

Sea of Faith

The National Religious Discussion Network

www.sof.org.nz

NEWSLETTER 98, JANUARY 2012

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

A MODERN ORWELL

An appraisal by Bill Cooke

For most people, Christopher Hitchens will probably be remembered for four things: his support for the invasion of Iraq, his being a compulsive contrarian, his bohemian lifestyle, and his outspoken atheism.

To my mind Hitchens was wrong about Iraq. Yes, Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator, but overthrowing dictators by outside force does not automatically ensure its replacement by democratic and open institutions. I still find it hard to forgive the aid and comfort Hitchens gave the Bush administration during 2003 and 2004. So far the only real victor in the Iraq conflict has been Iran, not known as a bastion of peace and democracy.

Neither am I enamoured of aspects of his contributions to the new atheism. *God is Not Great* is a well-written polemic and has value so far as that goes, but as an argument for atheism as the cornerstone of an authentic naturalist humanism, free from the conceits of traditional religion, it is not as helpful as it should be. It's not the weakest new atheist tract by any means (Sam Harris's books are) but the vigour of the critique overshadows the positive outlook that is also part of the book. This in turn allows people to forget the threat posed by fundamentalism and terrorism, which provoked the new atheists in the first place, and focus instead on the severity of the criticism. More successful, and more thoughtful, is *The Portable Atheist*, an anthology of atheist writers that Hitchens edited. His other great service to atheism was to die as he lived, without succumbing to the transcendental temptation.

It wasn't a good idea to arouse Hitchens' ire because that exposed one to a Hitchenslap, as his notorious putdowns became known. His ruthless and brilliant demolitions of Henry Kissinger, Bill Clinton and Mother Teresa changed forever the way those three



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were thought about. Neither Kissinger's nor Clinton's dissembling need much amplification now, but Mother Teresa still commands more support than is respectable. Hitchens revealed clearly her ignoble relations with dictators and how little of the money that streamed into her organisations actually went to poor relief. As Teresa openly admitted, she was not about saving bodies, she was about saving souls. So the primitive conditions, the humiliating restrictions on what the terminally ill could wear, eat, think or do, all mattered little to her and her followers. But even today many people still believe that a caring group of Christian people patrol the streets of Calcutta, bringing in the lowly and destitute for medical treatment and care. Damned lies, all of it, for anyone who cares to look – or read Hitchens.

The point about reading Hitchens is not really whether you agree with him. The point is that, when reading such flowing prose, one's own thought might also flow more freely. He helped readers do that most precious thing – to think for themselves.

...continued

That's a valuable gift. It also puts into perspective the overdone contention of him being a contrarian just for the sake of it. Christopher Hitchens believed firmly in democracy, free speech, the duty to smite humbug, and the joy of learning and conversation. There is a thread of consistency in his work that would elude, even appal, any self-respecting contrarian. Hitchens' basic consistency becomes clearer after reading his work *Why Orwell Matters*. Orwell's career encompassed the angry socialist exposé of poverty, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, but also *Animal Farm*, the most effective tract against the follies of ponderous state socialism ever written. The consistent thread was a loathing of tyranny, from whichever source. Hitchens walked that road.

I met Hitchens only once, at a conference run by the Center for Inquiry in the United States. The legend is true about the alcohol. I have never met anyone reeking so strongly of alcohol (even overpowering the ever-present waft of tobacco) and yet remaining so soberly articulate. One's got to drink a hell of a lot to manage that, but it doesn't make for old bones.

So, calling Christopher Hitchens a modern Orwell is not intended as a piece of throw-away flattery. That's his tradition; like Orwell (and Voltaire before him) he was a man of letters who asked searching questions of the conventional and, in doing so, helped clarify ideas and expose shams.

For me, that's a life well lived.

Bill Cooke is a Sea of Faith member who lives in Auckland. His latest book, ***A Wealth of Insights: Humanist Thought Since the Enlightenment***, was reviewed in the Sea of Faith Newsletter No. 97. His website is www.billcooke.co.nz

BISHOP JOHN SHELBY SPONG ON MEETING HITCHENS

Several years ago, while in England, I was invited to participate on a two-hour television program ... There were three other panelists one of whom was Christopher Hitchens ... In the course of that panel discussion, Hitchens, attacking Christianity, tossed out many of his verbal grenades that would someday show up in his book [*God Is Not Great*]. He sought to demonstrate both the inconsistencies and the contradictions found in supernatural religion as well as in the pages of the Bible. He spoke of the damage done to human beings as a result of religious claims and biblical teaching. To his surprise, I, as a representative of institutional Christianity, agreed quite publicly with him, citing the fact that biblical scholarship over the last 200 years has come to these same conclusions long before Hitchens discovered them. My problem with Christopher Hitchens was not his analysis, but that he obviously knew very little about contemporary Christian scholarship.

THE RISE AND FALL OF FOSSIL FUELS PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL

**David Kitchingman spoke to the Dunedin Sea of Faith group recently, with this as his title.
A summary by Don Feist**

David started with, 'Fossil fuels – the physical variety' and gave us a clear account of the present world situation with petroleum, natural gas and coal, and the challenges the world is facing.

Then he turned to 'Fossil fuels – some spiritual suspects' and asked: "Can we usefully use the term 'fossil fuels' figuratively? Can we speak of any spiritual entities as similar in some respects? Are there any sources of great religious energy, formed over lengthy periods, dominant drivers of seemingly endless performance, which may now be showing signs of decline and even warnings of possible danger ahead?"

His first candidate for fossil status was the Bible.

"The Bible exists quite literally as a result of the fossil-like preservation and discovery of Hebrew and Greek parchments. It was fashioned over a period of hundreds of years – well short of the millions for fossil fuels, but a lengthy gestation nonetheless. It went through a complicated process of refining before eventually emerging as a canon with high-octane inspiration.

"For centuries it has reigned supreme as sacred scripture, dictating and defending the central tenets of the Christian faith. In words it attributes to Jesus but which are often expanded to refer to its own fullness, *Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away*. (Mark 13:31). "Note how I establish my authority. To carry weight, I can cite the book, the chapter and the verse." A rough guide to the extent of literal dependency on Biblical texts is the frequency with which passages are cited within Christian writing and discourse. At one extreme, recall the peppering of Bible references in fundamentalist Gospel tracts.

"But what of more mainline churches? The Methodist Church's stated mission 'is to reflect and proclaim the transforming love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and declared in the Scriptures.' Observe that the Church appeals to the Bible as the very bedrock of its certainty. The differences between the various branches of Christianity with regard to the Bible are largely a matter of degree rather than of kind. The Bible remains definitive across the board, and I need not detail the enormous energy and inspiration it has produced over the ages."

“But dare I apply the fossil fuel analogy? Does the Bible’s supreme position in the Christian scheme of things, for all its wonder working power, also constitute a risk to human health? May it even be capable of doing grave harm?”

“Merely to ask such questions is, of course, heretical in some Christian circles. In more liberal-minded churches, the questions may be allowed providing any affirmative answers carefully distinguish between the Bible’s intent as a whole and the way it is interpreted. It may be conceded that some misapplied texts are dangerous, but taken collectively the Bible still constitutes the revealed foundations of the faith.”

“Perhaps no one who professes to be a Christian has so sharply critiqued that view as John Spong in his book, *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible’s Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love*. After speaking of some of the battles he has had against the way the Bible has been used throughout history, Spong went on to say:

At first I convinced myself that the problem was not in the Bible itself, but in the way the Bible was used. That, however, was a defensive and ultimately dishonest response. I had to come to the place where I recognized that the Bible itself was often the enemy ... It is the assumption that the Bible is in any sense the “Word of God” that has given rise to what I have called ... “the sins of scripture.”

“Spong went on to argue that many prominent Bible texts have been the sources of, and not just the justification used for anti-Semitism, abuse of children, neglect of the environment, denigration of other faiths, second class status of women, black slavery, and mistreatment of gays and lesbians. “

“Spong’s challenge largely goes unheeded. Like our fossil fuel dependency, the vast majority of Christians cannot contemplate anything less than an authoritative Bible. The infection is often very mild, but the condition is still technically called bibliolatry.”

David concluded this part of his talk by saying:

“Until the Bible is dethroned from its transcendental status it will continue to pose a risk to clean and renewable spiritual energy. It’s not just fundamentalists who are guilty of excess. The Church as a whole has found it all too convenient to fudge the issue by claiming more for the Bible than it would claim for itself. Like Paul, the Church must confess that ‘we have this treasure in earthen vessels’. Spong may have over stretched some of his own exegetical theories but he is right about the core problem. The Church must consciously revalue Biblical authority. It is causing too much collateral damage.”

The full text of David’s talk is available on the Dunedin SoF website: <http://dsof.blogtown.co.nz>

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For earlier Newsletters and much else
visit us at www.sof.org.nz

THE CLERGY PROJECT

The Clergy Project is a confidential online community for active and former clergy who do not hold supernatural beliefs. The Clergy Project launched on 21st March, 2011.

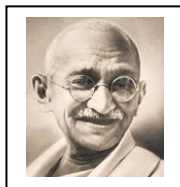
Currently, the community's 100 plus members use it to network and to discuss what it's like being an unbelieving leader in a religious community. The Clergy Project's goal is to support members as they move beyond faith. Members freely discuss issues related to their transition from believer to unbeliever, including:

- Wrestling with intellectual, ethical, philosophical and theological issues
- Coping with cognitive dissonance
- Addressing feelings of being stuck and of fearing the future
- Looking for new careers
- Telling their families
- Sharing useful resources
- Living as a non-believer with religious spouses and family
- Using humour to soften the pain
- Finding a way out of the ministry
- Adjusting to life after the ministry

Found at <http://clergyproject.org/>

SEVEN DEADLY SOCIAL SINS

attributed to Mahatma Ghandi



- **Politics without Principle**
- **Wealth without Work**
- **Commerce without Morality**
- **Pleasure without Conscience**
- **Education without Character**
- **Science without Humanity**
- **Worship without Sacrifice**

CHRISTIANITY AND REDEMPTION:

A Letter to the Editor from Laurie Chisholm

My thanks to Honor Hay for challenging my response to Richard Holloway (Newsletter 95). It's often not easy to really engage with another person and their views and not just talk past each other, but I will make an attempt.

My difficulties began with the way Holloway speaks of Christianity and Christians in the third person: "Christians think that this is not a myth ..." "... this radically compromises the purity of their compassion agenda". Now Holloway was a bishop and primus in the Scottish Episcopal Church and I assumed that he felt that he stands within that evolving cultural stream that we call Christianity. Book titles such as *Crossfire: Faith and Doubt in an Age of Uncertainty* and *Doubts and Loves: What is Left of Christianity* confirmed this impression. However, I have Googled Holloway for a second time, and came across this in *Wikipedia*:

His own theological position has become increasingly radical and he has recently described himself as an 'after-religionist'.

And this in a newspaper:

And it's a particular undervaluation – of gay priests and homosexuality in general by his former church – that propelled him out of faith in the first place, the result of an especially nasty synod of bishops in 1998 that threatened to split the Anglican church in two, and ended up losing them one of their most fluent primates.

Given this context, his article now makes a lot more sense to me and his personal stance does not seem so invisible any more. He agrees with Armstrong's views but questions their connection with Christianity and religion. He seems to me to be challenging Karen Armstrong's work by arguing that it puts too benevolent a spin on Christianity. While she wants to articulate and interpret Christianity in particular and religion in general in a way that is appropriate and relevant today, Holloway is more alienated from Christianity and is unconvinced that it is able to be reprimed in this way. I find this an interesting invitation to examine Armstrong's rhetoric carefully and to see what she includes and excludes from her discussions. It is

good to be questioning ideas that appeal to us and not merely those we have already rejected.

However, his argument – Christianity is a redemption religion that is primarily concerned with life after death and believes in a non-mythical resurrection – does not say anything that the most religiously superficial of the new atheists could have said. Like them, he privileges a conservative and fundamentalist view of Christianity. Let me briefly sketch a counter-argument.

‘Redemption’ is a metaphor from the slave trade and means liberation from slave status. Surely this needs to be understood as a transformation in this life, not merely as a ticket to a good place after death? Moreover, Christianity introduced no new thought regarding life after death that was not already in place in ancient Egyptian religion: the Last Judgment, resurrection, ascension, immortality, were all there, so it is rather odd that in modern times it has been thought of as mainly about the afterlife.

Regarding the resurrection as mythos or logos, it’s as if Bultmann’s programme of demythologizing the New Testament had never happened, and the work of form critics pointing out the inconsistencies of the post-Easter narratives had been forgotten. How I wish Holloway could read Drewermann’s brilliant account of how Christianity came to have an anti-myth attitude. As soon as Christianity came to the attention of pagan philosophers, they argued that there was nothing new in it; stories of the death and resurrection of a god were commonplace. While the Christian apologists found lots of common ground with Greek philosophers in their doctrine of God, they couldn’t acknowledge common ground over Jesus’ death and resurrection without compromising his uniqueness. So they adopted rationalistic and objectifying arguments for the truth of his resurrection, claiming it to be factual while the myths about the gods were demonic distortions of that truth, designed to deceive people. This resulted in a denial of the mythical nature of the Christian narrative and the complete disconnection of its anchorage in the psyche.

On both these issues, Holloway sides with the fundamentalists and the new atheists in their understanding of Christianity, ignoring a deeper

understanding of the tradition that would be friendlier towards his own views.

Honor does not seem to recognize the gulf between Holloway’s own views and his portrayal of Christianity/the church. She says, “...I see no suggestion in Holloway’s review that the church must resist this claim [that the resurrection is myth].” In fact, Holloway seems to have given up promoting a Christianity that understands the resurrection as mythos. He writes, “Whatever you make of the Christian claim, it resists any attempt to turn the resurrection into a myth.”

I am left pondering the difference between Holloway and me. For me too, the conservative Christian reaction to the liberalising of attitudes to homosexuality has been deeply alienating, making it difficult to regard institutional Christianity as my spiritual home. While he is a successful churchman and theological academic, my ecclesiastical career came to a dead end more than twenty years ago. Being an ecclesiastical bureaucrat could well be toxic to one’s spirituality. At any rate, for me the fundamental intellectual task is not to intellectually critique religion but rather to penetrate through the layers of rationalization and dogmatization of religious experience to find something valuable and meaningful for us moderns. I regard the former as superficial and boring and, thanks mainly to the pioneering work of Eugen Drewermann, I have found the latter to be a worthwhile task, and one that I think Karen Armstrong is also engaged in.

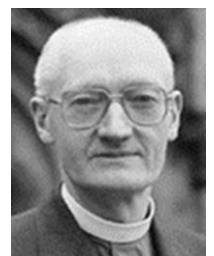
**Laurie Chisholm,
Christchurch, August 2011**

Bishop Richard Holloway

... is a former Anglican Primus of Scotland and who in many ways is the ‘John Shelby Spong of the UK’. He writes in a very progressive way – and writes well also. Access to very many of his articles, many of them sermons, is found at:

<http://homepages.which.net/~radical.faith/holloway/index.htm>

**Thanks to the Sea of Faith
in Australia *Bulletin* for
this information.**



STORIES AS VEHICLES FOR MORALITY

**David Simmers of Wellington
ruminates on $R = M + S$**

How do 'Progressive Christians' think of God?

Often they (Borg, Spang) adopt panentheism – God is *in* everything but is more than just 'everything'. Keith Hill, whose *The God Revolution* was reviewed by Bill Cooke in the last Newsletter, takes the same route. If they find that helpful, fine. But for me (and for Bill Cooke) it is unsatisfactory. There still is some sort of purposive God lurking in the ongoing world process, independent of us.

To me it is much more helpful to think of God as the sum of our values – either an individual's values or the values of a culture. Values are distinguishable from facts; they are the *judgments* we make *about* facts; they provide the *principles* by which we try to live, and which we recommend to (but cannot force upon) others. The most respected sages broadly agree on what is right (the *Charter for Compassion* comes to mind), but this does not mean that you can establish values in the same way as you can establish the boiling point of water. To establish values it is not enough to merely look carefully; you have to argue and persuade – and example is the most effective method of persuasion.

'Morality' can be abstract and boring. It comes alive when it is linked to *stories*, especially to shared stories which encourage us to reflect on the choices people make in particular situations. The stories may or may not be accurate historically; and the lessons we draw from them may change. Once the (idealised) story about the British Empire seemed inspiring, today it often seems embarrassing; and to me the same holds for many Old Testament stories. God is a character in many of our religious stories – but if we can understand them as *stories* rather than as factual accounts, that does not matter too much. These stories remain hugely important vehicles for moral discourse and the encouragement of moral behaviour.

A defensible equation is:

$R = M + S$ [Religion = Morality + Stories].

David Simmers, Wellington

THE DIVINE RIGHT OF MONEY?

Hilda Bak thinks it should be withdrawn

I was interested to read Dr Bertram's complaint [is his recent Conference Keynote] that economists today do not study the history of economic thought. I have felt that today's problems are being treated as were those of the 1930s, and those answers didn't work then. But economics never seemed realistic to me, and I was glad my knowledge only needed to be superficial. I did understand that we human beings created money for a convenient medium of exchange. It is therefore not subject to natural laws as are physics and chemistry.

I felt in my youth that economists assumed that we all wanted to make as much money as possible. This seemed to me to be wrong, as I knew many people who had much more socially benign aims, and that most people just wanted to be able to bring up their families decently, with enough to survive without hardship. Later in life, I decided that economists simply had no knowledge of human psychology, but that too is a social 'science'. A few years ago, there was an article in the *Guardian Weekly* about economists asking for an experiment to be done which showed which areas of the brain 'light up' when certain economic decisions are made. I cheered, but have read nothing further on the subject.

A great deal of research is being done today on the brain and how it works. It seems that evolution has kept the most primitive instincts, the fight or flight mechanism, but has added other abilities in later developed parts of the brain. Maybe, the neurosciences will one day give us a better understanding of economic thought processes, and also, perhaps, how to develop those parts of the brain which signal compassion.

In the meantime, we should admit that money is a human construct, stop worshipping it, put it in its place as a tool for the betterment of human life, and remember that life in its many forms is more important than anything that we have made, be it money, tables, computers, etc.

Why do people want money? Not only does it buy the necessities of life, plus a few luxuries, but it gives power and some people have a love of, a lust for, power. It is surely not beyond the power of the majority to recognise this and to create institutions and laws that will limit the money and therefore the power that some people have and others seek. We did it to overthrow the Divine Right of Kings, and to create democracy. How do we achieve this? Not by incessant talking, but by joining with others in action, such as the 99% protests, by advertising the *Charter for Compassion*, by joining the Equality Trust to promote the facts demonstrated in *The Spirit Level* by Wilkinson and Pickett. at (www.equalitytrust.org.uk and www.closingthegap.org.nz)

Finally, since we cannot serve both God and Mammon, do not vote into power people who have made fortunes in the present financial system, as they will never, ever consider that it is based on a misapprehension and will continue to make decisions in accordance with their beliefs.

Hilda Bak, New Plymouth

JESUS — AS HE WAS

A Review by Bill Cooke

New Zealand Jesus, by Geoffrey Troughton
(Bern: Peter Lang, 2011)

‘Groundbreaking’ and ‘fills a gap in the literature’ are the sort of phrase rolled out too often in reviews. By their very nature, few books can possess these qualities. And it means that when a book comes along that does actually fill a gap in the literature, people are jaded by the claim. And yet, *New Zealand Jesus* does break new ground and does fill a gap in the literature. It manages this, even though there is another publication, from 1974, with the exact same title. The difference between this *New Zealand Jesus* and the previous one is that the first one was a piece of Presbyterian apologetics, an attempt to tell the story of Jesus’ life in a way that would engage a New Zealand audience. It didn’t. But Geoffrey Troughton’s book is a social and historical study of the various understandings of Jesus and the uses he was put to in New Zealand in the first half of the twentieth century.

New Zealand Jesus is a distillation of Troughton’s doctorate and retains something of the academic style of language, which might deter some readers. He also assumes a broad familiarity with many theological terms which even readers of a book on this topic might not have. But with these caveats in mind, the book is clearly written. The author is a lecturer at the Religious Studies Department at Victoria University.

Troughton gives us a well-documented account of a long-gone New Zealand, a mono-cultural place where thoughts about Jesus were a lot more prominent than they are today. His study concentrates on the first half of the twentieth century. He gives splendid accounts of Jesus in church life, among the young, and among men, who were imperceptibly drifting away from religious adherence. There’s no talk of the theologians or biblical scholars. The Jesus Troughton talks of is much more the Sunday School Jesus that formed a large part of devotional life for churchgoers.

An important strength of *New Zealand Jesus* is his broadening out of the story. He’s brought together insights from social, cultural and religious history so as to understand Jesus’ impact. This means we learn about Jesus in art, poetry and films of the time. No previous scholar I know of has done this anything like as well as Troughton has.

Another important first is that he has gone to non-Christian sources and read them with care. On the strength of this reading, he has devoted an entire chapter to the way Jesus was spoken about and understood by a whole range of people, from esoteric mystics and

spiritualists through to rationalists and socialists. Most scholars so far have either ignored these sources, or treated them cursorily or with hostility. And the result has been to impoverish their accounts. Troughton has not made this mistake, and his book is better for it. It sets, I hope, a new standard for scholarly writing on subjects such as this.

This doesn’t mean, however, that he’s not above the odd dig himself. He persists with the oft-repeated claim, for instance, that the rationalist movement is ‘essentially religious’. This presumes that the author knows the mind of generations of people, many of whom took years to leave a joyless, fanatical or stifling religious upbringing, better than they did. Either that or it presupposes an understanding of religion so broad as to be valueless. Even worse, he thought some of the unbelievers’ material pompous, while apparently not noticing the same flavour in the passages he quotes of Pecksniffian churchmen bemoaning the doom awaiting civilisation if their views were not accepted at once.

One thing Troughton didn’t do, or at least not expressly, was explain why this culture around Jesus faded away so dramatically. He sums up well the trend toward Jesus-centredness in twentieth century Christianity and shows its changing emphases and motivations. He paints a vivid picture of Jesus in the lives of church-goers, and as was presented to children. Many readers will remember from their own childhood some of the hymns and ditties he mentioned. But why did all this stuff prove so unsatisfactory to so many people?

We only really get hints and suggestions of an explanation, some of which beg the question even more. For instance, he argues that the pervasiveness of Jesus language suggests a more widespread religiosity in New Zealand society than the gloomier statistics on church-going would. But if this is the case, then it’s even more important to understand why such apparently pervasive religiosity withered away in less than two generations. He

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acknowledges that the very pervasiveness of Jesus language and imagery meant that it became stretched almost beyond any coherent meaning and that invoking Jesus' name did not always indicate a religious commitment. At one point he notes that the churches resorted to all-embracing Jesus-language as a way of overlooking weak points and areas where the churches were divided. So the very pervasiveness of Jesus language was, in this way, an indication of trouble below.

New Zealand Jesus, all these caveats and quibbles aside, is scholarly, very interesting, historically sensitive, refreshingly inter-disciplinary and open-minded. And yes, it's ground breaking and fills a gap in the literature. I look forward to reading more from Geoffrey Troughton.

Bill Cooke is a Sea of Faith member who lives in Auckland. His latest book, *A Wealth of Insights: Humanist Thought Since the Enlightenment*, was reviewed in the Sea of Faith Newsletter No. 97. He is currently writing a short work on public controversies about Jesus in New Zealand. His website is www.billcooke.co.nz.

BOOK NOTE

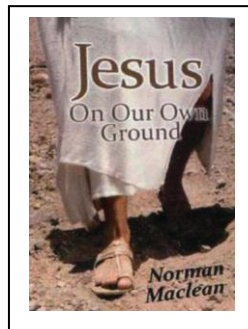
Jesus On Our Own Ground
by Norman Maclean
Melrose Books 2011

This book by Gisborne SoF member Norman Maclean was awarded first place in 2009 in the Ashton Wylie Charitable Trust for an unpublished manuscript in the body, mind, spirit genre. It is aimed at those with little background on the subject while retaining a sense of curiosity, wanting to know more about Christianity, science and mysticism.

Norman describes himself as a lapsed protestant with a strong appreciation of the Christian faith; his background includes forty years of study and extensive lecturing, travelling widely overseas and with articles published in New Zealand magazines and newspapers.

Jesus On Our Own Ground is a synthesis of historical views on the life of Jesus Christ, examining what is known and generally accepted about the man's life including the process by which he became the prevailing deity of the Roman Empire. The author suggests that through enlightened science and mystical experience, the fundamentals of religion - Christian or otherwise - may be taken more seriously by future generations... this is a book for anyone who 'wants to know more'!

Contact: Norman MacLean at normanmaclean@ihug.co.nz



LIFE, AND ALL THAT JAZZ

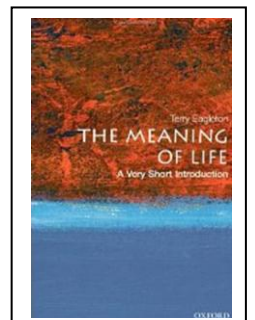
In the concluding section of his small book
The Meaning of Life, Terry Eagleton
offers an analogy

"Take, as an image of the good life, a jazz group. A jazz group which is improvising obviously differs from a symphony orchestra, since to a large extent each member is free to express herself as she likes. But she does so with a receptive sensitivity to the self-expressive performances of the other musicians. The complex harmony they fashion comes not from playing from a collective score, but from the free musical expression of each member acting as the basis for the free expression of the others. As each player grows more musically eloquent, the others draw inspiration from this and are spurred to greater heights. There is no conflict here between freedom and the 'good of the whole', yet the image is the reverse of totalitarian. Though each performer contributes to 'the greater good of the whole', she does so not by some grim-lipped self-sacrifice but simply by expressing herself. There is self-realization, but only through a loss of self in the music as a whole. There is achievement, but it is not a question of self-aggrandizing success. Instead, the achievement - the music itself - acts as a medium of relationship among the performers. There is pleasure to be reaped from this artistry, and - since there is a free fulfilment or realization of powers - there is also happiness in the sense of flourishing. Because this flourishing is reciprocal, we can even speak, remotely and analogically, of a kind of love. One could do worse, surely, than propose such a situation as the meaning of life - both in the sense that it is what makes life meaningful, and - more controversially - in the sense that when we act in this way, we realize our natures at their finest."

"Is jazz, then, the meaning of life? Not exactly. The goal would be to construct this kind of community on a wider scale, which is a problem of politics. It is, to be sure, a Utopian aspiration, but it is none the worse for that. The point of such aspirations is to indicate a direction, however lamentably we are bound to fall short of the goal. What we need is a form of life which is completely pointless, just as the jazz performance is pointless. Rather than serve some utilitarian purpose or earnest metaphysical end, it is a delight in itself. It needs no justification beyond its own existence. In this sense, the meaning of life is interestingly close to meaninglessness."

The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction, Terry Eagleton, Oxford University Press 2007.

In a footnote he credits the image to G. A. Cohen but gives no further details.



WHAT DO WE DO? WHAT SHOULD WE BE DOING?

At our AGM, during Conference in October, we talked about the name by which we shall identify ourselves in future. We didn't go the step further that would ask, "Is what we have been doing as Sea of Faith the best that we could be doing?" Are we perhaps, after twenty years, beginning to settle into a rut - so that we were more relevant in 1992 than in 2012?

For me, the biggest thing to come out of this year's Conference was a sense of urgency - accepting that the human race really is racing towards a brink. I'm one of those who really value the role of Sea of Faith as 'a safe place to talk about unsafe things' - a group of people who are not committed, as a group, to any religious position, who reckon that enabling and encouraging free discussion is both worthwhile, and sufficient justification for our existence. I don't want to lose that. But Conference has started me asking whether 'the brink' means that it is not fully responsible in 2011 to go on being a national religious discussion network, and exploring spirituality, religion and ethics, as though we can afford to go on in a leisurely way, talking among ourselves indefinitely.

Also at Conference I heard other people saying that Sea of Faith (NZ) should be doing more, or doing some things differently. Thinking about this, I can see three main possibilities for Sea of Faith (NZ):

- 1) We can affirm that free and open discussion - "exploring spirituality, religion and ethics" - is still valuable in itself, and continue as we are. (In saying this, I take into account that a good many of us are also active in other organisations which may express or supplement some part of what Sea of Faith represents for us - Amnesty, one of the churches, Ecology Action or Greenpeace, a sustainability group, a political party, an interfaith group, and so on.)
- 2) We could widen our activities, doing more, explicitly as Sea of Faith, to make others in New Zealand aware of issues, connections, spiritual values (or the lack of, and need for, them), with a view to influencing our collective behaviour.
- 3) We could decide that such a voice in New Zealand is needed, but that we don't want to compromise the open, uncommitted nature of Sea of Faith as a 'talk shop', so we will set up a separate group devoted to doing the things I mention under #2: raising awareness of issues, possibilities and values, and perhaps promoting an approach to religious faith that will allow some kind of faith position or spirituality to motivate and enable what urgently needs to be done.

What sort of organisation should Sea of Faith (NZ) be in five years time?

Will it be good enough for it to be, as it is now, a 'National Religious Discussion Network' for those who find us, and who are not put off by our rather cryptic name?

Would it be better if, one way or another, we are something more than that?

I'm sure there are other possibilities apart from those I've come up with, and variations on these as I've expressed them. I'm writing this with the blessing of the Steering Committee, to invite discussion. We very much want to hear, during the next twelve months, a range of opinions or suggestions for the direction we should be taking.

Donald Feist, Dunedin.

STOP CODDLING THE SUPER-RICH

These are excerpts from an op-ed on page A21 of the New York Times on August 15, 2011.

Our leaders have asked for 'shared sacrifice'. But when they did the asking, they spared me.

I checked with my mega-rich friends to learn what pain they were expecting. They, too, were left untouched.

While the poor and middle class fight for us in Afghanistan, and while most Americans struggle to make ends meet, we mega-rich continue to get our extraordinary tax breaks.

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, tax rates for the rich were far higher, and my percentage rate was in the middle of the pack....

And to those who argue that higher rates hurt job creation, I would note that a net of nearly 40 million jobs were added between 1980 and 2000. You know what's happened since then: lower tax rates and far lower job creation.

Since 1992, the I.R.S. has compiled data from the returns of the 400 Americans reporting the largest income. In 1992, the top 400 had aggregate taxable income of \$16.9 billion and paid federal taxes of 29.2 percent on that sum. In 2008, the aggregate income of the highest 400 had soared to \$90.9 billion — a staggering \$227.4 million on average — but the rate paid had fallen to 21.5 percent. ...

Twelve members of Congress will soon take on the crucial job of rearranging our country's finances. They've been instructed to devise a plan that reduces the 10-year deficit by at least \$1.5 trillion. It's vital, however, that they achieve far more than that. Americans are rapidly losing faith in the ability of Congress to deal with our country's fiscal problems. Only action that is immediate, real and very substantial will prevent that doubt from morphing into hopelessness. That feeling can create its own reality.

Job one for the 12 is to pare down some future promises that even a rich America can't fulfill. Big money must be saved here. The 12 should then turn to the issue of revenues. I would leave rates for 99.7 percent of taxpayers unchanged and continue the current 2-percentage-point reduction in the employee contribution to the payroll tax. This cut helps the poor and the middle class, who need every break they can get.

But for those making more than \$1 million — there were 236,883 such households in 2009 — I would raise rates immediately on taxable income in excess of \$1 million, including, of course, dividends and capital gains. And for those who make \$10 million or more — there were 8,274 in 2009 — I would suggest an additional increase in rate.

My friends and I have been coddled long enough by a billionaire-friendly Congress. It's time for our government to get serious about shared sacrifice.

Warren E. Buffett is the chairman and chief executive of Berkshire Hathaway.

GOD WOT!

A book by John Elder, reviewed by Alan Jackson

God Wot is a delightful collection of essays and longer stories, parable-style to the fore, exploring issues of faith – “*the human phenomenon of religion*” as John has it. It takes its title from a poem, *My Garden*, by J.E. Brown – “*a garden is a lovesome thing, God wot!*” (wot = know or knows).

With a background in the sciences, especially geophysics, and a very wide travel history, Elder’s work has taken him to over a dozen very different countries. He is ideally placed to offer opinion about science and religion. Does he see a conflict? No, two sides of the one coin; science is about “how”, religion about “why”. “How” – the description of the universe and “why” the reason for the universe and our place in it (p75). John’s differentiation is simple and clear.

God is accepted as a human construct as a means of answering the question “why”. The origin from “spirits” which were respected, venerated and propitiated to super spirits or gods and our attempt to control them.

John explores the evolution of religions in different settings: hunters, pastoralists, agriculturalists and gives clear summary of the way in which Vedaism swept across the Asian steppes between 1500BC and 500BC and influenced Indian religion as well as the Zoroastrianism of Persia and the evolution of a single, all-powerful god.

There are sections on many of the great faiths in which almost everyone will learn something new; not a once-over-lightly description but with comment and insight.

In the section dealing with science and some of the great discoveries, John opens with a quote from William Harvey (circulation of the blood) “*Don’t think! Try!*” and, with some entertaining parables, he shows how science can solve a problem of the quality of the gold in the king’s crown. Several scientists and their discoveries are mentioned and despite wide reading over many years, there are those listed of whom I have never heard but who made discoveries which make a daily difference to me.

John deals with fundamentalism, creationism, intelligent design and his method is never strident – he encourages the reader to think and decide at every point.

I really enjoyed this book and would have liked to have had it to read years ago and to have had it use in Youth Group classes in the days when I was active in church.

Buy at \$25 from Box 826, Timaru 7940 with cheque or to BNZ account BNZ, JW Elder 020100-0782222-00. Money very well spent.
Alan Jackson, Dunedin

INTROSPECTION

These fragment from a presentation by Laurie Chisholm offer some useful ‘positioning’ statements in the discussions about the name and role of our Network.
See also Natali Allen’s comments “From The Chair” on the next page.

What Are We?



Our Neighbours



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. We recently clarified our purpose by rebranding ourselves as “Sea of Faith: The National Religious Discussion Network” and “Exploring Spirituality, Religion and Ethics.”

We follow similar organisations in both the UK and Australia in taking our name from the 1984 television series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

The TV series both traces the decline of traditional Christian influence in the West in the past 250 years and invites the viewer to consider what might replace it. In New Zealand the Sea of Faith Network provides a forum for the continued exploration.

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 each year, maintains a website at www.sof.org.nz, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference. We have five **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, Ian Harris and Alan Goss.

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

The **Secretary** is **Alan Jackson**, 55 Evans St, Opoho, Dunedin, phone (03) 473 6947.

Membership of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both charges drop to \$15 if the 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 **Peter Cowley** (pcowley@paradise.net.nz) your mailing details.

Members may borrow books, CDs, etc. from the **Resource Centre** which is managed by **Suzi Thirlwall** (susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz), phone (07) 578-2775

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, phone (04)236-7533 email: noel@cheer.org.nz

FROM THE CHAIR

In reflecting on 2011 and thinking about what I might write at the beginning of another year, I noticed (and wondered if others did) the byline at the top of the November Newsletter.

Over the past two years, discussion about the name “The Sea of Faith” has come to focus more on clarifying and conveying what the Network actually is and does. Hence the remit at last Conference, which proposed the addition of ethics and spirituality to religion as areas of interest. Following this, the Steering Committee has agreed that each Newsletter this year will introduce a new byline. These will reflect the objects of the Sea of Faith and suggest different ways of naming and describing our organisation. My hope is that they will also engender thoughtful discussion.

Currently the Network objects are:

1. To facilitate the exploration of religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.
2. To provide encouragement, stimulation and support in fellowship with all persons engaged in this exploration.

While thinking about discussion within the Network, there were three items in the November Newsletter which drew my attention.

The first:

In Jeanette Fitzsimons’ response to the question posed by Conference (*Pulling Us Back From the Brink: Economics? Science? Religion?*), she outlined six crises facing the world today and suggested during the Conference that the main answer to averting these is first a change of values among the general population, followed by demands for action by the politicians. Her challenge to us was that as values are engendered in religion they are of our concern. James Speth in his book *The Bridge at the End of the World* which I have just finished reading, offers a similar challenge in his statement “**The environmental crisis calls the religions of the world to respond by finding their voice within the larger Earth community**”¹.

The second:

Val Webb’s response to the same question was “**Perhaps our topic needs to be turned around the other way. How can we pull religion back from the brink, whether that brink is extinction, fundamentalism or irrelevance?**”

In answering her own question she offers:

“Each of the great founders of religions stumbled upon compassion as the heart of their message in contexts where violence and oppression required a solution. ... Perhaps we need to begin again with the human value of compassion, as if centuries of religious overlay had never happened.”ⁱⁱ

The third:

The third was Laurie Chisholm’s reflections on Conferenceⁱⁱⁱ which included:

- **“The discussion on pulling us back from the brink cannot take place exclusively on the ‘external’ domain of facts and observations about the world. It also needs to encompass the personal, existential subjective domain. The brink is not just a problem ‘out there’ in the world, but also a problem ‘in here’ in us, in the way we are in the world, in the attitude we have to ourselves.”**
- The only “religious theme that received sustained attention was compassion,” and “extracting the principle of compassion as the lowest common denominator of various religions necessarily detaches it from its religious roots and risks moralizing it.”
- **“We didn’t explore the way that Christianity and the secularized world that emerged from it have in part caused the environmental crisis, by de-sacralising the world and concentrating all holiness in a transcendent god.”** He then listed other areas that were not considered.

These give us insights into three views of the concern, breadth and role of religion, and thus scope of potential discussion within the Network. At the same time, they invite questions such as:

1. What is the extent of our “religious thought and expression”? Is it that discussion within the Sea of Faith may encompass all or any of the following?
 - What we value, and values as a base for action.
 - World religions, their histories, literature and concerns today.
 - Developing an in depth understanding and critique of Christianity and/or other religions.
 - Personal spirituality, mysticism and responses to the religion and spiritualities of others?
 - Ethics and moral principles which include our relationships with, and possible responsibility for: others, the institutions and the society we live in, other cultures, and all Life.
 - The relationship of humanity *within*, rather than *on*, the earth, with the idea of health and well being of the planet being a manifestation of personal and human,

equilibrium and spirituality.

- A new human consciousness.

2. What is the purpose of our meeting and discussion? There is no doubt most of us experience the encouragement, stimulation and support in fellowship with others in the Network. Is there more ?

Both Jeanette and Speth have suggested one. Laurie suggests another in his closing statement:

“We will do justice to our claim to be ‘the national religious discussion network’ and ‘exploring spirituality religion and ethics’ only if ... ‘we focus more on articulating religion for our time’”^{iv}

And James Speth also suggests a third:

“A new consciousness should lie with the world’s religions ... no other group of institutions can wield the particular moral authority of the religions”. ... “In the past leadership came from scientists economists and lawyers. Today we need especially the preachers, the philosophers, the psychologists and the poets”^v.

Whatever else we may wish for 2012, my hope is that we will enjoy another year of encouraging and stimulating discussion, with the potential to also sustain and motivate each one of us in our exploration and expression.

Natali Allen
Chairperson 2011-2012

TAILPEACE

“All religions have caught visions of a transformed society. Hindus call it **dharmaraj**, the reign of righteousness: Christians the **basileia** or Reign of God; Muslims speak of **ummah** as the community of all believers ... and the Qur’an sees this community encompassing all humans. Spiritual needs are basic to humans.”

Val Webb quoting Ursula King in *SoF in Australia Bulletin* May 2010.

ⁱ Speth, J. (2008). *The Bridge at the End of the World*. Yale University Press. New Haven. (p.214)

ⁱⁱ Webb, V. (2011). *Crisis, Conflict, Creativity and Compassion*. Sea of Faith (NZ) Conference. Christchurch 2010

ⁱⁱⁱ Chisholm, L. (2010). *Can Religion Help Pull Us Back From the Brink?* Sea of Faith Newsletter. November, 2011.

^{iv} Chisholm, L. (2011). *Ibid*

^v Speth, J. (2008). *Ibid*. p.s. 214 & 235