

Conference 2008, Blenheim

The Ecological Imperative

Is TOMORROW'S GOD GAIA?



Any assesement of the current state of the physical well-being of our planetary home, the Earth, will be spoken of in some combination of the terms 'sacred', 'vulnerable' or 'vengeful'. James Lovelock used 'Gaia', the ancient Greek name for the Earth goddess, to name the phenomenon by which an environmentally-stressed Earth might move to protect itself against harmful human activity. Though he was speaking metaphorically and not attributing agency to the planet, the question can still be asked, "Is this the 'God' to whom we must now give obedience?"

Date: Friday 26 September to Sunday 28 September.

Venue: Clubs of Marlborough, 42 Alfred St, Blenheim.

Accomodation: in local motels — details later.

Keynote Speakers: Lloyd Geering, with others tba

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The Newsletter: Bigger, Brighter

We're experimenting with a new format for the Newsletter:

- 12 pages,
- 6 issue per year
- the paper version folded and with some colour on 2 pages

What you think of it?

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Gaia and Religion

"Gaia is a religious as well as a scientific concept, and in both spheres it is manageable. Theology is also a science, but if it is to operate by the same rules as the rest of science, there is no place for creeds or dogma.

By this I mean theology should not state that God exists and then proceed to investigate his nature and his interactions with the Universe and living organisms. Such an approach is prescriptive, pre-supposes his existence, and closes the mind to such questions as: What would the Universe be like without God? How can we use the concept of God as a way to look at the Universe and ourselves? How can we use the concept of Gaia as a way to understanding God?

Belief in God is an act of faith and will remain so. In the same way, it is otiose [pointless] to try to prove that Gaia is alive. Instead, Gaia should be a way to view the Earth, ourselves, and our relationships with living things".

*James Lovelock The Ages of Gaia p194
Oxford University Press 1995*

The Lost Art of Cooperation

[Competition] may be nature's way, as Charles Darwin proposed, but only when we conceive of nature as a jungle. Whatever we make of it, today competition dominates our ideology, shapes our cultural attitudes, and sanctifies our market economy as never before. We are living in an age that prizes competition and demeans cooperation, an era more narcissistic than the Gilded Age ... Competition rules.

We need only look at America's favorite activities sports, entertainment, and politics to notice the distorting effect of the obsession with competition. Sports would seem to define competition, as competition defines sports. But beginning with the ancient Olympics, sports have also been about performance, about excelling ... and about the cultivation of athletic virtue. It is not victory but a personal best that counts.

In the United States, [and NZ too! - ed] however, athletics is about beating others. Ancient and modern philosophers alike associate comparison with pride and vanity (*amour-propre*), and have shown how vanity corrupts virtue and excellence. When Shakespeare's Julius Caesar protests, "Such men as he be never at heart's ease / While they behold a greater than themselves" he captures what has become the chief hazard of a hyper-competitive culture.

*Prof. Benjamin R. Barber,
at the University of Maryland
Autumn 2007 Wilson Quarterly*

A Secular Age

From a review in The Guardian Saturday December 8, 2007 of A Secular Age by Charles Taylor 874pp, Harvard, £25.95

"[The book] traces the story of faith's decline and of how learned despisers of religion such as Dawkins became not only possible but popular. It has one big question. "Why," asks Taylor at the outset, "was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in say, 1500 in our western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy but even inescapable?"

In 1500, our ancestors thought the natural world testified to divine purpose. Floods, plagues, periods of fertility and flourishing were seen as acts of God. Now "acts of God" is a dead metaphor used by lawyers.

How did that happen? In the following 800-plus pages he tries to provide an answer that only a fool would deride as intellectually dishonest.

Miracles

By John Spong, in a recent Internet column.

"The miracles of the New Testament do not appear to me to be about supernatural events at all. ... The claims that the disciples of Jesus made for the God presence that they believed they had met in him were such that human language had to be elevated to the "nth" power to convey what they believed they had experienced.

- The holiness of Moses had to be topped by the holiness of Jesus.
- The powers attributed to Elijah had to be exceeded by the power of Jesus.
- The signs that would accompany the messiah inaugurating the Kingdom of God had to be claimed for Jesus' life.

That was the agenda of the gospel writers. They sought to enable people to see God in Jesus, not to describe what Jesus supposedly did. To literalize the miracles of Jesus is ... to distort the intentions of the gospel writers.

Which Theism?

From a review of A Plausible God: Secular Reflections on Liberal Jewish Theology by Mitchell Silver in Philosophy Now Issue 62 2007.

"... while being processed for imprisonment, Bertrand Russell was filling out a form that asked what his religion was. He wrote "atheist" ... whereupon the jailer remarked, "Isn't it wonderful?"

We may belong to different religions, but we all believe in the same one God." ... there may be more truth to it than he supposed.

More recently, theologian Karen Armstrong has argued in her book *A History of God* that atheism is always a response to a particular notion of God. Since what is meant by God differs from era to era ... atheism turns out to be an historically-conditioned concept. This means that today's atheism could be tomorrow's theism."

The Dogma Wags The Tale

The Pope isn't really looking for the Jesus of History

Jesus of Nazareth

Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI)

Bloomsbury England 2007

In an address at St Andrews on The Terrace, Wellington, in 2006, Don Cupitt opened by drawing our attention to "... a conflict between two ways of thinking — two ways to truth. The Victorians called it the conflict between dogma and criticism. We call it the conflict between fundamentalism and liberalism."

Earlier, in 2001, he wrote: "... we are products of the Reformation. The crucial point is that it has been shown that religion can be criticised and reformed; and, if that is so, then anything else can be criticised and reformed. For us, the individual may be right *contra mundum*, against the world. Nothing is sacrosanct. Tradition is dead. As Marx commented, the criticism of religion is the basis for all criticism; once the legitimacy of critical thinking had been demonstrated, the project of modernity was launched."

Cupitt invites us to take one of two positions in regard to the claims made, implicitly or explicitly, by formalised paths of faith or "religions". We can either sit *within* the complex of claims being made and judge the world outside in the light of those claims, or we can set those claims within the web of current and emerging knowledge so that what we take to be the case is a coherent amalgam of the best of current human thought. The first option is "dogmatic certainty" where truth is stabilized, by decree. The second option is "critical thinking" by which, as Cupitt has observed more than once, is "the current state of the debate."

Pope Benedict XVI, using his pre-papal name of Joseph Ratzinger, has written a book with the title *Jesus of Nazareth*. It is the first of a planned two, with this volume bearing the subtitle "From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration".

Though presented as a work of scholarship it does not operate within current norms of academic scholarship. For example, the author quotes the works of theologians familiar to him and in agreement with his position, he does not acknowledge the vast body of work on this subject from before Schweitzer up and through The Jesus Seminar. Far from debating with such scholars, he quotes the words of a Russian short-story writer Vladimir Soloviev, to denounce them *en masse*: "The fact is that scriptural exegesis can become a tool of the Antichrist. Soloviev is not the first person to tell us that; it is the deepest point of the temptation story itself. The alleged findings of scholarly exegesis have been used to put together the most dreadful books that destroy the figure of Jesus and dismantle the faith." (p35).

The Pope prefers "canonical exegesis" to "historical critical exegesis". A Peruvian seminary student, Ignazio de Vega, offered this definition: "Canonical exegesis uses all of the critical, factual armature of ordinary exegesis, but it uses them in the assumption that 'a voice greater than man's' ... speaks through the whole of the Bible, uniting the individual books and turning their apparent incongruities and contradictions into matters of faith, of unity."

Geza Vermes, writing in *The Times* May 19, 2007, said of the Pope's book: "In the absence of a stringent linguistic, literary and historical analysis of the Gospels, especially of their many contradictory statements, the identification [of 'the Jesus of History' with 'the Christ of Faith'] is without

foundation. One must declare groundless Benedict's appeal to "canonical exegesis", an exercise in biblical theology whereby any text from the Old or the New Testament can serve to explain any other biblical text. Such an approach to biblical studies would force back Catholic Bible experts, already the objects of frequent papal disapproval in Jesus of Nazareth, to a pre-Copernican stage of history."

Gerd Lüdemann, in his critique of this book (*Das Jesusbild des Papstes*, Springer: zu Klampen Verlag, 2007, 157 pp.) points out (p120) that the Pope offers "no convincing arguments against the scholarly consensus that the Johannine discourses have nothing to do with what Jesus himself actually said" ... [I]t is ... baffling to hear Benedict assert that "[t]he Jesus of the Fourth Gospel and the Jesus of the Synoptics is one and the same: the true 'historical' Jesus".

This then is not a scholar's book, nor a theologian's. If theology can be thought of (in Anslem's words) as "faith seeking understanding" then that quest is thwarted by the pre-emptive process of canonical exegesis — the dogma shapes the findings. There is no 'seeking', because seeking is inherently open-ended as to what is found. There are no un-doctrinal challenges to past interpretations because the canonically-approved answers determine which questions are legitimate.

Who then will benefit from reading this book? We can draw a parallel from John Shelby Spong's *Jesus for the Non-Religious*. Despite its title, that book would appeal more to the *already* religious, perhaps to Christians with jaded faith, because readers have to know a lot of the Christian story in order to appreciate the many good points that Spong is making. Similarly, Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth* is intended for the devout Roman Catholic 'in-group'. With Christianity under attack from many quarters and some of the incoming missiles hitting targets, the strategic choice of the current Pope appears to be to tighten the Roman Catholic brand-image by brushing aside the liberal and critical analyses of, scholars (especially non-Catholic) and to boldly assert a literary integrity to the scriptures which they certainly do not have. He does this even to the extent of anchoring his argument in the Gospel of John, that which is farthest in time and concern from what we can glean to have been the concerns of the objectively 'real' Jesus.

The Catholic Modernist, Joseph Loisy, gets a passing mention on page 48 with his ironic and perhaps sad observation of a century ago: "Jesus came preaching the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church". We see this most strongly in the Kingdom-focussed Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke when contrasted with the Jesus of John's Gospel who would deny entry to those who would seek the Kingdom other than through him.

Rather than a scholarly work, *Jesus of Nazareth* is instead a 374-page sermon. Seen from within the Roman Catholic cultus, it all hangs together. But apply post-Enlightenment critiques and 'all its varying rainbows die away'.

Noel Cheer 2008

Exegesis: the critical interpretation of the biblical text to discover its intended meaning. doctrinal and polemical intentions have often influenced interpretive results; a given text may yield a number of very different interpretations according to the exegetical presuppositions and techniques applied to it.

Encyclopaedia Britannica

A Book Review by Alan Goss

In Praise of the Secular

by Lloyd Geering, St. Andrew's Trust: (see p10)

For many people the words "secular" and "religious" are like oil and water, they simply don't mix.

But in his latest series of St. Andrew's Trust lectures Lloyd Geering takes a different point of view. He is at pains to show that today's secular world emerged out of the Christian tradition and from the pioneering efforts of many thinkers in that tradition, like Martin Luther, William of Ockham, St. Francis, and Ludwig Feurbach. Scientists like Darwin also saw the Christian-secular connection and were roundly condemned by the orthodox Church for doing so, but they never saw themselves as anti-Christian.

Geering is also concerned to show that in a secular age — which is not anti-religious — we need some kind of spirituality which he suggests might be termed secular mysticism. This would be focussed not on the saving of our own individual lives but rather on "the welfare of one another, the future of the human species, and the health of the planet." Such a spirituality, on which the religious rituals of the future would be based, require "the great coming together of all peoples on a global scale." Lloyd Geering's vision for the future also provides a challenge, and a hope, for the churches — should they be willing to grasp the spiritually secular nettle.

Earlier chapters in the book outline how our increasingly global and secular world gradually took shape. Darwin taught us that we humans are one species amongst millions of others, like (the author might have added) the Californian dung beetle. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition Geering traces the various phases through which that tradition has passed, including the Incarnation — God revealing himself in this human world and not above or beyond it. As each piece of the cultural jig-saw puzzle falls into place and as we move into the modern secular world, these cultural changes gather momentum. We are now freed from the old external authorities and able to think for ourselves and to be ourselves. But this freedom also brings dangers and responsibilities and these along with the advantages are examined in a separate chapter.

A very useful section on how New Zealand evolved as a post-Christian secular society is included, notably Geering's concern "... that the majority of New Zealanders have been left with little knowledge of our past spiritualities and have been given no guidance as to how to develop their own." Which brings us back to the author's secular mysticism dealt with in the books final chapter.

Over the years Lloyd Geering has had his critics, some of whom regard his teaching as dangerous, even

destructive. Richard Holloway, the former Bishop of Edinburgh, writes that the only way to preserve a tradition is to critique it, to be (as Jesus was) subversive of it.

Lloyd Geering is such a subversive. His book deserves a wide readership.

Alan Goss, December 2007

A Movie Review by Shirley Dixon

The Golden Compass

"The Golden Compass" is the film version of the first of Philip Pullman's trilogy of young adult fantasy books, "The Northern Lights".

It is doubtful, given the relatively financially poor returns so far from American film-goers — in spite of it having done very well in other parts of the western world — that parts two and three of Pullman's "His Dark Materials" trilogy: "The Subtle Knife" and "The Amber Spyglass", will ever be made. This failure has a great deal to do with religious controversy in the U.S.A.

The story is set in a world parallel world to our own in which some things are familiar to us, but several are crucially different. In particular, in this world, people's 'souls' are exterior to their bodies in the form of animal 'daemons', which are not unlike the 'familiars' usually associated with witches. Their souls are as much to do with the capacity to think and act in a mature way — that is, with a person's whole 'spirit' — as with religious and moral qualities.

The dominant group in this world is the 'Magisterium', who wish to impose their view of reality on the population and to limit and control adult independence of thought and action. When it was found that maturity results from space 'dust' entering the bodies of adults through the medium of their daemons, the Magisterium sets up an experiment to test the efficacy of controlling adults by severing pre-pubescent children's daemons, so that they will continue to grow physically but will never mature mentally or spiritually and so will be biddable creatures of the Magisterium. The story is focused on the struggle of a young girl 'saviour' figure to stop this experiment.

Reviews of the film have been less than glowing, including commenting that while the special effects and casting were marvelous, the film has too little character development and lacks genuine drama.

A film has to be judged on its own merits and comments such as that 'the books weave a magic the film simply cannot match' are hardly fair as every film-of-the-book has, of necessity, to translate literature into story. Yet I have thoroughly enjoyed many film-of-the-book movies, including "The Golden Compass".

While the film is an abridged, though faithful, rendering of the book, many reviewers have commented that the film has pleased neither the fans nor the foes of Pullman's books. In the books the Magisterium is the focus of the anti-church rhetoric — which readers understand as a thinly veiled attack on the Catholic church. In the film, though the Magisterium is still the 'baddy', it is presented much more generally as a dogmatic, corrupt, authoritarian organisation that quashes free will and restricts what people may know or investigate. So, fans of the books are upset by the watering-down of the anti-church rhetoric. Even though this was done in response to pressure from Catholic and Evangelical church bodies, these foes of the books are still not happy in that they say that Christian children might enjoy the film so much that they might be tempted to read the actual books — and so be exposed to the anti-church focus! A lose/lose situation for the film! It might be pointed out that in demanding the watering down of Pullman's rhetoric and in trying to keep children away from the books, these church bodies are doing exactly what the Magisterium does — trying to command thought and free-speech!

I have read the complete trilogy, and highly recommend the books to adults as well as to the teenagers, who are their primary intended readership. However, I feel that the extremity of Pullman's anti-church rhetoric is mis-focused in the same way as in the writings of the 'New Atheists' — such as Richard Dawkins in "The God Delusion". Many of the criticisms of the churches and of religion made by these writers are valid, but where I differ is that these writers will admit of no good whatsoever in the churches or religion, whereas I feel that such overstatement considerably weakens the persuasiveness of their case.

Therefore, in contrast to fans of the books, and to most reviewers of the film, I feel that the more generalised version — an 'expanded' version — of the Magisterium, encompassing all types of dogmatic control (political, social and intellectual, as well as church based) — actually strengthens the story.

It would be a pity if parts two and three of the trilogy that continue the story begun in "The Golden Compass" were not filmed as a result of the religious coercion and poor financial returns in America. We need stories such as Pullman's to remind us that, even though we in the West live in a post-Enlightenment world in which we are able to develop into mature beings able to think and act independently, we must be aware that the struggle is on-going against political, social, intellectual and religious fundamentalist dogmatists who might wish to diminish our freedoms.

Shirley Dixon, January 2008

A Book Review by Alan Goss

Letter To A Christian Nation

by Sam Harris, Alfred A. Knopf NY

This little book, along with Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchen's *God is Not Great*, caused quite a stir when it was released in the United States.

All three books are vehemently opposed to religion, especially in its extreme conservative and fundamentalist forms. And this in a country that is overtly very religious. The chances of any candidate for the American Presidency declaring himself or herself an agnostic or atheist are virtually negligible. Time magazine estimates that 30% of Americans believe in an authoritarian God who will punish mankind for its sins. According to Harris 53% of the population are creationists opposed to evolution and 44% expect Jesus will return to judge mankind "sometime in the next 50 years". He writes, "Our nation now appears, as at no other time in her history, like a lumbering, bellicose dim-witted giant". The book is largely a litany of protests against the extremes and excesses of religion, for example:

- The Bible and its teachings are muddled and self-contradictory and contain episodes of violence like stoning and sexual slavery.
- Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tortured and killed people in the name of God for centuries. Harris gives examples, including the Inquisition and the Crusades.
- The Religious Right is opposed to Stem Cell research and the use of HIV vaccine to treat Aids. The sufferings caused by sexual disease are largely ignored.
- Belief in God does not ensure a nation's health. In the Southern and Midwestern States of America — the bible-belt — homicide, teenage pregnancy and infant mortality is high. (Secular N.Z. probably conforms to European norms.)
- Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans in spite of all the prayers offered up to save it. Other examples are quoted, e.g. the Holocaust, showing that God is neither omnipotent nor omniscient.
- Religion is a divisive force, Harris cites the conflict in Northern Ireland (Catholics v Protestants), Shi-ites v Sunnis in Iraq, Muslims v Christians, and others. He sees religion as a barrier to building a global civilization.

Whatever the merits of Harris' case, my main criticism of the book is that, like Dawkins, Harris directs his fire mostly against the ravers, the ranters and the extremists on the Religious Right.

Religion needs to be seen in the round and not just on its tatty edges.

.... more

As Lloyd Geering reminds us, religion was once the superglue that held society together, it gave people a shared view of reality, a purpose to live for, rituals to observe, values to live by. Now the old religion has lost its viscosity, its stickiness, and the world looks and waits for a new religion for the new global age. There are signs that this new religion is already emerging on a world-wide scale.

Whereas traditional religion has previously been captive to the church, the synagogue, the mosque and the temple and largely the preserve of these institutions, this is no longer the case. Religion in all its colours is now diffused right through all sectors of society - in art, in music (including modern popular

songwriters like Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen), in poetry (e.g. Joy Cowley), on television and on the internet. Elements of religion like wonder, awe and transcendence are plainly visible at All Black Test matches where celebrities render stirring versions of the National Anthem and our rugged heroes bond before facing a daunting foe. The crowd's expectancy mirrors the faithful waiting for the Second Coming. Some church congregations are evolving into smaller groupings which are more open, more participatory, and more secular in the sense that current events are discussed and debated in addition to pondering the Big Questions of Life. Church buildings are being leased to community support groups, e.g. St Stephens, Napier, a sign that the institutional fetters are slowly losing their grip and that religion is now gradually becoming public property. Many will argue that this is how it should be. The focus of the new global religion will not be the Father God above but Planet Earth below in all its mystery and wonder and on whom our very life depends. That is where God, however understood, is present and leaves his indelible mark. Harris and his colleagues can rest assured that religion is here to stay.

*Alan M Goss,
Napier, August 2007*

“I Reject The Christianity that Sam Harris Rejects”

This is a comment by John Shelby Spong on Sam Harris' writing. It came via an Internet discussion list but was otherwise unattributed:

“I think Sam Harris has a great deal to say to America and I am pleased that he is writing. People need to hear the criticism of an honest

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atheist who is not afraid to speak his mind about what Christianity has come to mean to him. I reject the Christianity that Sam Harris rejects. The big difference is that I am aware of another and quite different Christianity, but Sam Harris does not appear to be. When I wrote *A New Christianity for a New World*, I tried to spell out what that different Christianity might look like. I believe it makes for a far greater and richer dialogue to engage the criticism of Sam Harris than to do what so many Christians seem to me to do, namely to search the Scriptures to find a way to give biblical authority to their latest prejudice.”

A Review by Ian Crumpton of Christchurch

Telling Stories

Julie Hunter's latest self-publication, *Stories from Wise People*, is a compilation of epithets, anecdotes, sayings and stories from around the world. I'm not one to read a great deal in bed, but these stories are perfect! Many are quite short, but each one provides something to reflect upon – from the shortest epithet (“God created man because he loved to hear stories” – African Legend) to the longest – a twenty-page Arthurian legend of Parzival.

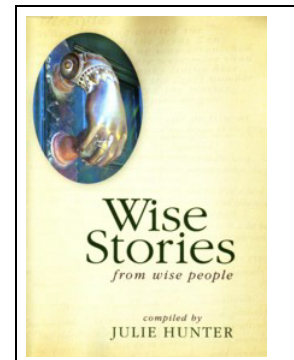
Julie draws heavily on that doyen of story-tellers, Anthony Du Mello. Du Mello, a Roman Catholic Priest, has found little favour with Catholic authorities, as his stories, gathered in the main from India, Asia and Africa, and from among Buddhists, Hindus and Jews as well as Christians, convey a good sense of the spiritual depth and wisdom to be found across all cultures and faiths.

That indeed is the consistent theme of this whole compilation, be they stories from Du Mello, Western culture, or Hunter's own personal experience. There's another strand running through the book as well: Each story will draw a smile!

If you're looking for a present for someone – recovering from illness, birthday, whatever – then here is a good choice. But read it yourself first!

Ian Crumpton

Julie Hunter is a member of the Sea of Faith Network Christchurch Group and can be contacted at Julie.hunter@clear.net.nz



Give Us Bread, Not Stones!

Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch offers a challenge

At first, I found the Sea of Faith liberating. It was a place where I didn't have to watch what I say, lest I upset the conservative faithful.

There was no unspoken assumption that one had to come to the 'right' conclusions and believe in the standard way. I felt free to develop as an individual rather than as just another member of a religious community. But now, several years down the track, I feel like I'm missing out.

I look to the Sea of Faith for ideas to live by, for building blocks to incorporate into my own spirituality, for something motivating and inspiring. In short, I need bread but all too often, I feel that I'm only getting stones. Why is this? I'm not sure; and when I try to pin the problem down, I keep finding positives! I am enormously stimulated by the annual Conference, and I appreciate the people in my Local Group. The Newsletter has a great variety of themes and approaches. In what follows, I'm trying to explore what it is that leaves me unsatisfied. I feel rather like a husband in marital therapy, voicing complaints about his partner, while at the same time being aware that the complaints will say as much about me as they do about my partner. Moreover, my complaints may turn out to be factually inaccurate, or to reflect the way the Sea of Faith was but now no longer is.

Let me begin with a little example, to try to indicate where my dissatisfaction comes from: Lloyd Geering tells us, in explanation of the voice of God speaking to Job: "What we hear coming to us out of the whirlwind of the universe is actually the echo of our own questioning." This reassures us that we are not required to believe in a superbeing who occasionally booms out a message to humans using an invisible sound system. But it gives no indication of what ongoing value Job's 'echo' might have. Geering's 'explanation' may be helpful to someone brought up in the Christian or Jewish tradition, in that it removes an unnecessary intellectual stumbling block, but it gives no positive meaning to Job's experience. Further, when you examine the explanation more closely, it doesn't seem all that convincing. While echoes usually are very similar to the original sound, Job's 'echo' is

very different from the lament over his suffering and his plea for justice.

What is true for this little example seems also to be true for many of the major themes that the Sea of Faith is known for: God is not 'real', but just a name for our highest values. Jesus is not a divine saviour, but just a wise man. Religion is not a divine revelation, but a human construction. There is no transcendent, heavenly world, but only this world.

Enlightenment-style reason dominates these themes. They examine the inherited religious tradition using the tool of human reason, and generally find that religious symbols don't make rational sense. As David Tacey complained at the 2006 Conference, we are stuck in a demythologizing position. Just as

The Sea of Faith is ... a talkfest. We love a good discussion and we are stimulated by interesting ideas. This means that we talk about religion rather than practicing religion or being religious.

evangelical Christians keep on celebrating and re-enacting the moment in which they 'found the Lord', so we keep on talking about the moment of abandoning the old metaphysical frame-work. Neither we nor they progress on a spiritual

journey (it helps to remember that theologians, particularly in Germany, began abandoning this framework around the beginning of the 19th Century). We are often told about the need to re-invent religion from scratch, but there are few signs of the Sea of Faith or its leading thinkers actually doing this. If the Sea of Faith is to provide me with nourishment, I need to hear of views and insights and perspectives that I can assent to, rather than be told of all the superseded doctrines that are unacceptable. I think this implies that for me the Sea of Faith is neither a temporary waystation for those leaving the institutional Church, nor a bastion of Enlightenment-style humanism from which to mount a sustained attack on religion. I want the Sea of Faith to be support and stimulus for my spiritual or life journey.

The Sea of Faith is, as Noel Cheer tells us, a talkfest. We love a good discussion and we are stimulated by interesting ideas. This means that we talk about religion rather than practicing religion or being religious.

We are in danger of what Drewermann describes as experience-less talk of experiences that are foreign to us. If someone comes to a therapist and talks about his problem, the therapist is likely to challenge this. The

aim is to live life, not to observe your problems from a distance.

Fritz Perls told such people to lose their mind and come to their senses. He also said there were three types of philosophy: about-ism, should-ism, and is-ism.

The Sea of Faith is heavily involved in about-ism and is also rather susceptible to should-ism (moralistic arguments about what ought to be). Is-ism is about experiencing rather than reflecting, about being rather than thinking. Of course, academic culture the world over is about neutral objectivity, about keeping yourself as a person out of the statements you make, and many of the leaders and opinion-makers in the Sea of Faith are academics. **Unfortunately, neutral objectivity is the death of religion.**

I've recently become aware of how embarrassed I am to admit to anything concerning religion or spirituality. I must have internalized the attitude of the dominant Kiwi culture, which tends to avoid or suppress these matters.

Of course, the words 'religious' and 'spiritual' have unfortunate associations of being holier than thou and of distaste for ordinary bodily existence, but that too could be taken as a sign of how popular culture has managed to caricature real religion.

As a result, I find it's so much easier to say 'I like arguing about religion' than to affirm anything more direct and personal. But what's wrong with engaging with the fundamental questions of life, having what Paul Tillich called ultimate concern? I gather that in some other cultures, sharing views about religion and politics is much more natural and accepted.

I'm not saying that we should stop being so intellectual and questioning. I have a strong drive to keep on questioning and not to be satisfied with simplistic re-formulations, which is part of why I find many Sea of Faith answers unsatisfying. We need a diversity of questioning perspectives but we also need to minimize the extent to which we orient our thinking on traditional or fundamentalist religion. Our situation is that of a Christian culture that has been challenged by Enlightenment thinking. Integrating these two strands is going to take some time; David Tacey thinks about 150 years. It is intrinsically improbable that Enlightenment reason has all the truth and traditional religion none. Moreover, we human beings are more than thinking machines and we may need to protect ourselves against excessive influence of the academic ivory tower. We are not above the fray and we do not want to be living only in our heads.

It seems that participating together in any ceremony or ritual is something that gives us the greatest

difficulty. This also troubles me deeply. If a group of musicians came together for a conference at which they talked about music and examined printed scores but never actually played or listened to music, we would think something was wrong. Jill Harris tried to express to us the importance of ritual in her talk to the 2007 conference. I was shocked to realize years ago at a live-in course learning German, that those around me all had their rituals: the Muslims celebrated Ramadan, my Yugoslavian priest room-mate prayed regularly from the Breviary, even the Chinese communists withdrew for their meetings, no doubt to keep up their Marxist fervor in the face of the temptations of the Capitalist West. But I, as a liberal Protestant, what rituals did I have? Very few, beyond the practice of attending Church on Sunday morning, which tended to be dominated by the (rather rational) sermon. Our preoccupation with ideas and alienation from ritual makes good sense from a historical perspective which sees us as a prolongation of the liberal strand of

Protestantism with its emphasis on the Word. Contrast this with a Buddhist teacher who gives no intellectual concepts but sends us off with some practical guidance to do some meditating and see what we experience.

To help me on the way, here are the questions I am trying to keep in mind in my listening and reading within the Sea of Faith:

- Why am I bothering about this? Is it going to have any personal (or better, existential) relevance? Am I only interested because of my religious upbringing or would it be relevant to a student with minimal religious background who is taking part in one of David Tacey's courses on contemporary spirituality?
- Is this examining a religious belief or symbol merely in order to knock it? If so, is the counter-perspective from which it criticizes discernable?
- Does this reduce religion and spirituality to a rational pattern of argument, or does it help to open up some form of experience that can resonate for me?
- Does this uncritically confirm me in my pre-existing modern/post-modern prejudices or does it open up new possibilities?

Laurie Chisholm January 2008

Who on Earth was Jesus? The Modern Quest for the Jesus of History'

by David Boulton,
O Books, ISBN 978-1-84694-018-7,

Distributed in New Zealand by Peaceful Living
books@peaceful-living.co.nz phone (09) 921 6222

A Review by Richard Holloway

In one of the great theological texts of the 20th century, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, published in 1906, Albert Schweitzer said that scholars who were intent on finding the real Jesus, the Jesus of history, were like people peering into a deep well and seeing their own reflections. It sounds dismissive, and was probably intended to be, but it is worth thinking about, nevertheless. Whether we like it or not, and whether or not we have a religion ourselves, what people see when they look down the well of history can have profound consequences for us all.

One of the most dramatic and disconcerting aspects of recent history has been the return of religion. Those

"[Boulton] he sets out to find out what historians have discovered when they have gone searching for the man scholars describe as the Jesus of History before he became the Christ of Faith."

of us brought up on the sociology of the 1960s were preparing — sadly or eagerly — for the final eclipse of religion in the West. The secularisation thesis claimed that history was moving inexorably towards the final collapse of religion. Like many prophecies before and since, the reality has turned out to be very different. **Religion is back, religion with a grudge, religion with something ugly on its mind.** It reminds me of that bit in *The Shining* when Jack Nicholson finally cracks and takes an axe to the door behind which his wife and child are sheltering, grinning maniacally and shouting: 'Here's Johnny!' Well, if that's the kind of figure you see looking back at you when you look down the well of history at your religious founder, then we are all in trouble.

David Boulton's brilliant and timely book is well aware of that dangerous possibility, which is why everyone ought to read it, especially those with no sympathy for religion and its crazier adherents. His book operates on two levels. Boulton is an investigative journalist by trade, and here he sets out to find out what historians have discovered when they

have gone searching for the man scholars describe as the Jesus of History before he became the Christ of Faith.

On this level alone the book is an enormous achievement. He tries to maintain a professional objectivity throughout his researches, while wryly acknowledging that that's not really humanly possible.

So what you get is a vivid description of what scholars have said in the past, and what living scholars are saying today, about the figure at the bottom of that 2000 years deep well. Apart from the excitement of the story of the scholarly quest itself, the book will be a useful resource for people who want a one-volume guide to a multi-volume industry.

It's all here, and it's as up-to-date as you are likely to get in what is a fast-moving business.

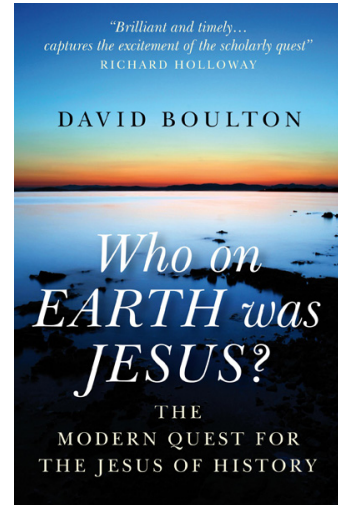
But there is a deeper level to this book, a level that brings me back to that reflection gazing back at me from the well of history. If, as Schweitzer hinted, we are never going to get at the absolutely incontrovertibly real Jesus, but only at refined versions of ourselves when we look for him, then what we ourselves believe and long for is going to be important. The theological category that is key to the interpretation of Jesus is his approach to what theologians call 'apocalyptic': that strand of religious tradition that relates to the End Times, the coming of God into history to establish justice and peace. Did Jesus subvert and humanise that turbulent tradition, thereby making it possible for us still to draw on his dream of a righteous human community? Or did he belong to the crazy end of the apocalyptic hope, which eagerly looks forward to the day when God will arrive on earth to exalt his true believers and damn the rest of us to eternal torment?

Does the Jesus you see down the well of history come in peace, or with an axe in his hand? As the passionate conclusion to this fine book demonstrates, this is a question that's important to us all.

Richard Holloway is the former Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

Lloyd Geering writes of 'Who on Earth was Jesus?': 'A unique treasure... Fair, objective, scholarly, yet lucidly written for non-academic readers. A masterly achievement'.

Best-selling historical Jesus scholar Marcus Borg writes: 'Simply the best and most thorough account of the breadth and variety of historical Jesus scholarship'.



Letter to The Editor

Spong's letter to Rowan Williams [Newsletter 74 p7] presents a devastating critique of Rowan's position, but does so with barely a shred of Christian charity (or compassion), to either Rowan, or to the side of the church he opposes. His comments about use of the Bible, by implication, suggest that the Bible cannot be believed for anything, instead one must give way to what is presented as an inevitable historical development. However, I suggest that those that use the march of history as evidence of inevitability are as tyrannical as those that mis-use the bible. Further, those that ignore the essential Christian tenet of compassion do not deserve to associate themselves with Christianity. Or have I lost my compassion as well!!

Gray Southon, Tauranga

Faith in Cyberspace

Jesus Then And Now

This is a collaborative project of the FaithFutures Foundation to map what we know about the historical Jesus and to explore new ways of celebrating the meaning of Jesus for people today.

This project was started in March 2006 and currently consists of 615 articles. See it at http://wiki.faithfutures.org/index.php/Main_Page

Editorial Our Second Constituency

In the article by Laurie Chisholm on pages 6 and 7, the author suggests that SoF should be generally warmer and less merely analytical. There's a particular reason to present a more welcoming public front which might not seem immediately obvious.

If SoF is to be merely the "non-church" of the disgruntled former church-goer (which is where it started 20 or so years ago), then it is likely to wither as that outflow slows to a trickle.

I suggest that we direct our gaze additionally to those people who, having reached their 50s and 60s, have never been exposed to the Christianity that SoF berates and which John Spong wants to rehabilitate. There's no point in reviving Christianity for them, they've never been there!

Arriving at an age when there is leisure to give time to "The Big Questions" and then finding the language and the metaphysics of traditional Christianity unintelligible, they might be attracted to SoF as an environment in which to at least sharpen up the questions in congenial company. They might discover, as many of us have, that one can "be religious" without being a wally, a fundy or fugitive from critical thought.

Noel Cheer

LEAVING HOME

This declaration would echo the experience of many SoF members. It is the work of David Keighley, an English Anglican Priest and it came to us via an on-line column by John Shelby Spong.

I'm off!

I must leave the political and ethical compromises that have corrupted the faith of my Jesus.

I must leave the stifling theology, the patriarchal structures.

I must leave the enduring prejudices based on our God-given humanity, the colour of my skin, my gender or how my sexual orientation is practiced.

I must leave the mentality that encourages anyone to think that our doctrines are unchangeable.

I must leave the belief of those who insist that our sacred texts are without error.

I must leave the God of miracle and magic.

I must leave the promises of certainty, the illusion of possessing the true faith.

I must leave behind the claims of being the recipient of an unchallengeable revelation.

I must leave the neurotic religious desire to know that I am right, and to play at being God.

I must leave the claim that every other pathway to God is second-rate, that fellow Hindu searchers in India, Buddhists in China and Tibet, Muslims in the Middle East and the Jews of Israel are inadequate.

I must leave the pathway that tells me that all other directions will get me lost.

I must leave the certain claim that my Jesus is the only way to God for everyone.

I must leave the ultimate act of human folly that says it is.

I must leave the Church, my home.

I must leave behind my familiar creeds and faith-symbols.

I can no longer stay in an unliveable place.

I must move to a place where I can once again sing the Lord's song.

I must move to where my faith-tradition can be revived and live on.

I must move to a place where children don't tell me what I believe is unbelievable but tell me they can believe what I believe.

I must move to a place where they are not playing at moving the deck chairs on the decks of an ecclesiastical Titanic.

I can never leave the God experience.

I can never walk away from the doorway into the divine that I believe I have found in the one I call the Christ and acknowledge as "my Lord."

I must move to dangerous and religiously threatening places.

I must move to where there is no theism, but still God.

I'm off! But to where, God only knows.

In My View: Norm Ely, Chairperson 2007-2008

My thanks to Laurie Chisholm for his article

“Give Us Bread, Not Stones!” (see pp7 and 8). It raises an important issue for us all – “What can Sea of Faith provide to ME?”

To better consider this question let us rephrase it to “What can I get (gain) from Sea of Faith?”

It seems to me that as most members of SoF have come from one or other (mostly Christian) Faith Groups they have an inbuilt comfort with Church based communities.

Generally their underlying code of caring for each other and the wider community derive from the experiences and teachings they gained in their earlier Church lives.

However, what these people have discovered over time is that the various doctrines the various Churches expound are any or all of:

- Untrue
- Able to be given secular explanations in light of information 2,000 years on.
- Promoted for the benefit of the particular Religious Faith Group.
- Morally and Philosophically bankrupt on many issues.
- suspect for other reasons.

In searching for a replacement for what they have lost after leaving the Church and in trying to find “answers” to their faith questions, these people have come upon Sea of Faith among other organisations.

In Sea of Faith people initially find a like community and are provided with food for thought and in some cases maybe answers to their concerns.

Laurie Chisholm states that in his case; “I felt free to develop as an individual rather than as just another member of a religious community.” And, “I look to the Sea of Faith for ideas to live by, for building blocks to incorporate into my own spirituality, for something motivating and inspiring. In short, I need bread.....”.

Laurie then goes on to say; “But now, several years down the track, I feel like I’m missing out”. And, “....but all too often, I feel that I’m only getting stones”.

Laurie goes on to discuss why and how he believes he is “missing out” and “only getting stones” from Sea of Faith. I found his discussion really interesting and I would suggest valid in the eyes of many of our members. Laurie finishes up with – “To help me on the way, here are the questions I am trying to keep in mind in my listening and reading within the Sea of Faith” and he goes on to set out the four questions. I suggest that these questions or some variation on them are uppermost in many of our member’s minds.

According to Noel Cheer, Sea of Faith is a “talk fest” especially the Conferences, I would disagree with Noel on that point.

The Sea of Faith positioning statement reads:

“The Sea of Faith Network is an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint”.

It goes on to say that Sea of Faith:

AFFIRMS the continuing importance of religious thought and practice as a vehicle for awe and wonder and for the celebration of key social and spiritual values;

DRAWS freely upon our spiritual heritage without being bound by it;

PROMOTES the quest for meaning and fulfilment as a human activity;

PROVIDES encouragement, stimulation and support in fellowship with others engaged in the quest.

Sea of Faith is not a Church which provides you with a sermon or direction to live by. While Sea of Faith is by its nature a Community, it is not necessarily a “Like minded One” on all matters of Faith. Sea of Faith, (in its present form at least), is there to challenge us. The positioning statement as set out above in fact says it all; Sea of Faith is an ongoing workshop.

The most recent Conference demonstrated a very diverse level of thought and debate on the topic of the day. It is over to each of us not to discard the information given but to take it away, digest it thoroughly, explore the points made and then come up with your own rationale. This is not a “Talk Fest”. Maybe it is an “Ideas Fest” or an “Exploration Fest”.

Here in Wellington we are very lucky in that we have Ephesus as well as Sea of Faith. Many members of one group are members of the other group. Much has been said about the similarities and differences. For me the core difference is that Ephesus not only looks at issues in a similar way to Sea of Faith but it also holds to more modern versions of old Christian Traditions. For example Ephesus has Liturgies. In some cases you may have to look carefully to see its Traditional Christian Liturgical counterpart in other cases they are more clearly defined. (For more information go to our website and look up the paper on the differences between Sea of Faith and Ephesus by Ian Harris and look up Jill Harris’ presentation to the last Conference on Liturgy).

In my opinion Ephesus provides a bridge between Sea of Faith and the more Traditional Church. In my case I find that Ephesus provides me with a “Faith Group” albeit I struggle with some Liturgies and other issues. But Sea of Faith provides me with a more in-depth learning, discussion and exploration group (perhaps a more studious group).

So “What do I get (gain) from Sea of Faith?” And in my case Ephesus as well.

Ephesus provides me with Bread, Sea of Faith provides me with the Butter and Cream.

Ephesus is the heart; Sea of Faith is the Brain.

Neither provides me with the Answers.

In combination they provide me with the resources I need to make my own interpretations and a formula on which to live my life. Equally, I cannot stop exploring and questioning as more information and ideas come to light.

Those of us who have arrived at Sea of Faith have moved beyond being provided with pat or simple answers, we have a strong need to go out and continue to explore and question.

That is exactly what Sea of Faith provides; the platform, the resources, the debate. The pathway to continue to explore, question, make our own decisions and in light of new information review yet again.

Norm



The Sea of Faith Network (NZ)
Congratulates our first Life Member



Lloyd Geering

on his 90th birthday
26 February 2008

**And Jesus said unto them,
"And whom do you say that I am?"**

**They replied,
"You are the eschatological
manifestation of the ground of our being,
the ontological foundation of the context
of our very selfhood revealed."**

**And Jesus replied,
"What?"**

Sea of Faith In Australia (SoFiA) National Conference

Date: September 19th to 21st, 2008.

Venue: Amberley, a conference centre located on Melbourne's Yarra River in Lower Plenty.

Theme: "Science and Faith: An Open Dialogue."
Speakers and Workshops to be announced.

Hosts: The Melbourne SoF Group

Details: www.sof-in-australia.org/conferences.htm



Sea of Faith (NZ) Steering Committee 2007-2008

Back: Bob Geddes, John Craighead, Betty Manning,
Geoff Neilson, Noel Cheer (backbencher)

Front: Mary Boekman (Secretary), Norm Ely
(Chairperson), Peter Cowley (Treasurer)

Absent: Bill Cooke, Derek Pringle

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 ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK) and Noel Cheer.

The **Chairperson** is Norm Ely, 16B Mawhare Street, Titahi Bay, (04) 236-6026

The **Secretary** is Mary Boekman, 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**, 2-56a Ira St, Miramar, Wellington

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.

There is a catalogue on the website,

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: noel@cheer.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.

Congratulations to The Dunedin SoF Group

who now have their own website at
<http://ourpage.co.nz/dsof/>

If you want to find out how then ask
Geoff Neilson at geoffail@ihug.co.nz