

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 107, August 2013

Conference 4-6 October, Lindisfarne College, Hastings

"Tell Me The New, New, Story"

These are our New-Story Tellers:

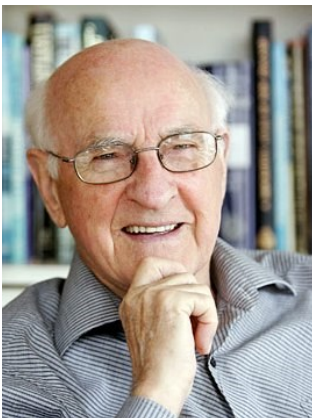
Sir Lloyd Geering discusses the landmark book *Honest To God*. In Protestant circles at least, many of today's new stories emerged from this book.

Dr Nigel Leaves says that there are so many new stories available that we have difficulty choosing.

Dr Rachael Kohn writes that addressing metaphysical yearnings is still important in a rational world.

Winton Higgins offers modern Buddhism as an example of an attractive model of secular religion.

Sir Lloyd Geering



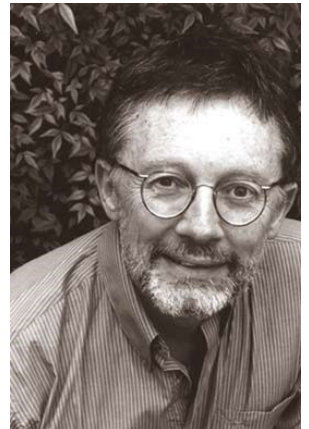
Dr Nigel Leaves



Dr Rachael Kohn



Winton Higgins



Other Speakers:

Tom Hall, Workshop



Shirley Murray, Workshop



Noel Cheer, Panel Discussion



STORIES FROM THE KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Our Keynote Speakers each deal differently with the Conference Theme

SIR LLOYD GEERING

Why *Honest to God* blew the roof off the church, and let in fresh air.

A new basis for theology was laid by Schleiermacher (1768-1830, father of Protestant liberalism). It was built on by the Modernists, and developed by Bultmann, Tillich and Bonhoeffer. Then, in 1963, Robinson unintentionally became a theological whistle-blower by revealing to people in the pews where the theologians were going. His words hit the church like a bomb so that 'things have never been the same again' (Ruth Robinson). But more has changed theologically in the fifty years since then than in the previous 150 years. In 1966 the word was shocked to hear of the 'death of God'. In 1993 Karen Armstrong published *A History of God*. So where are we now fifty years later? What can we honestly say today about God?

DR NIGEL LEAVES:

**Too many new stories!
Which one should we tell?**

Postmodernity has let not one but many genies out of the bottle! Following Nietzsche there is not 'One Truth' but many 'truths'.

Likewise there is not one new story but many new stories.

Indeed, even within 'liberal' and 'progressive' Christianity there is a huge divergence as to what story should be told.

In this lecture I will outline the new Christian stories that are being promoted today. Are all these stories permissible?

How do we decide between them; and what effect does this choice have on our understanding of 'God', 'the Church' and 'the future of religion'?

Dr. Nigel Leaves is Canon of St. John's Anglican Cathedral in Brisbane, Australia, and Adjunct Lecturer in theology at Charles Sturt University. He has a Ph.D. in Theology from Murdoch University in Perth, Australia, an M.A in Religious Education from King's College, London, and an M.A. in Theology from Keble College, Oxford University. He is currently at work on a new Polebridge book entitled *Which Jesus? Whose Christ?*

DR RACHAEL KOHN:

From Here to Eternity: what has changed and what has stayed the same in spiritual life today.

Scientific and technological breakthroughs have had a significant effect on spiritual discourse. 'God talk' has not only incorporated new secular concepts but has redefined the purpose of a spiritual life.

Yet metaphysical yearnings are not a thing of the past, and morals and ethics remain an abiding practice and concern in our lives.

"What has changed and what has stayed the same in our spiritual life today" is both a survey and a critique of some of the popular 'religion and science' research and debates and a recommendation for the future.

Rachael Kohn began the *The Spirit of Things* on ABC Radio National and she has produced and presented the programme for sixteen years.

Dr. Kohn taught Religious Studies at Sydney University, and in universities in England and Canada, and was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters by the University of New South Wales in 2005 for her "outstanding contribution to fostering religious understanding" in the Australian community.

Rachael has contributed to many books and journals on the subject of religion and has written *Curious Obsessions in the History of Science and Spirituality* (ABC Books, 2007) and *The New Believers: Reimagining God* (HarperCollins 2003). She is the Vice President of the International Association of Religion Journalists.

WINTON HIGGINS

What is religion for? A pragmatist inquiry
Christian and Buddhist secular religionists opt out of the language game of revelation – of asserting ultimate 'objective truth'. This move frees them from reducing religious life to its truth-claims, and opens up an inquiry – in the spirit of post-metaphysical thought and philosophical pragmatism – about how religion has served human needs and interests. It has done so from the most basic level of underpinning social cohesion, to its more advanced functions of ethical, cultural and aesthetic enrichment, so helping us develop into deeper and more articulate individuals as we confront and reflect on our everyday life predicaments. These religious purposes endure, even (or especially) in a secular age that draws its mundane beliefs from non-religious sources.

ALL ABOUT US

SEA OF FAITH

EXPLORING VALUES, SPIRITUALITY AND MEANING

Our formal name is The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Inc.

We are an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.

We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from the 1984 BBC TV 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 Beverley Smith

La Colline, 8A Adams Road, Whataupoko, Gisborne 4010, (06) 868-8208 beverleys@clear.net.nz

The Secretary is Laurie Chisholm

117 Collins Rd, RD4 Christchurch 7674, (03) 325-2142, 021-201-0302 laurie.chisholm@ihug.co.nz

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 and not on paper.

To **join**, 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, and DVDs from the Resource Centre which is managed by **Suzi Thirlwall** (07) 578-2775 susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz Refer to the catalogue on the website.

Editor: Noel Cheer,
26 Clipper St.,
Titahi Bay 5022



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Conference 4-6 October 2013 Lindisfarne College, Hastings

You should make your registration, travel and accomodations bookings ASAP.

The Registration Form accompanies this Newsletter and is also on the Website.

WHO TELLS THE BETTER “NEW STORY”?

THE CHURCH OR THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION?

By Noel Cheer, who found the need for new stories in Italy

A recent trip to Italy and the confusion of thoughts raised by visiting so many ancient churches, was supplemented by reading Nigel Leaves Religion Under Attack, Getting Theology Right in preparation for listening to his Keynote address at this year's Conference. This article explores that confusion.

The secular produces a better world

Wordsworth complained that the “The World is too much with us”: but it wasn't into supernaturalism that he suggested we go. Rather it was into an earthiness of sea and wind and flowers.

In contrast, the Roman Catholic churches which we visited in Italy spoke to me of an irrecoverable medievalism, turning its back on the world, in the way invoked by the recent Pope Benedict. It meant a refusal to co-exist with the secularist and egalitarian ethics of our times in which organisations such as The Human Rights Commission and the United Nations deliver what Jesus' view of the Kingdom proposed to do.

The Life of the Church: “Collaborative Legend Making”

In many of the churches, I was bothered by the rich narratives (which we took to be no more solid than metaphors) that were given an historical life of their own supported by tradition and dogma in a process I want to call “Collaborative Legend Making”.

I want to make an early claim of authorship of this term because I suspect that the Westar Institute's newest project – The Christianity Seminar – might come up with, it leaving me high and dry in plagiarism. More on this below.

My Complaints

Overall, I have three complaints: that monotheism constrains the spiritual options; that traditional Christianity fails to educate its members, instead promoting a child-like status; and that some of the motifs of Christianity seem to be at significant variance with what Jesus of Nazareth was promoting. This last point, really need not be a hindrance: after all it is possible that a cultural tradition might greatly change and improve over time.

Is Monotheism Boring?

In Verdi's opera *Otello*, (coincidentally also a product of Italy), Iago sings of his belief in a ‘cruel god’. That

might be thought of as one of the less adorable dispositions of the Abrahamic God. Any discussion of God will reveal an extensive range of attributes – Karen Armstrong's *A History of God* illustrates this. The Hindu faith traditions and Maori spirituality and Classical Greek or Roman pantheons, instead of supporting one god with a range of sometime contradictory characteristics, take a polytheistic stand, usually ranking the deities. A wit (whose name I have lost) referred to ancient Greece as a society of first-rate men and second-rate gods.

Another book for reading on the plane was *Consciousness* by Christopher Koch who is the colleague of Francis Crick. In the 1990s, Crick turned his attention from the double helix model of the chromosome to establish the study of consciousness on a sound scientific footing. He describes consciousness as autonomous – it doesn't depend on the will. Jung reminds us that the contents of our unconscious are constantly being projected into our surroundings seeking external targets by which to generate meaning.

But, though officially monotheistic, the Christian tradition is compromised -- there is a rich ensemble of angels and saints to whom are deputed divine activities.

Another tension was felt in the plane high over the Indian Ocean in listening to the choral music of Palestrina. The blending of voices is beautiful (I might say ‘divine’, if allowed to leave it as a metaphor). But the message conveyed by the musical vehicle just doesn't work for me.

In Marian Catholicism, the mother of Jesus (who, through some tortuous theology also becomes the mother of God) assumes a major extra-Biblical role – more of this on page 6. It is here that collaborative legend making has built the figure of the Virgin Mary. To me, these examples speak to the constraints placed on the human psyche by monotheism including the ugliness of Christian triumphalism (witness the Inquisition and the rape of South America by 16th century conquistadores), and the still-persisting ecclesiastical and liturgical systems which deny women positions of centrality or policy-making.

There are many important spiritual values that are not well addressed in monotheism. By extending our metaphorical reach into a 21st century pantheon of deities representing the natural order (not merely passive ‘creation’) combined with a sense of ‘place’ and of history we might extend our spiritual vocabulary.

The Cost of Belonging

Some of my uneasiness came about by reflecting on the part that these ancient (some over 1000 years old) churches played in the lives of village people. The atmosphere offered by these old Italian parish churches – the same can mostly be said of English Protestant counterparts – is mixed. There is the warmth of community, the support of certainty, the daily, weekly, yearly liturgical cycles which divide the year into regular manageable chunks. Pastoral work brings Mass or Communion to the dying and comfort to the bereaved.

But, there is a cost. To participate in this ethos is to be denied the

unfettered inquisitive mental world which has brought enormous benefits to humankind

in general, especially in the West. Galileo was not the only victim. It is also to make an enemy of the scientific method (Dawkins is correct on this point) by failing to distinguish reason from fantasy – however spirit-nourishing the fantasy may be. It fails to acknowledge the distinction between Karen Armstrong’s Logos and Mythos.

Another umbrella accusation: infantilisation. Some church activity requires self-abnegating deferential behaviour towards the institution itself which, as it were, stands in the foreground obscuring and mis-representing the Kingdom message of Jesus.

There is quite simply insufficient Biblical (or other) backing for the biographical material assigned to Mary. That the story may have developed, perhaps even been cultivated, to counterbalance the male values and power structures of the Church seems likely. In Pompeii there is a temple dedicated to Isis, who with her son Horus is frequently depicted in statues which directly pre-figure the Madonna-and-Child image, showing some of the metaphors that were ‘in the air’ twenty centuries ago. Surely Isis became a template for the Marian story line.

The value placed on the virginity of Mary creates biological problems. The payoff that this is said to offer for women is a compensatory status otherwise denied by exclusion from the priesthood. But the combination of

perpetual virginity and motherhood does seem to be a one-off achievement.

Jesus Misrepresented

I find crucifixes revolting. To see a modern staging of church crucifixes, watch (if your gut can take it) Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of The Christ*. The storyline is that the preacher Jesus has a special commission from God to rescue humankind from condemnation (by this same God) but has to die in a ghastly fashion to achieve it. To all Christians, of whatever denomination, my invitation is this: subscribe to a better God – one whose sense of justice exceeds that of nasty schoolmasters who bellow, “See what you made me do.”

Yes, Jesus was crucified. It was a very common way of dying in those days and was designed to humiliate and then to kill. About a century before Jesus there were 6000 crucifixions along the first 200km of the Appian Way south from Rome, the means of suppressing the

revolt led by Spartacus,

But we ... you and I ... didn’t put Jesus on the cross. It was his own integrity in

A visitor to Earth might see many Italian churches as shrines to a goddess whose son met a barbarous death.

counterpointing the empire of Rome with the Kingdom of God.

Just look around today’s world and you will see events that resemble that time. From tribal slaughter in Africa to the United States’ sinful shame of Guantanamo Bay and extraordinary rendition. Inhumane power swamping justice and mercy.

But there is another side. Reading Nigel’s book brought it into focus. The elements of Jesus’ ‘Kingdom’ – compassion, fair-dealing, equality of person, and much else is now present (even if imperfectly) in the post-Enlightenment, post-Christian, secular-governed West.

Leaves cites Lloyd Geering and Don Cupitt as promoters of the idea that the West is the improvement and the inheritor of the fast-fading, excessively institutionalised, Christian Church. A bit like “The (old) Church is Dead, Long Live the (new) Church”. Richard Holloway’s *Godless Morality* handles this well.

New, Secular, Stories

In short, whereas Jesus might not recognise the suite of collaborative legends that comprise the historical Christian Church, I believe that he would have a sympathetic recognition for the Human Rights Commission and the United Nations as being on the right track. They tell better stories.

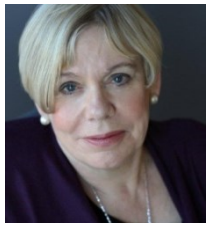
Noel Cheer

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH MYTHS AND NOVELS

Karen Armstrong shows how:

"We have seen that a myth could never be approached in a purely profane setting. It was only comprehensible in a liturgical context that set it apart from everyday life; it must be experienced as part of a process of personal transformation.

None of this surely applies to the novel, which can be read anywhere at all without ritual trappings, and must, if it is any good, eschew the overtly didactic.



Yet the experience of reading a novel has certain qualities that remind us of the mythology. It can be seen as a form of mediation. Readers have to live with a novel for days or even weeks. It projects them into another world, parallel to but apart from their ordinary lives. They know perfectly well that this fictional realm is not 'real' and yet while they are reading it becomes compelling.

A powerful novel becomes part of the backdrop of lives long after we have laid the book aside.

It is an exercise of make-believe that, like yoga or a religious festival, breaks down barriers of space and time and extends our sympathies to empathise with others' lives and sorrows. It teaches compassion, the ability to 'feel with' others. And, like mythology, an important novel is transformative. If we allow it to do so, can change us forever."

Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*

FLEMING

His name was Fleming, and he was a poor Scottish farmer. One day, while trying to make a living for his family, he heard a cry for help coming from a nearby bog. He dropped his tools and ran to the bog.

There, mired to his waist in black muck, was a terrified boy, screaming and struggling to free himself. Farmer Fleming saved the lad from what could have been a slow and terrifying death.

The next day, a fancy carriage pulled up to the Scotsman's sparse surroundings. An elegantly dressed nobleman stepped out and introduced himself as the father of the boy Farmer Fleming had saved.

'I want to repay you,' said the nobleman. 'You saved my son's life.'

'No, I can't accept payment for what I did,' the Scottish farmer replied waving off the offer. At that moment, the farmer's own son came to the door of the family hovel.

'Is that your son?' the nobleman asked.

'Yes,' the farmer replied proudly.

'I'll make you a deal. Let me provide him with the level of education my own son will enjoy. If the lad is anything like his father, he'll no doubt grow to be a man we both will be proud of.' And that he did.

Farmer Fleming's son attended the very best schools and in time, graduated from St. Mary's Hospital Medical School in London, and went on to become known throughout the world as the noted Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of Penicillin.

Years afterward, the same nobleman's son who was saved from the bog was stricken with pneumonia.

What saved his life this time? Penicillin.

The name of the nobleman? Lord Randolph Churchill .. His son's name? Winston Churchill.

Someone once said: What goes around comes around.

(forwarded by Tom Hall)

MORE ON MARY

"The phantom of a 'Holy Mother' has proved quite an earner for the Church of Rome, more tangible than the 'Holy Spirit' ... more approachable than Christ Almighty.

Having hijacked the 'sacred feminine' for the cause of Catholicism back in the 4th century, papal agents ever since have fashioned the Blessed Virgin into a malleable instrument of Catholic policy. 'Mary' was, and remains, the 'Word' of the Catholic hierarchy, a convenient, adaptable, protagonist of Church policy, freed not only from the laws of the physical universe but also from the restraints of Gospel teaching.

Whenever a local saint was wanting or in difficulties BVM could always be relied upon for a timely apparition, rallying the faithful and stiffening the doubtful."

Kenneth Humphreys

www.jesusneverexisted.com/mary.htm

Too harsh? Send a Letter to the Editor

SIR LLOYD AND HIS HOLINESS

In June, the 14th Dalai Lama visited New Zealand. The television station **Face Television** (Sky Channel 083) in collaboration with **The University of Otago** arranged an

interview with Sir Lloyd

Geering. It went to air on July 24th.

To order a DVD of this historic

50minute interview, mail a cheque for \$25+\$5pp with your name and address to **Face Television**, PO Box 78-034, Grey Lynn, Auckland.



FACE
TELEVISION

GOD IS NOT ONE

A Review by Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch

When I picked up *God Is Not One*, the title led me to jump to the conclusion that this was probably just another broadside by a new atheist against religion; along the lines that religions have such different ideas about God that it's pretty obvious that there's no truth in any of them. The subtitle quickly put me on the right track: **"The eight rival religions that run the world and why their differences matter."** The author, Stephen Prothero, is a professor in the Department of Religion at Boston University and the main content of the book is a series of overviews of different religions, one chapter for each: Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba religion, Judaism, and Daoism.

What you get is not an assemblage of dessicated, objective facts about religions, but a sympathetic attempt to enter into the spirit of each one. Moreover, he doesn't just give an account of the classical teaching of a religion but also explains its recent evolution, contemporary role and significance on the world scene. **Prothero argues that we need to understand different religions to understand what is going on in the world.**

SoFers are likely to find the Introduction and the penultimate chapter (A Brief Coda on Atheism) of most interest. The introduction analyses and critiques the view that all religions are essentially the same. This is a view that I have often heard and have been generally rather at a loss to know how to respond to. In this view, the foothills of the different religions may differ (different practices, beliefs, etc) but at a higher level they are like different paths to the peak of the same mountain. Prothero comments "this is a lovely sentiment, but it is dangerous, disrespectful and untrue." While the sentiment aims to promote religious tolerance, we are not helped at all to understand **the intractable conflicts around the world in which religion plays a role by this rose-tinted view.** The idea that Buddhism is a path to salvation is confused, because 'salvation' is a Christian concept, a solution to the problem of sin, which really plays no role in Buddhism. There is no one essence that all religions share: all you can say is that there are family resemblances in some of the seven 'dimensions' of religion identified by Ninian Smart: ritual, narrative, experiential, institutional, ethical, doctrinal and material. While religions are all ways of wrestling with the human predicament, they each have their own diagnosis and prescription for a cure.

The penultimate chapter contrasts angry and friendly atheism. For the one sort, religion is poison and the only

way forward is to abolish it, while the other asks only that atheism be regarded as a valid point of view deserving a fair hearing. He wonders whether the first sort actually functions just like a religion and hopes that the second sort will emerge more strongly.

The book has a lively, readable style and I never found it boringly familiar. Some may feel that it inclines towards the journalistic rather than the theological/philosophical but I found it satisfying and insightful.

This book was reviewed in Newsletter 90, Sept. 2010. The warning it brings is worth repeating [ed]

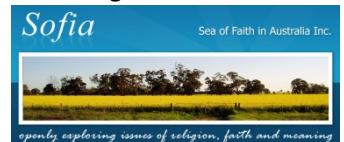
RELIGION & SEX

SoF in Australia Conference

13-15 September 2013

Picnic Point Conference Centre, Toowoomba, Australia.

You can register online by following the links from www.sof-in-australia.org



The Conference will begin on the Friday night with a cross-cultural perspective from a Q&A panel consisting of people from a number of different faith communities. In due course we will be inviting those who register for the weekend to suggest questions that we can put to panel members with the aim of better understanding their views on and attitudes to issues relating to sex.

On the Saturday **ethologist Glen McBride** will give us a view through deep history of sexuality and the human animal. Glen's book *The Genesis Chronicles* deals with key developments in human evolution; among these is our unique sexual nature.

Theological educator Steven Ogden will take us through the chequered history of sex and the Church, a topic he has explored in depth as background for his book *Love Upside Down: Life, Love and the Subversive Jesus*.

Psychologist Stephen Smallbone will speak on the vexed and very current issue of sexual abuse in religious settings. Stephen's professional work, both in practice and academically, has been looking at the causes and prevention of child abuse.

On the Sunday, **ethicist and researcher Leslie Cannold** will give an assessment of the intersection between sex and religion in contemporary Australia.

RICHARD DAWKINS HAS LOST

MEET THE NEW “NEW ATHEISTS”

Secular humanism is recovering from its Dawkinsite phase – and beginning a more interesting conversation. This item is adapted from an article by Theo Hobson in the print edition of *The Spectator* magazine, 13 April 2013.

The atheist spring that began just over a decade ago is over, thank God....Richard Dawkins is now seen by many, even many non-believers, as a joke figure, shaking his fist at sky fairies. He's the Mary Whitehouse of our day.

So what was all that about, then? We can see it a bit more clearly now. It was an outpouring of frustration at the fact that religion is maddeningly complicated and stubbornly irritating, even in largely secular Britain. This frustration had been building for decades: the secular intellectual is likely to feel somewhat bothered by religion, even if it is culturally weak. Oh, she finds it charming and interesting to a large extent, and loves a cosy carol service, but religion really ought to know its place. Instead it dares to accuse the secular world of being somehow deficient.

The events of 9/11 were the main trigger for the explosion of this latent irritation. There was a desire to see Islamic terrorism as the symbolic synecdoche of all of religion. On one level this makes some sense: does not all religion place faith above reason? Isn't this intrinsically dangerous? Don't all religions jeopardise secular freedom, whether through holy wars or faith schools? On another level it is absurd: is the local vicar, struggling to build community and help smelly drunks stay alive, really a force for evil — even if she has some illiberal opinions? When such questions arise, a big bright 'Complicated' sign ought to flash in one's brain. Instead, in the wake of 9/11, many otherwise thoughtful people opted for simplicity over complexity. They managed to convince themselves that religion is basically bad, and that the brave intellectual should talk against it. (This preference for seeming tough and clear over admitting difficult complexity is really cowardice, and believers are prone to it too.)

The success of five or six atheist authors, on both sides of the Atlantic, seemed to herald a strong new

movement. It seemed that non-believers were tired of all the nuance surrounding religion, hungry for a tidy narrative that put them neatly in the right.

Atheism is still with us. But the movement that threatened to form has petered out. Crucially, atheism's younger advocates are reluctant to compete for the role of Dawkins's disciple. They are more likely to bemoan the new atheist approach and call for large injections of nuance. A good example is the pop-philosopher Julian Baggini. He is a stalwart atheist who likes a bit of a scrap with believers, but he's also able to admit that religion has its virtues, that humanism needs to learn from it. For example, he has observed that a sense of gratitude is problematically lacking in secular culture, and suggested that humanists should consider ritual practices such as fasting. This is also the approach of the pop-philosopher king, Alain de Botton. His recent book *Religion for Atheists* rejects the 'boring' question of

"we are...at heart desperate, fragile, vulnerable, sinful creatures, a good deal less wise than we are knowledgeable, always on the verge of anxiety, tortured by our relationships, terrified of death — and most of all in need of God."

Alain de Botton -- *Atheist*

religion's truth or falsity, and calls for 'a selective reverence for religious rituals and concepts'. If you can take his faux-earnest prose style, he has some interesting insights into religion's basis in community, practice, habit.

And liberal punditry has softened. Polly Toynbee's younger sisters, so to speak, are wary of seeing all of religion as a misogynist plot. When Zoe Williams attacks religious sexism or homophobia she resists the temptation to widen the attack and imply that all believers are dunces or traitors. Likewise Tanya Gold recently ridiculed the idea of religion as a force for evil. 'The idea of my late church-going mother-in-law beating homosexuals or instituting a pogrom is obviously ridiculous, although she did help with jumble sales and occasionally church flowers.'

What, if anything, do these newer atheists have to say? In previous generations, the atheist was keen to insist that non-believers can be just as moral as

believers. These days, this is more or less taken for granted. What distinguishes the newer atheist is his admission that non-believers can be just as immoral as believers. Rejecting religion is no sure path to virtue; it is more likely to lead to complacent self-regard, or ideological arrogance.

It might sound odd to cite Alain de Botton as a critic of complacent self-regard, but this is central to his stated purpose. Attending to the religious roots of humanism can prod us out of seeing secular humanism as natural, the default position, and incite us to ponder our need for discipline, structure, community, and so on. At one point he commends the Christian perspective, that we are 'at heart desperate, fragile, vulnerable, sinful creatures, a good deal less wise than we are knowledgeable, always on the verge of anxiety, tortured by our relationships, terrified of death — and most of all in need of God'. Is this mere posturing at depth, for ultimately he does not affirm the idea of our need of God in a sustained, serious way? Yes and no: it is also a mark of the intelligent humanist's desire to avoid simplistic ideologising and attempt some honesty about the human condition. The key novelty of the newer atheism, perhaps, is its attentiveness to human frailty.

The religious believer might say: we do not need humanism to tell us this. Indeed not, but it might not hurt non-believers, inoculated against all religious talk, to hear of it.

* * * * *

THE GENIAL CASSANDRA

Excerpts from *James Lovelock: A man for all seasons*
By John Gray, published in *The New Statesman*, March 27
2013

Small but sturdily built, often laughing, animated and highly sociable, James Lovelock is, at the age of 93, far from being any kind of recluse. But he has always resisted every kind of groupthink, and followed his own line of inquiry.

It was during his time at NASA that Lovelock had the first inklings of what would become the Gaia theory – according to which the earth is a planet that behaves like a living being, controlling its surface and atmosphere to keep the environment hospitable to life.

He has more in common with thinkers such as Darwin and Einstein, who were able to transform our view of the world because they did not work under any kind of external direction, than he does with most of the scientists who are at work today.

Although Lovelock is grateful to [William] Golding for his inspired suggestion [of the name 'Gaia'], he views the notion of the earth as a self-regulating system as an integral part of science. **This insistence that Gaia is science, rather than myth or mysticism, has distanced Lovelock from Greens for whom environmentalism has become a religion.**

Turning to Gaia for a God-substitute, as some Greens have done, seems a fundamental error. Though vastly

older and stronger than the human species, Gaia is neither omnipotent nor immortal – and, unlike the God of western monotheism, it has no particular interest in human beings. The goal of a selfregulating system is to renew itself, rather than preserve any of its constituent parts, and if human beings become an obstacle to that end they will find Planet Earth increasingly inhospitable.

In the Gaia theory human beings aren't at the centre of things ... dislodging the human animal from primacy in the world, the Gaia theory can be seen as completing Darwin's work. ... other living things are not, for Lovelock, simply resources to be exploited by humans; but he rejects firmly any Romantic belief in the intrinsic benignity of the natural world of the kind that is often found among urban Greens.

This rejection of anthropocentrism helps explain another manner in which he differs from contemporary Greens. One of the reasons why Lovelock has long supported nuclear power is that its impact on the environment has been vastly less malignant, even in cases of disaster such as Chernobyl and Fukushima, than industrial technologies such as coal mining.

In any case a low-tech, relocalised economy would not deal with what Lovelock regards as the fundamental problem: the rising numbers of human beings. Climate change has not always been caused by us; there appear to have been several large shifts before the human species existed. However, if the current global warming is anthropogenic (as Lovelock still firmly believes), human numbers play a critical role in the process.

Almost certainly, a world population of ten billion or more – the level that experts estimate we will reach some time later this century – cannot be maintained indefinitely.

And yet, by using the technologies most demonised by contemporary Greens – genetically modified food, fracking and nuclear power, for instance, humankind could make possible a decent standard of living until our numbers fall globally (as they are doing already in some parts of the world) and eventually stabilise at a lower level.

The realistic alternative is a succession of intensifying resource wars in which endangered human groups fight for control of oil, water, minerals and arable land.

Lovelock remains open to the possibilities of geo-engineering, deliberately changing the oceans, air or land surface of the planet with the aim of countering global warming, but questions whether we understand the climate well enough to manage the large risks that geo-engineering involves. "We are not clever enough to handle either the earth or ourselves," he says. The way forward is to use human inventiveness to adapt to a shift in the environment that can no longer be prevented, and leave recovery to the resilience of Gaia. For the foreseeable future, human beings will most likely muddle through.

Where he differs from many is that his life affirmation is not restricted to human beings. He tells me his next book will consider the possibility that evolution may produce another species, one more capable than human beings have been of coexisting with other life forms on the planet.



THE NEWLY EMERGING STORY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

A review by Alan Goss of Napier

The British Labour M.P. Michael Meacher in his book *Destination of the Species: The Riddle of Human Existence*, has joined the chorus of those calling for greater urgency in matters of environmental and economic concern. What follows is a summary of the last chapter, the author's conclusion.

A Blinding Conceit

Meacher contends that it is a blinding conceit for us humans to see ourselves as the unique and final pinnacle in the development of life. So far from the Universe being made for Man, it is this grotesque conceit by humans about the centrality of their role which is primed to destroy the very foundation of their existence.

The phenomenal rise of science in the last four centuries has profoundly changed the checks and balances that previously held the earth broadly in equilibrium. It has unleashed a technological, industrial and cybernetic (electronic vis-a-vis biological systems) power into the hands of the dominant species in a way that is unparalleled in the history of the planet. This has transformed the stewardship of the earth to one of ruthless exploitation. Meacher cites rampant biological carbon production; civil engineering works which shift more soil each year than all the world's rivers bring to the seas; industrial emissions now eclipse the emissions from all the world's volcanos; pollution is being disseminated across the globe even in remote regions such as the Arctic.

This unprecedented mastery over nature has been exacerbated by two further factors:

- *The Rise in Human Population*: Estimates by the United Nations suggest that world population will reach 9-10 billion by 2050, with 99% of that growth occurring in the developing world.
- *Over Exploitation of the earth's resources*: half of the world's 2.5 trillion barrels of oil have been utilised since oil was first discovered 150 years ago. But the demands on oil world-wide and the frenetic industrial growth rate in India and China means that the oil supply will be exhausted in about 40 years. Even more critical is the growing shortage of water. Global consumption of fresh water is doubling every 20 years. The UN estimates that by 2025 the numbers living in areas of severe water stress will have risen to a staggering three billion. Fish are being hunted to extinction. Nearly half of all fish stocks are fully exploited, 20% are over-exploited and only 2% are recovering. The ravaging of the earth is utterly unsustainable.

Ecological Footprinting

The nett impact of all these trends has been measured by a technique called ecological footprinting.

It has been calculated that the human race is currently overshooting the planet's biocapacity by 20%. This is likely to grow so that, by 2050, we will need 2.3 Earths to sustain our population. There is general agreement that a sustainable population for the earth is around 2.2 billion.

Set against the 4.5 billion years of age of the earth, these accelerating rates of growth in population, minerals extraction, food and water scarcity, and population – within a mere half-century – are widely out of proportion with both past experience and future durability

The Consequences

The end of oil, a vital commodity for industry, agriculture, transport, and for fighting wars, will bring about an enormous social and political dislocation without precedent in human history. It will severely narrow the parameters within which economics, civilisations and individual quality of life operate.

Sharp reductions in water availability will generate wars which, given the spread of nuclear weapons, could prove unprecedentedly destructive. The colossal growth of population in the poor developing world will produce massive environmental refugee flight to the more prosperous regions of the world. This will bring the smouldering rich-poor divide into prolonged and violent conflict.

Climate Change makes it Worse

The above grim scenario is now exacerbated by the intensifying onset of climate change. Though this phenomenon is not universally accepted the evidence is very strong that sharply rising greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere are linked with the increasing average global temperatures; frequency and ferocity of hurricanes, floods and rising sea levels, drought and forest fires. In face of such an enormous global risk, a precautionary policy is the only sensible course. The failure of governments across the world to take such meaningful action, e.g. the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, says a great deal, if not about the human species' place in the universe, then certainly about the current state of the human condition. It reveals:

Climate change concerns are being sidelined by both the major economic powers determined to maintain their

wealth and by poorer nations prioritising economic growth over all other considerations to escape poverty and to enjoy Western living standards.

A widespread human committment to short-term gain over long-term precaution, even though the risk would be incalculably vast.

Conclusion

Humans are not the pinnacle of evolution, they are just species one among many, with intelligence too little matched by wisdom and self-constraint for our own good. Our destiny is still defined in terms of our power, our technological mastery over the whole natural world, our capacity to conquer and colonise the universe. Our current political and economic structures or government place too much emphasis on power and competitiveness, on greed and self-interest, for humans to achieve their real destiny – to live creatively and cooperatively within the minutely balanced systems of the cosmos. We neglect the emergent property of our spirituality, the single most important attribute of human uniqueness. The challenge now for we humans is not to transform the world but to transform ourselves.

Humans are not the pinnacle of evolution, they are just species one among many, with intelligence too little matched by wisdom and self-constraint for our own good.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

The April Newsletter had in it much to explore, true to the by-line of our title.

First, **Theopraxy** led us in as Jock Crawford reflected on the book *God is the Good We Do* by Michael Benedikt. A new format for God was explained by the author, and it is clear that God today is still in evolution mode.

We agreed with Shirley Dixon in February that “Tell Me The Old Old Story” needs updating for a modern fit. So we anticipated a heartwarming narrative. However, it seems that the “New New Story” is too multifarious to be grasped. Spirituality grows from an individual’s own most meaningful story experiences.

John Robinson’s *Honest To God* too, is almost history, but even now it is held in awe for its openness and questioning. Laurie Chisholm’s appraisal was commendable, he admitted that he never knew what Tillich’s famous phrase “Ground of Being” meant. Nor do we. We cannot think “without reflection” like the ancients did. Neuronal knowledge connections have replaced superstition and fear in our cerebral cortices.

Progressive Christianity honours the past yet marches into change in “Why Were We Not Told”, reviewed by Peter Creevey. Maybe the church’s persecution of Lloyd Geering has produced some of “his keen following”, but others know little of it. Rather it is the quality of his writings and lectures which draws people. He shows a highly intelligent understanding of life and his topics.

Next, “In Defence of Doubt” by Val Webb is sympathetic to uncertainty. It may be true that some doubters will soar into a more genuine faith, while others will flounder. At the same time numbers of newly convinced humanists find themselves with a deeper respect for their fellow humans, noble ethics, and a love of life here and now.

The apocalypse of global warming was claxoned yet again in Paul Gilding’s book “The Great Disruption”. Economic growth is the cause of

global warming, shopping has ousted religion as Marx’s opiate of the people, and Governments are to be blamed. So what can we do? I am cheered by the Tauranga “Sun” April 12th, when the editorial by Roger Rabbits begins “Global warming is cancelled due to lack of interest”. For now at least.

After that, Tom Hall’s analysis of “God’s Unemployment Problem” was a romp of pithy and relevant notions. Tom Hall too, appears to favour the evolution of God. We look forward to his workshop at Conference.

Observations “From The Chair” concluded the newsletter. Among them was a mention of the new Pope, then Auguste Comte’s opinion that an intelligent man could not believe in God was quoted. Are we to infer that the Pope should be denied his faith? It is a human right, in moderation. And despite Comte’s gloomy predictions about secular societies millions of people live quiet and good lives within them.

Chairperson Beverley’s page with its blended mix of ideas and life happenings – and like the rest of the newsletter – did keep us informed and thinking.

Margaret Whitwell, Tauranga

FAITH IN CYBERSPACE JOURNEY OF THE UNIVERSE

Go to Mary Ellen Tucker’s video address at ...

<http://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org/conference-at-chautauqua/>

... it’s worth the hour that it takes.

Tom Hall

FROM THE CHAIR

Greetings from Eastland.

Last month I wrote that everything was in place for the 2013 Conference. As I write, this is not quite so. Professor Michael Benedikt has regretfully informed us that he is unable to be with us due to his work commitments in the USA. Instead Dr Rachel Kohn from Australia has accepted our invitation to be a guest speaker.

I am very appreciative of book reviews. Although my library of theological volumes is ever increasing, I have to reluctantly put the brakes on my expenditure, so therefore the reviews by our New Zealand members, the ones in the UK Sofia and Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity keeps me up to date.

Recently Alan Goss, one of our venerated life members, told me of a book he was reading – *Living with Ambiguity: Religious Naturalism and the Menace of Evil*, by Donald A. Crosby. His argument is that nature, not a supernatural God, deserves our reverence and our devotion. We look forward to a review of this book from Alan soon.

A few years ago a 'Christian Book Shop' opened in Gisborne and then closed. "We can order any book you want", I was told. I gave them a list of books and names of authors, most of which I already owned, in the hope that they would purchase similar and display and maybe, just maybe attract a reader who'd left the fundamentalist, Sunday School emotive claptrap behind and whose thinking was changing. After all, Scott Peck told his readers they were in stages of religious development! The owners of the 'Christian' Book Shop totally disregarded my list.

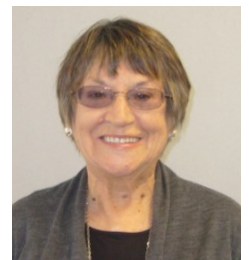
"In God we Doubt – Confessions of a Failed Atheist" wrote British Journalist John Humphrys whose award-winning BBC Radio Four series '*Humphrys In Search of God*', provided the biggest response to anything he has done in half a century of journalism.

Similarly Joan Bakewell, another British Journalist/Presenter, is quoted as saying the "Here and now is all that is real – the rest is an illusion". Her book of interviews with luminaries such as Paul Davies, Karen Armstrong, James Lovelock et al., offers encouragement to Sea of Faith folk that there is a spiritual interest 'out there'.

These people 'out there' and we all know some of them who have a spiritual interest in the journey of our amazing planet, and there are the folk who have left the Church, many reluctantly, and the ones who are just sticking with it – the numbers of progressives are increasing and they may even want to meet with like-minded people and fill up the empty churches. The name Church is a worry!

Glynn Cardy of St. Matthew's Auckland has accepted the position of Minister for St. Luke's Presbyterian Church in Remuera. A boost for progressive Christianity.

See you at the Conference!



Beverley M. Smith
Chairperson 2012 -2013