

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 121, November 2015

*"The 'cosplay Caliphate' of ISIS is a deadly fantasy, but a familiar one in the West.
It feeds the same urges as does Tolkien*

FINDING A KING TO WHOM THEY CAN PLEDGE THEIR SWORDS

Adapted from an article by Benjamin Dueholm in Aeon Magazine 30 June 2015

What accounts for the persistent appeal of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (or ISIS) to recruits from Chicago, Bradford or Melbourne? This year, the question became urgent to commentators and policymakers in Europe and the United States. The group's battlefield successes, its territorial ambitions and viral spectacles of cruelty were made only more ominous by the small but steady stream of recruits it attracted from wealthy democracies.

Some of the proposed explanations have been familiar: the marginalisation and alienation of Muslim minorities in the West; a religious zeal that transcends the smallness of secular life; even the group's thrillingly extreme apocalyptic vision. It's not hard to see ISIS as another gruesome camp-follower to modern democratic capitalism, one in a series of terrorist movements and guerrilla insurgencies that feed upon the discontents of the age and the psychoses of their members.

But the story of the arrival and lingering global charisma of ISIS features something that sets it apart: the idea of the Caliphate. Last June, the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph. The grandiosity of the claim was likely lost even on many educated non-Muslim observers. A position that has been gone from Islam in anything but name for 1,000 years, the caliph has to meet certain requirements: he must control territory, must enforce sharia law within it, and he must descend from the Quraysh tribe, the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad (the Ottoman emperors claimed the title into the 20th century, but their claim is widely rejected because they did not descend from the Quraysh). Pledging allegiance to a valid caliph, when one is available, is an obligation that ISIS supporters view as binding on all Muslims. And while Baghdadi's claim has been divisive even in the world of violent jihadism, groups in Nigeria and Libya have apparently made this vow of allegiance.

In English-language accounts, the idea of the caliphate and its evident appeal seems by turns exotic and ridiculous. '[T]his kind of transnational Islam seems to hold special appeal to young Europeans caught between competing identities,' wrote Malise Ruthven in *The New York Review of Books* this February. For all the violence of ISIS, the idea of the Caliphate encodes 'a moral order that transcends not just the boundaries of the national state, but the moral logic underpinning it'. Or, in the words of Nick Danforth writing in *Foreign Affairs* last year, it is 'a political fantasy – a blank slate' for the demands and ambitions of local politics.

Whether its central claim is an inscrutable dream of religiously legitimated sovereignty or a malleable delusion, the appeal of ISIS is easily abstracted from motives available to outsiders. It is, in the incisive words of the New York artist Molly Crabapple, a 'cosplay Caliphate', **a dress-up festival of blood-soaked nostalgia** whose very pretensions to antiquity mark it as the rankest kind of modern innovation.

ISIS and its ideology are violent, reactionary, wholly at odds with the ethos of democracy and progress cherished by modern secular societies. But the myth on which its appeal hinges – and the historical dress-up it seems to engage in – is not as foreign as it seems. A lot of people like cosplay. ‘One of the Islamic State’s less bloody videos shows a group of jihadists burning their French, British and Australian passports,’ Graeme Wood reported in his lengthy study of ISIS ideology in *The Atlantic* this March. ‘This would be an eccentric act for someone intending to return to blow himself up in line at the Louvre.’ Apparently, these people actually want to live under a caliph.

Far from being a parochially Islamic impulse or a nerd’s fantasy – something you can get involved in from ‘your mama’s basement’, as one counter-terrorism expert has said – the myth of the Caliphate echoes dreams of transcendent legitimacy that are deeply embedded in European culture and literature. To find a story of a sovereign authority long lapsed in kingship but still entitled to the allegiance of all the just, and fated to reappear at an auspicious moment, we need look no further than *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55).

J R R Tolkien’s sprawling, leisurely epic – itself a bit of literary cosplay – has managed only to grow in commercial and critical stature since was first published. It has at its heart the revelation of Aragorn as the king of men and his return to his long-vacant ancestral throne. As the story begins, Aragorn is preternaturally competent yet rustic. Over time, he proves himself both a biological heir and a worthy mirror of his kingly ancestors. His transcendent authority occasionally flashes forth, like ‘a king returning from exile to his own land’. Haloes of light gather around his head at particularly kingly moments, such as extracting aid from potential allies at sword-point.

Halo or no, however, the problem of legitimacy and allegiance endures throughout the story. The royal line has been extinguished in the kingdom for 1,000 years, during which a line of non-royal stewards has ruled. But ‘10,000 years would not suffice’ to make the best of a bad situation and simply round up the stewards to the rank of kings. The ancient signs of royalty – most notably a 3,000-year-old sword – are critical for Aragorn to persuade a long-kingless people to accept him. He

has a tendency to cry out the name of his most illustrious ancestor when crashing into battle, and attracts dream-like expressions of allegiance. A ‘light of knowledge and love was kindled’ in the eyes of a man restored by Aragorn’s particular – and uniquely kingly – gift for healing. ‘My Lord, you called me. I come. What does the king command?’

Many of Tolkien’s readers thrill to the notion of finding a king to whom they can pledge their swords without scruple or hesitation.

Read the full article at

<http://aeon.co/magazine/culture/the-appeal-of-isis-isnt-so-far-from-that-of-tolkien/>

DOCTORS AND DOCTRINE

At the conclusion of the inaugural Geering Lectures delivered by Bishop John Spong at St. Andrews on the Terrace, Wellington in October 1997, Lloyd Geering made this observation as part of his vote of thanks:

“It has always seemed to me extremely odd that the general public have quite a different attitude to the medical profession to what they have to the clerical profession.

How many people in the modern world would ever continue to go to a GP [general practitioner] who never read any of the latest medical literature? Not only that, but who even rejected much of the stuff they learned at the medical school because it was inconsistent with what the medieval practitioners did.

It would be sheer nonsense but that is the way that many of the public regard theology and the clerical profession -- it must stay the same as it was hundreds of years ago. That, of course, is not the Christian tradition ... in its living form.”

from Newsletter 24, December 1997

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: Norm Ely, 2/15 View Road, Titahi Bay n.ely@xtra.co.nz

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

The final Deadline date for submitted Newsletter copy for 2015 is: 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

CONTENTS

1. “.. to whom they can pledge their swords”
Is ISIS a malleable delusion in Tolkien mode?
2. Doctors and Doctrine
It's not the antiquity that counts.
3. All About Us.
The who, why, when and where – and how much!
4. Lifting Leviticus
Even Jesus didn't like the priestly class of Levites.
5. Supernatural
“no such thing”
6. On Me Bike
Lloyd Geering covered much of the South Island and some of the North – in the 1930s and 1940s.
7. If it all turns to custard ...
Don Cupitt asks “How should we act?”
7. Christian contributions to peace and peace-making
Conference in Wellington.
8. Major Islamic Climate Change Declaration
Similar to the recent Papal encyclical.
9. Being Progressive
Feet-on-the-ground spirituality.
10. The 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions
“The best ever”
11. Newly re-elected Chairperson's Last Word and Conference Roundup

A RECORD OF CONFERENCE 2015

We have made an Omnibus CD containing all of the papers (as pdf files) and all of the speeches (as mp3 files) from the 2015 Conference. You can buy a copy by sending \$15 to:

Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay. Make sure your name and address accompany the cheque.

If you are tech-lit then you can download the same material from our website at www.sof.org.nz at no charge.

**“Take care of the earth:
there is no backup copy”**

author unknown

LIFTING LEVITICUS

Colin Gibson delivered this paper at the Wellington Ephesus "Cross Creek" weekend Sept. 4-6, 2015

I've called this talk, 'Lifting *Leviticus*'; I want to honour the spirit of Palm Sunday by trying to disarm and dismantle the heavy cross this ancient text has become for the backs of gay people.

Leviticus has been used – and is still used – as a text of terror against gay and lesbian people simply because it includes a single verse (Chapter 18, verse 22) which solemnly records God's words to Moses, telling him that sexual intercourse between two males is forbidden among the people of Israel. [The verse is repeated in Chapter 20, verse 1-3, not because God forgot that he had already said it or intended to reinforce it, but because, like Genesis, the scribe or scribes included two versions of the same material, probably from different sources or priestly traditions. In the later passage, this is an offence, incurring the death penalty for both men.]

Leviticus is an ancient book of laws and rituals associated with the Levites, or 'sons of Levi', a priestly class whose special function was to carry out the cultic rites in the great Temple at Jerusalem. Judging by the gospels, Jesus didn't think much of the Levites; in the parable of the Good Samaritan a Levite was one of the ultra-religious types who passed by on the other side.

The book, then, is named after Levi and his family*, from whom the Levites proudly took their descent. This family were early allies of Moses, involved in a brutal killing for which they were rewarded with the status of priests.

According to the Book of Exodus (32: 25-9), when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with his famous tablets and found the Hebrews totally out of control, wildly worshipping the Golden Calf, he stood in the gate of the camp and called for supporters. The sons of Levi left the general mayhem, and gathered around him. Then Moses told them that it was God's command that they should each take their sword and go through the camp killing 'their brothers, their friends and their neighbours'. They dutifully massacred three thousand people, whereupon Moses declared them worthy of 'ordination for the service of the Lord', because each of them had killed a son or a brother, and so had brought a blessing on themselves that day!

* It was the Hebrew scribal practice to refer to a 'book' by its first sentence or phrase: so in the ancient Hebrew scriptures it is known as 'And he summoned'. The title *Leviticus* was first assigned in the Septuagint. The Talmud calls the book *The Law of the Priests*.

With that gruesome history behind it, it may be no accident that the book of *Leviticus* is spattered with blood: the blood of animal sacrifices, the blood of death penalties carried out by stoning, burning and simpler forms of killing. Most of the book consists of legal prescriptions, but there are two little narratives included which will give us a taste of the character of the book. They are probably a record of ancient events, kept in to give a grim warning of the consequences of disobedience to the letter of these laws..

In Chapter 10 we hear of two sons of Aaron (he was fellow High Priest with Moses), who don't follow the prescribed ritual. Fire flames out from the presence of God, and they are burned to death 'before the Lord'. Their bodies are then dragged out of the camp, and Moses instructs Aaron and his two surviving sons not to mourn them: otherwise they will die, and God's wrath will strike all the congregation' (10: 1-7).

In Chapter 24 we read the edifying story of the Israelite son of a mixed marriage, who gets into a fight and blasphemes by cursing the Name (of God). He is imprisoned while the tribe work out what God wants done to him. They are quickly informed by God (speaking through Moses as usual) that aliens as well as citizens are to be put to death for blasphemy; they are to be stoned to death by the whole congregation. The unfortunate victim is taken outside the camp and duly killed in this way. I leave you to decide what image of God's character is being projected here. And just imagine the consequences today if all the swearing and blaspheming we hear on playgrounds, television programmes, and everyday life came under the divine ordination declared in *Leviticus*. [Incidentally, *Leviticus* prescribes death by stoning for cursing the name of one's parents, too.]

What is this ancient text; what authority does it have? Can it still claim to rule our lives?

Much is made of the 'authority' of biblical texts, especially when they are being used as weapons against others. For many centuries, the author of *Leviticus* was taken to be Moses himself, and as one of the five books at the beginning of the Bible attributed to Moses (called as a group the Pentateuch) the book took on even more authority in the Jewish religious system ... an authority which was carried over into the Christian religion. What's more, the book largely presents itself as the record of God directly talking to or through Moses. (Throughout it uses the formula: 'the Lord spoke to

Moses – or to Moses and Aaron – saying...') Here is a text which claims divine dictation in a very literal way.

But the days are long gone when anyone could credibly claim that the author of the book was Moses himself. Although it contains some very ancient material, modern biblical scholars are pretty much agreed that it's a compilation of older and later writings: a sort of priestly manual or collection of practices, laws and regulations prepared for the priests serving the Temple before its final destruction during the sack of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.

It is equally impossible to recognise the god who talks-with-Moses-and Aaron as the God known to us through Jesus Christ – or indeed any God now worthy of the name. There can be no sense that in *Leviticus* we are hearing the voice of God speaking eternal truths valid in all times and in all

cultures. The god in *Leviticus* is only too plainly the local tribalised god of early Israel, made in the image of the priests who assembled this book. The *Leviticus* god deals in shekels

and grasshoppers and baskets of unleavened bread; in burnt offerings, grain offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings, ordination offerings and 'the sacrifice of well-being'. The *Leviticus* god is a male god, to whom women are insignificant and valueless-when they are not downright dangerous to male purity. For this god they have no place in worship or religious leadership of any kind. The *Leviticus* god is a trivial god, insisting that the weasel, the mouse and the gecko are unclean and may not be eaten; so unclean that if a carcass touches a plate that plate is to be destroyed. The *Leviticus* God is a quirky and selective god, banning tattoos, men's haircuts and beard trimming; banning male homosexuality – but with nothing to say about lesbian sex or women's haircuts (surely a curious instance of oversight, or ignorance, or indifference). He is a god who is tough on incest, but who never thinks to forbid sex between a father and his daughter. He is a jealous, manipulative god who promises peace, good weather, the removal of all dangerous animals, amazing fertility, complete military success and lots of children in exchange for total obedience to the laws and statutes set down in *Leviticus*.

This old text comes from a society utterly different from our own; it carries codes of conduct and social attitudes which not even a modern believer in the literal truth and final authority of the Bible would dare live by.

Leviticus accepts the practice of slavery; it assigns women a position of absolute inferiority and virtual

servitude to males (50 shekels for a male between the age of twenty and sixty, 30 shekels for a female; 20 shekels for a male between the age of five to twenty, 10 for a female; women who bear a son are declared ceremonially unclean for seven days, two weeks if a daughter is born); it bans the wearing of any cloth of mixed material (so much for T shirts of cotton and polyester); it declares pork, ostrich meat and eels detestable, unclean and not to be eaten, but allows crickets, grasshoppers and locusts to be on the menu. It gives elaborate instructions for the slaughter of sacrificial animals so that God may smell the pleasing odour of such choice bits as the fat covering the entrails, and be pleased by a thank-offering or placated by a guilt-offering. It proclaims a justice code of strict revenge-punishments: a life for a life, anyone who maims another

is to be maimed, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered'.

Leviticus and its priestly writers are obsessed with ideas of ritual purity and the

***Leviticus* and its priestly writers are obsessed with ideas of ritual purity and the mysterious (to them) physical processes which might sully the holiness of priests or the purity of ordinary individuals.**

mysterious (to them) physical processes which might sully the holiness of priests or the purity of ordinary individuals. Where the God of Genesis had pronounced that all of the creation was 'good', *Leviticus* divides everything into the clean and the unclean. Sexual intercourse, menstruation, childbirth, the consumption of blood in food, the onset of disease and death are all hedged about with purity regulations because they might pollute the whole community and the individuals concerned, as well as offending the tribal God. These are pre-scientific attitudes which have flowed on into post-biblical cultures, well down into our own day; they are often reflected in the various forms of new Puritanism that keep emerging among conservative religious people of many different faiths.

Let me try to sum up. The *Book of Leviticus* is a creature of its own time, the long distant past, and its own culture, a culture we can hardly comprehend now. We can find value in it: its insistence on good health practices, including a sabbath day of rest from daily work, its brilliant idea of the year of jubilee and release from debt, its emphasis on honesty in commercial practice, respect for the elderly, tolerance of foreigners in the community, care for the deaf and the blind, leaving something on every harvest field for the poor; its ideal of cosmic harmony between humanity and God, its sensitivity to the human desire for release from a sense of guilt.

But *Leviticus* cannot be heard as the final Word of God on any of the matters it deals with, including human sexuality. It is a fascinating window into an ancient culture, but it cannot be taken as laying down binding prescriptions for modern Christians, let alone modern secular communities like our world. Those who select verses and use them to support their own prejudices while ignoring the majority of the book harm the Bible's standing as a fundamental document for our faith, just as much as they give the Christian faith a bad name by rejecting its all-inclusive welcome and its foundation on love not law.

Of course the approach I have taken to this book raises serious questions about how to read the whole Bible. If we can't believe now that God stood at the entrance of the tent of meetings and told Moses and the Israelites not to eat geckos, can we believe that God literally spoke with anyone else, anywhere? But that's another larger subject: perhaps another sermon!

Who is Emeritus Professor Colin Gibson? He works in the Department of English & Linguistics, University of Otago, Dunedin.

His research interests include Chaucer, Renaissance and later drama, New Zealand hymnology and the interchange between literature and the visual imagination. Colin supervised a number of topics in drama, including comparative topics involving English, New Zealand and Malaysian playwriting.

Publications include editions of Renaissance English dramatists, seventeenth-century poetry, and a large number of hymns and songs (many in collaboration with Shirley Murray).

SUPERNATURAL – A THING OF THE PAST

“But, for the person who has stepped into the twentieth century with eyes open, the old distinction between a natural world and a supernatural world is a thing of the past. There are still plenty of mysteries and problems, some of them quite frightening, but there is no such thing as the supernatural. That person is concerned primarily with this world of space and time. It is the only known world, and we see no evidence of any other or of any future that lies beyond death. This is all very different from the world view which ancient people took for granted.”

From Lloyd Geering's article in "The Outlook" 25 September 1965, with the text edited to be 21st Century gender-free!

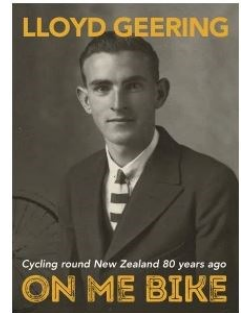
ON ME BIKE

Lloyd Geering's wife Shirley, having so often heard him say, "I went there on me bike", insisted he record the intrepid cycling journeys he made around New Zealand as a young man in the 1930s and 1940s.

In a memoir of six of the journeys that Lloyd undertook on his six-pound-five-shillings bicycle, he travelled as far south as Bluff and as far north as Hamilton. The maps at the end are a brilliant addition. He saw a different New Zealand from that of today – few roads were sealed, roadside camping, fossil forests and little electrification. All easily read about from a LazyBoy but a challenge to a traveller! The Viking-like end of the bicycle on page 114 was a gem!

"Not the Lloyd we know" you might say. But, if we say that "life is a journey" then surely there's a metaphor in there somewhere.

The 118-page book is published by Steele Roberts and retails at \$24.95.



Caught on an iPhone at St Cuthberts, Auckland, during the recent SoF Conference

ETHICS IN THE LAST DAYS OF HUMANITY

“The question Cupitt addresses, ‘How can we be world-affirming and ethically active in the face of very large scale disaster?’ will resonate with many readers. His answer deserves close scrutiny.”

Michael Zimmerman, *The Clergy Letter Project*

Following on from our 2015 Conference in Auckland, we have received an advance copy of Don Cupitt's most recent book:

Ethics in the Last Days of Humanity

Don Cupitt

Polebridge Press 2016 (sic)

Using the metaphor in the Conference theme, Don's orientation is that of a relaxed Cassandra. Sooner or later something of the seriousness of climate change was bound to happen.

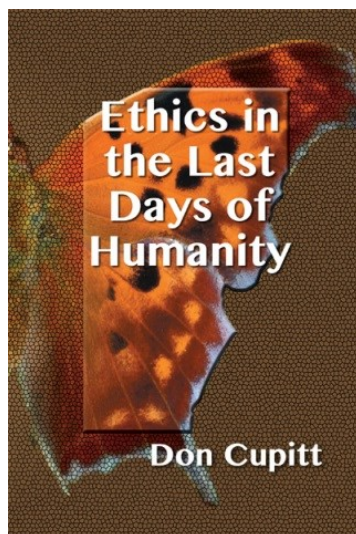
Most of the remainder of this article is from the promotion document issued by Westar Institute.

The task, according to Don, is to construct an ethics that will serve us well, that will “enable us to be resilient, courageous and ethical...” (John Shuck, *Religion for Life*.)

Ethics in the Last Days of Humanity is not about the science of global warming so much as the absence of a serious ethical and religious response to it. When all existing ‘reality’ breaks down, ethics can no longer be based on nature or religious law. Cupitt advocates an alternative inspired by the historical Jesus.

Contents:

- Introduction: Predictions and Prophecies of Doom
- 1. Self-Critical Religion Becomes Philosophy of Life
- 2. When a World Ends, the Old Morality Breaks Down
- 3. Eschatological Humanism: The Revelation of Man at the End of History
- 4. The Second Adam
- 5. Eschatologies, Ancient and Modern
- 6. On Not Going Anywhere: Learning to Live without Any Supporting Narrative
- 7. The Coherence of Life and Culture
- 8. After Humanity
- 9. Eschatology, Globalized and Personalized



10. Beliefs and Identities

11. Philosophy at the End of the World

12. Our Fall into Environmental Crisis—and Our Redemption

Don Cupitt is the author of more than fifty books, including *Creative Faith* (2015), *Jesus and Philosophy* (2009), and *Above Us Only Sky* (2008).

PEACE, NOT WAR, SHALL BE OUR BOAST

A Conference about historical, theological and contemporary perspectives on peace and Christianity in New Zealand. **Victoria University of Wellington, 18-20 November 2015**

<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/sacr/research/religious-studies/peace-conference-2015>

This conference will provide a forum for critical reflection on Christian contributions to peace and peacemaking in New Zealand. It will provide an opportunity to evaluate Christian contributions historically, and to think theologically about the relationship of peace to Christianity. The conference will be hosted by Victoria University, with support from the Religious History Association of Aotearoa NZ, the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (Otago), and the College of St John the Evangelist (Auckland).

Conference rates are subsidised: full registration: \$80 (\$70 early bird); unwaged/student: \$40.

Full details, including information about venue, timetable, bursaries, and registration forms are available online at:

<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/sacr/research/religious-studies/peace-conference-2015>, or by emailing Geoff Troughton (geoff.troughton@vuw.ac.nz)

MAJOR ISLAMIC CLIMATE CHANGE DECLARATION RELEASED

Istanbul, Turkey, 18 August 2015: Islamic leaders from 20 countries today launched a bold Climate Change Declaration to engage the world's 1.6 billion Muslims on the issue of our time.

Adopted by the sixty participants at the International Islamic Climate Change Symposium, (Istanbul, 17-18 August) the Declaration urges governments to deliver a strong, new international climate agreement in Paris this December that signals the end of the road for polluting fossil fuels by creating architecture that will give us a chance of limiting global warming above pre-industrial levels to 2, or preferably 1.5, degrees Celsius.

The Declaration presents the moral case, based on Islamic teachings, for Muslims and people of all faiths worldwide to take urgent climate action. It was drafted by a large, diverse team of international Islamic scholars from around the world following a lengthy consultation period prior to the Symposium. It has already been endorsed by more than sixty participants and organisations including the Grand Muftis of Uganda and Lebanon. **The Declaration is in harmony with the Papal Encyclical and has won the support of the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace of the Holy See.**

The Declaration calls for a rapid phase-out of fossil fuels and a switch to 100% renewable energy as well as increased support for vulnerable communities already suffering from climate impacts. It can be seen as part of the groundswell of people from all walks of life calling for governments to scale up the transition away from fossil fuels. Wealthy and oil-producing nations are urged to phase out all greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. All people, leaders and businesses are invited to commit to 100% renewable energy in order to

tackle climate change, reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development.

Amongst keynote speakers at the Symposium were three senior UN officials - from the UN Environment Programme, the secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Secretary-General's climate change team. Presentations were also made by scientists, NGO leaders and academics. Also attending were religious leaders from many other faith traditions.

That the Symposium was held in Istanbul is significant - for the first time in history, the G20 summit will be organized by the presidency of Turkey, a country with a majority Muslim population, just two weeks before the Paris Summit, Leaders from the world's largest twenty economies will gather in an attempt to reach agreement on how international financial stability can be achieved. The economic implications of climate change and the huge amounts of subsidies given by G20 countries to the polluting fossil fuel industry will also be on the agenda.

"Civil society is delighted by this powerful Climate Declaration coming from the Islamic community, which could be a game changer, as it challenges all world leaders, and especially oil producing nations, to phase out their carbon emissions and supports the just transition to 100% renewable energy as a necessity to tackle climate change, reduce poverty, and deliver sustainable development around the world." - Wael Hmaidan, International Director of Climate Action Network

Source:

<http://www.greenfaith.org/media/press-releases/major-islamic-climate-change-declaration-released>

BEING PROGRESSIVE

FEET-ON-THE-GROUND SPIRITUALITY

This is an editor's "thinking out loud piece" – the sort that emerges from the cross-fertilization of copy from different sources passing across the editor's desk.

My first stimulus came out of an introduction that I wrote for an interview of Winton Higgins – a teacher of secular Buddhism from Australia – in St Andrews-on-The-Terrace, Wellington. In tracking down the term "secularism" in Wikipedia I was reminded that George Jacob Holyoake invented the term in 1851 with the insistence that it was not a *rival* to religion but rather an *alternative*. Major characteristics of secularism, as he described it, are its suspicion of dogma, hierarchy and institution. Furthermore, it encourages the exercise of a free conscience and it asserts that there is no "capital-T" truth. That, at least, puts it close to Sea of Faith.

In the course of our interview Winton quoted a quip about how, some years after the crucifixion of Jesus, the first clergyman moved in! Those who think about the subject at all have a range of views as to how the sage-like teaching of Jesus transmuted to the operatic performances of institutionalised Christianity.

In recent times, the distinction has become more public between "orthodoxy" (the acceptance and promotion of right *opinions*) and "orthopraxy" (doing the right *action*).

Many Protestant denominations of Western Christianity – not to mention the "post-Christians" for whom any dogmatic allegiance is a step too far – are happily adopting the term "Progressive" and are marginalising much of the supernaturalism that has informed the church for the past nineteen or so centuries. *See the item at the bottom of page 6, above.*

It was interesting to discuss with Winton the motives behind Secular Buddhism in that quite a lot of what has been regarded (and still is for many) as essential to Buddhist practice has been re-classified as historical accident and cultural specificity or the reification of what was always metaphorical. Thus the "Four Noble Truths" are re-classified as four *tasks* to be focussed on – to be lived rather than proclaimed. There are counterparts of this in the Christian tradition. Philip Larkin's poem *Aubade* contains the line:

*"Religion ... That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die ..."*

I still have a quibble with the term "Progressive Christianity" in that it seems inconsistent to offer Christianity as a path of faith without at the same time subscribing – unambiguously and with no recourse to metaphorical evasion – to the theistic, literal, objective God of the Old Testament, the 'sponsor' of messiahship.

But, help is at hand.

The Amazon promotion of Gretta Vosper's book *With or Without God: Why The Way We Live Is More Important Than What We Do* says this:

"Envisioning a future in which the Christian church plays a viable and transformative role in shaping society, Gretta Vosper argues that if the church is to survive at all, the heart of faith must undergo a radical change. Vosper, founder of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity and a minister in Toronto, believes that what will save the church is an emphasis on just and compassionate living—a new and wholly humanistic approach to religion. Without this reform, the church as we know it faces extinction."

Michael Benedikt in his book *God Is The Good We Do* is about as Progressive as we can get. As many years ago, Don Cupitt wrote that "God is a myth we have to have", so Benedikt has made the practice of theopraxy ("God making") central to our religious life. He wrote (page 100): **"The aim [of theopraxy] is to help us to produce God from inside whatever creed, philosophy, or 'language game' we are born into or choose."** He sees similarity with SoF in this comment.

Next year, at St Paul's Presbyterian Church in Napier from 6 to 8 May 2016, there will be addresses about Progressive Spirituality by the best-selling author, Robin Meyers. He will speak on the theme **COMMON GROUND: Faith as Resistance to Ego, Orthodoxy, and Empire.**

Dr. Robin Meyers is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and a widely travelled lecturer and preacher. He is a fellow of *The Jesus Seminar* and Professor of Social Justice at Oklahoma City University. His latest book is *Spiritual Defiance: Building a Beloved Community of Resistance* (Yale University Press, 2015). Booking details will be available later this year at progressivespirituality.co.nz

Noel Cheer, Editor

**Merry Christmas,
Hanukah, Diwali,
Saturnalia ...
or whatever else
does it for you!**

**From the Steering
Committee of the
Sea of Faith Network,
New Zealand.**

THE LAST WORD

AND

CONFERENCE ROUNDUP

Laurie Chisholm, Chairperson

Well, the crescendo that is our annual Conference has been and gone. The Steering Committee worked for months deciding a theme and inviting keynote speakers. The Local Arrangements Committee liaised with the venue and arranged a myriad of on-the-ground details. Even so, the AGM caught us on the hop, with printed annual reports not available. A number of venue glitches needed attention.

What follows is my attempt to summarise Conference, and is of course only one point of view.

Once again, **Lloyd Geering** introduced the Conference theme, *Micawber or Cassandra? Responding to an Increasingly uncertain future*. He began by re-visiting his 1999 book, *The World to Come*. The ten future scenarios he outlined there are still with us, but three of them have become more urgent. Lloyd also gave us a high-level overview of significant developments in thinking about the future. There is Teilhard de Chardin's concept of planetization (globalisation) Thomas Malthus's insight into the exponential growth of populations, Rachel Carson's claim that insecticides were ruining the environment, the Club of Rome's realisation that our planet is finite, and Al Gore's efforts to persuade us of the urgency of action to combat climate change. He closed with ten guiding principles to support a Micawber view of life.

Anjum Rahman's big question was how to move beyond the current divisiveness to a truly global culture. Although diversity is an increasing feature of societies, we are still taken in by a cultural imperialism that views things from the perspective of the wealthy, industrialised countries and their majority culture. She made a strong plea for hope, a faith-based hope that refuses to accept that nothing can be done and recognizes that the

powerful have an interest in convincing us of this, arguing that there is no alternative. In her keynote speech and in her contribution to her core group, she challenged our unthinking assumptions

Kennedy Graham explored the dimensions of uncertainty. In pre-agricultural societies, humans peered out of their cave at an uncertain world, full of hungry predators evoking primal fears. Then, spirituality involved a sense of being at home in the cosmos, countering those fears. Today, we have lost that sense and are prey to a cosmic uncertainty. We now have to live with existential risk, requiring the art of risk management and a change in mind-set, a sense of planetary responsibility. We need to "confront our souls, to save our hides," the title of his talk. His focus was not on the greed or selfishness of the individual, but on system changes to reflect new realities. From his time in the UN, he was able to give us an illuminating overview of moves in that direction. The best sign of hope is that the International Criminal Court will be given teeth to impose jail sentences of up to 10 years for deploying troops overseas in violation of UN resolutions. Once the UN Security Council recognises that climate change is a threat to global peace and security, the UN has powers to require nation states to pass legislation, as it has done with terrorism (resolution 1373), the spread of fissile material (resolution 1540), and foreign terrorist fighters (resolution 2278). Global-level measures can be undertaken.

We saw a side to Kennedy Graham that is not apparent in his media appearances. His role model is Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary-General of the UN, whose deeply personal spirituality only came to light after his death, with the publication of *Markings*, his private journal. If Kennedy has a

search for God, it is through modern cosmology, experiencing infinite wonder at the sight of a meteorite shower in the Jordan desert, or even looking out at the Milky Way on Waiheke Island.

For my Saturday afternoon, I chose the excursion to the Earthsong community where thirty-two houses form a kind of eco-community, with communal meals twice a week, an optional shared laundry, visitor flat, orchard/vegetable garden and large communal living rooms. Each house has solar hot water and the garden is constructed on permaculture principles. For me, the sound of frogs in the pond at the bottom of the property signalled ecological soundness. If we are to move in a sustainable direction, we need lots more like this.

Rod Oram gave his talk on Sunday morning. Once I learned that he would be a keynote speaker, I followed his interviews on Radio New Zealand more closely. He brings a welcome depth of understanding and has lots of relevant information at his fingertips. His keynote speech brought out a side of him that I was unaware of. He has an evident love of poetry, quoting a poem written by the Obituary editor of the *Economist* that was effectively an obituary for earth, written at a time of media hype about the Mayan Calendar predicting the end of earth. He provided illuminating graphics from the World Economic Forum, the Stockholm Resilience Centre and Vision 2050 New Zealand. He explained how earth has nine planetary life support systems and that three in particular are in deep trouble.

He is also an active Anglican, and aimed in his talk to integrate economics and theology. Even so I was startled at his directness in using the God-word, even (gulp) reading a couple of prayers. We have become accustomed in the Sea of Faith to mentioning God, if at all, in the context of explaining why the old religious language doesn't work any more, how theism is at an end, and that "life" rather than "God" is the new totalising word. But I appreciated his attempt to connect religious talk with economics. He wants more than a general cultural and spiritual transformation, a new sense of ourselves in creation.

The **closing panel** discussion was impressive, as usual. Lloyd expressed the hope that a new secular religion would emerge from the current situation, and that all religions would contribute to this. While there are no guarantees of this outcome, there are signs that we have already moved in this direction: the decline in glorification of war, the increasing importance of the individual, the abolition of slavery.

Laurie Chisholm

Postscript

AGM 2015

Each year, the Sea of Faith holds its AGM at the annual Conference. This year, there was nothing controversial, but the following happened:

- Nobody's 4-year term came to an end. [But 4 will at the 2016 AGM – let's know if you are interested – ed]
- Current members were re-elected.
- Doug Sellman stood down early, for health reasons.
- Adrian Skelton was elected to the committee

Reports from the various portfolio holders were presented and approved as a block. Of particular note was Gretchen Kivell's report, which summarised the results of her work contacting local groups.

At a brief post-conference meeting of the Steering Committee, Laurie Chisholm and Jock Crawford were re-appointed Chairperson and Secretary respectively and Gretchen Kivell was re-appointed Local Groups Coordinator. Norm Ely was appointed Treasurer, as Peter Cowley had indicated his desire to step down

Conference 2016 was discussed but no definite decisions were made.

