



# Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z. **NEWSletter**



## Conference 2009

### **Who Needs Jesus?** **Life in the 21st Century**

#### **Waikato Diocesan School for Girls, Hamilton, September 25-27**

The School is sited in beautiful grounds close to the River. Its conference facilities are brand new – they were opened at Easter, the accommodation offered is comfortable and private, ranging from single and double rooms to completely enclosed cubicles in small dormitories of 8 units and the food is renowned. "Dio" is in River Road, 10 minutes from the centre of the city by direct bus, and if you are motel-inclined there is a choice of about 50 within five minutes by car.

Hamilton has much to offer within its boundaries if you have the time to enjoy it: a museum and art gallery (currently featuring a display of Leonardo da Vinci designs and a retrospective of Waikato artists); the gardens, planned around national themes, are famous and particularly interesting is the newly opened Maori garden cultivated in the traditional ways; there is a wealth of history to be explored in the city and environs and a night life which is mentioned for completeness though it will doubtless be of little interest to you.

**Fred Marshall, Local Convenor**

**An Information Sheet and a Registration Form accompany this Newsletter. Email subscribers can get both on the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)**

## **Is This You???**

I have received a Direct Credit of \$15.00 for a sub from a Ms E Erlinawati with a ref "Sea of Faith Sub: Graham".

I can't find any trace of anyone called Erlinawati in our records or in the white pages for the whole of New Zealand. Does anyone know who this person is or the Graham (of which I have several) to which she refers?

**Peter Cowley, Treasurer [pcowley@paradise.net.nz](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz)**

## **Conference CDs**

We're not offering the 2008 Conference CDs any longer. In November we plan to offer the CDs of the 2009 Conference — if all goes well!

## **Subs Due at End of June**

Annual subscriptions fall due at the end of June. If the date on the envelope in which this Newsletter came (the one now in your wheelbin!) is earlier than 2010 then you should fill in and mail the enclosed reminded slip — accompanied of course by a cheque! Email subscribers will be reminded by other means.

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## **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 Newsletter six times per year; 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, P.O. Box 50-393, Porirua, Phone 027 440 9267. The Secretary is Alan Jackson, 55 Evans St, Opoho, Dunedin (03) 473 6947.

Membership of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both charges drop to \$15 if your Newsletter is emailed. Send remittance and details to The Membership Secretary, PO Box 15-324, Miramar, Wellington 6243 or Internet bank to 389000 0807809 00 and tell [pcowley@paradise.net.nz](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz). Members may borrow books, tapes etc from the Resource Centre (Suzi Thirlwall phone (07)578-2775.) See the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz) for a catalogue and other details about us.

To offer a comment on material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact the Editor: Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay, (04)236-7533 email: [noel@cheer.org.nz](mailto:noel@cheer.org.nz)

## Ghastly Religious Visions

Some religious points of view which come out of the Christian and Muslim traditions provide fuel for terrorists, as James Carroll wrote in the *International Herald Tribune* on 16 September 2008 under the heading *Religious Comfort for bin Laden*. He wrote:

“Bin Laden wanted to be taken as the world-defender of Muslims; he wanted a war with the Great Satan as a purification of the House of Islam; he wanted the clash of civilizations. It worked, but only because a particular religious vision animated American responses.”

Here are that vision's main characteristics:

**Apocalyptic:** convinced that redemption comes through violence.

**Millennial:** taking prospects of bloodshed and mayhem as God-predicted tribulations from which the born-again will be rescued.

**Otherworldly:** so ready to denigrate life on earth as to risk its destruction, whether quickly through war or slowly through pollution.

**Israel-obsessed,** with the Jewish state openly seen as instrumental in God's plan for the coming Last Judgment.

**Manichaean,** with primitive notions of an absolute divide between good and evil - the saved on one side, the damned on the other.

## More on Manichaeism — from Wikipedia

**The founding prophet Mani** resided in Babylon, c.210CE–276CE. Most of his original writings have been lost but numerous translations and fragmentary texts have survived.

Manichaeism is distinguished by its elaborate cosmology describing **the struggle between a good, spiritual world of light, and an evil, material world of darkness**. Through an ongoing process which takes place in human history, light is gradually removed from the world of matter and returned to the world of light from which it came.

When Christians first encountered Manichaeism, they deemed it a heresy, since it had originated in a heavily Gnostic area of the Persian empire. Augustine of Hippo 354CE–430CE converted to Christianity from Manichaeism, in the year 387. This was shortly after the Roman Emperor Theodosius I had issued a decree of death for Manichaeans in 382CE and shortly before he declared Christianity to be the only legitimate religion for the Roman Empire in 391CE.

Manichaeism thrived between the third and seventh centuries, and at its height was one of the most widespread religions in the world. Manichaean churches and scriptures existed as far east as China and as far west as the Roman Empire.

## Of Religion & Value, Science & Technology

Stanley Fish, writing a review of Trevor Eagleton's book *Reason, Faith and Revolution* in the New York Times, suggests that Eagleton is asking questions like, “Why is there anything in the first place?”, “Why what we do have is actually intelligible to us?” and “Where do our notions of explanation, regularity and intelligibility come from?” Fish goes on to say, **“The fact that science, liberal rationalism and economic calculation cannot ask — never mind answer — such questions should not be held against them, for that is not what they do. And, conversely, the fact that religion and theology cannot provide a technology for explaining how the material world works should not be held against them, either, for that is not what they do.** When Christopher Hitchens declares that given the emergence of ‘the telescope and the microscope’, religion ‘no longer offers an explanation of anything important,’ Eagleton replies, **“But Christianity was never meant to be an explanation of anything in the first place.** It's rather like saying that thanks to the electric toaster we can forget about Chekhov.”

“Eagleton punctures the complacency of these questions when he turns the tables and applies the label of ‘superstition’ to the idea of progress. It is a superstition — an idol or ‘a belief not logically related to a course of events’ (American Heritage Dictionary) — because it is blind to what is now done in its name: “The language of enlightenment has been hijacked in the name of corporate greed, the police state, a politically compromised science, and a permanent war economy,’ all in the service, Eagleton contends, of an empty suburbanism that produces ever more things without any care as to whether or not the things produced have true value.”

## What Shall We Tell The Children?

**Liz McKenzie** of the NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists is inviting people to assist in a project of “putting together some material for a children's anthology on the beliefs of New Zealanders with a naturalistic world view”.

**Kent Stevens** of the NZ Humanist responded: “It is a good idea to get some simple materials sorted for teaching to young children. Lately, there has been a strong push to teach about religion in schools. It would be difficult to get source material for a non-religious viewpoint, while established religions such as christianity will already have huge amounts of such information.”

On the surface it looks as though Liz is trying to extend the range of material that children have access to -- a commendable ambition -- but that Kent is wanting to shut down any discussion of religion other than that which condemns it.

Perhaps there is a confusion between ‘*talking about*’ religion as an exercise in cross-cultural understanding and ‘*doing religion*’ as a self-conscious participatory exercise.

What do you think?

# DATING OF THE GOSPELS

By Robin Boom



## At the 2007 Sea of Faith Conference in Auckland, Bishop John Spong

in his talk on the 'forty years of silence' claimed that the four gospels were not written until after 70 AD, which is a view held by many other modern Biblical scholars, including most of those participants in the Jesus Seminar of which both Spong and Geering belong. Unfortunately the Jesus Seminar has butchered these ancient historical documents and their conclusions are laced with their own particular bias, due to its largely liberal and radical scholarship.

Although theology is not a science as such, from my own background in science, any hypothesis put forward as a scientific axiom must be able to stand up to the critical rigour of peer review. The problem is that if all of the peers themselves have been hand-selected because of their own personal leanings, then the science itself is in danger of being flawed from the outset. The influential philosopher of science, the late Thomas Kuhn, found that scientists would sometimes skew the results of their own research to fit with their own hypothesis, or set up trials in such a way that the hypothesis that they held could not fail, or would be unlikely to fail. He also found that scientists would also interpret data within the framework of their hypothesis, and ignore or dismiss data that was contrary. He even found extreme cases where the data itself would be altered so as to prove a particular hypothesis. My concern is that, if classical science can be affected by a researcher's particular bias, how much more bias is there in theological scholarship?

A major reason many scholars have for dating the gospels authorship post 70AD is Jesus prediction of the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple by the army of Titus Vespasian in 70AD. However, could not Jesus have fluked the prediction of the events of 70AD, or drawn this conclusion by reading all the signs he could see around him of Jewish nationalism? For scholars to be insistent that such foretelling proves these gospels were written after the events shows a complete lack of candour when other textual evidence is considered. For instance, Jesus spoke about his imminent return in the same passages where he predicted the fall of Israel which these scholars object to. He said 'this generation would not pass away' (Matthew 24: 34-36, Mark 13:30, and Luke 21:32) until these things had happened. In Matthew 16:28 Jesus said 'I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom'. In the end of John's gospel Jesus also suggested that one of his disciples would not die until he (Jesus) had returned.

These scholars who claim to be textual critics can't have it both ways. On the one hand they object to Jesus foretelling of the fall of Jerusalem, whereas if the gospels were not written until a much later date, why would the writers include passages of Jesus suggesting his return would be soon and disciples not dying? Surely they would 'cook the books', so as not to make Jesus out to be a false prophet.

These scholars also discard what Bishop Eusebius wrote in his *History of the Church*. Although three hundred years had passed since Jesus lived, Eusebius was in a position to collate a lot of the oral traditions and early Christian writings from which his work is based.

## Matthew

From the writings of Papias (70AD-160AD), Eusebius tells us that Matthew first wrote the 'Logia' in the Hebrew language, and others had translated it as best they could, and that Mark wrote his gospel at the dictation of Peter. Eusebius also wrote how John wrote his gospel after reading other gospel accounts which had omitted much of Jesus life and teachings. Exactly what Matthew's 'Logia' contained is sheer speculation, but as he was a tax-collector and would have probably been in the habit of keeping daily or weekly records and accounts, I speculate the 'Logia' may have been something like a journal of Jesus' deeds and teachings, similar to a ship's log. Papias claimed that the 'Logia' was written in the Aramaic language, which is interesting since the gospel attributed to Matthew that we have today has many passages that are grammatically poor and awkward in Greek, but when retranslated into Aramaic have a much better grammatical flow to them, suggesting at least parts of Matthew's gospel were originally written in Aramaic, and the Greek translators were diligent to try and translate it word for word into Greek. In his gospel, Matthew appears to be writing specifically for Jews, trying to prove to them that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah by quoting many Old Testament scriptural passages, which would have had little relevance to a Greek audience.

The Jesus Seminar earlier on bought into the idea that there was an early gospel account 'Q', which was the basis of the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), although today this 'Q' hypothesis has largely been dismissed, and it is believed that Mark's gospel was the first written, and that this formed the basis of Matthew's and Luke's gospel accounts. If this is the case, the writer of Matthew's gospel in Greek could have interposed the original 'Logia' over the general themes outlined in Mark's gospel.

The most ancient document from Matthew's gospel which has survived is the Magdalen fragment from Matthew 26, which in 1953 was reported to have been written between 130-200 AD, but more recently (1995) German scholar Dr Carsten Thiede from Oxford University has re-evaluated this fragment and dated its authorship to around 80-90 AD.

## Mark

A more controversial fragment is the tiny Qumran scroll 7Q5 found among the Dead Sea scrolls in the middle of last century, which Spanish professor, Jose O'Callaghan, claimed was from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark's gospel. This fragment was probably written before 50AD and hidden around 68 AD in this seventh cave. All of the scrolls found in the seventh cave were written in Greek which is puzzling in itself, as to why the Essenes — who were a strictly Jewish religious sect — would even have a whole lot of writings in Greek, and why all of these Greek writings were hidden in this one cave, and not intermingled with others, which were all Hebrew writings. It is traditionally believed that Peter was crucified upside down at Nero's circus in Rome some time between 62-66 AD, and if Papias was right that Mark was Peter's interpreter, then this gospel had to have been written before this time. As to whether Mark



himself actually met Jesus is open to conjecture, but there is the unique story found in Mark 14:51-52 of 'A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind him'. Such a story would have little significance or relevance to anybody except the author himself, and it would be reasonable to assume this certain 'young man' was actually Mark.

## Luke

As already mentioned, it is generally accepted that Mark's gospel is the framework that Luke used to write his gospel. Luke however fills in a lot of gaps, and the style of writing and grammar has been described as being more academically precise than the other gospel writers. Dante described Luke's gospel as the most beautiful book ever written. In the beginning of his gospel account, Luke wrote that many had written of what had been handed down to them by eyewitnesses of Jesus, and that he had 'carefully investigated everything from the beginning'. Luke was a Greek convert to Christianity, a physician by trade, and a travelling companion of Paul in some of his journeys. He was also the author of the Acts of the Apostles, and writes both his Gospel and the Acts to a certain Theophilus (lover of God). In the beginning of Acts, Luke mentions having already written his gospel, and picks up the unfolding story of what the Apostles did after Jesus ascension into heaven.

It is, however, how the book of Acts finishes, that I find immensely compelling for an earlier authorship than 70 AD. Tradition says that Paul was beheaded at Tre Fontana in Rome under Nero around 64 AD, yet at the end of the book of Acts Paul is still alive as a prisoner in Rome. Luke has no issue mentioning Steven's martyrdom in Acts 7 or of James being killed by Herod in chapter 12, so if as many modern scholars claim, Acts was written after 70 AD, why would not Luke have mentioned Paul's death or famous last words, as martyrdom was one thing early Christians aspired to, and Paul through his epistles made no bones about his readiness to die and be with Christ. Much of the latter part of Acts goes into tedious details of Paul's journeying and eventual arrival in Rome, which would be largely irrelevant to note unless Luke was also journeying with him. Paul himself mentions in possibly his last written epistle, II Timothy 4:11 that 'Only Luke is with me'. It is interesting to note in this passage, the next sentence Paul writes 'Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry'. Is this the same Mark who wrote the gospel account, and whose gospel Luke used as a framework for his own gospel? For me the most logical reason why Luke fails to write of Paul's martyrdom if it hadn't happened yet, and that Paul was still alive when Luke completed the Acts of the Apostles and his gospel account.

## John

As to when John wrote his gospel, in all likelihood Eusebius was right that John was already familiar with the writings of the synoptic gospels and attested to their accuracy, but wrote his gospel account to provide Christians with deeds and teachings of Jesus the others omitted. Much of the terminology and mystical narrative used in John's gospel is also found in John's epistles and in all probability had the same author, whereas only the first three chapters of the book of Revelation have this same Johannine writing style. Had it not been for the book of Revelation being included in the list of apostolic writings known to early Christian apologist, Justin Martyr (160 AD), then the book of Revelation would probably have found itself in the same fate as the Shepherd of Hermes, Epistle of Barnabus, Gospel of Thomas, and other apocryphal early Christian writings, rejected by Bishop Eusebius and the other 300 Bishops who decided what was and what was not to be included in the New Testament.

John is the only disciple of Jesus whom traditions have as not being martyred, although he was a prisoner on Patmos Island in the Aegean Sea for 14 years from 82-96 AD, during which time he purportedly received the Revelation, which was dictated to and written down by his disciple, Polycarp. He was released back to the mainland at Ephesus in 96 AD where he died in 98 AD. If this was the same person as John, the disciple of Jesus, he would have been at least 85 years of age when he died. In all likelihood John wrote his epistles and gospel accounts some time between 70-98 AD while living somewhere in the Aegean region around Ephesus or on Patmos Island. The earliest fragment of John's gospel we have today is the Ryland fragment which is dated around 115-125 AD.

I think there are good arguments for much earlier authorships of all three synoptic gospels than what Spong and the Jesus Seminar conclude. Luke's gospel was probably written prior to 62 AD, and if Mark's gospel was the framework from which Luke wrote his gospel, then Mark's gospel would have had to have been written some time between 40-60 AD. Matthew's 'Logia' was probably compiled between 30-33 AD as a rough diary or journal account by Matthew, whereas the gospel accredited to Matthew would have been put together some time after Mark's gospel account had been written. John's gospel was probably written some time between 70-98 AD.

**Robin Boom is a self-employed agronomist living on a large lifestyle block (22 acres) just out of Hamilton with his wife Sally and three children who are all still at school.**

**[Readers who are familiar with the work of The Jesus Seminar may find Robin's accusation that they "butchered" texts to be a bit harsh. The suggestion of researcher bias is left unsubstantiated as is his dismissal of the 'Q' theory of gospel origins. He places a higher value on Eusebius than many today would and he accepts that the author of John's gospel was the disciple.]**

**The function that your editor believes that he should fulfil is to provide a platform for a variety of points of view, from within and outside our membership. If you would like to take a point of view different from what Robin has set out please send it to me, up to 500 words and well argued.**  
**Noel Cheer, Editor]**

## RE-MODELLING GOD

Alan Goss, Napier

**Like the whole of the Western world, organized religion is under threat.**

This is not just because of raucous radicals or fiery fundamentalists but because the ink is running dry — organized religion needs a new vision, new stories and new models which capture the imaginations and stir the hearts of ordinary people. In his parables Jesus used examples from everyday life - treasure, nets, seed, sheep, leaven - to convey his vision of the Kingdom of God, the impact of those stories still resonate with us today. The late Bob Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar, said that the Kingdom of God is like looking through a knot-hole in the fence to catch a glimpse of a world where our conventional human values and priorities are reversed, turned upside down.

This article offers a "glimpse"; it suggests a new way of remodelling God which locates the divine in our modern scientific world. Most people are generally aware of terms like nuclear energy, quantum mechanics, the theory of relativity and so on. There is nothing outside the divine domain. Remodelling God as Pure Creative Energy is at least a place to start, we live in an energy-soaked world of television, ipods, mobile phone networks, computers, even the humble washing machine. Energy fills and drives the whole created universe. In a recent book<sup>(i)</sup> Hal Taussig of Union Theological Seminary, New York, is one of thirteen American scholars who reflect on their own spiritual journeys. Taussig refers to the work of cosmologists Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme whose 1992 book *The Universe Story* has circulated here in New Zealand. Briefly, Swimme and Berry show how everything in the universe is connected, everything has its own inner life ("it is full of feeling"), everything is different. The universe is like a giant hive or organism, everything is humming and bristling with energy, everything is changing from one moment to the next, everything becomes new. Some of the Psalms capture this vibrant mood as did Julie Andrews in her spirited "The Hills are Alive with the Sound of Music".

God is Ultimate Mystery; God is embodied and immersed in the world, God needs the world and the world needs God. "God-talk needs world-talk", we cannot speak about God in airy-fairy abstract terms as a Being "up there" who guides and directs human affairs. This results in crude and nonsensical images of God as "the Man upstairs" and "the guy in the sky" which only demean the Christian cause.

Re-modelling God as Pure Creative Energy confronts us squarely with the age-old human dilemma, the problem of evil. Because of our lust for power, our selfishness and our greed mankind frequently hinders and thwarts God's Creative Energy and the purposes for which it is intended. War, pollution, political and economic oppression, racialism and other abuses are of our own making and no-one else's. So God, as Pure Creative Energy, is limited, God is not omnipotent. It is mankind, ourselves, who ravage and plunder the Earth. "The buck stops here."<sup>(ii)</sup>

Re-modelling God as Pure Creative Energy in a universe where everything is different, everything has its own inner life, everything is connected, has major implications. It provides a charter — God's charter — for the way we shall live our lives in a global community. It strengthens our bond with the earth which sustains us and upon whom we utterly depend. It suggests a Presence which we can feel and see and which can be nurtured in meditation, in rituals, in scriptures, in art and books, in people, in nature - the whole gamut of life.

Other models of God will emerge as our world evolves, others after us will paint pictures and weave stories that deal with those central issues and questions which affect us all. Re-modelling God will change our ways of thinking, change our religious and secular institutions, change our ways of looking at and acting in the world.

(i) *When Faith Meets Reason* by Charles W. Hedrick. (Polebridge Press). I acknowledge the valuable insights suggested in this book, some of which appear above.

(ii) See *Encounter with Evil*, by Lloyd Geering (St. Andrews Press). A succinct account of the problem of evil.

*Alan M Goss, May 2009*

# What I Believe!

Stewart Anderson

*In an email accompanying this article, Stewart wrote the following about himself:*

“I was Parish Minister in Kerikeri in the late 1970’s – a wonderful experience ! A friend from those days ... said “You know, after all this, I really don’t know what you believe, would you write something down ?” I was surprised because we had many group discussions in those days and they all knew that I didn’t believe in the traditional “God” figure – for five years I never used the word except when reading or quoting – and nobody said a word! I said yes I would, but when I started to write I wished I hadn’t ! It got longer and longer and I increasingly felt it inadequate. But, eventually, I finished it and sent it off to the friend. I’m sending a copy to you [as an offering for the Newsletter].”

This is the article:

I’ll try to set out what I believe and then try to explain *why* that’s what I believe !

1. I believe that:

- the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth have become totally obscured by the Church through the years.
  - Jesus’ ministry was for three years - was limited to northern parts of Galilee - and was to peasant farmers - impoverished by the demands of the priests in Jerusalem. Jesus’ message was – my words – “I have good news you – the way to find life worthwhile is – not by meeting the requirements of Priests in Jerusalem - but by entering into a certain relationship with your God, yourself and your neighbour.” This really was good news and their response was enthusiastic.
  - Jesus, in his inscrutable wisdom, perceived that the way to get full satisfaction out of life - life in all its fullness – was through entering a certain relationship with yourself and others - and not through observance of rules and religious requirements – this message drew enthusiastic acceptance from the peasant farmers of Galilee.
2. Our problem is this. If Jesus said that fullness of life is by entering a “certain relationship” – the “Jesus relationship” – what are the elements of that relationship? My contention is that we can answer by looking at the Gospels to discover how Jesus related to other people. There we find that Jesus, 1) *accepted* an other person just as he or she was 2) *enabled* him to see himself as he was; 3) *encouraged* him to set goals for what he might become; 4) *enabled* him to “visualise” those goals being achieved . This released in the other the full power of the mind – the conscious mind and the subconscious mind.. That “Jesus relationship” was defined by Paul, and in the Gospels, by the Greek word **agape**. [you might like to read the sidebar now – ed]
3. When Jesus was arrested, the disciples fled back to Galilee. Later they returned to Jerusalem and began to talk about what Jesus had taught them. Paul heard of this he resisted it for a time then became a follower.

When Paul wrote his letters between 50CE and 65CE he recognised the “Jesus relationship” he realised it wasn’t just “love”, as in the Greek *philos*. He took an ancient Greek word *agape* which had meant a special kind of love but it had gone entirely out of use and gave it a special meaning — “the Jesus relationship”. This is the word Paul uses in his Letters decades before any of the Gospels !

A crucial scripture for me is chapter 21 of John’s Gospel in that it was added later, after the Gospel was ended. It is a story about the “Risen Christ”. But how do you visualise the Risen Christ? Surely the Risen Christ was the thoughts in the minds of the disciples as they reflected on Jesus.

As we learnt the story it was because Peter had three times denied that he knew Jesus and so the “Risen Jesus” challenges Peter three times to affirm that he loves Jesus! But that is not the story at all! Unbelievable! We’ve been taught nonsense!

If we consider the Greek in which the Gospel was written (in the late 90’s ), this is the story:

## More on Agape

mostly from *New Testament Words*  
by William Barclay SCM 1964

- As a NT Greek word it is pronounced ‘ah-gah-pee’. It sometimes gets hypercorrected to ‘ah-gah-pay’.
- It is the most common word for ‘love’ in the NT. In the noun and verbs forms it occurs about 250 times.
- Key usage: Matt 5:43-48 — ‘seeking the highest good’ in imitation of God.
- **unconquerable benevolence**
- **invincible good will**
- it is sincere, innocent, generous, practical, tolerant, forgiving, restorative, it underpins liberty and truth.
- “the very key word of NT ethics”
- more than merely an emotion, it is a deliberately principled way of living.
- it does not wait for reciprocity — it is unilateral.
- It means both the attitude to others described above and a ‘love-feast’ which was the pre-cursor of the more formalised ‘communion’.

The Risen Christ said to Peter, “do you have *agape* for me?” Peter replied, “Lord you know that I have *philos* for you.” Then the Risen Christ said, “But do you have *agape* for me?” Peter replied, “Lord, you know all things, you know that I have *philos* for you.” The third time the Risen Christ said, “Peter do you really have *philos* for me?”

Surely the implication of this story is that, as the disciples reflected on Jesus’ life with them, they were convinced that the true response to Jesus’ message is not *philos*, ‘love’, but it is *agape*, ‘the Jesus relationship’.

All through the New Testament, except for only about five instances, where we read the English word ‘love’ we are reading a mistranslation of the Greek word *agape* !

Now I’ll set down the factors that we have to take into account in identifying and assessing the teaching of Jesus.

1. Jesus’ public “ministry” was in Galilee for only three years. At the time that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, the disciples fled back to Galilee and nothing happened in Jerusalem until they returned some weeks later because only the disciples and the people of Galilee knew the teaching of Jesus. The Jesus Movement began when the disciples came back down to Jerusalem and talked about the teaching of Jesus.

2. The Jesus Movement, now called The Church, began in Jerusalem and, as the Jesus Movement spread, the early Church, all Jews, was governed from Jerusalem. But, in 70CE, the Romans completely destroyed Jerusalem and the Jewish Nation ceased to be (until 1947) and the “government” of the Church moved to “The West”.

3. Paul was initially a persecutor of the “Movement” but later became an enthusiastic member. Using his scholarly skills he wrote letters to various centres in the “West”. These letters, written between about 50CE and 65CE became the first books of the New Testament.

4. It wasn’t until the mid-70s that the first “Gospel”, Mark, appeared. Why was it written? After intense study of the situation at that time and of the OT scriptures, it has become clear that this Gospel was written to provide “Bible Readings” for the weekly “Service”! This was because, in the 70s and 80s, most of the “followers of Jesus” were Jews, not in Jerusalem but round the Mediterranean. They worshipped in the Synagogues each week where the scripture readings were all [our] ‘Old Testament’. So they needed “Readings” to express their belief that Jesus was the fulfillment of the OT promises.

An example: every Sabbath, right through the year, there was a reading from the Torah (The Law – the first 5 books) so that every year the whole Torah was read. If the Torah reading was, for instance, about God providing ‘food’ for his people in the desert when they escaped from Egypt, by declaring that, in Jesus, the Kingdom of God had come, there needed to be a story in the Gospel of how Jesus fed thousands with a tiny amount of bread and fish.

Another: on the Feast of the Atonement, the Torah reading was of how two perfect lambs, Lambs of God, were taken to the Temple. One was slain and its blood poured out, in the Inner Temple, for the forgiveness of the sins of the people. The other was sent off into the desert. The matching Gospel reading was part of the Crucifixion story where Jesus, the Son of God, was killed as atonement for people’s sins — while Barabbas was sent away. ‘Bar Abbas’ is Hebrew for ‘son of God’!

In Mark’s Gospel, every miracle story, including the Crucifixion and bodily Resurrection stories, are mirror images of Old Testament stories centered on Jesus which are to be read alongside the Torah stories of the Old Testament.

And Matthew and Luke each contain almost the whole of Mark.

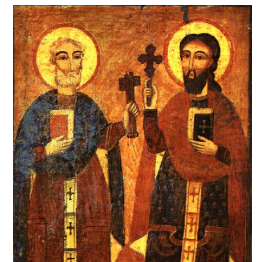
If the Prophet Isaiah says in chapter 35 that, when the Kingdom of God breaks in, the mute will speak, the lame will walk, the blind will see, the deaf will hear and so on, then if in Jesus of Nazareth the Kingdom was breaking in then there had to be stories of how the blind can see, and so on. There are such stories in the Gospels, and each one of them is the mirror image of an Old Testament story, not because those things actually happened in the life of Jesus, but because such stories declared that, in Jesus of Nazareth, the Kingdom of God was breaking in!

In many aspects of life increasing attention is being given to the power of the mind – conscious and subconscious – to have huge influence on the functioning of the body. If you accept the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth (I’ve been there!) and find time daily, or at least weekly, to reflect or meditate – thinking first of your breathing, then of your functioning body, then identifying your present situation, then setting clear goals to achieve what you really want, then visualizing those goals actually being achieved, then doing the same for those close to you, and for your “God” — then you will be blown away by what happens!

By the end of the first century following the destruction of Jerusalem, the ‘Jesus Movement’ was led, not by Jerusalem but by ‘The West’ and became subject to all the religious pressures of the “Mediterranean”.

The Holy Catholic Church was the result and the simple teaching of Jesus was lost.

What do you think? What do you believe ?



Apostles Peter and Paul – a Coptic Image

Shalom; Stewart



A review by Bill Cooke

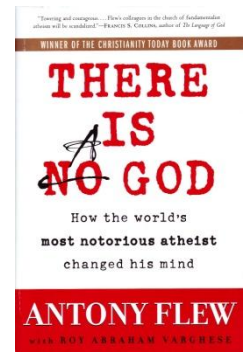
# One Flew Out of the Atheists' Nest

**Flew's value as Christian poster boy could be very short lived**

*There is A God*

Antony Flew

New York: Harper Collins, 2007



I have met Antony Flew twice and corresponded with him for more than a decade and have found him to be unfailingly polite and considerate. He made a point of seeking me out at the second conference we were at together and included me, a colonial unknown, in his conversation. Despite his status as a major philosopher, he was always open to an invitation to write for the *Open Society*, notwithstanding the humble status of that journal in the scheme of things. I have almost all his books and have admired his thought and clear prose, if not all his opinions, for more than twenty years. And as an atheist, it would be foolish to pretend I am not saddened by his recent conversion to a variety of theistic natural theology.

His latest book, *There is a God*, is subtitled 'how the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind'. Atheists always have to be notorious, it seems. Or dogmatic. Or aggressive. Or arrogant. Flew ups the ante when he calls atheists an 'endemic evil' (p 86). The Flew I remember would have dealt summarily with sweeping denunciations like that. Clearly the world of academic Christianity is elated by the conversion. *There is a God* is replete with breathless endorsements by prominent Christian thinkers and has received the *Christianity Today* Book Award. But this endorsement is disingenuous, given Flew's specific distancing of the God whose existence he defends from any revealed religion, or from any personal experience of God (p 93). He also repudiates any belief in personal immortality (p 2). The closest he gets to actually endorsing Christianity is his rather cryptic comment: 'If you're wanting omnipotence to set up a religion, it seems to me this is the one to beat!' (p 157) Despite all this, care is taken to talk up Flew's significance as an atheist, so as to enhance their triumph.

Flew's chapters are hemmed in by the Christian philosopher Roy Abraham Varghese, whose preface begins the book and whose lengthy appendix denouncing the new atheists follows it. Varghese condemns the new atheists for their combativeness and truculence, without recognising that his own writing is replete with the same qualities. The conservative English churchman, Tom Wright, brings up the rear with a second appendix.

Suitably reined in, Flew pens the story of his conversion. The first Part is more of an autobiographical reminiscence and survey of his career. We don't get to his new views until Part Two. This is the most disappointing section of the book because all we get is a warmed-over review of the argument to design and the fine-tuning argument. There is nothing new here; Flew's arguments are summaries of those of Richard Swinburne, Paul Davies, David Conway and others.

Slightly disturbing about Part Two is the sudden appearance of American turns of phrase not found in any of his previous writings, or even in other sections of this book, which prompts the question how much of it he actually wrote. See page 114 for a clear example. Flew acknowledges that Varghese 'collaborated with me in the production of the present book.' (p 159)

It will also be interesting to see whether the Christian choristers continue to sing Flew's praises once they realise how many core points of doctrine he still eschews. And how will they respond to Flew's extreme hostility to Islam in general and Muslim migrants in Britain in particular, attitudes which resulted in him being kept at arm's length by the humanist movement for the last twenty years? Flew's value as Christian poster boy could be very short lived.

Flew's arguments for theism, like most other such accounts, come across to me as special pleading where a vast cosmic backdrop is thought necessary as the only possible explanation for something as marvellous as ourselves. I see no reason to alter my suspicion that theism is simply an expression of hubris masquerading under the veil of humility. Unable to accept our overwhelming irrelevance in the scheme of things, Flew, like the theists he is following, has simply rewritten his conceits across the cosmos and then denounced as evil those who would question him. I am saddened that a thinker I have long admired has been reduced to this.

**Bill Cooke** is chairman of the Auckland Sea of Faith Network. His latest book, *A Wealth of Insights: A Hundred Years of Humanist Thought*, is due out in September.





## Pre-Conference Jesus Watch

# Part 2: The Prophet

**As with so many words used in religious contexts, ‘prophet’ and ‘prophecy’ have everyday counterparts that can mislead.**

In biblical language, a prophet was not concerned with predicting the future but with being God’s spokesperson. Of course this might have incidentally had a future orientation. Both the Hebrew *nabu* and the Greek word *prophetes* means ‘to speak on behalf of’. In Deuteronomy 18:18, God says that he will raise up a prophet and “I will put my words in his mouth and he will speak to them all that I command him.” The Old Testament records 55 prophets (48 male, 7 female), the greatest of whom was Moses.

All religious traditions have prophets and Jesus is often referred to as a prophet. Muslims regard Adam as the first prophet and Muhammad as the last, the culminating, prophet; hence Muhammad’s title ‘Seal of the Prophets’. Islam regards Jesus (*Eisa al-Maseeh*, Jesus the Messiah), as a messenger and as a prophet.

In the Jewish scriptures which were adopted as Christianity’s ‘Old Testament’ and starting with Amos about 750BCE, the prophet took a position which held all human life in radical criticism. Not even kings were exempt. The medieval king’s jester is an echo of that status. The career of Jesus is sometimes seen as continuous with OT prophets, though given a boost by the fading of the role of the prophet two centuries earlier and the ever-present hope and expectation of return of prophesy.

Out of favour with liberal scholars today, Albert Schweitzer’s characterisation a century ago of Jesus was that of an apocalyptic prophet who believed that God would intervene dramatically in the world’s affairs. Schweitzer read in Matt 10:23 of Jesus telling his followers to “expect tribulation before the end time”. Seeing that there was no tribulation on the required scale, Jesus felt that he personally could bring about the end time and precipitate the Kingdom by going to Jerusalem, confronting authorities, and suffering and dying. In this view, Jesus hoped that God would accept his sacrifice and so save his followers from the tribulation. Schweitzer concluded that Jesus failed in his self-appointed suicide mission.

Less dramatically, and almost entirely in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus appears to do prophet-like things: he reads from the scroll of Isaiah (“[God] has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor”) and identifies with it; he performs miracles like those of the prophets Elijah and Elisha; he relates himself to Jonah and rebukes his disciples when they try to follow suit in making prophet-curses. Like prophets of old, he denounces religious leaders (Luke 11:37 – 12:3). There is a long-shot possibility that Luke identified Jesus with OT prophets in order to contrast the rejection (so much experienced by prophets) by his own people with the acceptance by Luke’s target readership, non-Jewish converts in the Hellenistic world.

But is it accurate to say that Jesus was a prophet?

Little of what can be reliably credited to direct utterances of Jesus (at least according to The Jesus Seminar) takes the form of “thus saith the LORD”, so typical of King James OT prophetic utterances.

Jesus confronts authority as an advocate for the poor. He downplays the purity motive for morality in favour of compassion and he radically inverts social conventions, such as lavishly welcoming the spendthrift son. But whatever authority Jesus appeals to, it is rarely to God, in the way that a traditional prophet spokesperson would (“thus saith the LORD ...”). It is not his own authority either, even though in Matthew’s gospel he appears to put his authority against convention (“You have heard it said ... but I say ...”). This is usually seen as Matthew kitting-out Jesus to be the new Moses for sceptical Jewish followers. )

Through his aphorisms and parables, his asides and one-liners, Jesus appeals to transcendent-human values such as compassion as well as feet-on-the-ground common-sense. He invoked ‘the Kingdom’ more than he invoked ‘God’.

Like a sage.

*Noel Cheer, Wikipedia and others  
next month: The Sage*

# JESUS WITHOUT CHRIST

Norman Maclean, Gisborne

The contribution of Shirley Dixon in the May Newsletter requested other thought-provoking images of Jesus that might be viewed by members. With that in mind, I have enclosed a copy of **The Laughing Jesus**, sourced many years ago from a second hand copy of that rather non-theological publication, *Playboy*.



As every young man will swear, the glossy magazine is read for its excellent articles and I have to firmly insist that was the reason I pounced upon it at the time because I had previously read a *Playboy* article giving a penetrating analysis of the Bible's impact on Western culture, entitled, "The Most Dangerous Book in the World." What article it was that the Laughing Jesus illustrated, I cannot recall, but the image has been framed and now adorns the room in which I teach - among other things - Religious Studies to senior students of a Catholic college.

They love it, perhaps because it is such a striking contrast to the saccharine portrayals frequently found in Church schools where - like Doug Sellman's image of a very Californian Christ the King - Jesus is seldom represented in a way that touches reality.

Sellman incidentally, based his contrasting painting of that very ordinary Jewish Jesus on a still from the book of Zeffirelli's film, "Jesus of Nazareth. The man in question actually appeared as the disciple, Simon the Zealot but he's certainly a vast improvement on the bearded lady in a nightgown who is the Jesus most of us grew up with as we perused the pages of our illustrated Bible Stories.

What most appeals to me in the Laughing Jesus is the sense of sheer vitality that is conveyed. Here is a man who might convincingly insist that, "I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

He is also a potential party man - very like the Jesus of the Gospels who seems to have enjoyed nothing so much as a good night out having dinner with rich and powerful friends. Accusations of being a glutton and a drunkard - as his enemies describe him in the Gospels - are repudiated by the face of a loving man who discovers the little known nature of the Most High in everyday things: a glowing oil-lamp; a flask of good wine; the smiling faces of those with whom he lies down to dine and drink and debate.

And the Laughing Jesus is easily accepted as the eldest brother of at least six siblings (apologies here to the Marian cult) who works as a *tekton* like his father, knows the workaday world of the tradesman and is as far removed from the Holy Joes in their sacramental vestments as any man can be.

I would prefer him with his flowing locks tied back in a thong behind his neck or, better still, lopped off altogether as in Sellman's image. Most artists never stop to consider two important factors.

Firstly, the prevailing Hellenic culture that had stamped the near East for three hundred and fifty years in Jesus' time, meant that adherence to the Mosaic Law was almost certainly minimal. Jesus should probably wear a tunic that comes to his knees and a sun-hat of woven straw, like any other working man of his time.

Secondly, why in the name of reason, would any man have let greasy, sweatmatted hair flop over his face in forty degrees of heat as in a Galilean summer? I worked on a Kibbutz at the edge of the lake where he went fishing with his mates: believe me, short hair was essential as my hippy mates soon discovered, back in 1970. And the less you wore, the better.

For that last reason, we must dispense with the draped towels and turbans too. Who in their right mind wraps their head in swathes of thick fabric on a steamy summer's day when the comfortable straw *petastos* had been commonplace for centuries? Even the Roman emperor, Augustus wore one when doing a spot of gardening: a favourite hobby. Graeco-Roman Judaea/Galilee was no back-water.

So my plea is not only for a suitably de-sanctified figure of Jesus but one that begins to fit with what is historically acceptable in every respect.

**Norman Maclean**

## Open Letter to Bill Cooke from Lloyd Geering

I remember how critical you were of the mention of Carl Jung at the 2006 SoF Conference, so I was not surprised by your *Theses on Jung* in Newsletter 79. I was surprised, however, at the sharpness of your response to Jim Feist's reply in Newsletter 82. You seemed to abandon the calm, rationalist approach for which I have long respected you and you proceeded to refute Jim's criticism in rather extreme and emotive language. This made me think that there must be something about Carl Jung that really riles you.

So I turned back to your theses to find out what that is. I do not for a moment wish to defend Jung in everything he said and did. I too feel that some of what he said about the collective unconscious and also synchronicity are very much open to question. But I feel you have dismissed him and his contribution to our self-understanding altogether too rashly. I believe I have learned more about myself from him than from any other psychologist. I have a shelf-full of books either by him or about him, along with several documentary videos in which he figures.

In absolutely none of these do I find any evidence of a man who is 'megalomaniac, misogynist, intellectually dishonest, racist and anti-Semitic', as you claim him to be. You seem to be describing an altogether different person from the one I have learned about.

You say his work has been completely bypassed but you seem to overlook the fact that there are numerous practising Jungian analysts worldwide, as well as Jungian societies that promote his work, including one in Auckland. Moreover many of the terms he invented – introvert, extrovert, and archetype – have become part of our common vocabulary.

Certainly he is dismissed by many psychologists but it should be noted that in some university departments of psychology the so-called 'scientific' psychologists are hardly on speaking terms with the clinical psychologists, yet it is largely from the latter that we receive most practical help in the art of living.

Of course there is much in Jung's writings that has now become dated. Knowledge and culture are moving so fast that that is inevitable. All I can say is that I am glad I discovered him when I did. I found his analytical psychology threw a great deal of light on what some call religious experience, such as the dramatic change to Paul on the Damascus road and how the Qur'an came out of Muhammad's creative psyche.

Along with Jim Feist, I find your theses on Jung to be very narrowly focused, and the books you cite in support to be a rather odd collection. To make a more balanced judgment of Jung I suggest you read rather more widely, including some books by his followers. I am still puzzled as to why you wish to fasten on only the negative judgments about him. I find him to be a man whose creative analysis of the human psyche is worth trying to understand.

*Lloyd Geering*

## Letter to the Editor

In my March letter about the mysteries of Ephesus, I mentioned the current idea of the interconnectedness we humans have with the ecology.

It turns out that the idea has spread rapidly; speakers and writers repeat it, and it has ensnared our minds like a discovered epic of both wonder and commonsense.

This maxim of our innate ties with nature has already been translated into four languages: secular, traditionally religious, widely religious and almost fey. These could be described more correctly, perhaps, as expositions couched in different words and phrases in accord with each proponent's views. Churches deem the notion theologically sound. For others Gaia is revived, while the rest air their convictions between. But, the basic messages are the same, whatever the vernacular. We are part of nature and the responsibility to care for it diligently and intelligently rests on us.

So, like a credit card transaction when there is money in the bank account, the verdict for the idea comes up 'accepted'. And thus from small beginnings a culture's thinking is changed over time.

*Margaret Whitwell  
Te Puke*



**A Review by Lloyd Geering**

## Telling Her Story

Huberta Hellendoorn, *The Madonna in the Suitcase*,  
published by Hubert Hellendoorn,  
49 Warden St., Opoho, Dunedin.

**This is a fascinating little book of only 116 pages**, that tells the heart-warming story of a gifted Down's syndrome girl called Miriam who was born in Dunedin over forty years ago. To add to her problems she suffered a severe stroke on the eve of her fortieth birthday. To aid in her rehabilitation (and that has been remarkably good in the circumstances) her mother conceived the idea of slowly telling to her the story her life in the hope that this would restore her self-confidence.

It is this story that has now been published. Miriam was always a happy and responsive girl in spite of occasional bouts of withdrawal and it was not discovered until she had completed her schooling that she had a gift for expressing her feelings in art. After this had been encouraged by sending her to art classes her work began to be shown in exhibitions. The title and cover page comes from one she painted at the request of her mother for the family Christmas card.

I have known the Hellendoorn family since the Opoho Presbyterian Church assisted the immigration of the young couple from Holland in the early sixties and I actually baptized Miriam. Later they became our close neighbours.

This story is written with such love, insight and sensitivity that it could be an inspiration to many readers. As well as being the story of a most unusual girl it tells how a family coped with many setbacks with such patience, perseverance and, above all, loving care.

Alas, no publisher willing to accept the manuscript could be found and so encouraged by her friends, and with a little financial help, the author overcame the final obstacle by publishing it herself. No one will ever regret reading it though it may bring tears to the eyes.

*Lloyd Geering*



## My View

### From the Chair

#### **Conference 2009: "Who needs Jesus? Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century AD".**

This edition of the Newsletter brings with it the Registration Form and details of Conference 2009.

The venue this year is Hamilton and we have chosen Waikato Diocesan School for Girls as the venue. It will provide us with a very good brand-new venue; in-house accommodation for most of our attendees; a good central location for North Island attendees and an easy-to-get-to location for all other attendees.

As you will see in the Registration Pack we also have a good mix of extremely talented and well qualified presenters to talk on the Conference Theme of "Who needs Jesus? Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century AD".

Once again Sea of Faith NZ looks to challenge our thinking — this time on the subject of Jesus and how his life some 1950+ years ago impacts on life in 2009 (if, in fact, it does at all).

We each might ask "what impact (or influence) has Jesus had on my life"? Exactly where did this impact emanate from?

How do we translate this from a biblical text 1950 years old to today?

At the Conference this year there will be "Breakout Groups" of 15 to 20 people, each group will be led by a facilitator. These groups will meet after each Keynote presentation and discuss the ideas/concepts/facts offered by the presenter.

This will allow ALL attendees to take each of the three Keynote presentations and expand on them like never before. The Steering Committee is expecting the level of insight and understanding available on the Theme to be greater than ever before.

We do have one problem in that the venue can seat only 160 people. I believe with the quality of Presenters, the Theme and the ability to get right into the issue, we may well have more people registering than spaces available.

The Steering Committee is looking forward to meeting you again in Hamilton in Late September.

*Norm Ely*

