Karumi: lightness

Shiori: tenderness

Sabi: contented solitariness or detachment

Wabi: the spirit of poverty, an appreciation of basic things

Bashō stressed that oneness with nature was required of the haiku writer.

'Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the subject and do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and your subject have become one ...'

In the 20th century, particularly after the Second World War, awareness and appreciation of haiku has spread around the world. There are many haiku writers in Aotearoa and several anthologies have been published.

Our group of 15 learner poets read from several of the Japanese masters writing from the 17th to the 19th centuries and then looked at how New Zealand poets introduce local motifs.

But the object was to discover for ourselves, so we dispersed and looked for inspiration in the things about us.

Here is a selection of the haiku that we shared when we came together again:

Mary Boekman:

The tui in the kowhai
Sings his parson-song
No sermon for me

Shirley Dixon

In these halls of privilege —
cabbage trees stand tall
in the courtyard

Aelred Edmunds

Four branches and one trunk
Bird on branch calls —
Learn!

Frank Gaze

The fallen twig has three buds
None of which will flower
Before next Spring.

Larry Haist

Chairs congregating
Discussion
On four legs

Archie Kerr

Still lucid leaves
stir gently
as thoughts pass

Cora Leenman

Listen ... food for thought
Consume ... food for body

Ralph Pannett

Quiet pool
my perfect reflection
shudders

Jack Salas

the Sun
lights up
the Moon's path

Laurie Salas

Christo et ecclesiae
it says;
motto outmoded?

Graham Shearer

I am vulnerable
I am pierced
I heal.

Gordon Smith

Summer comes
Outdoors Living loving
Solar Life

Ralph Pannett

courtyard,
at rationalists' conference —
crazy paving

The Parables of Jesus the Sage

Originally published in *Jesus As Precursor*, 1994, the attached excerpt comes from Brandon Scott's forthcoming collection of Bob Funk's essays on the parables.

The parables, which Jesus tells as though he were hearing them, are undoubtedly the primary receptacle of his vision.

The striking feature of the parables is that in them Jesus does not speak about what his first listeners — and his subsequent listeners — expected and expect him to speak about. (Our expectations dictate the range of our hearing: we have great difficulty hearing anything outside that range.) Jesus does not speak about God in his parables, he does not develop a doctrine of God, he does not speak about himself, he does not proclaim his messiahship, he does not predict his passion and death, he does not claim that he is about to die for the sins of humankind, he does not predict that history will soon end, he does not depict a last judgment, he does not picture supernatural beings, or miracles, or even exorcisms, and he does not commission his disciples to form a church and conduct a world mission. On all these topics of burning interest to people in his day, to his disciples of the second and third generations, and modern

readers of the gospels, he was and is simply and startlingly silent.

In his parables he does speak about a robbery on an isolated road, about shrewd business managers, about day laborers in a vineyard, about the wild mustard plant, about lost coins, sheep, and wayward children, about secret treasure and fantastic pearls, about assassins and strong men, about baking bread, about a dinner party, about leased vineyards, about prayers in the temple, about rich farmers and money held in trust, about sowing seed, and about an empty jar. All mundane topics, everyday particulars, often caricatured or exaggerated, regularly with surprising endings open to audience participation.

On the basis of his parables, we might conclude that Jesus rarely spoke about religion at all. Insofar as religion figures as subject matter in his stories, it appears to be part of the secular landscape, something that one stumbles across the same way one observes a woman carrying a jar on her head or a farmer prodding a donkey along the path. Readers of the gospels speak glibly about the religion of Jesus because his followers created a religion **about** Jesus. It is not at all clear that religion concerns Jesus.

Atheism?

Justin Gregory who is a producer of spoken features at Radio NZ wrote this to Sea of Faith:

An international series of documentaries [will be] made by public service broadcasters from around the world.

The overall theme of the series for this year is Belief; my particular slant upon it is to look at Atheism, and I am trying to find some people to talk to me about their personal journey's, either away from God, or towards God and away from Atheism.

Questions for the programme include;

- What does an atheist believe? What does atheism provide? Is it enough?
- What are the benefits of atheism, for the individual and for us all?
- What certainties are there? What doubts?
- Can you lead a spiritual life without a belief in a god or gods? Can you lead a good life without god?

If you would like to help Justin, please contact him on (04) 474 1446 or 027 246 0954

Of an English Cathedral In the Marble Floor To a Fossil Shell

**There must have been a time
you knitted yourself a string
to cling to a rock,
sifting the tide;
or trawled some small territory
of an acean floor.**

**Living shell, destined to a strange immortality,
it is surely a parable that you should have chosen
to be sealed in marble beneath this arching stone.**

**This place astonishes —
fills me with a Presence, a promise
of spirit outliving planetary substance,
affirmed in this encounter
of that shell
With my bone.**

By Joyce M Harrison of Wellington, who wrote it as part of a poetry workshop at the 2005 Conference in Christchurch. It refers to Jonathan Mane-Wheoki's mention in his keynote address of fossils in the marble flooring of a cathedral.

The Spirituality of a Grounded Faith

This is a summary of five *Vision Directions* abstracted by Alan Webster from radical theologians Don Cupitt, Marcus Borg, Robert Funk, John Crossan, Karen Armstrong, Richard Holloway and John Spong and presented as a Workshop.

Direction One To Formulate a New Christianity

- The core of the domain realized in Jesus is a compassionate ethic
- The basis of a Jesus-based life is ethical action
- The best we can do in a post-creedal world is to exercise practical compassion
- Fundamental doctrine must be re-conceptualized
- The image of God can no longer be that of supernatural theism
- A new myth of incarnation sees God in every human and in all being
- The ethical kingdom is a celebration of life
- The human illness is spiritual/psychological illness such as greed and hysterical depression
- The present spiritual malaise calls for a living Human/God Ecology
- All religions must surrender their claims to absolute truth
- The resurrection must be made 'spiritual' in the sense of dramatizing spiritual victory over all deaths
- We must get used to a seamless universe
- We must cease converting beliefs into factual/material propositions

Direction Two To Realize a Holistic Spirituality

- There is a call to a this-worldly spirituality
- Spirit comprises the active, compassionate process of enhancing the life world
- The current reform of Christianity is the rediscovery of a kingdom of God theology, comprising the whole domain of being
- Spirituality has become independent of existing power structures
- Spirituality is not a private domain of individual gratification
- Spirituality consists in challenging and ministering to the domain of the world

Direction Three

To Define Salvation as World-Making

- Salvation as consenting membership in the organism of God
- To define belief as "a habit of action" (Holloway), projected through transformative consciousness
- To practice prayer-action: prayer as contemplation, issuing as ethical world-making
- To move from a dogmatic-objectivist belief mode to a relativist-subjectivist-thought-process

Direction Four To cast Jesus and all Christs in a different role in a this-worldly drama of the unfolding of the possibilities of creation

- To recall ourselves to the God of prophetic faith
- To redefine Jesus as human fore-runner
- To see Jesus as an expression of the sacredness of all being

Direction Five To be a World-Renewing Human Body

- To forge a different ecclesia, based on the reign of God
- To liberate the church from its delusions of unchanging privilege
- To welcome all practical expressions of divinity:
 - sharing eternal meanings
 - searching for new truth
 - being a centre for caring
 - uniting around both experiential encounter and intellectual apprehension of God-presence
 - to celebrate deepest consciousness in places made holy
 - to live as individual and communal members of God's domain — to love as those who are touched by the Christ-being — to be whole and healing, personally and publically
- TO BE MISSION AND THUS TO BE SPIRITUAL (and v-v)

Reference: Alan Webster, *Different World/Different Church*.
Study booklet authorized by the Board of Ministry of the Methodist Church of New Zealand, 2006.
Alan's summary of the radical theologians can be seen at www.sof.org.nz/altvis.htm

All About Us

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 national Steering Committee publishes a regular Newsletter, maintains a website, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

We have three **Life Members**: Lloyd Geering, Don Cupitt and Noel Cheer.

The **Chairperson** is Norm Ely, 7 Bay Drive, Titahi Bay, (04) 236-5749

The **Secretary** is Mary Bockman, 138 Rata St, Inglewood, (06) 756-7644

Membership of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$27 if outside NZ). Write your cheque to "SoF (NZ)" and mail to: **The Membership Secretary**, P.O. Box 35651, Browns Bay, Auckland. (Phone 09-478-2490). To query your membership status email member@sof.org.nz

Members may borrow tapes, books etc from the **SoF Resource Centre** at 34 Briarley St, Tauranga. It is maintained by Suzi Thirlwall (07) 578-2775 resource@sof.org.nz

Further details can be found on our **website** at www.sof.org.nz. 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 email: editor@sof.org.nz

The only copy appearing in this Newsletter that may be construed as reflecting SoF policy is that which is accompanied by a by-line of a member of the Steering Committee.

Optional Extras ...

"sofia" is 28 page A4, 6-times-a-year magazine produced by the UK SoF Network. For instructions on how to subscribe, send an email to member@sof.org.nz

SATRS Booklets: Many of the study booklets referred to from time to time in this Newsletter are available from The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society. A catalogue and ordering instructions appear on their website www.standrews.org.nz/satrs

Center for Inquiry Releases New Religion Review

QUARTERLY JOURNAL WILL SHED LIGHT ON RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN AMERICA

Amherst, New York (October 9, 2006)

The Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (CSER) has announced the publication of the first issue of a new quarterly, the CSER Review.

According to R. Joseph Hoffmann, chair of CSER, the journal comes at a critical time in the public discussion and understanding of religion in America. "Recent polls suggest an increase in the American appetite for religious fiction and inspirational works but a lack of awareness of critical perspectives about religion in general and the historical development of religious ideas and texts in particular." Hoffmann says that he intends to bring to the journal "intellectual rigor in an era of intellectual chaos." The latest study from Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion (September 2006) revealed that 90% of Americans believe in God and that nearly 50% of the population describes itself as "Bible-believing" or evangelical Christians, with the fastest growth sector in the Pentecostal traditions. "With no theological axe to grind, this publication is designed to raise the critical awareness of this population as well as the between 11 % and 15% of those who claim to have no religious affiliation," said Hoffmann.

In the wake of the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Purpose Driven Life* and Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins's *Left Behind* series, as well as consistently high sales for inspirational books, the first issue of the series is dedicated to a critical examination of the life of Jesus by biblical scholars Hoffmann, John Dominic Crossan, and Gerd Ludemann. The periodical also features reviews of movies and books on religious subjects, a print forum of CSER's scholars, and op-ed pieces on topics of urgent concern, ranging from religious hate speech to the wearing of the hijab in public schools. "There has never been a point in American public life where the need for a publication such as this has been more clear," said Hoffmann. "When it comes to the public understanding of religion - measured by every objective means - we are trailing the rest of the developed world. This journal wants to raise critical questions about why this is true. It also wants to respond to what we see as the growth of religious illiteracy in the world." The next issue of the CSER Review will feature articles on biotechnology and religion and the deepening rift in the secular and religious cultures of North America.

CSER is based at the Center for Inquiry/Transnational, a think tank dedicated to advancing reason, science, and humanistic ethics.

Anyone wishing to subscribe to or receive a sample copy of the CSER Review can contact the Center for Inquiry at P.O. Box 741, Amherst, NY 14226; (716) 636-4869, ext. 240; or by e-mailing cserchair@aim.com



All by Noel Cheer

Book Notices

Father, Son & Rubber Ducky

*God In The Bath
Relaxing in the
Everywhere Presence
of God*

Stephen Mitchell
O Books 2006



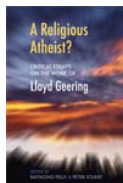
One of the founding members of the original (UK) SoF Network, Stephen Mitchell is a CofE Rector in Suffolk.

Treading Blougram's "dangerous edge of things" Stephen trips along the border between 'liberal' and 'radical'. Being still in the clergy business, Stephen must grapple with the distinction between 'Jesus' and 'Christ'. To distinguish merely between 'name' and 'title' is no longer sufficient. In radical circles at least, the rivalry is now seen to be a conflict between the 'sage' figure promoted by the Jesus Seminar and the cosmic redeemer of Pauline (and therefore traditional) Christianity.

Stephen's book is a gentle, sometimes quirky, defence of the latter.

Repudiating 'Geeringite' Theses

*A Religious Atheist?
Critical Essays on the
Work of Lloyd Geering*
ed. Raymond Pelly & Peter Stuart
Otago University Press 2006



These observations are not complete as I will not be able to finish reading the book before the Newsletter is printed.

These essays arose out a Colloquium held in 2004 under the joint auspices of the Wellington Theological Consortium, the VUW Religious Studies Programme and the NZ Society for the Study of Religion,

The two editors are, *inter alia*, Anglican priests in Wellington. I attended the Colloquium and sat through an extended 'beat up' of Lloyd Geering to which he responded with reason, wit and grace.

Indicative of the style of both the Colloquium and the Introduction to this book is the use of peevish terminology (of which 'Geeringism' and 'Geeringite' are two examples) inconsistent with the 'academic credibility' called for on page 10.

That the book and Colloquium were trials rather than conversations is evident

in the accusations made: that Geering is a secular ideologue rather than a theologian (p 10) who employs a 'quasiprophetic reading of history'. Rather than allowing that Schleiermacher, Feuerbach, Jung, and 'de Chardin' (more properly abbreviated to 'Teilhard') are Geering's sources, they are called his 'supporting cast'. Where is the 'academic credibility'?

To say, as on page 11, that Geering 'neglects .. the recovery of sense of the sacred' would suggest that the author has been on another planet for the past decade and more.

In the one-third of the book that I have read so far there comes through, to me at least, the tension that must be felt in the person who is both an academic and a person of faith. This is set out rather well on page 23 (though directed at Geering rather than, in this my case, the authors of these essays) as a spectrum of viewpoints. At one end, theology is normative in its debate with Enlightenment thinking but at the other it becomes subservient.

The authors that I have read so far appear to demonstrate an expectation ('faith' perhaps) that the fuzziness and incompleteness of where western critical thinking leaves us can be resolved by recourse to the traditional Judeo-Christian theology. But that they cannot, or will not, surrender unsustainable traditions marks them out as conservatives or, at their most daring, liberals.

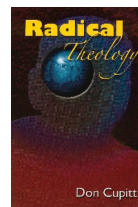
It takes courage to launch out, as did Abraham, in faith (and not 'the Faith', that grand shorthand for dogmatic certitude) with no forward reservations and no guaranteed destination.

But, I am confident that Lloyd Geering would say that the risk is worthwhile.

And your thoughts? See page 9

Radical For 25 Years

*Radical Theology
Selected Essays*
Don Cupitt
Polebridge Press 2006



"Radical theology tempts people to hope that they can make a very big splash with only a very small talent" writes Don on page 2.

But Don is at the other extreme. His considerable talents of the past quarter century are set out in seventeen 'big splash' essays that he has written in that time.

Particularly useful is the second-tolast which contains, in summary form, the crystallisation of his thoughts in, respectively, philosophy (anti-Platonist); philosophy of religion (away from institutional- and towards pilgrim-religion); and the re-formulation of Christianity to be undogmatic and an agency of love.

Spirituality In The Arts

*Music In The Air
Song and Spirituality*
Winter 2006, Issue 22



John Thornley is a lay preacher at Wesley Broadway Church in Palmerston North and the editor of this twice-yearly A4 size magazine. (\$24 per year, mail to Songpoetry, 15 Oriana Place, Palmerston North).

The Winter 2006 edition contains an article on "The Christian Art of Colin McCahon" with an additional appreciation of McCahon by singer-songwriter Dave Dobbyn. Dobbyn himself is saluted in an article about him.

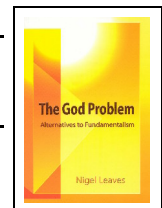
Rachel Kohn's *The New Believers* is quoted for its analysis of The Wizard of Oz.

Shirley Murray is shown photographed on the occasion of her being appointed a Fellow of the Royal Society of Church music.

This is a worthwhile magazine for those who value music and poetry in a spiritual context.

Manifesto Of Reason

*The God Problem
Alternatives To
Fundamentalism*
Nigel Leaves
Polebridge Press 2006



This book posits four alternatives to fundamentalism and convincingly sets out examples. The groupings are:

- Spang as pantheist;
- Geering and Cupitt as non-realists;
- David Tacey making an appearance in 'grassroots spirituality'
- and the awe and wonder of nature pointing us back to the earth and the interconnectedness of the natural order.

At less than 100 pages this is one of the best manifestos that this reader has seen of the point of view that one can be religious without being a terrorist crank, a smug xenophobe or a wally.



A Post-Christian Reflection by Alan Goss

Wrestling With God,

The Story of My Life,

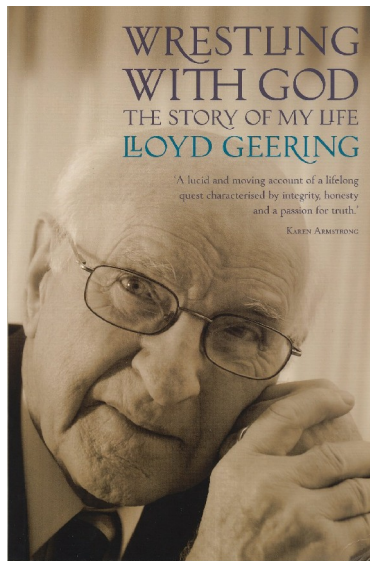
By Lloyd Geering

Bridget Williams Books in association with Craig Potton Publishing.)

THOSE OF US WHO HAVE LIVED THROUGH AND BEEN associated with many of the events and personalities covered by Lloyd Geering in his autobiography turned the pages with anticipation and with pleasure. Those with a fleeting or casual interest in religious affairs will also find it a lively, even gripping, read. Lloyd Geering writes in clear and concise prose and it flows. The content is part personal and part theological, lightened with touches of humour and sharpened with conflict. Although it took place nearly forty years ago, the 1967 heresy trial is still a defining moment in New Zealand public life. But this autobiography is above all the story of one man's wrestling with the big deep questions of life, especially when viewed through a Christian lens. This struggle has involved a lifetime of hard thinking, reading, lecturing, writing and broadcasting which has influenced many lives and which (I will claim) is on the brink of bringing to birth a new religious species, post-christian man.

Those who have seen the excellent Swedish movie "As It Is In Heaven" will have caught glimpses of post-christian man portrayed in the attitudes and actions of members of the local church choir. Under the tutelage of a famous young and handsome conductor the choir develops not only musically but in ordinary human ways. Its members become more at ease with one another, more honest and open but not without episodes of emotional and physical conflict. An obese man taunted and pilloried all his life sees the wrong righted; an intellectually handicapped boy is welcomed into the choir and cared for when he soils his pants; a young abused wife is given refuge; sexual feelings are

expressed but not flaunted. The musical repertoire of the choir is expanded to include secular as well as sacred pieces, performances are held in the village hall as well as in the church, the choir have fun and games and parties and when the conductor falls ill at a national competition in Austria the members take over - and apparently win! All this happens during a crisis with the very conservative and authoritarian village pastor who is jealous of the young conductor, especially because of his appeal to the women members of the choir. The pastor rails against sin until his wife — also in the choir — can take it no more. In one explo-



sive scene she shrieks at her husband, "Sin, sin, there is no sin. It's all in your head, all in your mind."

The movie highlights the contrast between the more conservative and traditional Christian era passing away and the post-Christian era now emerging; it was as though Lloyd Geering had written the script in his autobiography. The choir members found, under the guidance of their young creative conductor, a wide range of possibilities opening up before them. These were not imposed by any external authority but welled up from within. And they became a new people.

Post-christians, I am suggesting, are of the same ilk as the members of the church choir. Post-christians, if they choose to use the term God at all, will be aware of a Voice, a Presence, a nudge or niggle or prompting from within, "Someone" of "Something" calling them to realize the highest moral and spiritual values one can live by. Often this Voice is deafeningly silent, cruelly absent — or seems so. Post-christians will see Jesus as a sage or visionary who saw further than other mortals and who is altogether human though not divine. Some may experience Jesus in a transcendent though not other-worldly, way.

Post-christians will be citizens of the secular world which is the only world we have and know. Their mission will be to add as much value as they can to this world which they share with other races and peoples. They will be constantly aware of the wonder and mystery of life which they may choose to call "God".

Post-christians will not "go to church" but will be participating members of a small group or fellowship of their choice which may or may not be specifically religious. These groups will have a "liturgy", a work to do, whose function will be to add value to life.

Post-christians will be more amorphous than their forbears, they will not necessarily have a specific "Christian" identity but will be open to the gifts and insights of other world-views, religious, scientific, philosophical, political and so on.

This, (to quote from a previous title of a Lloyd Geering book) is the shape of *The World to Come*. It is indeed already emerging, it is (to quote another Geering book) *Resurrection, A Symbol of Hope*.

Alan M Goss, November 2006

Note: Some material from Ian Harris's paper "Is the Sea of Faith Drying Up?" presented at the 2006 NZ Sea of Faith Conference is acknowledged.

The Sacred

The opening question in the Panel Discussion at this year's Conference canvassed the subject of 'the sacred'. For some additional thoughts we can turn to these notes which were made by Don Feist at a meeting of the Dunedin Group. He confesses that he may not have captured all that was said.

- ☺ "Sacred" for me used to be applied to God, Jesus, the Bible. Now, it is much wider, more open. It could include the Universe.
- ☺ "Sacred" and "profane" used to be rigidly distinct. They're not nearly so clear now, but mystery is an element in what "sacred" means.
- ☺ I no longer used the word — what used to be sacred and profane are now integrated for me.
- ☺ In its traditional sense "sacred" roughly equalled 'holy'. It denoted a person, place or building consecrated to a deity. But I don't use it much now. I prefer something like 'the central mystery of life'. "Sacred" refers now to what is most important most valuable in life for me, e.g. wife, family, friends.
- ☺ It's an abstract word referring to something special. It's to do with tradition, rather than religion; I don't really use it.
- ☺ What is sacred is what is loved to the degree that it is revered and worshipped.
- ☺ I don't use it much. What is sacred is what other people say is sacred for them, and in different cultures I'm in contact with, there's a wide variety of what is considered sacred. It's important to respect these different views.
- ☺ It covers what is very precious to a person, or related to God.
- ☺ I would rather use "respect" or "value".
- ☺ I think of a chapel I knew well. It was a special place. Patients who spent time there became much more peaceful. It was a sacred place.
- ☺ For me, the word used to apply to experiences like Moses at the burning bush. But for me now, a sentence from David Tacey's recent book is nearer the mark: *'What youth culture deems to be sacred, namely ecology, nature and the physical world, or the stars and planets ... or the search for the inner or true self, or the quest for mystical experiences, appears to be at odds with what traditional religion has deemed to be sacred, namely scripture, rituals, dogma and ecclesiastical faith'*.
- ☺ I don't like the word. It has associations of the rules and regulations of the established Church. Wikipedia says it refers to things people have reverence for, respect or highly esteem [so that to US citizens the Stars and Stripes are sacred]. What I highly esteem is rather family, the natural world as I meet in in the mountains, the mystery of life itself.
- ☺ All our sacred cows have been shot down in flames, so I don't use the word.
- ☺ For me the word has too many overtones of supernatural absolutism. But there is a use for it, as 'that which matters more'. So on one hand, to the Amish people whose daughters were massacred, forgiving the killer was a sacred duty. On the other hand, to the National Rifle Association, the right to bear arms is a sacred right.
- ☺ For me the word means what the Concise Oxford says it means: "devoted or held especially acceptable to a deity, dedicated or reserved ... to some person or purpose; made holy by religious association ...". If it were true that nothing is sacred any more, it would imply that nothing is left that everyone agrees is sacred, and society would be the poorer. *"If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred"*. [Wait Whitman] Now there's a thought.
- ☺ David Suzuki has spoken of a sacred balance of earth, air, fire, water. Sacred for me is making sure the world is more eco-friendly. My grandchildren's future means a lot to me.
- ☺ Sacred spaces and sacred things are important to me. Since an accident when I nearly died, I see the world differently, and now any and every experience is sacred.
- ☺ I think of two places I've been — an old, tranquil Quaker meeting house and a cathedral where I marvelled at the work of the craftsmen that went into it. These places are sacred because people of faith have been involved in them.
- ☺ I found that "sacred" isn't in the Bible. Perhaps the nearest word for it is "precious".
- ☺ Many uses of "sacred" raise problems. Some say God is present in all life, so all life is sacred — and yet they kill animals. Others say some religious practices are sacred — but they carry them out so meticulously it becomes ridiculous. Perhaps most meaningful is to use 'sacred' of a happening which is memorable or transforming. The Celts spoke of 'thin places' where things happened that made them more aware of the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

The New Steering Committee For 2006-2007

The following were elected at the AGM.
In addition, Noel Cheer was awarded Life
Membership.

Chairperson

Norm Ely, 7 Bay Drive, Titahi Bay,
Phone (04) 236-5749
email info@sof.org.nz

Secretary

Mary Boekman, 138 Rata St
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Treasurer & Membership Secretary

Ron Wilson, P.O. Box 35-651, Brown's Bay,
Auckland, Phone (09) 478-2490;
email member@sof.org.nz

Arrangements Committee Chair 2007

John Irwin, phone (09) 413-8513

Resource Centre Librarian

Suzi Thirlwall, 34 Briarley St,
Tauranga;
Phone/Fax 07-578-2775

Archivist

Alison Eng, 163 Rangiora-Woodend Road,
Woodend, North Canterbury,
Phone/Fax (03)312-7227, email
alison.eng@paradise.net.nz

Members

Bill Cooke (Auckland), Peter
Cowley (Wellington), Bob Geddes
(Rangiora), Betty Manning
(Timaru), Geoff Neilson (Dunedin),
Ralph Pannett (Wellington), Derek
Pringle (Auckland), Shirley Wood
(Tauranga)

Invitation

In the March 2007 edition of
this Newsletter, I plan to
devote a page to readers'
responses to *A Religious
Atheist?* (see page 6).
Please have yours (about
200-300 words)
to me by February 1, 2007.

My addresses appear
on page 5.

Thanks, Noel Cheer, Editor

Editorial

My comments (page 6) on the book *A Religious Atheist* make it plain that there is much about it that I didn't like. (See the bottom of this page for your opportunity to comment). But I was impressed by the typology by David Ford quoted on page 23 which sets out a spectrum of viewpoints in theology's contest with Enlightenment critical thinking. At one end theology is normative, it defines the arguments and the terms — think of Biblical literalism and pentecostal fundamentalism. At the other end theology is subservient to critical thinking, as we find in today's critical scholarship.

We meet a similar phenomenon on page 107 of *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader*, (editor Walter Truett Anderson, Fontana Press, 1996) which suggests that contemporary Western societies have at least four distinguishable and competing approaches to truth which can be seen as a spectrum of options:

1. **the social-traditional**, in which truth is sought in the heritage of Western Civilization, including its religious traditions.
2. **the scientific-rational**, in which truth is discovered by disciplined research.
3. **postmodern-ironist**, which sees that truth is socially constructed
4. **the neo-romantic**, in which truth is encountered through harmony with nature and/or oneself

Marcus Borg in *Reading The Bible Again for the First Time* writes of a yet another spectrum which can operate in the life of a person. He gives the Christian story as his context but it can be applied much more widely. He wrote of "... a major need for contemporary readers of the Bible is to move from precritical naivete through critical thinking to postcritical naivete." He gives the name 'precritical naivete' to our acquiescent acceptance of whatever the significant authority figures in our lives tell us is true. This attitude is found among subscribers to dogma: religious, anti-religious, military, economic, political. But as we move to critical thinking we sift through what we learned as children to see how much of it we should keep. Is there really a tooth fairy? Are babies brought by storks? ... Did creation really take only six days? Were Adam, and Eve real people? This can lead to a needless wholesale rejection of the religious context in which we first met the ideas. Postcritical naivete is the ability to hear the biblical stories (or to read other mythicisers such as Chairman Mao or Milton Friedman) once again and, while knowing that they are not factually true, discover value that does not depend upon their factuality.

Many the Sea of Faith Network reject fundamentalism in any context as intellectually arid and politically dangerous. The trust given to revealed truths and the dogmatic formulations of them also makes the typical SoFtie uncomfortable. The lack of exposure to independent scrutiny has, and still does, provided a safe haven to frauds and corruptions. On the other hand, as Don Cupitt has observed, the democratic process when underpinned by critical thinking has given a large percentage of humankind a life of unprecedented affluence and security of person and property.

Whether we like it or not we are products of the Enlightenment. Our world is shaped by the staggering mental re-alignments produced by the works of Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, Freud, Jung and Einstein. We are now invited to revise and re-evaluate the religious heritage of the West along the lines of Cupitt's call for outright rejection of all things Platonist and of the invitation by The Jesus Seminar to 'demote' (their term) Jesus, the founding figure of traditional Christianity to the status of human sage. As John Spong will write in his book *Jesus for the Non-Religious* to be published next March, the value of Jesus to us lies on our recovering his full humanity.

And our's too.

Noel Cheer, Editor.

Last Word

FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

THIS IS THE “LAST WORD” FROM ME AS YOUR NEW CHAIRPERSON OF THE SEA OF FAITH NZ STEERING COMMITTEE.

Noel Cheer previously has been Newsletter Editor, Website Manager, Steering Committee Chair and Commentator in the Last Word Column. In the few weeks I have taken on the Chairperson's position I cannot believe Noel managed all of the above with such seeming ease. Many thanks for your past efforts Noel, congratulations on your Life Membership and thanks for continuing on with the positions of Newsletter Editor and Website Manager. A great effort!

However, I am not too enamoured with the Column title “Last Word”. I don't consider that any one of us has the supreme skill and knowledge on any subject that allows them to claim “The Last Word”. Indeed, the Sea of Faith Network in its promotional material claims that “it is an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint”. However, that is not what I have sensed in talking to many members. I have heard quite dogmatic and entrenched views on many aspects of discussion in Sea of Faith, including and sometimes most fervently, who SoF should invite to speak to it.

One of our Steering Committee Members made the following comment on The Sea of Faith: “I do not know what the total membership [of SoF NZ] is and if it has been falling, nation wide. I do know that our own [local] group has halved, the reason mostly given is that the organization helped them through their change from church belief and membership to a new way of thinking but they have moved on from the Sea of Faith which does not seem to be moving on. Talking to people at the Conference and to Sea of Faith people in the UK some are thinking along similar lines. Perhaps we should ask ourselves if the Sea of Faith is going the way the Church has already gone. Dishing out more of the same and not listening to their members changing needs.”

Ian Harris, an Elective speaker at Conference and respected commentator in the Dominion Post, raised a similar issue to that expressed by my fellow Committee Member by entitling his presentation “Is the Sea of Faith Drying Up?”.

I have heard a number of comments to the effect that SoF NZ is “standing still and not progressing”. Perhaps this is a safe and recognisable position to retain, especially as we age and some of us may need some reassurance as to “what life has been and will continue to be all about”. But this position is not progressive. This is not exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint. This is not an open minded approach.

A constantly recurring theme with Lloyd Geering is that he is consistently re-evaluating and re-thinking his position on a subject. He keeps progressing with his thinking and research. Lloyd's word is never the “Last Word” on any subject.

Bill Cooke's presentation at the Marton Conference had a similar underlying theme as he demonstrated throughout his presentation the number of times he had re-evaluated his thinking and therefore his position as the years had progressed.

Don Cupitt on the other hand seemed to me to be “Dancing Around in a Small Circle”. There was not much new. (This has seemingly been the case for some years now). Don's was a Comfortable Position.

Conversely, David Tacey appeared to me to be trying to accommodate his very active Catholic Faith with a much more liberal reality brought about by his academic research. To me he seemed to have considerable difficulty with the position of the above three people because if he accepted any part of their position it destroyed his Catholic Faith position.

I am a new member to Sea of Faith, albeit I have been a member of Wellington Ephesus for some 12 years. (For a comparison of the two groups go to www.sof.org.nz. Then go to “Take a quick trip on the Sea of Faith”. Then, “What's in a name”, then, “Ephesus”). As a new member and in my second year on the Steering Committee I sense that there is a groundswell in SoF NZ to move forward and explore new territory, to expand our thinking and seek new horizons, to step out on to a slightly unsafe ledge of knowledge. Wherever we started from, a step out on to this ledge and an open minded review of research and thinking and new knowledge, will cause us some fears as reassurance is lost and the unknown stares us ever more firmly in our faces.

I am hoping that there is NO LAST WORD on anything for any of us in as far as our seeking our own personal Sea of Faith. It is many many years since I last stood on Dover Beach and my life and my faith path has moved and changed beyond anything I could have considered then. Maybe we need to “Re-stand on our Dover Beaches”, look to the future and seek the unknown.

The name of this column will change by the next publication. Ideas for a new title for this column are welcome from any of you who wish to submit that idea.

Norm

