

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 120, September 2015

AN OLD CHINESE PARABLE

**Retold by Osho (formerly known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh)
and submitted by Laurie Chisholm.**

A man falls into a well. It was at a big gathering, a big festival time. And there was so much noise and people were enjoying dancing, singing, and all kinds of things were going on, so nobody heard him fall. And at that time in China the wells were not protected by a wall surrounding them. They were without any protection, just open. You could step into a well in the darkness without being aware that it was there.

The man starts shouting, "Save me."

A Buddhist monk passes by. Of course a Buddhist monk is not interested in the festival – or is not supposed to be interested – I don't know what he was doing there. Even to be there means some unconscious urge to see what is going on and how people are enjoying themselves: "All these people will go to hell and I am the only one here who is going to heaven."

He passes by the well, and he hears this man. He looks down. The man says, "It's good that you heard me. Everybody is so busy and there is so much noise I was afraid I was going to die." The Buddhist monk says, "You are still going to die because this is happening because of some past life's evil act. Now you are getting the punishment. So accept it and be finished! It is good; in the next life you will start out clean and there will be no need to fall again into a well. The man said, "I don't want any wisdom and any philosophy at this moment..." But the monk had moved on.

The man is still crying for help. He is heard by a Taoist who says, "This is not manly. One should accept everything as it comes – that's what the great Lao Tzu has said. So accept it! Enjoy! You are crying like a woman. Be a man!"

The man said, "I am ready to be called a woman, but first please save me! I am not manly, and you can say anything you want to say to me afterwards – first pull me out."

But the Taoist said, "We never interfere in anybody's business. We believe in the Individual and his freedom. This is your freedom to fall into the well. This is your freedom to die in the well. All I can do is just make a suggestion: You can die crying, weeping – that is foolish – or you can die like a wise man. Accept it, enjoy it, sing a song, and go. Anyway, everybody is going to die, so what is the point of saving you? I am going to die, everybody is going to die, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the day after tomorrow. So what is the point of bothering to save you?" And he moves on.

A Confucian comes and the man sees some hope, because Confucians are more worldly, more earth-bound. He says, "It is my good fortune that you have come, a Confucian scholar. I know you, I have heard your name. Now do something for me, because Confucius says, 'Help others.'"

Seeing the response of the Buddhist and the Taoist, the man thought, "It is better to talk philosophy if these people are going to be convinced to save me." He said, "Confucius says, 'Help others.'"

The Confucian monk said, “You are right. And I will help. I will go from one city to another, and I will protest and force the government to create a protective wall around every well in the country. Don't be afraid.”

The man said, “But by the time the protective walls are made and your revolution succeeds, I will be gone.”

The Confucian said, “You don't matter, I don't matter, Individuals don't matter. Society matters. You have raised a very significant question by falling in the well. Now we are going to fight for it. You just be calm and quiet. We will see that every well has a protective wall around it so nobody falls into it. That just by saving you, what is saved? The whole country has millions of wells and millions of people can fall into them. So don't be so concerned about yourself, rise above this selfish attitude. I am going to serve humanity. You have already done a great service by falling into the well. I am going to serve by forcing the government to make protective walls.” And the Confucian walks on.

But the Confucian has raised a significant point: “You are being selfish. You just want to be saved and waste my time, which I can use for the whole of humanity.”

Do you know if anything like ‘humanity’ exists anywhere, if anything like a ‘society’ exists anywhere? These are just words. Only individuals exist.

The fourth man is a Christian missionary, who is carrying a bag with him. He immediately opens the bag, takes out a rope, throws the rope down: before the man even says anything, he throws the rope into the well. The man is surprised. He says, “Your religion seems to be the truest religion.”

The missionary says, “Of course. We are prepared for every emergency. Knowing that people can fall into wells, I am carrying this rope to save them – because only by saving them can I save myself. But I am concerned – I have heard what the Confucian was saying – you shouldn't make protective walls around the wells, otherwise how will we serve humanity? How will we pull out people who fall in? They have to fall in first, only then can we pull them out. We exist to serve, but the opportunity must be there. Without the opportunity, how can we serve?”

The Book of Understanding by Osho p 42.

The moral of the story seems to be that the various religions have insights with a lot of truth, but they are somewhat abstracted from reality, so don't actually correspond to the needs of the man in the well.

The characterization of the different religions is not particularly accurate factually, but the ideas presented are definitely ‘in the air’ in our culture, making this a thought-provoking and insightful parable.

Laurie Chisholm

NEW INSIGHTS ON BONHOEFFER'S US VISITS

***John Thornley of Palmerston North
offered the following:***

I appreciated Laurie Chisholm's references to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Newsletter 119, whose life and writings also ‘continue to engage my attention’, to quote Laurie's words. Two recent publications shed new light on the significance of Bonhoeffer's contacts with the African-American churches. During his study leave at the New York Union Theological Seminary (September 1930 to June 1931), followed by a shorter visit (June to July 1939), Bonhoeffer, through friendship with an African American student, was introduced to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. This was a congregation of 7000 African Americans led by the Adam Clayton Powell Snr.

Bonhoeffer's lukewarm contact with US Protestantism contrasts with the positive appreciation of the vitality of African-American worship and church life, not only for their singing (spirituals and gospel) but also the way they ‘walked the talk’ of Jesus' teachings and life (e.g. strong educational and social outreach activities). His acceptance as a teacher of children and the invitation to preach at a worship service testify to his acceptance into African-American life and culture.

While earlier publications are aware of this period, two recent books can be commended for more in-depth studies of the significant influence that Black churches had on Bonhoeffer's evolving theology. First, Bonhoeffer's *Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* by Reggie Williams (Baylor Press); and second, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Charles Marsh (Vintage Books). As the titles indicate, the former title covers the Harlem years, while the latter longer book, the full life.

John Thornley

PUBLIC GOOD NETWORKS IN NZ AND AROUND THE WORLD

Public Good Aotearoa New Zealand might be seen as operating on the boundary where religion and politics profitably interact. It advocates “a Strong Public Sector, Genuine Democracy and Engagement, and Community Wealth.” Have a look at their website at <http://www.publicgood.org.nz/> and form your own opinion.

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, Sea of Faith 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. (The late Alan Goss was, for a time, a Life Member).

Chairperson: Laurie Chisholm, 117 Collins Rd, RD4, Christchurch 7674, (03) 325-2141, 021-201-0302, laurie.chisholm@ihug.co.nz

Secretary: Jock Crawford, P.O. Box 12-246 Chartwell Square, Hamilton 3248, (07) 854-7553 jockcrawford@actrix.co.nz

Treasurer and Membership Secretary: Peter Cowley, 1/30A Dunns St., Silverstream, Upper Hutt 5019 pcowley@paradise.net.nz

Newsletter Editor and Webmaster is Noel Cheer, the **Copy Editor** is Shirley Dixon and **Newsletter Distribution** is by Yvonne Curtis (paper copies) and Peter Cowley (emailed copies).

To offer a comment on material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact **The Editor, 26 Clipper St., Titahi Bay, Porirua 5022**, (04) 236-7533 or 0274-483-805 or email to noel@cheer.org.nz

Deadline dates for submitted Newsletter copy for 2015 are: 21/10/15, 21/12/15.

Members may borrow books, CDs, and DVDs from the Resource Centre which is managed by Suzi Thirlwall phone (07) 578-2775 email 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 future is our's – shape it!

CONFERENCE 2015

Date: October 2 – October 4, 2015

Venue: St Cuthbert's College,
Epsom, Auckland

Theme: Micawber vs Cassandra:
Responding to an increasingly
uncertain future

Keynote Speakers:

- Sir Lloyd Geering
- Rod Oram, business commentator
- Kennedy Graham, Green Party MP
- Anjum Rahman, Waikato Interfaith Council

You can find a Registration Form on the website at
www.sof.org.nz

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the Sea of Faith Network NZ (Inc) will be held at St. Cuthbert's College, 122 Market Road, Epsom, Auckland on Friday 2 October at 5:00 pm.

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- Doug Sellman has asked to step down from the Steering Committee at the time of Conference, so it is desirable for at least one more person to be available for election. Please submit nominations to the secretary (jockcrawford@actrix.co.nz). We already have one nomination – see below.

NOTICE OF MOTION

- Any notices of motion must be submitted to the secretary (jockcrawford@actrix.co.nz) at least 14 days before the AGM.

AGENDA

- Welcome
- Apologies
- Minutes of the 2014 AGM
- Matters Arising
- Reports (Our aim is to circulate reports in advance so that they don't need to be read in full at the AGM.)
 - Chairperson: Laurie Chisholm
 - Treasurer: Peter Cowley
 - Local Groups Coordinator: Gretchen Kivell
 - Archivist: Alison Eng
 - Resource Officer: Suzi Thirwall
 - Webmaster/Newsletter Editor: Noel Cheer
 - Notices of Motion (if any)
- Election of Steering Committee Members

- These existing members offer themselves for re-election: Laurie Chisholm, Jock Crawford, Peter Cowley, Bernadette Krassoi, Gretchen Kivell
- Election of new members: see below
- Other Business

ANDREW SKELTON: NOMINEE FOR STEERING COMMITTEE

I have a background in teaching mathematics in England and as a VSO volunteer in Ghana. On return from Ghana, I candidated for ministry in the United Reformed Church in the UK; trained in Birmingham and served in pastorates in Southeast London and Surrey.

My wife, Kate, also worked in Ghana and we have two boys, nineteen and seventeen.

In the 1990s, I was introduced to *Living the Questions* study courses, showcasing progressive Christian scholars John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Jack Spong, and Lloyd Geering.

For the past fifteen years or so I have been a constant reader of Don Cupitt, admiring particularly his *After God* (1997) and the three *Everyday Speech* books of 1999-2000. This year I had the opportunity to do some research into Cupitt's papers lodged at Gladstone's Library in Hawarden, Wales.

I have been a SoF member for the past five years and was part of the local organising team for the 2013 SoF Conference in Hastings. I treasure the memory of friendship with the late Alan Goss who was such a central part of our Hawke's Bay meeting.

I have an MA in Theology and Education from King's College, London and yet I remain committed to the radical humanistic values promoted, celebrated and lived by Jesus of Nazareth.

INCREASED STOCK

SoF NEW ZEALAND RESOURCE CENTRE

One of the benefits of being a subscribing member of SoF New Zealand is that you can borrow items from the Resource Centre. This is a list of books recently added.

- | | | | |
|------|---|------|--|
| B256 | Batchelor, Martine: <i>Zen</i> | B258 | Teilhard de Chardin: <i>Le Milieu Divin</i> (in English) |
| B255 | Borg and Crossan: <i>The Last Week</i> | B257 | Teilhard de Chardin: <i>Let Me Explain</i> |
| B249 | Borg, Marcus: <i>Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time</i> | B259 | Teilhard de Chardin: <i>Letters from a Traveller</i> |
| B248 | Borg, Marcus: <i>Reading the Bible again for the First Time</i> | B260 | Teilhard de Chardin: <i>The Future of Man</i> |
| B275 | De Blank, Joost: <i>Uncomfortable Words</i> | B263 | Tillich, Paul: <i>The Eternal Now</i> |
| B276 | De Lubac, Henri: <i>Teilhard Explained</i> | B252 | Tomlinson, Dave: <i>How To Be a Bad Christian</i> |
| B274 | Dunn, James: <i>Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?</i> | B267 | Van Buren, Paul: <i>Theological Explorations</i> |
| B254 | Fox, Matthew: <i>The Coming of the Cosmic Christ</i> | B268 | Vermes, Geza: <i>The Nativity</i> |
| B280 | Frankfort, Henri <i>et al</i> : <i>Before Philosophy</i> | B269 | Walker, Alan: <i>Breakthrough</i> |
| B251 | Funk, Robert: <i>Honest to Jesus</i> | B270 | Ward, Keith: <i>Is Religion Dangerous?</i> |
| B246 | Gandhi, M.K.: <i>An Autobiography</i> | B265 | Webb, Val: <i>Like Catching Water in a Net</i> |
| B250 | Geering, Lloyd: <i>Christianity Without God</i> | B266 | Webb, Val: <i>Stepping Out With The Sacred</i> |
| B273 | Gleick, James: <i>Chaos</i> | B264 | Winston, Robert: <i>The Story of God</i> |
| B261 | Gollwitzer, Helmut <i>et al</i> , eds: <i>Dying We Live</i> | B285 | Wolpe, David J.: <i>In Speech and In Silence, The Jewish Quest for God</i> |
| B253 | Heiler, Friedrich: <i>Prayer: A study of the History and Psychology of Religion</i> | | |
| B283 | Jonassen, Jon: <i>Cook Island Legends</i> | | |
| B286 | Jung, Carl Gustav: <i>Matter of Heart</i> , video transcript | | |
| B279 | Keller, Werner: <i>The Bible as History</i> | | |
| B242 | Lewis, C.S.: <i>Mere Christianity</i> | | |
| B247 | Macquarrie, John: <i>God-Talk</i> | | |
| B277 | Marshall, I. Howard: <i>The Origins of New Testament Christology</i> | | |
| B282 | Mizruchi, Susan ed.: <i>Religion and Cultural Studies</i> | | |
| B278 | Moffat, James: <i>The Theology of the Gospels</i> | | |
| B243 | Ogden, Schubert: <i>Christ Without Myth</i> | | |
| B244 | Pagels, Elaine: <i>The Gnostic Gospels</i> | | |
| B245 | Phillips, J.B.: <i>Your God is Too Small</i> | | |
| B284 | Phipps, William E: <i>Muhammad and Jesus</i> | | |
| B241 | Raphael, Chaim: <i>The Springs of Jewish Life</i> | | |
| B262 | Ratzinger, Joseph: <i>Jesus of Nazareth</i> | | |
| B239 | Sanders, E.P.: <i>The Historical Figure of Jesus</i> | | |
| B272 | Schweitzer, Albert: <i>More from the Primeval Forest</i> | | |
| B271 | Schweitzer, Albert: <i>Out of My Life and Thought</i> | | |
| B240 | Shenk, David: <i>Muslim Nation and the Christian Church</i> | | |
| B281 | Spangler, David <i>et al</i> : <i>Reimagination of The World</i> | | |

SoF Resource Centre

is at 34 Briarley St, Tauranga
and is maintained
by Suzi Thirlwall
whose phone number is
(07) 578-2775 and email is
susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz

Other details, including the catalogue, can be
found on the website at www.sof.org.nz

STOP PRESS

**A NEW DVD HAS BECOME AVAILABLE FOR
LOAN:
THE JESUS FATWAH:
LOVE YOUR MUSLIM NEIGHBOUR AS
YOURSELF**

WE WILL MISS HER STRENGTH AND SUPPORT AND WARM SMILE.

THE PASSING OF MARGARET FEIST



Margaret Feist's funeral, on Tuesday 12th August, remembered her special contribution to her many roles, and was well attended by those her life had touched. The Rev. Dr. Kerry Enright's first action was to ask those attending to talk to someone near to them whom they didn't know; in acknowledgement of Margaret's always drawing in the stranger, the new person, to make them feel welcome. The church was rapidly abuzz – she would have liked that.

Margaret was born in London in 1932, the daughter of a Baptist minister. Her family moved to New Zealand in 1945, initially to Auckland. Margaret found friends and her social life – and Don – with SCM while at university. Her father moved to Dunedin with his job, and Don moved to study at Knox Theological Hall, so Margaret's first job as a teacher of English was at King Edward Technical College.

Don's first ministry was at Matiere in the King Country, where he and Margaret lived in shearing quarters. Time in Gore saw her busy with family (they had three children – two girls and a boy) and in her role as 'the minister's wife'. On arrival back in Dunedin Margaret returned to teaching at Kaikorai Valley HS; she became a school inspector and the national moderator for School Certificate English.

Margaret and Don had a very active life in the Dunedin community, thoughtful and supportive and always contributing their special skills. As we know, Margaret was very affected by Don's death in 2012. Nevertheless, she continued to belong to and contribute to many groups, including Sea of Faith. Margaret and Don were members of the Dunedin Sea of Faith committee from its inception. In March this year she read to our group a 'Letter to my Grandchildren' which she had written fifteen years ago.

We will miss her strength and support and warm smile.

Gretchen Kivell

DUNEDIN ABRAHAMIC INTERFAITH COUNCIL

<http://www.dunedininterfaith.net.nz/>

The May Sea of Faith Newsletter had a very interesting feature of the relaunch of the Wellington Council of Christians and Jews as the Wellington Abrahamic Council of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Dunedin has had an Abrahamic Interfaith Council since 2001. The aftermath of '9/11' in September that year brought real concerns for Muslim students, with hate mail and Muslim women sworn at. The university chaplain Greg Hughson, leaders of the Muslim and Jewish communities, Rev David Grant from Knox Church, and others, helped form a group The Dunedin Abrahamic Interfaith Group, initially to support the Muslim community.

Mayor Sukhi Turner gave her support. The Council met in the Municipal Chambers and Fliss Butcher attended as DCC representative for many years. Paul Sorrell as secretary, and Father Kevin Toomey who wrote the constitution, were two who gave much to the group and gave it a sound start.

Right from the beginning, the chairmanship has changed between the faiths annually. An initial task was to share information 'What is Christianity?', 'What is Islam?', 'What is Judaism?', documents that took some time to prepare (considering, for example, the diversity of Christian traditions). This information can be found at dunedininterfaith.net.nz

Interfaith visits to schools by three group members (or students arranged by the group) have been proceeding for several years, and are well-received. Often this will be the first occasion students have met and been able to talk to a Jew, or a Muslim, and sometimes even a professed Christian. Their message is interfaith respect and understanding, and also a strong message of peace in the world and between peoples.

The DAIG has sponsored a Peace lecture since 2004, when David Lange gave the inaugural address (and what was to be his last public engagement) 'Old Faiths, New World'. This address can be found on the website dunedininterfaith.net.nz and also on YouTube. Since then there has been a Peace lecture every year, by a national or international member of one

of the faiths in turn. The lecturers have, without exception, been impressive and thoughtful people. This year's speaker is Rabbi Fred Morgan, who is on the staff of the Melbourne Catholic University.

The newly-formed Dunedin Interfaith Council, on which a number of DAIG members are active, organised the first national Interfaith Conference to be held in Dunedin, in 2014. It was very successful indeed. It seemed for a while that the DAIG might be subsumed by the Interfaith Council, but this hasn't happened and the two groups are both active with their complementary agendas.

The Dunedin Abrahamic Interfaith Group sees a need for continued vigilance and witness in the light of ongoing war and distress for people of their three religions in the world today.

Gretchen Kivell

Objectives of the Council

1. To enjoy cordial respectful relationships with members of other faiths and religious traditions;
2. To provide a forum for its members to consult and discuss interfaith matters;
3. To promote harmony and cooperation among members of the Council and by doing so be an example to those in the wider community;
4. To promote the universal themes, values, ethics and norms common to all Faiths;
5. To support each other's commitment to expressing our faith in action, in order to enhance the wellbeing of our community and world.



**Understanding the Three Abrahamic Faiths:
Judaism, Christianity and Islam.**

"JESUS WAS A HUMANIST"

FROM A SERMON BY REV. VICTORIA WEINSTEN, NOVEMBER 14, 2004

The Rev. Dr. Victoria Weinstein is the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn, Massachusetts. She hails from Connecticut and has degrees from Northwestern University and Harvard Divinity School. She received a Doctor of Ministry degree from Andover-Newton Theological School in May 2011. Her great loves outside the church are musical theatre, cooking, and traveling. The following comes from a sermon that she wrote in 2004. – ed

The sermon starts with material adapted from pp 33-36 of *Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time* by Marcus Borg.

The historical Jesus was a spirit person, one of those figures in human history with an experiential awareness of the reality of God. The older, semi-technical term is holy man, but spirit person seems better. Spirit persons are known cross-culturally. They are people who have vivid and subjective experiences of another level or dimension of reality. These experiences involve momentary entry into nonordinary states of consciousness and take a number of different forms. Sometimes there is a vivid sense of momentarily seeing into another layer of reality; this is the classic experience of the shaman. Sometimes there is a strong sense of another reality coming upon one, as in the ancient expression, "The Spirit fell upon me." Sometimes the experience is of nature or an object within nature momentarily transfigured by "the sacred" shining through it.

The first book I ever read that explained Jesus from a respectful, historical and unorthodox perspective was *For Christ's Sake* by Thomas Harpur, published by McClelland & Stewart. Harpur's book changed my life by introducing me to the tenets of liberal Christianity, which I have tried to outline for you here:

(1) Though we will never all agree about Jesus' relative divinity, we see in him a human exemplar, and we treasure his humanness. Those who called him "The Christ" were bestowing upon him an honorific, not claiming him to be co-equal with their God. "The Christ" means "the Anointed." It is an honorary title signifying special calling and blessing. Jesus never said he was God. I agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson and other Unitarian forebears that this orthodox understanding of Jesus is based on a misunderstanding

of his message and a misreading of Scripture. When asked who he was he, actually, Jesus most often responded with another question, "Who do you say that I am?" He was a Wisdom teacher, a mystic, and a shaman.

(2) Jesus was a prophet of love and inclusivity, of justice and healing. His reforms of Judaism were not an attempt to destroy Judaism but to critique it for being overly legalistic. He was a faithful Jew. He never claimed to found a new religion or to be anything but a faithful Jewish man with an ecstatically intimate relationship to the God of Israel.

(3) Jesus preached an internal religion based on inner honesty and pure love. He wanted to encourage his people to move away from empty, outward forms of piety and observance, and more inward to a spiritual renewal based on the assurance that all human beings are equal and precious in God's sight. Even them. They had trouble believing this because they were Jews living under imperial Rome and most were living in poverty, totally expendable people. They were all officially second-class citizens of the Roman Empire and among them there were the lowest of the low, the untouchables. Jesus made it a special point to accept and extend care and healing to those considered ritually unclean by Jewish and Roman purity laws.

(4) We'll never know what the first disciples saw after Jesus's death in the events that are now commemorated at Easter. The point is, whatever they experienced totally transformed their lives. It is not necessary to believe in a physical, miraculous Resurrection to be moved by this fact.

(5) Finally, liberal Christianity is more interested in the religion of Jesus than the religion about Jesus.

I believe Jesus would be perplexed about the state of Christianity today.

Because really, he was constantly saying that the point of spiritual life is to transform the heart so that we are strengthened for work in the world – for healing, for feeding, for bringing others back to life when they are cast out, hurt, and dejected. To store up our treasures in heaven and not try to buy a sense of security by collecting things. And what are millions of Christians spending their time doing? Shopping. Judging others, in direct opposition to what Jesus taught. Arguing about the supposedly proper forms of sexuality about which Jesus never said one blessed word. Obsessing about worship practices when Jesus said to get out and love your

neighbor, and stop living by the letter of the religious law.

Jesus was a humanist. Perhaps this is why Unitarian Universalist humanists are so offended by the perversions of his teachings and life, because in him they recognize one of their own – a mystical one of their own, but one of their own -- and they become angry and grieved to see his basic humanist message so warped and distorted. He lived and taught an essentially humanistic form of religion – a religion which emphasized human relationships, human responsibility, and the human ability to be the hands of divine love for each other.

FROM ALPHA TO OMEGA IN FAITH

A review by Peter Creevey.

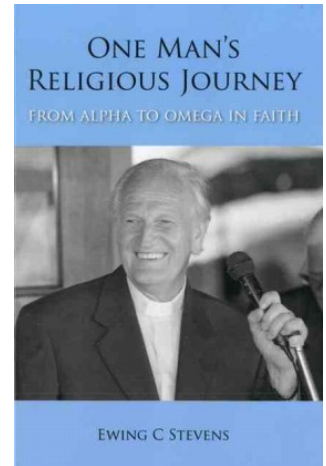
How can it be that my path has never crossed with that of this man?, I asked myself when I commenced reading *One Man's Religious Journey*, by Ewing Stevens. Although he states quite clearly that no two people will ever agree completely about theological issues, I sensed that I had come across a Kindred Spirit with whom I would enjoy walking, talking or working. His values and ethics I found to be unassailable.

He has worked productively and sincerely with Presbyterian, Methodist and Unitarian gatherings from Otago to Auckland, as well as with radio talk-back programmes from the old Waipiata TB Sanitorium (probably the first 'pirate' radio station in New Zealand), to those of Gordon Dryden and others in Auckland. He also edited a Methodist newspaper for some years. His writing, particularly his book 'Jesus' in 1973, took him into the elite company of those who, along with Sir Lloyd Geering, have been suspected by the Presbyterian Assembly of committing heresy. Even the hate-mail is re-printed in this book, and reads as vaguely pathetic conservatism in this time of shrinking congregations.

To look today at "The Book Jesus", included in this autobiography, it seems to be a fairly innocuous, but valuable, discussion of the stories, myths, inserts and dogmatic additions to the Christian Bible. I was reminded of the recent publication "Why Weren't We Told?", which contains the views of many Progressive Christians in Australasia. Those studying at Knox College were introduced to Biblical scholarship, but also warned that they risked enraging or outstripping their congregations after they were ordained into the church.

To see most of the Gospels, miracles, parables, and other religious writings as metaphors rather than history - not

to be taken literally - is today accepted by growing numbers of people, and is seen as giving huge new strengths to religious belief. To add humility to "the full armour of God" is also a valuable trait to be developed by those who choose to live out the essential Christian message of love, that 'agape' which is unconditional, non-judgmental, universal and practical.



Ewing Stevens put considerable energy into working with young people and listening to those outside formal religious institutions, finding this to be the cutting-edge of a lived personal faith. His views on the future of formal 'churches' and the ordained 'ministry' are pragmatic and forthright. The call for committed persons to become counselors, advisors, facilitators, therapists, chaplains, social workers, rather than to proselytize and to dogmatise, is a clear and valuable one.

Ewing Stevens' book is available through Nationwide Book Distributors in 351 Kiri Kiri Road, Oxford, Canterbury. Also through Auckland freephone 0800 459 459.

**This bio material appeared on the website of
Nationwide Books at www.nationwidebooks.co.nz**

Ewing's life has known many twists and turns. He is still an ordained Presbyterian minister and has been a minister in another calling since 1979.

His faith has been shaped through illness for five years with tuberculosis, his theological training for the church, his experiences of the suicidal death of a son, the death of his wife and remarriage, the controversy over a book he wrote about the life of Jesus, his work over nearly twenty years with questioning and rebellious youth and fifty years of radio broadcasting.

Ewing has always questioned his Christian faith and some of the ancient doctrines of the Christian church in the light of the scientific age. The virgin birth of Jesus, the miracles, stories of Jesus' resurrection, and the place of the Christian church in a world of many beliefs.

His aim is to encourage his readers to question what they believe and to be honest in their thinking about faith. And to encourage the adoption of a belief system that leads to a moral approach to the whole of life through this philosophical autobiography.

BITS AND PIECES

SAFEGUARDING HUMAN HEALTH IN THE ANTHROPOCENE* EPOCH

REPORT OF THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION-LANCET COMMISSION ON PLANETARY HEALTH, THE LANCET: JULY 16, 2015

By almost any measure, human health is better now than at any time in history. Life expectancy has soared from 47 years in 1950–1955, to 69 years in 2005–2010, and death rates in children younger than 5 years of age have decreased substantially, from 214 per thousand live births in 1950–1955, to 59 in 2005–2010. But these gains in human health have come at a high price: the degradation of nature's ecological systems on a scale never seen in human history. A growing body of evidence shows that the health of humanity is intrinsically linked to the health of the environment, but by its actions humanity now threatens to destabilise the Earth's key life-support systems.

As a Commission, we conclude that the continuing degradation of natural systems threatens to reverse the health gains seen over the last century. In short, we have mortgaged the health of future generations to realise economic and development gains in the present.

* The 'Anthropocene' is a term widely used to denote the present time interval, in which many geologically significant conditions and processes are profoundly altered by human activities.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Voltaire was the embodiment of "The Enlightenment". He defined his ideal religion in his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764). Such a religion would be as simple as possible:

"Would it not be

- that which taught much morality and very little dogma?
- that which tended to make men just without making them absurd?
- that which did not order one to believe in things that are impossible, contradictory, injurious to divinity, and pernicious to mankind,
- and which dared not menace with eternal punishment anyone possessing common sense?

Would it not be

- that which did not uphold its belief with [the aid of] executioners, and did not inundate the earth with blood on account of unintelligible sophism?
- that which taught only the worship of one god, justice, tolerance and humanity?"

from page 357 of Karen Armstrong's *A History of God*

HERESY - THE PREQUEL

Fifty years ago, Lloyd Geering wrote an article for *The Outlook*, the journal of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand as a backgrounder to the upcoming 450th anniversary of Reformation Sunday. In the article, Lloyd commented on ideas in John A. T. Robinson's book *The New Reformation?* One thing, as they say, led to another and responses to that and other articles had Lloyd appearing before the bar of the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in November 1967 charged with 'disturbing the peace of the Church'. This later morphed, in the public mind, to 'heresy'.

In four events during this September, at St Andrews on the Terrace in Wellington (satrs.org.nz), Lloyd will read four articles which provoked the charge, and then discuss them each with Noel Cheer.

This Newsletter will pay attention to them in the November issue.

They will be available from St Andrews as a special issue of "The Fourth R", the journal of the Westar Institute.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

There are a lot of issues to discuss at the Conference and we will find it all the more enjoyable and stimulating by doing some background reading.

Go to www.sof.org.nz/2015studyguides.htm

Remember ... the clouds that we see are not confined to Climate Change, and not all clouds are black!

It's our future, and that of our descendants ... let's take it seriously ... and with hope.



THE LAST WORD

Laurie Chisholm, Chairperson



Growing up in a liberal Baptist congregation, I imbibed the general assumption that one ought to go to church. Church-going was not simply a free choice, but something burdened by a fairly heavy dose of ‘ought’.

Naturally, I assumed that the bible supported or even commanded attendance at church, so it was quite a shock to realise that there’s nothing in the words of Jesus of this sort. There’s not even a “Thou shalt pray.” Prayer and worship turn out not to be a matter of ‘divine revelation’ at all, but rather a natural human inclination common to many religious traditions. The only issue is how one should pray, to which the story of the institution of the Lord’s Prayer gives a response.

Most embarrassingly for those with a traditional notion of biblical authority, there is a passage in the bible that is implacably opposed to services of worship. The prophet Amos thundered against religious festivals, their sacrificial ceremonies as well as the strumming of harps and the chanting of psalms. So on the one hand, God (rather anachronistically) issues in the Pentateuch detailed commands at Sinai for the institution of the temple and for carrying out sacrifices and ceremonies in it, and on the other hand, Amos claims that God utterly rejects temple worship. This passage has accompanied me down through the years. In the 70s, we performed a John Ylvisaker song that sets Amos’s words to music, to a conference of the Association of Presbyterian Women. What was intended as a critique of the solemn and rather dour character of Presbyterian worship produced only bland incomprehension. Listening later to Claus Westermann’s lectures on “Introduction to the Old Testament”, I gained a greater appreciation of the nature of the prophets and their message. Even today, I listen with enjoyment to Ylvisaker’s song on my phone.

We tend to retrospectively discount the subversive nature of Amos’s attack, balancing the prophetic with the priestly or claiming Jesus as prophet priest and king, summing up and fulfilling all the different strands of Hebrew society. Of course, ‘church’ in the Christian sense had not been ‘invented’ yet, but as we can see

from the Psalms, there are many parallels between coming together in the temple and coming together on Sunday in a parish church. Others argue that Amos wasn’t against church services as such, just against church services that act as a cover for blatant injustice. Scholars have looked carefully for any signs that Amos still has links with priestly tradition and it is likely that v22 upends the conventional priestly declaration that God has accepted a sacrifice. As a prophet, Amos spoke to the specific situation at that time. He was not interested in developing a subtle dialectic of “on the one hand...but on the other hand,” designed to provide a universal perspective on the relationship of prophetic protest and priestly tradition. His “No” is simple and unconditional — just look at the emotional temperature of the words he used: hatred, despising, rejecting, not listening.

It is easy to jump to the conclusion that Amos is speaking with a modern, post-Enlightenment voice that is concerned with right behaviour (the ethical monotheism of the prophets was a favourite theme of liberal Protestant theology) rather than right belief or ritual. More likely, the concepts translated as justice and righteousness are subtly but significantly different from our modern concepts. ‘Justice’ is what was dispensed – by the elders at the city gate, and Amos catalogues current abuses such as debt slavery. Amos portrays both concepts as fluid-like and we could imagine that sharing together in worship and the accompanying communal meal created a solidarity that should work itself out in the wider community, but is being undermined by an increasing divide between indebted peasant farmers and a new rich class.

For us it is natural to assume a connection between going to church and behaving ethically. David Bentley Hart has argued that this assumption derives from the revolution that Christianity brought about and was absent from pagan religions at the time of the Roman Empire.

The indigenous sects of the Roman world simply made no connection between religious piety and anything resembling a developed social morality

Christianity linked religious ritual with charitable action for the poor and widows and rejected such practices as the exposure of superfluous or unwanted newborns. It went on to found hospitals, leper asylums, orphanages, and almshouses. We hear a lot, especially from the new atheists, about the evils of religion, but this generally involves accepting a grand narrative about the wonderful improvements that Enlightenment reason has brought about. Hart begins from the other end, portraying the emergence of the Christian revolution in contrast to the culture of the time, and arguing that until Christianity, participation in religious rituals was essentially disconnected from ethical obligations. One could do one's civic duty by sacrificing to the Roman gods and then cheerfully go on exploiting the poor for personal benefit and ignoring the plight of widows with no income.

In the Sea of Faith, we have had our problems with ritual and ceremony. Some of us feel antipathy to anything that reminds us of the church culture we have grown beyond. Others are troubled by supernatural language. I suspect that much of what we do in church services has ceased to resonate. My only hope is that undoing that sense of 'ought' can have a liberating effect. Numerous experiences give credence to this: sitting on the grass at St. Martins Island discussing a text instead of listening to a sermon, watching the enthusiasm of fourteen year olds at a Confirmation weekend in Germany when they were given responsibility for many of the practicalities of a church service (welcoming, reading bible passages, taking up the collection). We say that something has a point or is pointless, but German has a third option: point-free (*zweckfrei*), and rituals, like music are best when they are point-free. They are best engaged in for their own sake, not as a means to some other end. Then all sorts of emotions can emerge from the depths of our being.

The Sunday Assembly, Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists*, David Tacey's claim of a spirituality revolution underway among young people, and Gretta Vosper's congregation are all signs of hope that something new will emerge.

Laurie Chisholm

LIFE ATTITUDES

This year's Annual Conference asks us to consider how we might confront the future. These are some options:

- **Worry that we can see the problems but have no power to fix them.**
- **Hope that the ingenuity of human beings will pull us through: e.g. geo-engineering to counter climate change processes.**
- **Require national leaders to take all dangers seriously.**
- **Analyse (and attempt to assuage) the grievances of terrorists.**
- **Become an activist, recruit our grandchildren as disciples.**
- **Plan mass evacuations, move people away from the increasing deserts in the tropics or even from Earth to, say, Mars.**
- **Learn to grow vegetables and to bake bread.**
- **Ignore all concerns: "I'll be dead before any of this happens".**

Noel Cheer, Editor

