



Letter From The Editor

About Labels and Contents, Nouns and Adjectives

The name “Wellington Railway Station” both *names* and *describes* the object. Orwell’s “Ministry of Truth” *names* and cynically *mis-describes* the object. “Sea of Faith Network” *names*, but does not even attempt to describe our organisation.

So, when should the **name** and the **description** be required to agree?

I have recently been sent off into semantic tangents by the term “Progressive Christianity”, especially as articulated by Gretta Vosper, who is both founder and chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity. Gretta recently spoke at St. Andrew’s on The Terrace in Wellington. (You can buy the 2-CD set of her lecture series at www.standrews.org.nz/satrs. Look for “With or Without God” in Publication section.)

“Progressive Christianity” is certainly fine as far as the adjective goes. “Progressive” is a synonym for positive change and the changes suggested and implemented by the Progressives are attractive. But what about the noun? As the old PHIL101 teaser asks, “How much can a thing change **and still be that thing?**” Was Christianity at its inception “Progressive Judaism”? Is Rugby “Progressive Soccer”.

Like me, Progressive Christians don’t subscribe to a supernatural ‘God’. The status of ‘Christ’ and the Bible are similarly sidelined. But these are the three factors that Marcus Borg, at least, insists are essential to Christianity.

It seems to me that a threshold has been crossed with this approach. The title of Gretta Vosper’s book – *With or Without God* – says it well. The subtitle – *Why the way we live is more important than what we believe* – does a fine job of completing the move from orthodoxy to orthopraxy.

The more I hear about Progressive Christianity, the more it seems like a bottle with “Coca-Cola” on the label but which, when sipped, proves to be a fine Pinot Noir.

Yes, it is a modern and thoroughly progressive approach to 21stC spirituality. It follows Karen Armstrong on putting compassion ahead of dogma. Both Jesus, before his promotion to ‘Christ’ (without his permission) and The Buddha were strong on that.

But doesn’t Christianity have characteristics that cannot be surrendered, no matter what is the apparent gain?

Yes, if you don’t like the orthodoxy then you can walk away. Millions have. But surely turning your back on all that tradition makes you no longer a “Progressive Christian” but a “Progressive **Post-Christian**”? And all the more human for it!

Noel Cheer, Editor (who welcomes Letters To The)

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Inexcusably Obscure Theological Words #673

Theodicy

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?

Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing?

Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing?

Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing?

Then why call him God?’

Epicurus (341-271 BC)

Letters (of opinion and clarification) to the Editor are invited.



Annual Subscriptions are due on June 30.

**If yours is due to lapse then you should
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Hutt Hospital Labyrinth

Merran Flemming of Wellington

Labyrinths are known to have existed for millennia through many continents and cultures, their precise origins being lost in the mists of time.

A labyrinth is unicursal – meaning that it has a singular circuitous path with only one entrance that is also the exit. The labyrinth pathway meanders in such a way that the walker can never be quite sure how near to the end point they are, the route teasing them into false assumptions as to their location in relation to it.

By contrast, a maze is a more modern concept, arising during the Middle Ages, and intended to puzzle or trick us into making errors and getting lost. A maze is multicursal – meaning that it has many intertwining paths. Throughout the media the term labyrinth is often used to imply mega-maze whereas it is quite a different concept and arose from a wide range of religious roots as a spiritual tool.

The labyrinth is an ancient symbol that represents a journey to our own spiritual centre. They have been integral with cultures as diverse as Celtic, Greek, African and Native American and predate Christianity by at least 3500 years. Christian labyrinths arose during the Middle Ages, built when the crusades made pilgrimage to Jerusalem too dangerous. Chartres Cathedral, built during the early 13th Century when it was believed to be the most divine thing on earth honouring God, is now the only remaining “Jerusalem” Cathedral.

The architecture and labyrinth layout in Chartres Cathedral were made to fit the stringent demands of sacred geometry. The Cathedral’s labyrinth was probably built around 1215-1235 at a time when most people were illiterate. The geometry provided a compendium of Biblical knowledge, a lunar calendar and a place of penitence. Today it is impossible to replicate this labyrinth design, one of the most popular to be used in the 21st century, without beginning with an invisible 13-point star. The cruciform shape across the entire design is an obvious Christian symbol.

A characteristic of the Western post-modern society is that many people search for meaning and purpose in life outside the traditional church organizations. The labyrinth construct continues to speak as a spiritual tool and since the 1990s there has been a major resurgence of interest in building them. Predominantly in North America and Europe they are increasingly to be found in such places as churches, retreat centres, hospitals, prisons, cemeteries and open public spaces. Since the opening of the labyrinth at Fredric Wallis House [FWH] the number of labyrinths in NZ and Australia has been steadily growing.

At Hutt City’s FWH the labyrinth was used daily by those at the ecumenical retreat and conference centre. It also hosted such events as a wedding, part of a funeral service, anniversary celebrations and a family bereavement walk. Monks from the local Buddhist monastery regularly walked it together and a local SoF group used it on a number of occasions. Vigil prayer was held there for East Timor.

Built in 1997-9, through community effort and funding, the labyrinth became the first in-ground labyrinth in Australasia. It is in the Chartres Cathedral design with unique colour-ways to reflect NZ’s flora and geography. The original objective was that the labyrinth enhance the magnificent botanical grounds at FWH and assist with peace, prayer and meditation. When FWH closed a saddened local community again financed the labyrinth, moving it to nearby Hutt Hospital where it became Australasia’s first hospital labyrinth. This relocation was an unprecedented historical event in

known labyrinth circles that has created interest from around the world.

By hosting the labyrinth the Hutt Valley District Health Board [HVDHB] recognises that there is a need for a holistic approach to healing, and that people want to address their spiritual and psycho-social needs. The relocated labyrinth identifies Hutt Hospital as caring for each individual’s well-being. Since being relocated and restored, the labyrinth has become more accessible to the community and is available to people whether or not they are using or providing hospital services. It is recognised as a public installation that is now a



We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

“Little Gidding” from Four Quartets by T.S. Eliot

part of the Hutt City Council's E-Tu Awakairangi Public Art Trust. The labyrinth is a regional taonga that when in use becomes a living sculpture.

Set amongst heritage trees and a remnant of the original forest floor the labyrinth continues as a popular "place to be". In summer it is a favourite lunch and picnic spot. Seating is placed strategically around the labyrinth so as to intrude as little as possible with those walking it. Hospital patients often set an initial target of being well enough to get onto the labyrinth, which is wheelchair compatible. Visible from the road a wider cross-section of the community and all age groups are now using it.

Busloads of school children have walked and studied it, the hospital chaplains from the lower half of the North Island have visited, an Anglican Church service has been held there, and it has hosted a hospital staff member's wedding. The local Mongrel Mob and Black Power have used it. During June 2010 The Wellington Heritage Promotion Council assisted with promoting the historical event "Move it or lose it". The Wellington Interfaith Council is soon to engage in a multi-faith dialogue and experience of mediative walking assisted by Fr. Chris Skinner singing Taize-style chants. Carols Around the Labyrinth in mid December, sung at dusk to the light of glo-sticks, is an enhanced tradition carried over from FWH.

The labyrinth offers an ecumenical, interfaith and generic environment for people of all diverse cultures and traditions. It can be used simply for meditation or well-being or it can be used within a number of traditional religious formats. It offers creative space that reflects the beauty of the trees surrounding it for rites, rituals, memorials and celebrations for individuals and groups.

HVDHB has placed the labyrinth symbol at the centre of their logo. A photo of the labyrinth fronted their 2009 annual report to parliament and the front cover of the 2009 book detailing medical research done on their campus. A sentence at the bottom of this cover draws an analogy between the labyrinth pathway and scientific research. While the labyrinth has become part of the core infrastructure that the HVDHB has responsibility for, thus ensuring its upkeep, any additional work such as publicity or special events are the prerogative of the Labyrinth Committee. This committee consists of eight volunteers representing the community and the hospital. They are appointed by HVDHB for three-year terms and are dependent on the good will and financial support of the community served by the labyrinth.

Haere i roto i te wairua. Walk in the spirit. Merran Fleming

Coming up: A Meditative Labyrinth Walking on September 26th and Carols Around The Labyrinth on December 10. See www.labyrinth.org.nz



A Review by Lloyd Geering

‘The Ancient Lost Vocabulary of Religion’

Don Cupitt, *Theology's Strange Return*, SCM Press, 2010.

Cupitt chose this title for his new book because he believes 'the major themes of standard religious doctrine are not merely persisting but undergoing transformation and coming back to us in post-modernity'.

Some examples of the themes he isolates in this regard are 'eternity', 'God' (as Life, our Maker, Judge), 'divine grace', the cosmic Christ and 'the sacred'. However, what he sees as evidence of the grand themes in a new form may not be as transparently obvious to his readers as it evidently is to him. Some will think that, at best, they are no more than vaguely discernible. He has left the door open for critics (whether secular agnostics or defenders of the traditional faith) to accuse him of some special pleading.

Certainly his exposition contains many insightful observations and yet he fails to present his argument with sufficient clarity to make it cogent. Indeed he draws upon such a wide diversity of references from the worlds of philosophy, literature and art (as few could do as well as he) that it is sometimes difficult to see the wood for the trees.

**THEOLOGY'S
STRANGE
RETURN**

This is disappointing for I think Cupitt is really on to something important here. After all, there are two reasons why we should not be surprised to find evidence of the traditional religious themes surfacing again in post-Christian secular culture even if they do appear in a 'strange' form.

The first is this; the traditional themes of theology - such as 'God', 'salvation', 'judgment' – emerged and became dominant in response to the universal needs of the human condition. This has not changed substantially in the last two thousand years. What has changed is the way we understand the world we live in and that is the reason why these themes, if they do reappear, must of necessity assume a markedly different form.

The second reason is that what has been called 'post-modern culture' did not emerge out of the blue, lacking any genetic forbears; on the contrary, as Cupitt himself points out, today's secular culture is 'the perfectly legitimate heir and continuator of the Christian tradition'. I agree thoroughly with him in this respect though many (again both secular and traditional) would strongly dispute it. But even people like Richard Dawkins, who strongly deny the existence of God, immediately betray the fact that they are products of Western Christendom.

This fact is humorously illustrated by the atheistic Edinburgh professor who insisted on describing himself as a 'Presbyterian atheist'. It is too easily forgotten that it is only in the three monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) that the God symbol has played such a dominating role. Whether we affirm it or reject it we show ourselves to be Westerners.

As the theologian Gordon Kaufman pointed out, the God symbol played a very important unifying role in monotheistic cultures, enabling us to relate all our knowledge and experience to one central point. It is only to be expected therefore that, in a time of 'the death of God', this unifying role will be so sorely missed that a satisfying replacement will be sought. Thus just as some secular scientists (eg Einstein) have resorted to the term 'God' just because there was no satisfactory alternative to hand, so the use of the term 'god' may yet stage a return, stripped of much of its traditional meaning.

To test Cupitt's thesis let us take the concept of the sacred, which he does in chapter 11. The experience of the sacred (or the holy) is essentially a subjective feeling with regard to some place, thing or person. As Cupitt rightly points out, the modern secularizing process has meant that most people no longer regard Sunday as a holy day or regard church buildings and cemeteries as sacred places. But has the sense of the sacred disappeared completely for secular people?

Cupitt finds it present in art and music, in such things as 'the sublime in landscape, personal charisma and icons'. I suggest that we may even more convincingly point to the way in which the sacred (that sense of feeling that impels us to approach something with genuine solemnity and awe) has been transferred from the traditional holy sites to such places as Anzac Cove, Ground Zero in New York, and the Memorial to the Six Million in Jerusalem. They have even become places for pilgrimage.

Cupitt does refer to 'our tendency in recent years to bring back the ancient lost vocabulary of religion' but fails to mention such obvious examples as the return of the ecclesiastical term 'sanctuary' in such places as 'bird sanctuaries'. Indeed, today's conservationists display the same intense effort and personal self-sacrifice in their endeavour to save the whales, black robins and other endangered species as did the mediaeval crusaders who set out, as they thought, to protect the holy places in the holy land.

But even if such examples do convince us that the great themes of traditional theology are returning (though in a strange form) do they justify the use of the phrase 'theology's return'? This depends on how we understand the enterprise of theology for many will argue that the 'death of God' entailed the demise of theology. Thus, if the common use of the word 'God' is being replaced, say, by 'Life' (as Cupitt argued in some earlier books and repeats here in chapter 4) should not the term 'theology' bow out gracefully in favour of such a phrase as 'philosophy of life'?

It all depends on the way we use language and that is changing so rapidly it is sometimes hard to keep up with it. So what Cupitt has written is perhaps best understood as 'work in progress'. Even if his arguments may not wholly convince, he has been right to alert us to what is surfacing in today's secular culture and seek to interpret it as best we can.

Lloyd Geering

Bits and Pieces

Resource Centre

WE HAVE RECENTLY UNDERTAKEN A REVIEW AND UPDATE OF THE RESOURCE CENTRE.

Video tapes are no longer available. Most of their content has been transferred to DVD. Some older and/or scruffy books have been removed. New titles have been purchased and we have copies of most of the books reviewed in recent issues. These include works by Geering, Spong and Armstrong as well as the donation of Boulton's latest [*Who On Earth Was Jesus?*] from Peter Cowley of Wellington and *Jesus, the Cold Case* from Arch Thomson of Auckland. [All except the last were mentioned in Newsletter 88 – ed].

There are a few newer DVDs. The second series of *Living the Questions* has been purchased together with a subscription to downloadable companion material. It comprises three DVDs with seven programmes each of about 10 minutes. They are available for loan under their separate titles: *Invitation to Journey*, *Reclaiming the World*, *Call to Covenant*. Contributors include many well known commentators.

The Resource Centre gets fewer requests than in the first decade. It was once a struggle to keep up! My feeling is that this is part of the development of our group and the fact that the best material for group use has already been used. However if anyone has any thoughts about how this service can be improved, please let me know. Many libraries probably stock the better book titles we possess but they are here if needed. By the time postage is paid, the cost of borrowing is pretty much the same as trying to order from another library branch and there is a longer borrowing time.

Suzi Thirlwall, Resource Centre Curator phone/fax (07) 578-2775 susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz

What's Available?

There's a catalogue on the website at www.sof.org.nz. If you can't get access to the website, send a letter to **Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper St., Titahi Bay**. He will send you a printed catalogue. SoF is happy to bear the cost in cases where computer access is a problem.

New in The Resource Centre

B206: Bryan Bruce *Jesus, The Cold Case*

A forensic review of the circumstances leading to the judicial murder of Jesus. The approach will be familiar to readers of Spong, Crossan and The Jesus Seminar. Identifies early anti-semitism in the Gospel material. An easy, untaxing but satisfying read. [Noel Cheer]

Papers Instead of Workshops

The Conference this year will again not feature workshops. There's plenty of other good stuff instead. If you were dying to present a workshop paper, then why not share it with the Newsletter readership? About 1000 words maximum please, and on the Conference Theme: **"Compassion and Crisis: Our Human Dilemma"**.

Auckland One-Day Conference

Saturday 28 August 2010

At St Lukes Community Centre, 130 Remuera Road on the theme:

Engaging with the sacred –

What does this mean in today's world?

Confirmed Speakers: **Roger Booth**, scientist, speaking on the Sacred in Science; **Don Binney**, artist, speaking on the Sacred in the Arts; **Lloyd Geering**, speaking on the Sacred in the natural world; **Helen Palmer**, psychologist, speaking on the psychological aspects of the Sacred.

Thoughts on Love

based on *Situation Ethics in Six Propositions* by Joseph Fletcher

- Love is, in its nature and essence, inherently good.
- Love is at the heart of everything that is good.
- God is Love and God is a Spirit; thus God is the Spirit of Love that leads to compassion, an inner sense of what is or is not good, right or wrong, true or false.
- Love is the basis of justice which works for the good of all, defining everyone's rights and responsibilities, their duties and obligations, and strives to share opportunities and resources amongst all.
- Justice is love coping with the situations of community life, providing fairness and equity for all.
- Love and justice seek that which is good for all, whether they be 'one of us' or 'someone other' in terms of race, ethnicity, birthplace or geographical location, education, poverty or wealth, religion, or other affiliations of any kind.

submitted by Ian Harvey, Orewa, May 2010

Letters

Bill Robottom responds to ...

Laurie Chisholm article, "My Journey with Richard Dawkins"

I agree that the fundamentalist's appeal to the ideals of Biblical creation are denying modern science. But for Dawkins to ridicule rejection of the evolution theory as "bad religion" and "exceedingly retarded (and) primitive" and his statement "You won't find any opposition to the idea of evolution among sophisticated, educated theologians", offensive and not correct. I for one can make a good case which would make Dawkins look like a school boy in the corner with the dunces cap on. Yes and I can find a lot of scientists who could do a much better job of that than I can, and Richard Dawkins knows that is so.

I attacked an article in the Wanganui Chronicle where Dawkins was asked if he was, "aware of a single serious biologist" who "embraces intelligent design or questions evolution?" The answer he gave was "No, not a single one." I have a number of books and articles that do. Richard Dawkins knows that too. Another question was if the "various mutations of flu strains in recent years" means "evolution in action". Dawkins answered "It is, it's before our very eyes." When creationists say, "It is still a virus." Dawkins' untenable answer is, "What they want to see it turn into a hippo!" Yes indeed; as that is the very thing evolutionists claim; a single cell [evolves all the way] to mankind.

The sheer gut racking idiocy of the evolutionary theory and the untruths which come out of the mouths of men like Dawkins astonishes me. How can the 'pot' of evolution call the 'kettle' of fundamentalism black?

The article in question says, "Before evolution had a solid scientific basis." And, Dawkins is overwhelmed by the simplicity of Darwinian natural selection. These are, in his words, "sacred, unconditional truths that must not be adulterated."

The scientific books and papers I read have a different view, to which my sense of honesty and integrity compel me to agree; so where is the scarceness of evolution? There are many books and papers out now that make the intelligent designed universe compelling to believe. I can find nothing in the theory of evolution that gives me the slightest reason to discontinue my belief in God. A complaint that I have of Lloyd Geering is that he has moved away from, "God in the New World," to religion *without* God.

I think, like Laurie, we should look before we leap, at least play it safe. I commend Laurie's article on page four, my sentiments in the main, but I am not sure if we can blame religion for every wrong? I think we all agree a better world is the dream the prophets, Jesus, Dawkins and the Sea of Faith is our goal. Heaven sounds good to me; think I will book me a patch.

R.L. (Bill) Robottom.

[abridged for reasons of space – ed]

Bill Robottom responds to ...

Don Feist's response [in Newsletter 87] to his article [in Newsletter 86].

Thank you Don, for your comments. I used the word, 'theism' as in my dictionary, "belief in the existence of gods or a God — supernaturally revealed to man" and "As opposed to atheism". Also an encyclopedia entry: "belief in the existence of God; not to be confused with Deism or polytheism."

I am unaware that Sea of Faith has a different interpretation. Don says, "our use, of the word 'theism'." Can that mean, "Our view of God and how he should be; an atheist?"

My, "sweeping statements" are from much of my conclusions from study over many years. The article was only one page cut down from two and I was dealing with, "Religion without theism." I was trying to point out that I agree with Lloyd Geering's, "God in the New World" but not, "Christianity without theism". To me, without theism means without God as my dictionary says.

I am an ardent believer in God but not the one portrayed in the Bible. Nor do I think I believe the one much of The Sea of Faith is portraying.

R.L.(Bill) Robottom

[Note: SoF has no official definitions. Among its membership there are definitions of God as varied as those found in the community at large – ed].

Margaret Whitwell and Spirit

Dear Editor:

Bill Cooke's review (Newsletter 88, May 2010) of André Comte-Sponville's *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* expands the theme admirably. But the author's most significant maxim could be missed in the verbiage of the small print in the quotation from page 134.

The author wrote: "It, (the human spirit) is our most noble part – or rather, our highest function, the thing that makes us etc."

Sandwiched between the words 'part' and 'thing' which will imply to many readers that our human spirit is a separate entity – an object even – the qualifying phrase "rather, our highest function" simply describes the sum of our noblest actions, arising from the machinations of our brains and minds.

The ambivalence of these suggestions is the Achilles hell of this interesting treatise.

Margaret Whitwell (now of Tauranga)

God-Talk in the Gun

Alan Goss talks of a new emerging spirituality

THE MARCH/APRIL ISSUE OF THE WESTAR INSTITUTE'S (USA) JOURNAL "FOURTH R" features a hard-hitting article on the practice of God-talk by Davidson Loehr, a retired Unitarian minister living in Austin, Texas. Loehr contends that we are on the brink of thinking about religion in a whole new way. In the same issue of the journal there is a glowing appreciation from another writer of the work of the Cambridge (UK) scholar Don Cupitt which expands on his own call for a "religion of everyday life", familiar to most of us in the Sea of Faith.

Loehr shows how, as language developed, we humans invented gods and stories about gods. When those stories die the gods die with them, both the stories and the gods exist only in the individual and collective imagination of the story-tellers. The thirteen gods on the Olympic pantheon are now dead, politically and militarily they are utterly powerless. But the ancient Greeks had deep and abiding insights about the human condition and in that sense the Greek gods, "live". They're not "beings" or objects, rather they're ideas or concepts which can still help people sort out the complexities of everyday life. Loehr links this to Western Christianity and our ways of talking about God. He claims that we have reached a new level in understanding how limited God-talk is in enabling us to think in useful ways. People like Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*) have in recent years mounted attacks on religion and have gained notoriety for doing so. Their books are angry and the response from the churches predictably defensive. For all their failings these malcontents have a point. Like the prophets of old they are challenging outworn beliefs in favour of a higher message; and they want us to stop using foolish and misleading language - at least that is what is clearly implied. Dawkins and his fellow travellers are showing us that God-talk is simply a way of talking about and pointing us towards things which are important to us. That is what Don Cupitt calls "The Great Questions of Life", questions about who we are and how we should live. God-talk, in what Loehr calls "our dwindling God-talk clubs" (ie churches) is what the club members are used to. They see God as a Person and in personal terms who has attributes very much like themselves, like seeing, knowing, loving, hearing, though all at the highest level. Nevertheless one suspects that much of this God-talk language, while politely acknowledged, sails harmlessly over their heads.

God is not a being, an object, a thing. God is not a super-Person.

Loehr then explores a number of difficulties around our use of God-talk. First, in the Bible God is portrayed in various ways, sometimes loving and kind and at other times cruel and inhumane. So when we use the word "God" we have to be clear what we're really trying to say. Fervent fundamentalist God-believers sometimes openly express a willingness to commit violence, even murder, in obedience to a vengeful God. So we need to take out these crude and primitive tribal chief versions of god and ask ourselves, when we use the word God, "what accurate and healthy statements we're actually trying to make".

Secondly, we frequently hear and speak of God as someone who does things. Theologians speak of "The God who acts". God created, sees, hears, plans, cares, loves. Indeed if God couldn't do these things we might as well put him out to grass. The difficulty arises when we realize that "doing" words like creating, hearing, loving and so on are what we refer to as the "attributes" of God. But as Loehr points out, only beings (like human beings) have attributes, only beings (like humans) create, love, care etc. God is not a being, an object, a thing. God is not a super-Person "up there", is not "a Guy in the Sky", is not "the Man upstairs". These are idolatrous images. God is an idea, or a concept, or as Ian HARRIS puts it, God is "the supreme creation of the human imagination". God doesn't live in a heavenly attic, God is "all in the mind". Our myths, our stories, our festivals and observances and our social conventions are all visible expressions of how our minds and imaginations portray the symbol-word God. We invented these mind-pictures and we can let them go.

Loehr then asks, if God-talk is just a way of talking, of expression, what's left? Is God-talk the best or even a good way of tackling life's important questions? (Loehr is of course addressing this question mainly to the

American church scene, Sea-of-Faith-ers are much more discrete in their use of that idiom). The old myths have lost their footing and "a big religion is fading out at history's slow pace". This leads to inevitable counter-claims that Christianity is growing especially in the Third World, though much of it is of the legalistic and lethal kind. A widening gulf has developed between the world as we know it and the imaginary world painted by old God-talk. Old God-talk is a lot of baggage to lug around and Loehr asks, why carry it at all? Without it ministers, priests and theologians would probably feel tongue-tied, God-talk language is their bread and butter and without it they might struggle to have a message at all.

Today ordinary people find that God-talk is a brand of patter reserved for the religiously inclined. Others have discovered that it is often "dangerous, dishonest and misleading". It fudges our real questions and clouds our search for insights by which we can live more fully. God-talk, science-talk, atheist-talk, any kind of talk, are all fragments of a larger picture. No one language is privileged above another. No one language is sacred.

Loehr concludes by reminding us that religion and life "aren't about gods, and God-talk at its best only strikes our enduring questions a glancing blow." Some humanists and atheists claim that God-talk is not necessary at all. Symbols, however, are important and the symbol God is a useful way of expressing our quest for meaning and spiritual fulfilment. God-talk is like marmite, it is best when sparingly spread. Otherwise it loses the flavour. Religion and the big topics of life need a "Coming Back to Earth" (to borrow the title of a recent Lloyd Geering book), that's where we live, that's where the action is. Those hooked on God-talk may well feel that the use of ordinary language to illustrate "sacred" things is crude and demeaning. Not so. Whether we use prose, or poetry, or ordinary down-to-earth language (viz Cupitt) we are "speaking in the deep language of head and heart".

Loehr's article in the "Fourth R", alongside the appreciation of Don Cupitt, continues to reinforce a growing realization that mankind has entered a new religious era. A new world view has taken shape built upon the discoveries of people like Darwin and Galileo and which is now commonly referred to as "The Global or Secular Age." As Lloyd Geering has constantly reminded us, it was out of Christendom that the secular world emerged. The supernatural is being edged out, the shared information/technology blitz continues apace, everything is connected, Cupitt's religion of everyday life is slowly seeping its way into our collective consciousness. So also a new spirituality. The new emerging spirituality will continue to draw upon our rich Christian heritage although its prime focus will be the wonder and mystery of the universe and this tiny globe of which we are a part. Like Abraham of old we will travel light in faith, risk ourselves in hope, and include everyone in love. See "Coming Down to Earth" (Polebridge Press) by Lloyd Geering; also the author's writings on this subject.

Alan Goss, Napier, May 2010

Is This Us?

David Simmers of Wellington wondered whether there is a connection between our initials "SOF" and the concept "En Sof" from the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah.

Here's clarification from a Jewish encyclopaedia: "The Zohar [14thC commentary on the Torah which is foundational to Kabbalah] explains the term "En Sof" as follows: "Before He gave any shape to the world, before He produced any form, He was alone, without form and without resemblance to anything else. Who then can comprehend how He was before the Creation? Hence it is forbidden to lend Him any form or similitude, or even to call Him by His sacred name, or to indicate Him by a single letter or a single point. . . . But after He created the form of the Heavenly Man, He used him as a chariot wherein to descend, and He wishes to be called after His form, which is the sacred name 'YHWH'. In other words, "En Sof" signifies "the nameless being".

**Which doesn't sound much like Sea of Faith Network.
It's good that we got that cleared up!**

But This Is 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.

The **Chairperson** is Natali Allen,
P.O. Box 120, Rawene, Northland
Phone (09) 405 7755.

**See www.sof.org.nz
for further details.**

Public Prayer Project

**Dr. Valerie Grant, Academic, Psychologist and
SoF member from Auckland discusses the
intrinsic value of religious rituals.**

Since many SoFers left mainstream churches over things like “talking to god”, it may seem odd to want to re-visit the issue of prayer, especially public prayer. But, following a recent talk to SoF in Auckland, a small email group has been set up to explore the possibility of contributing to the on-and-off debate about New Zealand’s Parliamentary Opening Prayer. The talk to the Auckland group re-visited the details of the prolonged row over the North Shore City Council’s opening prayer in 2003.



Councillor (as he was then) Andrew Williams argued that it was an infringement of his human rights to have to listen to a prayer at the beginning of every council meeting. He derided the opposing viewpoint, saying that “only the little old ladies at the Methodist church” cared about such things any more. To most people’s surprise, there was a vigorous argument over this, carried out through the pages of the local newspaper, later spreading to the national newspapers and questions about the use of NZ’s parliamentary opening prayer.

While acknowledging that Christianity has given rise to some very bad things, it may also be argued that the basics of our western civilisation are also founded on Christianity – health and education for all, taxes (far more than the recommended tithe), from the relatively well off so that the poor might have decent lives. In our time the state has taken over the role of listening to distressed people, begun by the church, then extended as Lifeline and now available to the whole population through counselling on ACC.

What else has the church to offer secular society? There could be at least two more major contributions, one being related to motivation, and the other to the provision of a ritual or framework for what might be called “big events” – all the way from the private to the state funeral; from marriage to the opening of parliament. In addition there are the smaller, more frequent rituals - openings and closings, in schools, councils and other meetings.

Such rituals provide an important psychological function. They gather people together, help focus on the business in hand, assist people to put aside other concerns, and offer an opportunity to re-state one’s intentions to act in accordance with the society’s and the individual’s ideals. In addition, the appeal to a higher level – ‘god’ - allows everyone an equality and a dignity that otherwise might be overshadowed by the boss i.e. prime minister, head master, mayor, business chief or king.

If one accepted the intrinsic value of such rituals, it might be worth further exploring the contemporary reluctance to use them. Many found it was the actual words that were the sticking point (as opposed to the music, architecture, art, etc), so perhaps the problem could be tackled by thinking again about the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of the words we use. The case could also be made for re-considering the role of development – we all have different needs at different times in our lives. We seem to be able to make the change from

Opening Prayer for New Zealand Parliament

According to Bruce Logan in a *NZ Herald* opinion piece October 20, 2003, the prayer dates back to 1854. It is read by the Speaker of the House at the opening of each day’s proceedings.

Almighty God, humbly acknowledging our need for Thy guidance in all things, and laying aside all private and personal interests, we beseech Thee to grant that we may conduct the affairs of this House and of our country to the glory of Thy holy name, the maintenance of true religion and justice, the honour of the Queen, and the public welfare, peace, and tranquillity of New Zealand, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

(One sentence; word count = 73).

the concrete to the symbolic quite easily in other contexts. For example, when the child realises that Father Christmas and the reindeer do not deliver the presents, do we ditch Christmas? No, we teach the child about the symbolic value of the story - i.e. giving to others.

In the last part of the meeting several different prayers were scrutinised, including the New Zealand Parliamentary Opening prayer. At the time of the debate on the North Shore City Council's opening prayer, two national commentators, Richard Randerson and Ian Harris, both wondered whether a range of prayers, gathered from a variety of sources, might improve the current regime.

Anyone who is interested in this topic is welcome to join a small email group by sending their email address to vigant@xtra.co.nz. On receipt of such an email, further material will be sent. Members of the group can either just watch and listen, or contribute by helping to gather material or do further research.

Valerie will be a Keynote Speaker at this year's Conference



From The Chair

If you receive this Newsletter by mail you receive also the 2010 Conference Programme and Registration form. Email subscribers should look for it on the website (www.sof.org.nz) and print their own copy.

The Conference theme "Compassion and Crisis", in response to the **Charter for Compassion** developed by Karen Armstrong, allows us to respond to members' 2007 requests for more interfaith dialogue, and discussion of issues emerging in today's world – albeit, given the potential in these areas, only an introduction.

However, I hope that in the two days we have, we will be able to explore questions such as:

- Where and when in human history did the idea of compassion arise ?
- Do we know why ?
- How did it become central in many religious and philosophical traditions ?
- How is it expressed in other traditions ?
- Has it really had significance in human behaviour and history ?
- Why has it resurfaced in this way, at this time, in an increasingly secular world ?
- Can compassion help break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries?
- Does it really have meaning beyond individuals and relationships with others? Areas such as politics, the economy, medicine, law, agriculture, the environment, the planet?
- Is it possible to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion, to encourage a positive appreciation of diversity, or to cultivate informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings?

The speakers in the Conference will address some of these, and we will have opportunities to consider the evolution and expression of the idea and the practice of compassion, in relation to both peace and population in particular. Core groups will also be able to explore other areas of interest, think widely about the practice of compassion and then contribute questions to extend the debate in the final panel discussion. Core groups, visits, and the informal times at Conference will also allow time to meet others, to share thoughts and ideas, and to hear about other groups and their activities.

There is increasing discussion about the Charter. Those in the South Island may have read Ian Harris's column in the Otago Daily Times, some groups have already had an introduction to the Charter, while for those who have access to the internet there is an increasing amount of comment and writing if one is interested to pursue the idea. Whatever you have considered to date, there will be more at Conference. We can look forward to really interesting and stimulating presentations, thought and discussion; as well as an enjoyable weekend catching up with others and making new friends from within the Sea of Faith throughout the country.

Natali Allen, Chairperson 2009-2010

Reinventing the Sacred

Leo Hobbis, Scientist, SoF member

Summary of a talk to Remuera SoF on 21 February 2010

**The title of my talk is taken from the 2008 book
Reinventing the Sacred: A New view of Science, Reason, and Religion,
by eminent biologist and complexity scientist, Stuart Kauffman.**

Spirituality: Sacredness is part of human spirituality which I take to mean sensitivity to certain non-material aspects of human experience. It can range from the simplest understanding that “we do not live by bread alone”, through the occurrence of spontaneous transcendent or peak experiences – prompted, for example, by a piece of music – to profound mysticism. Spirituality is an innate quality quite distinct from religion. Like all subjective experiences, it is a quality which lies in a non-material domain. If we want to have a coherent world view, we have somehow to reconcile this awareness of the non-material with our understanding of the universe, of the nature of reality.

Reality and science: Some take the view that reality consists only of the objects which can be studied by science. This has led to the view that everything from societies down through people, our organs, cells, and the molecules of chemistry, is to be explained ultimately in terms of the movement of atoms. This is ‘Reductionism’ and leads to nihilistic statements such as that from Steven Weinberg, “The more we understand the universe, the more pointless it all seems”, a view of reality which offers nothing constructive for our living. But the ‘laws’ of science are not immutable and science can claim no monopoly of the language we may choose to describe the universe. However, whatever language we choose, our descriptions must withstand being tested against our experience.

Cosmic evolution as a progression in relationship: We can choose to view cosmic evolution as a succession of creative processes. Starting from the big bang, we see the formation of primordial hydrogen, the evolution of stars and galaxies, and the synthesis of the heavier chemical elements by stars, the appearance of planets and complex molecules, and on to the emergence of life. On this view, each one of us embodies the whole history of the cosmos, an awe-inspiring thought!

I like to describe this as a progression in *transcendent relationship* in which things at one level of complexity have combined to form new things whose properties may be quite different from those of the constituent parts. Each new entity carries the potential for further complexity and diversity by changing the environment for everything else. There is ceaseless and endless creativity which derives from the nature of all the inter-relationships present.

This story of the evolution of the universe and planetary life in terms of transcendent relationship, in contrast to the nihilistic view, helps us to relate to the whole of creation in a world in which everything is connected. It is told in a different language from that of reductionist science but such a language is necessary for the story to make sense in terms which are relevant to our living.

The role of love in human evolution: At the human level our relationships are a major factor in our wellbeing, at its best when love, compassion and justice are present. Darwin recognised the role of love in human evolution. In his second book, *The Descent of Man*, he referred frequently to love, moral sensitivity, and cooperation, and hardly at all to ‘survival of the fittest’.

The same point is developed strongly by H. Maturana and F. Varela in *The Tree of Knowledge*. They describe love as the biological foundation of human living. Without love, without acceptance of others living beside us, there is no social process and, therefore, no humanness.

Complexity and the emergence of life: Stuart Kauffman has written extensively about the behaviour of highly complex systems of molecules, cells, and organisms, and their role in the evolution of life and the biosphere. Increasingly, scientists are accepting that physics can’t explain all the properties of such complex systems which may exhibit self-organised order with the appearance of new and sometimes unpredictable

properties. Such properties are said to be *emergent*. (Life itself is perhaps the most obvious emergent property.) They don't break any laws of physics but can't be deduced from the properties of the components. There seem to be laws of organisation which apply to complex systems, in particular to the evolution of the biosphere. Self-organised structures can evolve without evolution in the Darwinian sense having always to feature.

Paul Davies is another who emphasises the significance of life, consciousness, and mind, as fundamental emergent features of the universe. He favours the view that the universe is somehow destined to bring forth conscious life, that it must be such as to give rise to observers who then become participators. The universe may even have engineered its own self-awareness.

Mind, consciousness, and reality: The pinnacle of the evolutionary process so far is the emergence of conscious minds in the higher animals. Consciousness is a major unsolved mystery. In spite of the progress in neuroscience nobody can say how brain states can give rise to the sensations of our mental experience. (Brain is not identical to Mind.) Some philosophers of mind attempt to escape the problem by saying we only think we are conscious! It would seem more reasonable to take consciousness as a given because no human experience can happen outside it. Perhaps Descartes should have said, "I experience, therefore I am".

Our thoughts and attitudes can lead to change in ourselves and in the external world. We are agents of change. Kauffman writes, "While life, agency, value, and doing presumably have physical explanations in any specific organism, *the evolutionary emergence of these cannot be derived from or reduced to physics alone*. Thus life, agency, value, and doing are real in the universe". It follows that our reality contains material and non-material elements, the physical things we infer as existing outside us and the non-physical qualities of our mental experience, including our spirituality.

Reinventing the sacred: Kauffman has written extensively about the need to move away from reductionist science. In his recent book, *Reinventing the Sacred*, he writes that part of this will be "...to heal the wound derived from the false reductionist belief that we live in a world of fact without values, and help us jointly build a global ethic". **Kauffman finds reverence in the ceaseless and unpredictable creativity in the unfolding of nature, a creativity which he says is "God enough for me"**. He also writes.... "I also feel parts of the religious person's sense of awe. I sense the solace that prayer to a transcendent God brings. But I don't believe in a transcendent God. I do believe in this new scientific worldvieweven without talking about God, this new scientific worldview brings with it a sense of membership with all of life and a responsibility for the planet that's largely missing in our secular world."

This new understanding of science leads naturally to the recognition of spirituality as a feature of reality which we don't have to consign to some other-worldly realm. Spirituality belongs naturally within an holistic world view. Our sense of the sacred may be an expression of a deep inter-connectedness with all that is. It is hardly surprising that people, when contemplating the wonder of creation, have felt the need for gods to explain it.

Biographical

After training in physics in NZ, Leo spent most of his working life in Britain as an accelerator physicist at the (now) Rutherford-Appleton Laboratory contributing to several major projects and as a project leader on new research facilities for neutron scattering and high power lasers. He contributed to the promotion of several international projects, including those at CERN, Geneva, and during the five years prior to his retirement was Head of the Science Division of the UK Science and Engineering Research Council. In retirement Leo has been particularly interested in finding a world view which takes account of both our spirituality and our understanding of the world.

