

# Pre-Conference Issue



## The Conference: Where It's At

### Waikato Diocesan Girls' School, Hamilton

*Principal Co-ordinator, Fred Marshall, provides an update:*

**Registrations are already over the 100 mark**, the single and twin rooms are all allocated. The roomlets booked are as yet few, and this is disappointing because as dormitory accommodation goes, this is the nicest set-up I have seen. The units were designed by the girls themselves and look very comfortable; in groups of four to a side with no impression of crowding. Hopefully there will be more takers in the coming month. The roomlets and twin rooms are all under a common roof, the single rooms are in a building apart.

If you are coming by car, all the accommodation is accessed by a drive off River Rd at 698. However the pupils will be moving out on Friday so we can't move in until about 5.00pm. So you should come initially to the Conference Centre, which is accessed through the School's back gate off Martin Street (off McNicol, off Clarkin). Consult the map on the website or the instructions that accompanied the registration application to find out how to get there. It is no good going into the main gate where the trees romantically link their branches overhead since that is the administration area, the parking is limited and permanently full and you are remote from both the accommodation and the conference. There is abundant parking in the Conference and accommodation areas. If shuttles and taxis put you off in the central area, the way to the Conference centre will be signposted. Bags will have to be left there or in your cars until the Happy Hour after Sir Lloyd's paper and the break-out group which follows it. A bit of extra time has been made in the programme to allow for shifting in. Remember to bring your Gold Card for free off-peak travel on the Hamilton bus network.

A feature of the last Waikato Conference (at Cambridge) was a concert put on by senior university music students. We have been successful in arranging a similar event this year, drawing on the exceptional talents of young artists on the threshold of their musical careers. They get an audience, we get a concert, everybody wins. This will take place on Saturday night in the school chapel from 8 pm. Open entry and no charge.

Drinks will be provided at the Happy Hour and also served at the Saturday dinner, but if you want wine with your dinner on Friday night then you will have to supply it. Arrangements are under way for you to buy a bottle at the Happy Hour in the centre and take it to the dining room, but note that glasses may NOT be carried from the centre to the dining room – its a bottle or nothing. No drinking alcohol in the accommodation blocks either, please. Coffee tea and Milo will be provided in the lounges there.

The school is seamed with smoke sensors; if one of them is triggered the fire brigade will send two units at a cost of \$1500 —which will be charged to the culprit — so its strictly **NO SMOKING** indoors anywhere.

It would be a good idea to bring your mobile phone. The school phones are all off-limits. But we hope to arrange access to computers and the Internet.

Unity Books has agreed to put on a book display during the conference and the St Andrew's collection will be available also. Noel Cheer will bring for sale copies of the UK SoF's new book *This Life On Earth* — a gem of a collection of autobiographies, prose and poetry.

A word about receipts. To save postage, the Steering Committee have decided to give you your receipts at registration and to settle then any adjustments necessary to what has been paid. But this raises uncertainties as to whether your application was received and what accommodation was allotted to you. So the silence on our part was not a good idea. Those who were too late to get the room they requested have been phoned or emailed by me, so if you haven't heard then you can assume that you got what you asked for. If you want to confirm that all is in order then send me an email (fredmarshall@actrix.co.nz) or phone me on (07) 834 3374.

Arrangements are progressing on time, our speakers are excellent, the Conference centre is brand new and the accommodation is comfortable. The omens are good for a successful Conference. See you there!

*Fred Marshall*



## Contents

- 2: Roadmap to the Conference
2. Lost in Translation
2. Notice of the AGM
2. All About Us
3. Jesus, The Sage
4. Bill Cooke and Lloyd Geering's Response
- 5 Dating The Gospels
5. Freedom to Offend
5. What GBS thought of Darwin
6. Bob Scott, Obit
7. Personal Memories & The Jesus Seminar.
8. Religion in Four Flavours
9. Humanity, Red in Tooth and Hand
9. Sir Lloyd is knighted.
10. The Trouble with Jesus
11. Opening the Time Capsule
12. View from the Chair

**It's not too late book. All you need to know and do is  
on the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)**

## Roadmap To The Conference

**The question of the relevance of Jesus today tends to be seen through one's opinion of who he was and what he actually said.**

On page 1, Fred Marshall told us how to get our *selves* and our *luggage* to the Conference. The articles cited below point to ways to get our *thoughts* there. The articles do not always agree with each other and we should further expect a range of views from the Conference speakers.

- On this page **Alan Goss** reminds us that Jesus spoke both the vernacular Aramaic and religious Hebrew. Living only a few kilometres from Sepphoris he was probably familiar with both Greek and Latin also.
- The article on page 3 positions Jesus in the category of "sage" as does **Don Cupitt's** new book *Jesus and Philosophy* reviewed on page 11. Cupitt sees the original secular "Kingdom" message of Jesus overlaid and smothered by the institutional church.
- **David Simmers** on page 5 reminds us that the dating of gospels has been controversial and **Fred Marshall** on page 7 discusses the memories of people who knew Jesus and how these memories became gospels.
- On page 10, **David Kitchingham** sets out 23 theses as to the nature of Jesus.

**We can expect these threads to be tugged backwards and forwards by the Conference speakers.**

## Lost in Translation

The **Hawke's Bay group** recently discussed the topic "Lost in Translation", introduced by Joy MacCormick, an Anglican community parish priest in Hastings.

When Jesus taught he spoke in Aramaic. Joy helped us explore the variety of meanings his hearers might have taken from the words of the Lord's Prayer and of their significance for us today.

Aramaic was the vernacular for ordinary people. Hebrew usage was confined to the synagogue and to the "civilized" classes. The use of the vernacular — in all languages — allows for more flexibility and offers people whose interest and circumstances change over time the freedom to make their own choices. In other words, choosers are (literally) "heretics". There's no other way!

*Alan Goss, Napier*

### 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: Sir 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 38 9000 0807809 00 and tell 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 for further 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 [noel@cheer.org.nz](mailto:noel@cheer.org.nz)

## Notice of the 2009 Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting of the Sea of Faith Network (NZ) (Inc.) will be held at 2:30pm on Saturday 26th September at the Conference venue.

Remits for the AGM should be sent in writing to the Secretary by 11 September.

They will be circulated in the Conference packs.

Please note that only financial members may submit a remit, or vote during the AGM.

Alan Jackson, Secretary, 55 Evans Street, Opoho, DUNEDIN 9010  
[alanjackson@extra.co.nz](mailto:alanjackson@extra.co.nz)

## Pre-Conference Jesus Watch

### Part 3: The Sage

THE ASSESSMENT OF JESUS AS 'SAGE' IS RELATIVELY RECENT and appeals to those for whom the development of Christianity is best seen as away from mystery and supernaturalism and into a more humanist, even more secular direction. Many scholars trace the early development of stories about Jesus as devotional elaborations of historical facts or even as imagined fact. Over more than half a century, from the letters of the apostle Paul, and his 'gospel' (*Epistle to the Romans*) and then through the canonical gospels (*Mark, Matthew, Luke* and *John*) the character of Jesus is rhetorically inflated. None of the authors was without an axe to grind.

For us now to look on Jesus as a sage is to set aside all of that interpretive scheme and to return to a wandering preacher who, through charisma and healing, invited people to live better lives. Those who protest at this re-characterisation have two complaints: the attempt is impious or the attempt is futile. Or both.

A 'sage' is a person who dispenses wisdom — not the conventional wisdom of Oprah and life coaches, but radical and subversive wisdom. Such a contrast is seen in the Old Testament with *Proverbs* providing *conventional* wisdom and *Job* and *Ecclesiastes* providing *subversive* wisdom. Just as the Zen *koan* destabilises the mind and clears the way for fresh insight, so too does the unfamiliar logic of Jesus' aphorisms in which the dead are left to bury the dead, or we are urged to turn the other cheek to an aggressor, or where the most recent vineyard hirees get the same pay as those hired earlier, or the narrow gate is to be preferred, or the last ends up first. Jesus' vision was utopian. Rather than a detailed prescription for action, he provided an open invitation for each listener to work out how to make God's reign work 'on earth'.

Marcus Borg in his *Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time* (pp69-) likens the pre-Easter Jesus (that is, before the memory of him attracted layers of devout interpretation) to Lao Tzu and The Buddha and Socrates (whose fate of execution Jesus shared). Jesus spoke in aphorisms, one-liners, and parables. Today he might have said "Blind guides, you fuss about gay clergy and condoms but are smugly comfortable with the immense wealth of your church." Furthermore, Borg says that it is a mistake to run the aphorisms together — they would have been uttered singly, in the flow of conversation or public speech. Don Cupitt thinks that Jesus carefully crafted his sayings — 'offline' as it were — and used them in conversation later, as did Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. The Kingdom of God — Jesus' most-sung 'song' — is only ever described aphoristically, as being *like* yeast in dough, or *like* buried treasure. And, because these pithy statements worked so well, he would have used them over and over — why waste a good line?

At the end of a parable we are left dangling. Who really *was* the neighbour of the mugged traveller? Why *did* the father fete the wastrel son? We are not told, we must 'go figure'.

Where conventional wisdom 'domesticates' reality (Borg), Jesus' divine wisdom invites a new way of looking at things — a way of the transformed life.

Robert Funk, founder of the Westar Institute and The Jesus Seminar, in his *Honest To Jesus* (1996 pp302-303) wrote: "Jesus is one of the great sages of history, and his insights should be taken seriously but tested by reference to other seers, ancient and modern, who have had glimpses of the eternal, and by reference to everything we can learn from the sciences, the poets, the artists. ... The glimpse is no respecter of theologies, theological schools, or evangelists. The glimpse blows where it will — every which way."

Don Cupitt in his *Jesus and Philosophy* (2009 p49 — see also p11 of this Newsletter) wrote: "Almost the whole content of his teaching ... is set in a secular-humanist world, with only the most minimal supernatural apparatus. ... Jesus has no teaching about 'spirituality'." He was a sage.

**Noel Cheer, Wikipedia & others,**

Especially Roy Hoover *Profiles of Jesus*, ed. Polebridge Press 2002

[More of this on Radio National on September 13 at 5:12pm when the author talks about SoF to Maureen Garing on "Spiritual Outlook"]

## The dialogue continues ...

### An Open Reply to Sir Lloyd Geering

I thank Lloyd for talking the trouble to air his concerns about my treatment of Jung in his Open Letter, which appeared in the previous issue of the *Sea of Faith Newsletter*. Without going over old territory, let's remind ourselves why this controversy began. I was moved to respond to the declaration, made at the 2006 Sea of Faith Conference, that Jung would be one of the paradigmatic influences of the twenty-first century. This claim struck me as sufficiently unbalanced and extreme that a compilation of some of its negative consequences would be salutary. The original fifteen theses, then, were compiled in the name of counter-balancing a bizarre claim (which neither Jim Feist nor Lloyd Geering has attempted to defend). In this way, Lloyd's objections miss the mark because they overlook what I was trying to do. It was not my intention to present a general account of Jung's thought. Rather, the objective was to present, in as simple a style as possible (a.k.a Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*) a critical response to a claim that struck me as extreme. This relates to the charge of reading too narrowly. I have, of course, read material favourable to Jung; Anthony Stevens' *On Jung* being the most recent of them. But as I've said, it was not my intention to offer a general account of Jung's thought.

*My sole intention for this controversy was to call into question a claim about the beneficent influence Jung would cast over the twenty-first century.*

Let's now look at the charge of resorting to emotive and extreme language because, if valid, my case would be undermined. Lloyd gives no indication of which passages are disfigured in this way, so I am going to assume that he refers to my description of Jung as megalomaniacal, misogynistic, intellectually dishonest, racist and anti-Semitic. Lloyd's charge would carry weight if I had conjured these words out of the air, but the point of my original theses was to summarise, in as few words as possible, a whole literature of criticism of Jung, which strikes me as undervalued if not totally overlooked by Jungians. Each of those terms are the encapsulations of criticisms of Jung made in the books I listed in Newsletter 79. These sources are dismissed as 'odd', but isn't that true of any works uncongenial to one's own beliefs? Those terms are not simply me ranting, but the clearest summary, often the exact words, of much longer and more considered criticisms. So, before we ask whether my criticisms of Jung are extreme or emotive or the sources odd, should we not ask first whether they are true?

Lloyd then suggests I have overlooked the world-wide network of Jungian analysts. On the contrary, I am fully aware of them, but they are not my concern. There is a world-wide network of Scientology offices as well, that does nothing to recommend the truth-claims of Scientology. A more important point is Lloyd's response that, in all his reading of and about Jung, he has never come across instances of the failings I have outlined. This is probably because the Bollingen foundation consistently refuses access to Jung's papers and unpublished works to those they suspect of being anything less than devotedly pro-Jung. My sole intention for this controversy was to call into question a claim about the beneficent influence Jung would cast over the twenty-first century. I hope this controversy has encouraged readers to at least think twice about that claim, and perhaps even to consult some works critical of Jung, so as to arrive at their own conclusions.

**Bill Cooke**



## Dating of the Gospels

IN NEWSLETTER 83, ROBIN BOOM CONTESTED THE “RECEIVED” DATING OF THE GOSPELS. HE IS NOT ALONE.

In 1976, Bishop John A. T. Robinson (primarily a New Testament scholar and hardly a conservative) published a sizeable and scholarly book called *Redating the New Testament*. He argued that all the New Testament was written before 70 AD (though he allowed that II Peter and possibly the Gospel of John might be later).



The evidence for the received dating is very flimsy.

- Mark (and the other synoptics) seem to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. However, the references are quite oblique, and do not mention (as would surely be unavoidable) the destruction of the temple. The reference could easily be to any of a number of occasions well before 70AD when Jerusalem was under threat.
- It is commonly said that it would take quite some time for the ideas that we find in, for example, the Pastorals and John to develop. This is pure supposition – and in fact there are strong hints of their distinctive ideas quite early.

We have a much firmer fixed date in the concluding section of Acts. It is almost inconceivable that this could have been written if Paul was dead. So Acts (and Luke) must be before 65AD, and Mark could be as early as 45AD.

Robinson sees an explosion of Christian thinking and writing between 50AD and 60AD – a sort of ‘Elizabethan Age’ of the early church. This seems to me not only credible but more convincing than the ‘received’ dating. The debate is of some interest to historians, but the outcome does not make much difference to anything important.

*David Simmers, Wellington*

["One of the oddest facts about the New Testament is that what on any showing would appear to be the single most datable and climactic event of the period - the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and with it the collapse of institutional Judaism based on the temple - is never once mentioned as a past fact. " from *Redating The New Testament*. ed]

## Freedom to Offend

In a book review printed in the *Washington Post* on May 1, 2009 Jeremy Lott made this observation:

"Free Speech" leans heavily on the philosopher John Stuart Mill's 1859 classic *On Liberty* to supply the justification for freedom of argumentation and expression. Mill's arguments boil down to three propositions.

- First, truth matters.
- Second, the best way to get at truth is to allow a serious and open contest of ideas. Mill likened this to a marketplace, although it seems closer to a college seminar.
- Third, the government is only really justified in regulating us if do we violence to others — or intentionally stir others to violence.

Mill thought free speech precious because it would maximize the happiness of society. Many who came after Mill have pointed out that his utilitarian calculus doesn't really add up. Freewheeling speech may lead people to the truth, or it may move them in the other direction. Ultimately, freedom of speech - with its implied and unpopular right to cause offense - matters because freedom matters.

## George Bernard Shaw on Darwin

"[Darwinism] seems simple, because you do not at first realize all that it involves. But when its whole significance dawns on you, your heart sinks into a heap of sand within you. There is a hideous fatalism about it, a ghastly and damnable reduction of beauty and intelligence, of strength and purpose, of honor and aspiration."

*Back to Methuselah (1921)*

## ***Bob Scott, Gisborne***

*That person is a success who has lived well, laughed often and loved much;  
Who has gained the respect of intelligent adults and the love of children;  
Who has filled his niche and accomplished his task;  
Who has never lacked appreciation of earth's beauty or failed to express it;  
Who looked for the best in others and gave the best he had. That was our Bob.  
Our Bob Scott who died suddenly on Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> June.*

At Bob's funeral, his son Ron spoke warmly of his father as an extremely well organised person and a great recorder of important events in his life. Our Parish appreciated those skills when they appointed him 'Archivist' of our Church history. When a particular piece of history was required, Bob could always go directly to the records.

Although Bob lived most of his early and married life at 36 De Latour Road, he had a great wanderlust. At four years old he accompanied his parents to Scotland which entailed six weeks aboard ship each way, marking his early acquaintance with the sea. This led Bob switching from the Army to the Navy during World War II and serving with the RNZN and the Royal Navy in Britain.

In his forties, he became keen on tramping in the hills, bush and mountains in many parts of New Zealand. Tramping was the catalyst in allowing him to develop his love of photography, botany and geology.

Bob's priorities in life were his dear wife Janet and their family, the church, his work and active recreation.

Bob and Janet took their children on many extensive camping holidays throughout New Zealand and after his retirement in 1984 he restored his vintage Riley car and attended many rallies throughout the country.

At seventy years of age he joined the crew of the sailing ship "Tradewinds" on a voyage from Gisborne to Tauranga. One of his favourite sayings was "you cannot discover new lands or places unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore and the city lights".

More of his favourite sayings were "Only Nature can sculpture these grand designs" and "No one can go to sea, or into the mountains without having their mind expanded, their imagination quickened, their soul refreshed and their whole morale invigorated and strengthened. Who could ask for more than that"?

Bob's enquiring mind led him and Janet to becoming members of the New Zealand Sea of Faith and they attended most national annual Conferences.

His liberal voice is a real loss.

***Beverley M. Smith***  
***Co-ordinator, Gisborne Group***

## Personal Memories and the Jesus Seminar

Fred Marshall of Hamilton also takes issue with The Jesus Seminar

Robin Boom has taken the Jesus Seminar to task over the dating of the gospels. There was, according to TJS, a prolonged period during which memories of Jesus were preserved orally and, by the nature of that tradition, modified in the preserving. Robin challenges the length of that oral transmission. I do not have the expertise to argue on these grounds but from the evidence provided by the manifesto of the group, *The Five Gospels*, there is another aspect of its methodology which betrays a serious flaw.

The Jesus Seminar has set out to distinguish the authentic sayings of Jesus from the distortions created by group memory over time and from the adaptation of what Jesus said in different contexts and from the narrative necessities which such adaptations required. The writing down of Jesus' sayings was further distorted by the obsession of reconciling the Old Testament prophecies with a life that was seen as a fulfillment of them, so that the past and Jesus' life become confused in the written tradition. To make this distinction the 'scholars', as they call themselves, have drawn up a series of rules: Those sayings are more likely to be authentic which are derived from more than one source, or can be traced to the earlier period of the transmission. If they correspond to Old Testament texts they are likely to be derivative. From the authenticated sayings, characteristics of Jesus' style can be determined – pungent, exaggerated, unexplained etc.— and these qualities can be used as a measure of authenticity for other texts. The conclusion of the 'scholars' is that Jesus was a wandering sage. In *The Five Gospels* the authenticity of Jesus' words is measured on a scale of 1 – 4 and printed in shades from red to black, black being the least authentic.

One can accept that the stories about Jesus circulated orally for a period of time before they were written down and that they were shaped by different contexts. Details were selected or dropped to conform to the view point of the writer. Different sources were amalgamated, narrative invention linked episode with episode (whether or not the conversations reported corresponded with the exact words Jesus used), compilations of sayings about a given topic were made and inserted into a contrived narrative setting –the "Sermon on the Mount" is one such collection. Matthew 23 similarly is a collection of condemnations of Pharisaic self-righteousness. The gospels themselves each have a predominant theme. Matthew addresses the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies, John, the divinity of Jesus. Whether the period of this oral tradition lasted 20 years or 40 is not really material to my argument. It can be accepted that the processes described in the thesis proposed by *The Five Gospels* took place and over the period of the writings to — and beyond — the end of the first century, patterns of evolution can be observed. In *Born of a Woman* Spong makes a case for the progressive displacement of Mary Magdalene as chief woman in favour of Mary, Jesus' mother and her progressive elevation to quasi-divine status. In *The Jesus Dynasty* James Tabor makes a similar case for the reduction of John the Baptist from equal collaborator with Jesus in a messianic enterprise to the status of "supporting cast". Over the sweep of Paul's writings and the gospels culminating with John and *Revelation*, we observe the progressive and exclusive divinisation of Jesus — as Lloyd Geering, in an unforgettable lecture *Excavating Jesus*, has demonstrated.

What this method does not take into account is the insertion into the written tradition of personal memories engraved on the minds of individuals with the exact precision of an unforgettable experience. Robin evokes one of those in Mark 14:51 when the young man fled naked, leaving his robe in the hands of his pursuers, a narrative detail which adds nothing to the context, but betrays a personal memory. I propose to look at four sayings of Jesus preserved in the personal memory of his friends and see how they are treated in *The Five Gospels*.

Luke 2:49 **"Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I have to be in my father's house?"** The context: the young Jesus caught up in the excitement of the visit to Jerusalem and enjoying the interest of elders forgets to stay with his parents and is left behind when they set out for home. His mother reproves him and the young teenager, knowing he has been thoughtless, strikes back, reproaching his mother for his illegitimacy\* by repudiating Joseph, intending to hurt. He succeeded and the gospel records that Mary remembered it. The 'scholars' reject a vivid memory as "Luke's composition" when there is no narrative necessity for the account and in so doing dismiss significant and rare evidence of the influences that formed Jesus' character.

Matthew 11:3; Luke 7:19 **"Go, report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind see again, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news preached to them".** The context: Tabor offers the hypothesis that John the Baptist and Jesus, who were associated with each other from childhood, were colleagues in a joint messianic mission. In support of this association he cites *inter alia* the commendation that each makes of the other (Mark 1:7-8, Matthew 11:7 ff, Luke 7:24-25). John is imprisoned by Herod and sends to Jesus to find out how the mission is going. By the rule that what is derived from the Old Testament is spurious the 'scholars' conclude, "The words of Jesus can only be the work of his followers". Yet given John's concern, to quote the Isaiah texts which fired them both is the most appropriate response Jesus could make. To dismiss the episode as derivative suppresses evidence of Jesus' relationship with John.

\* Refer to Fred's paper *Jesus The Bastard* in the Documents section of the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)

John 8: 7: "**Whoever is sinless in this crowd should go ahead and throw the first stone at her**" The episode of the adulterous woman has both the recognition of the malign intention behind the challenge made to Jesus ("They said this to trap him") and the precise detail of a lived event ("Jesus stooped down and began drawing etc"). The context: Jesus' illegitimacy is discreetly acknowledged in all four gospels and had a bearing on his whole life. The attack by the Pharisees is directed at that. If he says "Stone her" he condemns his own mother; if he says "Let her go" he becomes complicit in the breaking of Mosaic law because of his mother. His evasion is brilliant and typical. He cuts through mob violence by attributing the responsibility for action home to the individual. He rejected mob rule in principle in the "temptations in the wilderness", he confronted it in Nazareth when he walked through the angry crowd, daring each individual in turn to act, and a similar challenge to individual responsibility explains the "miracle" of feeding crowds. So we have precise detail, typical behaviour and a perfect response to context. The 'scholars' print the text in black (inauthentic) and comment "While the Fellows agreed that the words did not originate in their present form with Jesus, they nevertheless assigned the words and story to a special category of things they wish Jesus had said and done". ! (My exclamation).

### **My approach is not without its problems.**

John 2:4 "**Woman, what is it with you and me? It's not my time yet**". The translation of *tis moi kai soi* seems imprecise. Does it imply 'You are always getting at me'? "What has that to do with you and me?" "What business is it of ours?" seems better contextually. The episode is full of precise detail: the relationship between Jesus and his mother; her grasp of the situation shown in her instruction to the servants; his instructions to the servants — these all fit the criteria for precise personal memory, yet the outcome is impossible. The *Five Gospels* commentary notes that "It's not my time yet" is part of a skein of thematic references exclusive to John's gospel, and theologians from the first century to our own have had a field day with the water-into-wine story. But the precise detail and Mary's intuitive knowledge of her son gainsay the conclusion of the Fellows "that the words ascribed to Jesus in this narrative were the creation of the storyteller or were derived from common lore". The same situation occurs in the interchange between Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the tomb episode (John 20:15ff). Perhaps in cases of uncertainty like this we should withhold judgement. Something occurred, even if we cannot say what it was.

**The Jesus Seminar have brought to bear a huge weight of scholarship** in an attempt to find the things Jesus might really have said. They have succeeded in creating a stereotype which, when applied to the gospel texts, masks the human reality that lies implicit in personal reminiscences, which retain their integrity whatever uses are made of them in the gospel frame in which they are placed. The passages I have chosen assert their authenticity against the application of rule by the eye-witness precision of the detail, by their pertinence in specific contexts, by the absence of narrative necessity — they are not there to link A with B — and by their poignancy. There are others like them, particularly the words on the cross, graven indelibly into the memories of agonised eye-witnesses. And from such passages comes a deeper insight into the people engaged in the gospel stories, too valuable to ignore.

**Fred Marshall**

## **Religion: Strong, Weak, After and Absent**

Owen and Joy Lewis recently lead a discussion in the Auckland Group, which looked at a variety of religious responses to the human quest for meaning, drawing on concepts taken from Richard Holloway's recent book *Between the Monster and the Saint: Reflections on the Human Condition*.



"...I [Holloway] can detect four responses to the human quest for meaning. Using the radio metaphor, I describe **the first notch** on this long continuum or spectrum as 'strong religion', because it claims to be in possession of a clear and perfect signal from the divine."... " (Believers) claim to be owners of a body of revealed knowledge...and they claim to be in possession of the final and unalterable lifestyle manual dictated by God during the original broadcasts." (p94).

**The second notch** Holloway describes as 'weak religion' because "we could describe the people who occupy this place as those who receive a weak and intermittent signal from God." (p105) "Humans can never be sure of the meaning behind the signals of transcendence they receive, because they themselves are the faulty equipment that has to interpret them...While it (weak religion) reverences and learns from the religious tradition that has nurtured it, it also respects the society of its own time and learns to go on adapting to its best discoveries." (p106).

**The third notch** is called 'after religion': "People in this position see religion as an entirely human construct, a work of the human imagination, but one that carries enduring meaning." (p113) "They may even go to a synagogue, church or mosque...because they want to stay in touch with one of the oldest and most enduring of human institutions...they do not want to cut off themselves or their children from the old truth-bearing myths." (p114).



**The fourth notch** is “the complete absence of religious consciousness...it is totally deaf or colour-blind to the imagination that conjures up the religious response to the mystery of life...Life is its own meaning. It just is. So get on with it.” (p116). In the weak form religious consciousness “is tolerated as an example of a comforting faith...their response is completely without hostility.” (p117).

“Strong fourth notchers are a different breed... The most passionate neo-atheists are motivated by a strongly ethical and entirely praiseworthy loathing of cruelty and violence... It is the theory that religion is the root of all evil that lies at the heart of the new atheism.” (p117)

**What's your 'notch'? Send copy for printing in the Newsletter.**

## Humanity, Red in Tooth and Hand

Your “From the Archives” article, “Nature, red in tooth and claw” featured in the May 2009 newsletter, poses the curious question of whether God envisions a pelican chick as an end in itself or merely as a means to other ends, and concludes with the statement that this is the issue that “any Christian interested in the relation between God and nature must address”. The article was prefaced with a warning that we should not get too sentimental about “nature”. It is then pondered whether God, watching from a distance, shares the suffering of creatures that suffer violence and early death. Is God empathetic or uncaring?

Much more to the point surely is whether we are empathetic or uncaring! The rejected pelican chick, referred to in the article as an example of “nature, red in tooth and claw” has an easy life and death compared to the millions of animal deaths caused by humans.

God (or whatever means the good) shows no sign of being *able* to intervene (even if s/he wants to) on behalf of the pelicans, sparrows, pigs, battery hens, truckloads of farm animals on their way to death camp abattoirs and all the other creatures that we hunt, exterminate, exploit and rob of their habitat.

We have long used the “nature, red...” cliché as some sort of absurd justification for *our* exploitation and cruelty to other species, as if violence in nature gives *us* free rein to do our worst. As we consider ourselves to be the most intelligent animal on the planet, and apparently the only one capable of making ethical choices, this is a very strange piece of reasoning.

Instead of asking whether “God” cares about individual animals, we need to ask why we seem NOT to care. Because, unlike God, we actually have the power to make choices that would be beneficial for both individual creatures and their species. Let animals do what animals do – we may wince at some of the brutality of nature – but we do not need to be so brutal ourselves.

We play God with the non-human animals on the earth – to this one we give value and go to enormous lengths to protect an individual or the species and to that one we confer pest status and ruthlessly exterminate it. This one is food and can be confined in cages, that one is a pet and can't be. This one is endangered and huge amounts of money and time must be spent on saving it and that one is part of a group that is too big so must be “culled”.

Let us not ask whether “God” or “evolution” values an individual creature or its species. Let us instead, having conferred upon ourselves the status of gods, ask ourselves whether the enslavement, exploitation and extermination of non-human animals is something that we care about enough to change *our* ways.

Lynette Vigrass, Belmont, Lower Hutt

*Sir Lloyd Geering*

Dear Lloyd

On behalf of the membership of the Sea of Faith Network (NZ), the Steering Committee would like to add their congratulations to the many others you will have received, for the decision you made to accept the title. Whilst the honour has already been won and will have been well celebrated earlier, this more recognisable addition to the honour will let the world know much more readily, just how highly regarded you are in this country.

That decision cannot have been easy as there has been significant discussion on that topic in the press for months now. For our part, we offer every support.

We are all delighted to have such a close association with you, most grateful for the invaluable leadership which you give to this group and are always inspired by the clarity of your writings.

We are all looking forward to hearing you again at Sea of Faith Conference in September, and to reading your forthcoming book on Ecclesiastes.

Norm Ely



## The Trouble with Jesus

**David Kitchingman offered these propositions to the Dunedin Sea of Faith Group**

1. Jesus, in so far as we can know him, is in large measure a composite of the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the Jesus movement that grew out of the legacy of his life and death.
2. From a birth at Bethlehem to major segments of the Passion narratives, much of the so-called life of Jesus arose from creative interpretations by the Evangelists, including retrofitting imaginary sayings and events onto earlier scriptures.
3. The real Jesus, beneath the thick varnish of the records about him, remains elusive despite much scholarly effort and some more progress in recent decades.
4. Whatever else might be historically ascertainable about Jesus, there are two indelible characteristics conferred through his genetic and cultural inheritance to take into account – his maleness and his Jewishness.
5. The quest for the Jesus of history is valid and helpful but does not of itself settle the bigger issue of what is at stake once a more authentic Jesus is revealed – authenticity is one thing, intrinsic authority quite another.
6. Everyone, even those who pare down their expectations of the historicity of Jesus, has a predisposition as to his significance, which may well be carried over from earlier imagery of him.
7. Christians are even more sensitive about their image of Jesus than their image of God, in part because (to adapt Albert Schweitzer's analogy) finding Jesus can be like peering into a deep well and seeing one's own reflection.
8. It must be acknowledged that without the traditional Christ of faith, risen and ascended, it is uncertain how well the Jesus of history would have been preserved. The two Jesuses are mutually dependent.
9. It may not be too much to claim that Jesus' story remains the greatest ever told, yet the story itself may be even greater than its hero.
10. The Christ of faith has been an all-embracing and generally grace-mediating influence within Christianity.
11. It seems to match a deep-seated need in the human psyche for some heroic godlike figure as a protector and guide, and might have gained more universal acceptance if world history were confined to the Middle East.
12. Yet history has demonstrated that unquestioning commitment to act according to a particular perception of Jesus as Lord can be dangerous and damaging. Examples abound.
13. Whether Jesus himself had any flaws in his character may not be a very fruitful line of inquiry given the compulsive idealisation of the early church and the gulf that separates us historically and culturally.
14. That is not to say that he should be regarded as immune to criticism. To be fully human is to have a personality, so at the very least some people must find his personality (even if shadowy) less compatible with their own than others do.
15. The contention that there is trouble with Jesus is not to be confused with a negative response to the challenging fact that in one sense Jesus was, and still is, a troublesome prophet, an uncomfortably unpredictable do-gooder, and a gadfly.
16. The main problem with Jesus is that his enthronement by the Church as Lord and Christ has elevated him into a supernatural world inhabited by the doctrine of a triune God, an increasingly alien concept in the modern worldview.
17. In particular, the divinisation of Jesus has presented him as a virtually exclusive gateway into the fullness of life, thereby treating other faiths as inferior paths to salvation.
18. The godhead role assigned to Jesus creates a credibility gap on a grand scale – remarkable as his effects have been on human life, the fact remains that the combined inspiration of his teachings and example can never fully deliver on the expectations of such a divine saviour.
19. Jesus needs to be emancipated from the theistic literalism that stands in the way of genuine acceptance of him as a human being, creative dialogue with his message, and the celebration of his story.
20. He needs to be interpreted as a giant leap in the evolution of human culture and gathered up into a broader movement of person-centric and earth-centric reverence embracing all of humanity.
21. Realistically, no such pivotal change is likely to take place in any mainstream church anytime soon – the notion of lordship lies too near the heart of the power structures of church polity.
22. Nevertheless, there are some small signs of hope of a retreat from Christian chauvinism. (With apologies to George Herbert, the non-realist "God's mill grinds slow, but sure".)
23. A major breakthrough would be full acceptance and joint celebration among those who relate to Jesus in what would normally be considered mutually exclusive ways. There is for some, "one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God ... whose kingdom shall have no end" and for others, an astonishing affirmer and giver of life and love, not fundamentally more and scarcely ever less. ■

## Opening The Time Capsule

*Jesus and Philosophy*

Don Cupitt

SCM Press 2009

**When you see the small humble church adopted and repaired by Francis of Assisi, crouching inside the huge and anything-but-humble church of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi, you get a tangible view of what Don Cupitt is saying in *Jesus and Philosophy*.**

Just as the adoration that came Francis' way was siphoned-off by the Church for its own purposes — which were definitely not the modesty and poverty of Francis — so too has an accurate portrayal of Jesus' 'Kingdom' message been trapped, in a time capsule as it were, for the past 20 centuries. Francis turned from the pomp and power of the church and took poverty as central to his spirituality. Jesus turned aside from the conventional religious practices of his day and spoke of ethics that were not based on supernatural assumptions. As Cupitt writes, Jesus "follows the prophets: he has in mind a new trans-religious state of humanity, in which all the old ways of religious world-building will be fulfilled *and will therefore disappear*". [italics added]. But the developing Christian church smothered Jesus under layers of interpretation.

Ethics, for Cupitt, is the mainstay of philosophy — at least of human philosophy. But what sort of philosopher was Jesus? It's been nearly 20 years since The Jesus Seminar gave us a reasonably dependable collection of authentic Jesus sayings in *The Five Gospels* (think of it as the NT 'highlighted') and *The Gospel of Jesus* (containing only the 'authentic' sayings). A bit later, the now late Robert Funk put the findings of The Jesus Seminar into the descriptive *Honest To Jesus*; and a committee of authors, edited by Roy Hoover, attempted to 're-discover an authentic Jesus' based on the probably authentic sayings in *Profiles of Jesus*. All of this, and other, post-Schweitzer work was majesterially summed up in David Boulton's *Who on EARTH was JESUS?*

But Jesus as philosopher? Ethicist? Yes, according to Cupitt — and leading-edge, too. Don picks up the comments of others about Jesus' rhetorical skills — the one-liners, the parables with the twist in the tail, the exaggerated imagery — and he contrasts the 'vertical' religious ethics of those who see religious duty as attending to God, with Jesus' 'horizontal' religious ethics that requires of us Blake's "mercy, pity, peace and love".

*For Mercy has a human heart / Pity a human face,  
And Love, the human form divine/ And Peace, the human dress.*

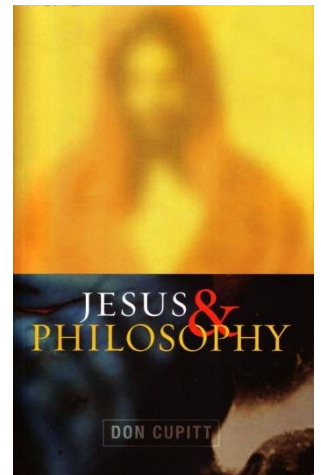
William Blake, quoted in the Preface of *Jesus and Philosophy*

Reading Cupitt, and many of the above-mentioned authors, we see an 'only-slightly-religious' Jesus, ready to use conventional religious ideas but in the service of his agenda. He showed a respectful attitude to God but a fierce utopian passion to "the space between one human and another" which, when done well, is The Kingdom of God. Read also Buber's *I and Thou*.

Jesus then is a religiously-tinged, secular utopian moralist who puts the human before the Sabbath, fellow-feeling ahead of 'religious duty'.

As formal Christian affiliation drains away, in the West at least (Africa is another and more complicated story), the ethics of Jesus are escaping from 20 centuries of burial in Christianity.

*Jesus and Philosophy* is easy to read and it gathers up threads that Cupitt has been spinning out over the last decade, particularly that the end-point of religion is its growth into a feet-on-the-ground, love-your-neighbor secular concern. "Take the cash", as the later sage Omar Khayyam said, "and let the credit go".



**Noel Cheer**

## My View

From the Chair, Norm Ely

### **My View after four years on the Steering Committee and three years as Chair, is that Sea of Faith in New Zealand is as vibrant as it has ever been since its inception.**

Over the four years that I have been involved on the Steering Committee it has carried out such an in-depth survey regarding the thoughts, understandings, needs, definitions and general expectations of members of Sea of Faith, that it has taken us three years to analyse it and report back to members. This Survey has produced information that will serve the Sea of Faith for the next ten years at least. The final report will be made to the SoF Conference 2009 and all detailed analytical information will be given the SoF Archives for future use and research.

The Sea of Faith Newsletter has undergone a review and upgrade in all aspects of its production and publication. Improved quality paper; more colour (you can receive the Newsletter via email in FULL colour); increased number of pages; and at a lower cost per page; have all been achieved. There are more articles received and published than space in most editions but we give precedence to copy from members. We have received and published more controversial opinions than ever before. The Newsletter is obviously read and scrutinised more than ever before.

The Website continues to be improved and contains a vast array of material and information for individuals and groups to use as a resource. The Website, and especially the resources contained on the site, is one area that in my opinion is greatly under-used and I would really recommend members and groups make more use of this superb resource.

Communication between the Steering Committee and the Local Groups has been one of the other highlights of the last three years of my association with the Steering Committee. This has proven to be an invaluable asset for both the Steering Committee and the Local Groups.

Another Local Group initiative that has been very successful is the Local Group Website that Dunedin and Christchurch Groups have set up. These sites have links to and from the main SoF website.

The Sea of Faith Conferences over the last three years have each had variations from previous formulae. Members have expressed desires for particular aspects of Conference to be incorporated. This has given us a small difficulty in that we cannot accommodate all of these points at each Conference. Therefore, we have made adjustments to each of the last three Conferences to allow for each of these variations to be tried. We will know the final result at the end of the coming Conference. I suspect that each variation has its own success and benefit. This raises the question as to how frequently each of these three variations should be used if at all. I suspect that the Theme of a Conference will in many ways determine how a Conference is put together.

The last three years during which I have been Chair have been extremely busy and very fruitful for me, as I am sure that they have been for other Steering Committee members, as well as most members of the Sea of Faith NZ.

The achievements of the last three years have been made possible only by the tolerance and constructive criticism of the general membership of Sea of Faith NZ. Equally, these achievements have been completed by the quality discussion; team work; effort and hard work by the last three Steering Committees, and the three Conference Area co-ordinators, over the last three years.

Naturally, some individuals have been able to offer more than others but it is the TEAM effort that produces the results. Therefore, naming individuals is not warranted, but everybody who has been associated with the last three Steering Committees has, in my opinion, a lot to be proud of.

I am delighted that Sea of Faith NZ is in such a strong and vibrant phase and I would personally like to thank you all for your thought, time, effort, debate and support.

Shalom.

Norm

