

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 113, August 2014

Obituary

Alan Montgomery Goss

16 October 1922 – 30 June 2014

The Rev. Alan Goss, a Life Member of the Sea of Faith Network (NZ) and founding member of the Hawke's Bay Sea of Faith Group, died in Hawke's Bay Hospital on 30th June, aged 91.



Alan was born in Napier where his parents lived after his father's return from World War 1. As a youngster he attended the Port School and it was there he experienced, at 10.45am on Tuesday 3 February 1931, the Napier earthquake. Alan would often talk about that day and up until very recently he attended "survivor" events commemorating that dreadful time which changed the course of many lives.

His secondary education was at Napier Boys High where he made lifelong friendships. Alan was always keen on sport, playing rugby, cricket, tennis and table tennis. Throughout his life he followed these codes at national and international level and it was a great joy to him to be able to watch them on Sky TV in the last decade or so of his life. It was pertinent that when Alan wrote his memoirs in 2002, he named them "Only a Second Eleven Man".

In 1941, only months after starting his first job as a clerk, Alan was conscripted into the NZ Army and, in 1943, served in the Middle East and Southern Italy. After the war he returned to work in Napier where at the Hawke's Bay Education Board, he met his wife, Shirley. [We marked the passing of Shirley in March 2014 in Newsletter 111 – ed].

Around this time he also met Rev. Lex Miller who was a huge influence on Alan's decision to work eventually in the Presbyterian Church, first as a Youth Director and later as an ordained minister.

Over the following years Alan ministered at Waikaka Valley, Reefton, Napier and finally Havelock North.

Through his experience in the "real" world, Alan was always able to see the bigger picture. He once wrote "There are not two worlds, a churchy one and a secular one but for us humans only one world and that's the one we live in."

Towards the end of his time in Havelock North, Alan was initiating informal discussions with individuals interested in the kinds of ideas he eventually found in Sea of Faith. In 1994, following the Hamilton Conference, Alan set up the Hawke's Bay Group. From small beginnings it grew and flourished. He joined the Network Steering Committee in 1998 and continued to convene the local group until 2002. Alan read widely and was a prolific writer, contributing countless times to the Network Newsletter. He was honoured with a Life Membership of Sea of Faith (NZ) in 2010. His passion for the Network never waned. As the person who followed him as Hawke's Bay Convenor, I had his guiding hand always available. The humble peacemaker in him was ever present, his wisdom boundless. He was only ever a phone call away. We had a code name for him, "Emeritus". When he helped me with a problem he would finish with "this too will pass" then laugh his wonderful hearty laugh!

I shall miss him very much.

Jocelyn Kirkwood, Napier

In Grateful Memory of Alan Goss

I first came to know Alan more than fifty years ago. So far as I recall, Alan was trained as a teacher and had become a mature student in his middle thirties by the time he undertook theological education. On completion, it was his teaching ability that propelled him quickly into the role of Youth Director of the Presbyterian Church. This was a time when the Bible Class movement and church youth-work generally had already entered its decline. Alan faced a great challenge and set out to help the church face up to a rapidly changing religious climate. He continued to do this through his later parish commitments and retirement.

For the Bible Class Conference in Gore in 1962-3 he invited me to be Chief Speaker and thereafter we became firm friends and fellow-supporters. But, as we lived in different cities, our paths rarely crossed until we were both in retirement. I was the recipient of many letters from Alan for he was an assiduous correspondent and I learned to appreciate his theological acuteness. Unlike too many of his fellow-ministers he kept abreast of theological developments, studied and absorbed the books of theologians at the leading edge of Christian thought, such as Don Cupitt and Gordon Kaufman. He did his best to draw the attention of the church to urgent issues by writing very lucid articles and reviews in church publications.

I doubt if the church at large ever appreciated what a faithful and skilful minister it possessed in Alan. He was not only in himself a man of moral and theological integrity but he was highly motivated to recall the church to its true task and status in a rapidly changing world. His teaching skills and incisive mind could have been listened to and used by the church to much greater advantage than they were. His motivation and theological alertness remained active to the very last. I find it an honour to be able to add this word of grateful testimony as we farewell a man who can justifiably be called, in traditional language, 'one of God's most faithful servants'.

Lloyd Geering

Alan Goss

We, John and Sibyl Patrick, wish to pay tribute to Alan who has been a good friend to us for many years. Indeed the friendship with Sibyl goes back to 1955 when New Zealand cricket had its most inglorious day, being dismissed for twenty-six runs by the visiting English! John first met Alan when going through the slings and arrows of being a Presbyterian minister.

We both appreciated his sly, biting sense of humour; his incisive thinking on matters to do with God, gods and other

so-called spiritual things; his ability to use simple language to talk about complicated matters; his warm and accepting friendship; his hospitality, and his kindness to us both, especially to John when he was having a rough time giving up on traditional Christianity and leaving the ministry.

While visiting Alan and Shirley, John built the fishpond which was still alive and full of fish the last time we heard. We both slept (well, that's an exaggeration) on the futon! Alan asked how we had slept and were honest (that is "not well") and he and Shirley had a discussion (difference of opinion) about how comfortable the "bed" was: Shirley asserting that it wasn't a "bed", it was a futon! Presumably it wasn't meant to be comfortable.

Alan loved his cricket (John always claimed that it is the only game played in heaven, and Alan agreed). We also thought that God was the bowlers' umpire, Jesus at square leg and the Holy Spirit the TMO (as, of course, he could reveal what was otherwise hidden).

Alan was a staunch member of Sea of Faith for many years, and contributed many outstanding articles and book reviews to the Newsletter. He was not afraid of change and new learning, and his innovative take on "Church" was an experience we enjoyed.

On another occasion, we were to visit the Gosses when we heard that Alan had had a fall and broken his neck. We suggested to Shirley that we didn't come, but she insisted that we did – on the grounds that, if there was to be a funeral, John should conduct it. Shirley wasn't joking!

Broken neck and all he was loved by hospital staff for his resilience and good humour in the face of what could have been a fatal accident.

We both loved the man, and his death means the loss of one who was able to make sense of "love thy neighbour as thyself" and live those understandings on planet earth in the only life he would ever have. (We both agreed that "the end" is the end).

With love and appreciation of a life well lived.

Sibyl and John Patrick (Warkworth)

From The Editor

Shirley pre-deceased Alan by just over 16 weeks.

Alan was one of our most prolific Book Reviewers. His style was concise and well-written. He went to the nub of the argument and wrote it well.

There is some additional material, including video, about Alan, at <http://portstories.co.nz/people/alan-goss>

Goodbye Alan, and thank you for your contributions to this Newsletter and to SoF in general.

Noel Cheer, Editor



ALL ABOUT US

SEA OF FAITH: EXPLORING VALUES, SPIRITUALITY AND MEANING

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.

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

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.

“Sea of Faith” 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 Fred Marshall.

[note: recent corrections in red]

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Deadline dates for submitted Newsletter copy in 2014 are:
14 July, 25 August, 27 October.

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.

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 (listed above) or Internet bank to 38 9000 0807809 00 and tell pcowley@paradise.net.nz your mailing details. **Bonus:** If you already receive the paper version then you can receive the email version in addition, **at no charge**. Send an email requesting that to pcowley@paradise.net.nz

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The Astonishing Hypothesis

[to be read in conjunction with "The Last Word" page 12]

The Astonishing Hypothesis is that "You," your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.

As Lewis Carroll's Alice might have phrased it: "You're nothing but a pack of neurons."

This hypothesis is so alien to the ideas of most people alive today that it can truly be called astonishing—because in spite of differences among religions, there is broad agreement on at least one point: people have souls, in the literal and not merely metaphorical sense.

Francis Crick

MORALS – A BIG BOOKFUL

The Quest for a Moral Compass: A Global History of Ethics

By Kenan Malik

Atlantic Books 2014, Paperback \$40 (NZ) retail

This book caters for those who want a big cake with big nutritious slices. Think of Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* or Karen Armstrong's *The Great Transformation*. Such books cover great swadges of time, interrogate many cultures, and draw comprehensive conclusions. While they are not promoted as "for Dummies", nor written at that level, such books are insightful for the novice and, the reader suspects, applauded by academics. Clark did it with Western art history (though overlooking the Spanish), Armstrong with "a global account of the time when religious belief was born" [jacket blurb] and Malik with *The Quest for a Moral Compass*.

From the Categorical Imperative of Kant to the Battle of Kurukshetra, from rival and contradictory readings of Plato and Sophocles, from the Vedas swimming in the mists of antiquity to the publication of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* cited as a test case of Consequentialism – the history-long quest for a moral compass is well-attested. It is readable by those who still can read critically and it is thought-provoking to those who are open to such provocation. In short, it's a good read and a good think.

SoF member Arch Thomson from Auckland, whose semi-fictional characterisation of Jesus as "The Galilean Terrorist" appeared in Newsletter 111 and on our website, donated a copy to the NZ Resource Centre (see www.sof.org.nz)

In doing so he offered his thoughts, on pages 60-63, on how *Moral Compass* treats Jesus:

After a brief summary of the conventional Gospel story, Malik comments: "Or so the story goes... there exists no eyewitness account of his life or ministry... Modern scholars dispute even whether Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and there is no certainty as to what charges were levelled against him at his trial and who was responsible for sentencing him to death."

He gives considerable credit to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew's Gospel): "Many of Jesus' sayings are pulled together into a single address to create perhaps the most powerful expression of Christian ethics... a belief in the importance not just of performing good acts

but of being a good person... virtue, Jesus insisted, is a good in itself."

A can of worms. The jargon of philosophy contrasts two kinds of ethical action:

- in (pragmatic) **consequentialism** we assess the value of an action by its *results*;
- the "opposite" is **deontology**, where our (good) actions are inspired by an inner *commitment* to duty, obligation or rightness.

But are either of these good enough for the Jesus of Christianity? – or should that be the 'Christ' of Christianity? Doesn't the goodness of the good person need to go beyond mere duty or rightness? What happens if I've tried very hard to be good, but I still know in my heart that I'm not really a good person? And what about God? How good does God need to be in order to be God?

This takes us back a few centuries to the revolution in thought now known as the Axial Age (see Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*). "Pre-Axial" gods, like those in the Greek myths, have been characterised as (alphabetical order): arbitrary, autocratic, capricious, dictatorial, erratic, inconsistent, inscrutable, irascible, irrational, pedantic, perverse, petty, petulant, puritanical, temperamental, unpredictable, vengeful and vindictive. In short, rather unappealing had they been humans. But the Persian teacher Zarathustra (Zoroaster) moralised the

KENAN MALIK

Kenan Malik is a writer, lecturer and broadcaster. He is a presenter of *Analysis* of BBC Radio 4, and a panelist on *The Moral Maze*. He has taught at universities in Britain, Europe, Australia and the USA, presented many TV documentaries, and writes regularly for newspapers across the world including the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Göteborgs-Posten* and the *Australian*. His books include *Man, Beast and Zombie*, *Strange Fruit* and *From Fatwa to Jihad*, which was shortlisted for the 2010 Orwell Prize.

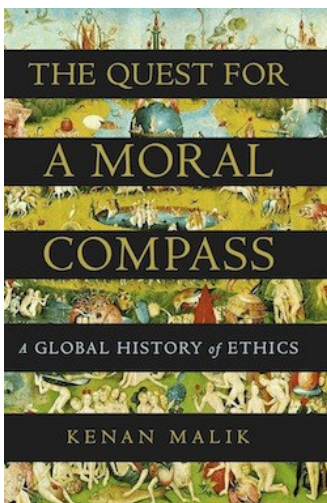
His website, Pandemonium is a place for his writings, talks and photography. It thrives on debate.



universe and its creator. The Supreme Divinity (Ahura Mazda or Ohrmazd) would have to be, above all else, good. (His great adversary, the Hostile Spirit Angra Mainyu or Ahriman, is clearly the ancestor of the Satan of Christianity and Islam.)

So what did Jesus and the earliest Christians have to add to this God of Goodness? – plenty. God was not merely Good, God was Love (1 John 4.16 and 1 Corinthians 13). This was not an entirely new concept, but eschatological Christianity made it credible! So of course we also have to be Love. Problematical. What if I decide that I'm just not a loving sort of person? – it could be a minefield for the depressive personality. And can we ever be loving enough? If we're writing a history of ethics, don't we need to assess the overall effect on a society and culture of introducing an impossible standard of perfection, the perfection of unlimited love? Doesn't it make us all sinners, because (if for no other reason) we can never love enough!

How does Kenan Malik get to grips with this dilemma? At least he seems to be on the right track: "Jesus preached in the belief that the end of the world was nigh and that God's Kingdom was imminent. His morality was a morality to prepare people for this coming transformation. An ethics for the end of the world..." Love your enemies! (Matthew 5.44;



Luke 6.27, 35) – yes, but how is that injunction going to fare when the End of the World persistently fails to eventuate? This is not some theoretical historical problem. On 29 May 2014 the New Zealand Herald reported that an Anglican pastor had quit the church and taken [most of?] his

congregation with him, because the General Synod had decided to recognise same-sex relationships and to allow clergy to perform gay marriages. What does a righteous person know about these gay people? – they are an embodiment of the Enemy. The enemy! Oops.

Malik notes that "the Sermon on the Mount can seem both compliantly passive and defiantly subversive... Over the past two millennia Christians have read the Sermon on the Mount in both these ways, both as an ethics of conformity and as a challenge to the social order."

Jesus gets three pages, out of 344 [with a handful of short comments elsewhere]. This *Quest for a Moral Compass* has a lot of ground to cover. And the emphasis is on ethics (a public concern), rather than on existential problems (a concern of the individual). At a time like the present, when thoughtful New Zealanders agonise over how to teach ethical standards in state schools, and whether this area of education is supposed to be filling a void left by a decline in religious faith, this book is undeniably relevant.

Arch Thomson, Auckland

CENTENARIES

This year, 2014, marks several centenaries:

- 1300 years since the death of **Charlmgagne**, first Holy Roman Emperor, in 814.
- 700 years since the Battle of **Bannockburn** in which Scots under Robert the Bruce defeated the English in 1314.
- 300 years since the appointment and coronation of Louie George, Elector of Hanover, as **George 1st** of England 1714. His latest royal namesake was born earlier this year.
- 200 years since Rev. **Marsden** held the first service of worship in NZ, Christmas Day in 1814
- 200 years since the abdication of Napoleon **Bonaparte** in 1814.
- 200 years since British forces captured Washington DC, and set the **White House** on fire in 1814.

And, just one century ago

- Start of "**The Great War**" 1914.
- The **Irish Home Rule Bill** went into effect 1914.
- First successful **blood transfusion** 1914.
- First ships through the **Panama Canal** 1914.
- First **traffic lights** - in Cleveland Ohio 1914.

"MY WAY"

This is an excerpt from the truly exceptional 1990 Reith Lectures given by Jonathan Sacks, who soon after, became the Chief Rabbi of the U.K. The Lectures were subsequently published under their title *The Persistence of Faith* by Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London. This extract appears on pages 41-42.

"One of the great motifs of moral thought of the last century has been the crucial importance of private space, the territory in which we are simply free to be ourselves. Rarely in human history has the idea of an obligation imposed on us by others seemed so constricting and suffocating. ...

"But what is missing ... is the idea once thought to be definitive of morality: that there can be obligations which constrain our choices, and duties that place a limit on desire.

"It is not that we have stopped thinking morally altogether. It is, rather, that our moral imagination is bounded by three central themes -- autonomy, equality and rights -- the values that allow each of us to be whatever we choose.

"The central character of our moral drama is no longer the saint or hero, but the free self, unencumbered by attachments, unobligated by circumstances, freely negotiating its temporary contracts with others: Frank Sinatra singing, 'I did it my way'."

BLESSING

Blessings on those who serve others: for they serve God.

Blessings on those with faith: they do God's work as they serve others.

Blessings on atheists: they seek goodness and refuse to worship false gods.

Blessings on agnostics: they forgo easy and false certainty.

Blessings on those tormented with doubt: for they seek God.

Blessings on those who know they are poor and weak: theirs is God's domain by right.

Blessings on the rich and powerful: they peer over death's precipice and know they are poor and weak.

For we must love our neighbours as ourselves.

Our neighbours with faiths that differ from our faiths,

Our neighbours with little or no faith.

Our rich neighbours, our poor neighbours.

Our neighbours difficult, arrogant, argumentative, selfish.

Our neighbours pleasant, humble, unassertive and generous.

Because they are us and we are them, and we must love ourselves and them as one.

Lionel Sharman, from his book *Matter & What Matters*, published by Steele Roberts Aotearoa Ltd.

NZ JEWS, CHRISTIANS, AND MUSLIMS UNITED IN CALL FOR PEACE

Wellington, 23 July 2014

Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders in Wellington issued a joint statement today regarding the current conflict in Gaza and Israel

"We call upon all of the parties involved in the current conflict in Gaza and Israel to cease hostilities, and sit down at the negotiating table and do the hard work necessary to obtain a just and lasting peace. We urge all New Zealand Jews, Christians, and Muslims to pray for peace."

Dave Moskovitz, Jewish Co-Chair Wellington Council of Christians and Jews,

Jenny Chalmers, Christian Co-Chair, Wellington Council of Christians and Jews

Sultan Eusoff, CEO, Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand

PAST THE END OF THE PIER

"... science over the past 400 years has been tremendously successful. We have reached the moon, eradicated smallpox, built the Internet, tripled lifespans, and increasingly tapped into those mind-blowing truths around us. **We've found them to be deeper and more beautiful than anyone could have guessed.**

But when we reach the end of the pier of everything we know we find that it only takes us part of the way. Beyond that all we see is uncharted water.

Past the end of the pier lies all the mystery about our deeply strange existence: the equivalence of mass and energy, dark matter, multiple spatial dimensions, how to build consciousness, and the big questions of meaning and existence."

From *Beyond God and Atheism: Why I am a Possibilian*'

David Eagleman, New Scientist 27 September 2009

PROGRESSIVE SPIRITUALITY CONFERENCE

St. Lukes Community Centre

130 Remuera Road, Auckland

August 28-31.

Details & Registration at www.progressivespirituality.co.nz

A THOROUGHLY MODERN MARY

Tom Hall introduces his workshop which will be conducted on Saturday afternoon at the 2014 Conference.

Laurie Chisholm must be prescient. As long ago as April he submitted to this Newsletter an essay entitled "The Soul Did Not Fall From Heaven," a central assertion of which is that "spiritual/intellectual functions of the human being ... are the result of evolutionary developments. They do not need the metaphysical principle of God or soul for their explanation."

Clearly so, but lacking the incalculable benefits of modern knowledge, the ancients – who like many even today prefer a fantastic explanation to ignorance – proposed some pretty arcane theories. The Gospel of Mary of Magdala (GMar) is based on one of these, a neo-platonic dualism of spirit and matter in which the soul is portrayed as a divine spark from on high that takes on the burdens of humanity when it joins with an earthly body, and then seeks to regain its home in the realm of perfection when that material shell returns to dust.

This workshop will consist of a brief overview of GMar's textual history, followed by its narrative portrayal of Jesus and Mary and Mary's role as "Disciple in Chief." It is hoped that most of the discussion will focus on the doctrine that Mary received from Jesus in a vision: that the soul must have knowledge (Greek *gnosis*, hence "gnostic") of the challenges it will face in seeking to return to the realm of pure spirit – of the evil 'gatekeepers' who will try to bar its upward way and the correct answers it must give to elude their machinations.

To be sure, this drama is highly fanciful, but it is one I have come to see as a considerably more fruitful metaphor than those found in the traditional salvation scenarios. However weird and metaphysical GMar may be on the surface, a moderate lens adjustment may be enough to give an assessment of the human condition not far from that offered by an objective secularist. Perhaps "Soul" and "Heaven" can continue to serve as useful metaphors if we remember that's what they are. So also in the case of "God" – though that may be a little more difficult.

Tom Hall, USA

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

We *homo sapiens* are merely animals which have sported (by mutation) an enlarged brain which makes us self-aware.

Developments such as Kerlian photography have already demonstrated that our force-field of energy extends out beyond our physical body. It should not surprise us too much when science is able to show that "soul", "freewill" and "spirit" are simply the product of autonomous (or sometimes willed) behaviour of molecules, chemistry or electricity, within our over-large brains.

Unfortunately, the experience of becoming self-aware also led to the widespread idea that human beings are the apex of a supernatural god's creation, and not merely an evolutionary off-shoot (which may yet prove to have been a *cul de sac*).

Religion is almost a psychological necessity for our species, because we became aware (and fearful) of the fact that all life-forms eventually die, and rot, and cease to be. This jars with the strongest animal instinct for self-preservation, the second one being the urge to reproduce.

Some enterprising characters (like Paul of Tarsus or Joseph Smith) thought of Religion as an institution which would bring them gullible followers, fame, and a comfortable living. To assure disciples and subscribers that they would pass on to eternal life (in a Paradise whose existence could not be proved or disproved) was quite a master-stroke. One can still hear people, even fervent non-believers, voicing platitudes about angels, the after-life, ancestors, and heaven, at funeral services.

The emperor Constantine saw Christianity as a useful method of social control, and it has changed too little since it was so adopted.

It behoves us all to behave with more humility, instead of hubris, and to support ongoing neuroscience in any way we can. The error of Descartes will eventually be set aside, and a holistic approach will see body and mind/soul once more reunited in our understanding.

Our busy subconscious knows "freewill" as a natural phenomenon yet to be acknowledged, but one is still able to make meaningful input into the brain's operations - mind over matter.

Peter Creevey, Christchurch.

Sea of Faith Conference 2014

Friday 3 October to Sunday 5 October

Tolcarne Residence, 12 Tolcarne Ave, Dunedin

Full details can be found at www.sof.org.nz

LOYD DRESSED AS A PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER

This story was told by Shirley Geering at the recent weekend event of the Wellington Ephesus Group

This is a story about one of Lloyd's grandsons.

He and his school girl friend lived at her family home from when the girl was in the 7th form. Some time after this they went to live in Sydney for about eight years

Lloyd and I visited them when we were in Sydney and they mentioned they were thinking of returning to NZ which they did about two years ago.

Last January Lloyd received an email from this grandson telling him that to celebrate the tenth anniversary of their relationship, they would be delighted if Lloyd would officiate at their marriage. This was to take place in June.

He added that they hoped Grandpa would not be offended but they had decided not to take either of their family names, and as his fiancée had already changed her name by deed poll he intended to take the name of Lemonby with her.

Lloyd graciously accepted this surprising information, and was very happy to hear of marriage plans.

During the next month I was with the young man's mother and she said to me, "They want to have a dress-up wedding—film characters—you would enjoy that".

"Oh yes", I said, "I could be Helen Mirren dressed as the Queen—hat, pearls and gloves".

Her husband was not pleased about it, she said!

I asked her to please tell the young people to let Lloyd know the date as we had holiday plans in June.

The date was settled and time passed, Lloyd had heard from me about the dress-up party idea weeks earlier and had dismissed that from his mind immediately, I think.

The weeks went by and then, the wedding invitation arrived.

A lot of work had gone in to it—it was like a postcard and gave all the helpful information including the venue—a private room in a hotel—and also that everyone was asked to please not to send gifts but to join in the festivities by wearing a costume related to the movie world.

Lloyd was shocked, very shocked and disturbed and, after thinking this over, and having a disturbed night decided that a posted letter would be best way to express his dismay and to have a meeting arranged urgently.

His letter said he felt they were overlooking the solemnity of the marriage ceremony, and turning it into a joke. Marriage is the most serious step a person can take and requires the exchanging of binding vows, the pledging of lasting love and loyalty.

He continued by saying that they may need to find someone else to take the service because he could not marry people who were dressed up as others. Furthermore,

it was unfair to put people to the expense of costume hire. "Please come and visit me soon!"

The reply came by email and after Lloyd had had a little time to calm down.

Dear Grandpa,

Mum said she had told Shirley about our plans so I thought you knew all about them.

The letter was very well written and all the items Lloyd raised were dealt with.

People do buy new clothes to attend weddings, Brides and Grooms and their attendants have very elaborate costumes usually acquired at huge expense and we have asked that no gifts be given.

As bride and groom we certainly are not wanting to make light of our marriage vows.

We feel we have something very special together and have saved up for a long time to be able to have this celebration, and we hope to make this a happy occasion for our close relatives and friends. It will be a small wedding of thirty and we feel that the film theme will be excellent.

We do not think you are a fuddy duddy as you suggested and hold you in the greatest respect. We look forward to seeing you soon and, most of all, we want assure you that we want you to marry us and hope to resolve all the difficulties you perceive.!!!!

They met, all formal arrangements were made and peace reigned!

A family member asked Lloyd what he was dressing up as and the answer was, I'm dressing as a Presbyterian minister!!!* However, a certain type of hat turned him into a wizard. "The Wizard of Oz", said Lloyd, "unseen until now".

We had the wedding and as we waited for the bride and groom Lloyd said "Oh, what magic I can perform".

How wonderful to be able to accept the differences of the third generation, to keep the peace in a diverse family of interesting people. I found this a most interesting experience to be involved in.

PS. Our table of ten relatives won the prize for the pub type quiz—cinematic items were everywhere, the tables featured with bowls of popcorn and lollies of great variety. Oscars were presented as all had enjoyed a very different Wedding celebration.

Next day, a sigh of relief from Grandpa.

Shirley Geering

*He was then, and still is! - ed

David Simmers of Wellington Discusses the Outcomes

IF HOPE VANISHES

Hope motivates us to keep going, to keep trying. Why then do we keep going when things become hopeless? It's a question that may arise for any of us from time to time, and a question to which Christianity has often offered an answer.

In a recent cricket test in the West Indies, New Zealand in their 2nd innings were eight wickets down and still 50 runs behind the Windies' 1st innings total. There was more than a day to play, with good weather forecast. It was hopeless – and so it proved. The tail-enders, however, fought dourly on into the 5th day. Did they hope for a miracle? Why not just give up? Or at least have an entertaining hit-out? They made the Windies score 100 more to win; which was easily done. But why did they try?

In his classic and powerful novel *The Plague* Albert Camus examines how people respond to a hopeless situation. Often they have a mixture of responses.

Many people are basically *passive* and apathetic, accepting whatever comes and trying to make the best of it. They keep on doing pretty much what they have always done, perhaps hoping that some miracle will happen to alter the situation, or that somehow it won't be too bad; but if the worst happens they will just accept it.

Others are *active*, and try to do something about it. This may take several forms.

Some, realising the gravity of the situation, will try to escape. Sometimes this may be possible – an investor bailing out of a collapsing company. Sometimes it may involve daunting risks with no guarantee of success – boat people fleeing to Australia.

Some will simply seize for themselves whatever they can while the opportunity exists, without regard to consequences; this is one response to impending climate change.

And for others – though Camus does not discuss this alternative – their despair will be so profound that they put an end to it all by committing suicide, perhaps taking as many others with them as we can.

And then there are those who accept the hopelessness but refuse to give in. They feel compelled to keep on fighting by whatever means they can.

In the light of these options, what do we make of *Christian hope* which has been a vital ingredient in Christian living? But what is hoped for?

A theist would base his/her hope on the belief that, because this is God's world, God's will must ultimately prevail. This will happen through some combination of various factors.

- (1a) Humans will increasingly obey God's laws and the kingdom will finally come.
- (1b) God helps them as they claim that assistance.
- (2) God will at some point intervene to bring in the kingdom.
- (3) Good people may or may not prosper in this world, but will certainly be happy in the next.

It seems to me that Jesus probably emphasised (1) and (2), thinking (1) was already partially possible, and (2) would come soon. The early Church focused on (2), and the Church since then on (3).

For post-theists like me, however, (2) and (3) are no longer options, and (1b) is problematic. Only (1a) is plausible, though we must depersonalise the "God" language.

It is plausible because it does seem that determined human action could bring about great improvements, and there are some signs that we are gradually making progress; so there is still some hope to motivate us. But there are also signs that humanity is disintegrating into self-destruction and there is little hope of a good outcome. If hope withers to vanishing point, do we still keep trying? Do we simply become apathetic? Or give up on Church? Or what?

It does seem that there is something widely present in the human spirit that wants to keep on struggling even when there is no hope. This may go back to the primordial evolutionary urge to survive; the "selfish gene" is not really selfish, but strives against all odds to preserve its family or its species.

But we can point to more than just a primeval urge. It is also part of our human condition to have *dreams*, ideals. We have *glimpses* of a better state of things. Even when we know these glimpses can never become reality (which is why I call them *glimpses* or *dreams* rather than *visions*), to deny them would be to deny an essential part of ourselves. Admittedly different people may have different dreams; but these glimpses are enough to keep us trying; perhaps not very hard, not necessarily with any hope; but it seems vital at least to keep the dream alive. This is close to what I think Reinhold Niebuhr was driving at in his *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* when he wrote about "the relevance of an impossible ethical ideal"; though the NZ cricketers were probably not aware of it.

Those for whom Christian symbolism is still meaningful could even interpret the resurrection of Jesus in this light. His death surely ended all hope for the Jesus movement, but during his life his followers had glimpsed something they felt to be of over-riding importance. His strangely empty tomb filled them not with confidence but with fear – which was where Mark finished his gospel (16.8). Yet in spite of that fear, as witnesses of the Jesus dream, they felt compelled to keep alive what they had glimpsed, to witness to and to follow the Jesus way, even if it meant suffering as he had. "Resurrection" may be not so much a "symbol of *hope*" as a symbol of *commitment to preserving the Jesus dream*, however possible or impossible of fulfilment that dream may be.

This may seem thin gruel. Is it enough? But if all hope vanishes and this is all there is, we do still have something to motivate us.

David Simmers, Wellington

EXPLAINING BELIEVERS AND SKEPTICS TO EACH OTHER

A review by Laurie Chisholm of *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship With God* by T M Luhrmann

This book is the result of anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann's study of a newly emerged religious movement: the Vineyard Christian Fellowship. Traditionally, anthropologists go to remote tribes that have had little or no contact with modern civilization, live with them and try to understand their myths, rituals and world view. With few such tribes remaining, it is understandable that anthropologists now turn their attention to unusual groups within modern society. Tanya Luhrmann has already published one study on contemporary Londoners who practice ritual magic and another on American psychiatry. In her most recent book (2012), she turns her attention to the Vineyard, a movement that began in the 70s and now has more than 1,500 churches world-wide, including 18 in New Zealand. Approaching her subject matter as an anthropologist committed to "participant observation," she immersed herself in the Vineyard with impressive determination, attending worship, conferences and prayer groups, even trying out their prayer practices under the guidance of a spiritual counselor. She carried out in-depth interviews of many members, used questionnaires to provide quantitative statistical data, and even conducted experiments with them to see how prayer practices altered their psychology.

Generally, Sea of Faith is only interested in evangelical, charismatic, and fundamentalist Christianity as a negative contrast to a modern, liberal spirituality that takes evolution, modern science and historical-critical study of the bible seriously. This book is grounds for re-thinking that attitude. Its aim is to explain to non-believers how "sensible, educated people [are able to] believe in an invisible being who has a real effect on their lives." The central focus of the Vineyard churches, at least in Luhrmann's presentation of them, is to cultivate a relationship with God through prayer and to learn to discern the voice of God in the multiplicity of what is going on in one's mind. Luhrmann, not herself a Christian or a "believer," is well aware that this strikes the modern skeptic as completely weird and that it is "as alien to liberal Christianity as Mongolian shamanism." She has written this book because she believes that she can "explain to nonbelievers how people come to experience God as real" and hopes that this will help to bridge the great divide in contemporary society between skeptics who do not understand believers and believers who

do not understand the skeptics. Indeed, she has chosen the Vineyard specifically because its view of God as supernaturally present is dramatically at odds with modern secular views of reality.

But does this God actually exist? Although she admits to having "complicated philosophical thoughts about whether God was real," Luhrman disclaims any ability to answer this question as an anthropologist; the social sciences can only describe the human side of the relationship with God, "and so I will not presume to know ultimate reality. I will not judge whether God is or is not present to the people I came to know." Having as it were bracketed the question of the reality of God and set it to one side, she is free to explore just how this experiential faith functions. Her aim is not to extract from the Vineyard a concept of God as a subject for intellectual debate but to understand what is involved in the Vineyard congregants' experience. Luhrman is at pains to describe this experience carefully and in detail, with many examples from her interviews, and with the help of a number of psychological models. The Vineyard are interested in people learning to do something rather than to think something. They learn to discriminate between their thoughts and God's thoughts. They are training their minds to experience part of that mind as the presence of God. When a bible verse jumps out at you, when thoughts or images just pop into your head, this could well be God's doing. Uncanny coincidences could also be God communicating with you. Some congregants even hear (rarely) the audible voice of God. (Luhrman explains that such "sensory overrides" are in fact quite common in the general population and argues that they are different from the voices that psychotic people hear.)

The results of her investigation are subtle and many-sided, so not easy to summarise. First, Luhrman was surprised to discover that far from having a firm and unshakeable faith, congregants' awareness of God takes shape out of an exquisite awareness of doubt. Vineyard congregants are well aware that the society they live in finds their talk of God incredible.

Insoo Kim believes in his God. But he cannot escape his doubt. It is part of his social world. It is part of the way he comes to know God. ...The playfulness and paradox of this new religiosity does for Christians what postmodernism, with its doubt-filled, self-aware, playful intellectual style, did for intellectuals (p322).

Second, the God of the Vineyard Fellowship is very different from the God of traditional evangelicals like Billy Graham. Judgment and hell-fire are not present. Things are more experiential, more like psychotherapy. God is like an intimate friend, a perfect friend in an imperfect world. Congregants talk to God about the most trivial matters of everyday life, even asking for an opinion on which dress to wear.

Third, this God is a little bit like a young child's imaginary companion. Young children often have an imaginary companion, or a stuffed animal that must be fed and bathed and tucked in to bed. They have, says Gregory Bateson, a play frame and a reality frame. Vineyard congregants think like this about God, except that their play frame also involves a reality claim. This is like ritual ceremonies in all cultures; according to the historian Johan Huizinga, in sacred play the distinction between belief and make-believe breaks down.

Fourth, this God is like an internalised therapist. Heinz Kohut thinks that the benefits of psychotherapy come when a client learns to experience the therapist as an internal "object" that is loving and caring.. The client is able to "act and think and feel as if always aware of that therapist's loving concern." Those not needing therapy effectively already have helpful, soothing self-objects. Lurhman refers to the anthropologist Rebecca Lester, who concluded that nuns learn to carry God internally as one who loves, cares, and attends always.

Fifth, this God is "hyperreal." We live in a world where the media image of Marilyn Munroe is far more vivid, present, "real" than the actual reality of Marilyn Munroe as an actual person. That media image is said to be hyperreal. In a similar way, much modern literature often has a style described as "magical realism."

"It is my belief that the God of late twentieth and early twenty-first century has become imagined as magically real because that way of imagining God helps those who wish to hang on to God manage the doubts that surround them. This God is so real, so accessible, and so present, and so seamlessly blends the supernatural with the everyday, that the paradox places the need for the suspension of disbelief at the center of the Christian experience. The supernatural is presented as the natural, and yet the believer knows that it is not.

It is in effect, a third kind of epistemological commitment: not materially real like tables and chairs; not fictional, like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs; but a different conceptual space. (p.321).

Lurhman tells the story of how this type of religion has emerged. Pentecostal Christians were initially just a small group at the time when fundamentalism rebelled against historical criticism of the bible. Fundamentalism lost credibility, for example in the Scopes trial. Then new evangelicals emerged (pre-eminently in the Fuller Theological Seminary), softening the stance on the literal infallibility of the bible. The counterculture of the 60s gave rise first to hippies

and then to the Jesus freaks, Christian hippies (a story Lurhman thinks has not yet been properly told). Finally, a new type of religion emerged, a merging of Jesus freaks, the new evangelicals and the charismatics; more experiential, more therapeutic.

Why has there been growth in belief in a personal God? Lurhman suggests that it is a response to the attenuation in meaningful personal relationships in modern society and to the decline in civic engagement. An intensely intimate relationship with God compensates for the inadequacies of real-world social contact.

Many of us have friends or relatives who are conservative Christians and find it difficult to relate to them. We are turned off by triumphalistic enthusiasm for their faith, their unsubtle attempts to convert. They do not want to hear our doubts or be exposed to our questioning. If we voice our personal convictions, they will be attacked as inadequate and unbiblical. Lurhmann acts as a skilled mediator. She describes an aspect of Vineyard life/practice/belief, then translates this into language we can appreciate, often providing parallels from the bible or describing ways that liberal thinkers have expressed similar ideas. Her aim is of course not to convert us, just to help us understand.

The liberal assumption is that we are in the midst of a process of secularisation. Religion is disappearing; the most one can hope for is that something like a liberal Christianity survives. On this assumption, movements like the Vineyard are temporary setbacks in the onward march of civilization towards the end of the era of religion. Yet what we are seeing is an enormous growth in belief in a personal God. In 1996, 39% of Americans said that they were born again. 88% of Americans pray to God. The liberal churches are declining, churches like the Vineyard are growing.

There are pockets of liberal Christianity left in America and in Europe, but Christianity around the world has exploded in its seemingly least liberal and most magical form—in charismatic Christianities that take biblical miracles at face value and treat the Holy Spirit as if it had a voltage. (p.302.)

We may lament that they show so little understanding of the bible in its context, that they are not interested in intellectual questions about the faith, that their God-concept does not face up to the issues modernity raises, but conservative religion continues to evolve and it has marketed itself much more successfully than liberal religion. Uncomfortable though it is for us, the reality is that in the future, institutional religion is going to look more like the Vineyard than the mainline liberal Protestant churches.

Laurie Chisholm

An outline of what the NZ chapter promotes and believes:
<http://www.vineyard.org.nz/resources/PDFs/Statement-of-Faith.pdf>



THE LAST WORD

Laurie Chisholm, Chairperson

THE OPENING WORDS of Francis Crick's book *The Astonishing Hypothesis* were quoted in the June Newsletter and they are on our website, the text is also on page 3 of this Newsletter. They bear repeating as they put in a nutshell why this year's Conference has a neuroscientist as a speaker.

Conference will, then, explore this "hypothesis;" that we aren't a dualist combination of two fundamentally different entities: body and soul, but can be understood monistically. I notice two things about this quote. The first is that it speaks of a hypothesis, not of something that science has proven. Things were initially similar with the Copernican world view and with evolution. Galileo could not prove that the earth went round the sun rather than the other way round; it was just that things were simpler and more elegant; the planets moved in ellipses rather than in a strange pattern (with epicycles, for example) that had them sometimes moving backwards. Evolution was a fashionable world view long before Darwin's researches and Thomas Huxley, Darwin's "bulldog" did not mention it in his lectures to medical students; it was philosophy rather than science. Both these currently accepted scientific ideas are not intuitive and they entailed a revolution in thinking. Many neuroscientists think that they are in the vanguard of a similar revolution.

On the face of it, the traditional notion that we have a soul that is fundamentally different from the body but related to it has some obvious difficulties. All sorts of things in the body affect the "soul." Tiredness, fever, and drugs all can have dramatic effects. In a famous example, Phineas P. Gage suffered a brain injury that left him fully able to function, but with a dramatically different personality. None of this fits well with the notion of the soul as an immortal substance essentially other than the body.

The second thing I notice is the reductionist language "no more than...", "nothing but..." This may be useful in combating traditional notions of soul, but not so helpful in integrating what we know of the brain with what we know of our own subjectivity. We would find it rather odd to have someone loudly declaring that computers were "nothing but" combinations of little bits of slightly impure silicon. To understand computers, you need to know about software as well as hardware. You need to think in terms of information (physical states that function as bearers of information) and of binary logic, not just atoms and molecules.

I have been trying to read up on the brain, and while this is often hard work, I come across many interesting characters with very diverse agendas. After discovering the double helix structure of DNA, **Francis Crick** turned his formidable mind to understanding consciousness. **Christof Koch** joined him in this quest. **Ramachandran** found an ingenious way to stop the (often painful) sensations from the phantom limbs of amputees by tricking the brain. He also studies strange side-effects of brain damage such as the person who was convinced that his mother was an imposter when she visited him, but found her quite OK when she talked on the telephone (his brain recognized the visual image of his mother, but had lost its emotional associations). **Oliver Sachs** discusses similarly odd cases, such as the man who mistook his wife for a hat (the brain needs to not only receive visual inputs from the eyes, it must also be able to process the raw stimuli and construct recognizable objects. The recently deceased **Gerald Edelman** was critical of using the computer as a model for understanding the brain and proposed instead that groups of neurons are in a kind of Darwinian competition with one another to select what emerges into consciousness. **Eugen Drewermann** has devoted the last two volumes of his massive German opus "Liberating Faith" to brain science, the only theologian I am aware of who has paid neuroscience detailed attention. **Andrew Newberg** is a neuroscientist who is interested in scanning the brains of people in various "religious" or "spiritual" states: prayer, meditation, rituals. **Mary Midgley** is critical of the current fashion for a "materialist" understanding of brain and mind. In her 90s, she has just published a book—does this sound similar to someone you know?—"Are you an illusion?" The Australian philosopher **David Chalmers** conducts thought experiments with "zombies," imaginary creatures just like us but without consciousness. Finally, **Klaus Grawe** was interested in how neuroscience can help psychotherapy be more effective.

This is no more than background to this year's Conference, which will come to grips with the neuroscientific challenge to ideas of soul, spirit, and free-will. Sadly, one of our life members will not be joining the conversation. Alan Goss is no longer with us, but the many book reviews he contributed can still be accessed from our website. They are clear and helpful and testify to a lively exploration of new thinking.

Laurie Chisholm,
Chairperson 2013-2014

