

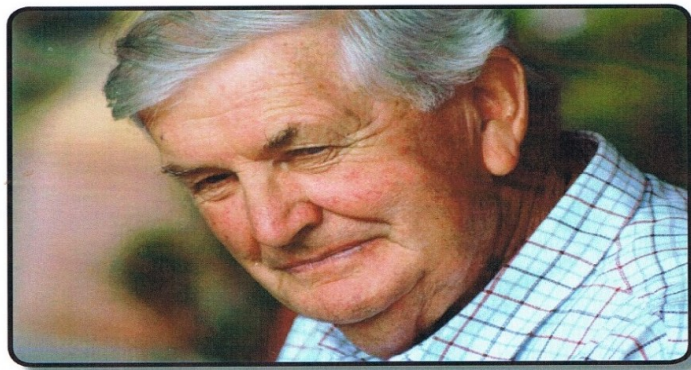
Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 127, November 2016

Remembering with Love



Malcolm James Rangi Talbot

29 May 1932 - 20 May 2016

The Talbot family of Temuka, South Canterbury, lost its patriarch and the Timaru Ephesus Group a much loved and valued member with the death of Malcolm, just days before his 84th birthday.

Some 24 years ago Alison and I joined the Trinity Presbyterian parish in Temuka where we met Malcolm and Marian who had worshipped there for most of their lives until Marian's untimely death nine years ago. It is interesting to note that Malcolm, who had been both an elder and lay preacher, some years ago resigned from the eldership because he could no longer commit to the current fundamentalist theology now so prevalent within the wider church.

Until his retirement Malcolm was a committed farmer with a huge respect for the land and for all that the agricultural and pastoral way of life had to offer. He served on the South Canterbury Presbyterian Support Board for many years and on many other boards and committees. His love of gardening was wonderfully displayed with the seasonal blooming of his numerous, healthy and much loved roses.

Both he and Marian were enthusiastic members of Timaru Ephesus and invited us to attend the Ephesus meetings with them, which pleased us greatly!

Malcolm often chaired our group and over the years arranged for an eclectic group of speakers to address us. Malcolm's long standing friendship with Sir Lloyd Geering meant we were fortunate in welcoming Lloyd to Timaru on a number of occasions.

Malcolm, particularly in later years, was a consummate reader of the 'postmodern' writers: publications by Lloyd, the Jesus Seminar, Don Cupitt, Richard Holloway and Dominic Crossan to name a few. He always looked forward to the arrival of the Sea of Faith Newsletter which gave him much reading pleasure and further broadened his theological horizons.

For Alison and me, and for many others, he was a very dear friend and mentor, an intellectual man always willing to pass on his understanding of the changing nature of the faith and of his own commitment to 'the Way of Jesus'.

We all miss him hugely.

Post script - like many of us, Malcolm hoped for a quick death and did not want any medical intervention; he got his wish when a major aneurism occurred while shopping in Temuka.

Ronald Spanton

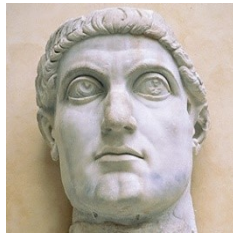
CONSTANTINE and The Nicene Creed

VERSUS

ARIUS and non-Trinitarianism

The Story so far ...

Christianity was illegal in the Roman empire until the emperors Constantine and Licinius agreed in 313 to what became known as the Edict of Milan, resulting in toleration for Christianity.



Emperor Constantine I – called The Great, vanquished his co-Emperor Maxentius at the Battle of The Milvian Bridge in Rome in 312CE. Early Christian historians enthusiastically portrayed Constantine as a pious Christian convert. In later years some scholars suggested that the emperor simply used the faith to his political advantage. The truth may lie somewhere in between, but Constantine's importance to his adopted religion is beyond doubt.

Council of Nicaea, (325 CE), the first ecumenical council of the Christian church, meeting in ancient Nicaea (now İznik, Turkey). It was called by the emperor Constantine I, an unbaptized catechumen, who presided over the opening session and took part in the discussions. He hoped that a general council of the church would solve the problem created in the Eastern church by Arianism, a heresy first proposed by Arius of Alexandria that affirmed that Christ is not divine but a created being. Pope Sylvester of the Western branch of the Church did not attend the council but was represented by legates.

The Nicene creed is so called because it was originally adopted in the city of Nicaea by the Council of Nicaea. The Emperor Constantine's role regarding Nicaea was that of supreme civil leader and authority in the empire. As Emperor, the responsibility for maintaining civil order was his, and he sought that the Church be of one mind and at peace.

Arius: When first informed of the unrest in Alexandria due to the anti-trinitarian disputes encouraged by the priest Arius in Alexandria, Constantine was "greatly troubled" and he "rebuked" Arius for originating the disturbance and allowing it to become public. The council of Nicaea condemned Arius and, with reluctance on the part of some, incorporated the nonscriptural word *homoousios* ("of the same substance") into the Nicene Creed to signify the absolute equality of



the Son with the Father. Arius preferred *homoiousis* ("similar substance"). The emperor then exiled Arius, an act that, while manifesting a solidarity of church and state, underscored the importance of secular patronage in ecclesiastical affairs.

The Council of Nicaea in 325 had not ended the Arian controversy which it had been called to clarify. Arius and his sympathizers were admitted back into the church after ostensibly accepting the Nicene creed. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, the most vocal opponent of Arianism, was ultimately exiled. However, because the Council of Nicaea had not clarified the divinity of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, it became a topic of debate which was resolved in favour of the Nicene Creed at the Council of Chalcedon in Asia Minor in 451CE,

Nicene Christianity also had its defenders: apart from Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers' Trinitarian discourse was influential in the council at Constantinople. Apollinaris of Laodicea, another pro-Nicene theologian, proved controversial. Possibly in an over-reaction to Arianism and its teaching that Christ was not God, he taught that Christ consisted of a human body and a divine mind, rejecting Christ having a human mind. He was charged with confounding the persons of the Godhead, and with giving into the heretical ways of Sabellius.

Chalcedon: After long and sometimes acrimonious debates the Church gave a final definition of its Christology by affirming belief in Jesus Christ as One Person in Two Natures, which are united without confusion – the Nicean definition.

Christology, which attempts to define the relationship between God, Christ and occasionally the Holy Spirit, distinguishes (in the words of 21C historian, Bart Ehrman) between 'exaltation' (Jesus, starts out human and gets promoted to divinity) and 'incarnational' in which the already-divine Jesus (e.g. John 1:1, 'In the beginning ..') assumes human flesh, at least *pro tem*.

Encyclopedia Britannica, Wikipedia, edited by Noel Cheer

May we may now ask whether Arius' anti-Trinitarian view is making a comeback via Progressive Christianity and Gretta Vosper, Unitarian Christians and Sea of Faith?

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).

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Publication deadlines for submitted Newsletter copy for 2017 are 21/12/16, 21/2/17, 21/4/17, 21/6/17, 21/8/17, 21/10/17.

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 at www.sof.org.nz.

Membership of the national organisation costs \$25 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both charges drop to \$20 if the Newsletter is emailed and not on paper.

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 n.ely@xtra.co.nz

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SONGS OF THE SPIRIT

John Thornley's series on Radio National – on Wednesday at 7 pm with Bryan Crump as lively host – concludes with the final two sessions on November 16 and December 14.

The music for the Poi E film features in November, and two carols in December.

First, folksinger John Archer's cover of the Peter Cape poem 'Nativity', and second, from The Band's song 'Christmas Must Be Tonight'.

There is Online access to earlier programmes

CHRISTIANITY

TRINITARIAN *VERSUS* PROGRESSIVE

As the date of this year's Conference grew closer and as the disagreement between Gretta Vosper and the United Church of Canada grew stronger, the Conference Committee decided that we needed a "Plan B", in case Gretta was not able to come. So the Conference Committee asked Clay Nelson from Auckland to be on standby.

In the event, Gretta did get here and we gave Clay free admission to the Conference as our thanks to him. Clay Nelson came to New Zealand in 2005 from California where he had been serving as the Administrator of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento, while preparing to be a Unitarian Universalist minister. He was already an ordained Episcopal (Anglican) priest and had served parishes in New York, Michigan, New Jersey and California, and was later Archdeacon of the Diocese of San Diego. He then served the Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara as their administrator before moving to Sacramento.

Upon his arrival in New Zealand he served St Matthew-in-the-City Anglican Church as their manager of communications and marketing before adding the role of Priest Associate to his responsibilities. His claim to fame (notoriety?) was overseeing the production of numerous controversial billboards, some of which went viral around the world.

You can see why we considered Clay as a stand-in for Gretta. He, like an increasing number of radical Christians, describes himself as a 'Progressive Christian.' He does not believe that the traditional Christian creeds are helpful to our faith journey—certainly the historical Jesus wouldn't have subscribed to them. Clay is a non-theist who believes that each of us must take responsibility for nourishing and developing our own spirituality. This is not a passive activity. He has been nurtured most in his own journey through worship and service to others, such as working on Habitat for Humanity projects in northern Mexico and Appalachia, organising faith communities in Michigan and New Jersey to provide shelter to homeless mothers and their children, and founding an inter-faith hospital chaplaincy.

Currently, as minister to Auckland Unitarians, he hopes to be a resource to all who desire to experience their full humanity through their chosen spiritual path. And who wish to do so in a community committed to transforming the world to be more just and more peaceful.

Robin Meyers, who wrote *Saving Jesus from the Church* (which was reviewed in Newsletter 125), looks at how it all went wrong. He challenges us to look at the Sermon on the Mount: "In the whole thing, there is not a single word about what to believe, [but] only instructions on what to do or how to be. Fast forward 300 years to the Nicene Creed and the essence of what is supposed to define a Christian, and there's not a

word about what to do or how to be—only about what to believe. Clearly, something's gone wrong," he concludes. [This resonates with Keynote Speaker Michael Benedikt's thesis "God Is the Good We Do".]

"WHY UNITARIANS NEED TO SAVE JESUS"

What follows are excerpts from Clay Nelson's 12-part lecture series with that title which was delivered to the Auckland Universalist Church just before SoF Conference.

"The series focused on the historical person, the pre-Pauline, pre-Gospel, pre-Easter, pre-Church Jesus. The one who lived and breathed, taught and healed, laughed and prayed. He would not recognize the spiritual Christ his followers created out of his humanity after his death.

Since 1961, when Unitarians and Universalists in America merged, Jesus' importance has diminished for Unitarians and that was seen to be because we have confused Jesus with Christianity. Thus, for many who have been the victims of toxic Christianity, both have been rejected. It is understandable. None of us here wants to be associated with the misogynist, homophobic, anti-science, prejudiced, oppressive aspects of the church. Marcus Borg has pointed out that people who believe the creeds and adore the post-Easter Christ can still be jerks. ... We need to reclaim the historical Jesus as one of our own. The world needs him. And to be fair, there are a growing number of Christians who feel the same, I just don't hold much hope for their success in redeeming the institution. Although I would welcome their success. *Cont*

The Comma, by Robin Meyers

Both creeds [Nicene, Apostles'] more or less say that Jesus was 'Born of the Virgin Mary (comma) suffered under Pontius Pilate.' And there you have it: the entire life of Jesus, all of his teachings, the parables, his interaction with the poor, his healings—whether metaphorical or literal—all reduced to a comma."

So, those of you who were not part of this adult religious education experience might ask, “What is in ‘the comma’ worth saving?” Here is the summary of 18 hours of presentation and discussion on *Saving Jesus*:

Unitarians reject a literal interpretation of the Virgin Birth, but we shouldn’t necessarily reject the meaning behind the story of the incarnation – God made flesh in Jesus. His life and message were not about his being the one and only person in history who embodied the divine, but that the sacred is everywhere. We each embody it and are one with it. This understanding undergirds our first Unitarian principle to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Jesus was never a Christian, but [he was] a good Jew. He was also a prophet, a healer, a wisdom teacher, a companion, a mystic, but no more or less the son of God than any of us. He never claimed to be anything more than what he was: human. The South African scholar, Albert Nolan, puts it this way: “Jesus is a much-underrated man. To deprive this man of his humanity is to deprive him of his greatness.” Unitarians who are secular humanists could applaud this.

Jesus was an eastern, not western, teacher. He sought to raise consciousness, not teach right belief or a moral code. He used the tools of the wisdom teacher to do it: humour, stories, irony, metaphors and short sayings. His purpose was to make his audience think for themselves. The wisdom tradition is often associated with the mystical or spiritual aspects of various faith traditions. It helps people work through the ‘whys’ of life without resorting to shallow, pat answers. Jesus encouraged our fourth principle before we had it: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Jesus proclaimed one message and it was NOT, “I have come to die for your sins.” **He came to proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of God was here now.** It was not a saccharine message about going to heaven sometime in the future. It was a political statement that was intended to confront the oppressive kingdom (actually “empire”) of Rome. He sought to give us a picture of a world where God reigns now – and he put us in the picture. He wanted us to know that it

resides in us. We make it tangible by bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favour. Unitarians summarise this less poetically in our second and sixth principles: We seek justice, equity and compassion in human relations with the goal being a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Jesus never heard of his resurrection. He did not preach or promise it. But he might have understood why such stories would be told. Like we who sometimes feel the presence of a deceased loved one, those closest to him felt the same. The resurrection stories were their way of trying to explain his inexplicable presence. But even more, they were an attempt to explain how he had transformed them by his life of compassion, courage and integrity. He had taught them how to

stand up to a world not fitting of the divine within, between, and beyond them. In Greek the word for resurrection means literally to stand up. The historical Jesus would be pleased when any of us are resurrected, standing up to all that entombs us; all that oppresses us.

Unitarians have long been a resurrected people. We have stood up for freedom of thought and toleration, we have stood up to superstition and mindless prejudice, we have stood up against slavery and for civil rights, we have stood up for women’s rights, we have stood up for the full inclusion of the LGBTQ community, we are standing up for refugees, we are standing up against all forms of violence, we are standing up for those not receiving a Living Wage and children living in poverty, and we are standing up for a sustainable world.”

... none of us here wants to be associated with the misogynist, homophobic, anti-science, prejudiced, oppressive aspects of the church ...

**Whenever we do
[these things],
we are
Unitarians
saving Jesus.**



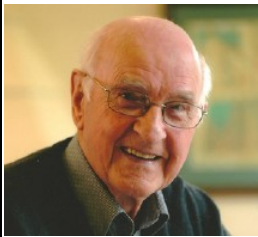
Clay Nelson

EXTRACTS FROM CONFERENCE PAPERS

As always, the Conference Papers this year were informative and stimulating. You can make acquaintance with them by reading the papers handed out after the corresponding lecture or by reading (and perhaps downloading) them from the website at sof.org.nz. On the website you can also find the audio versions.

For your convenience we have included below some excerpts from the papers – some readings may not ‘flow’ because some excerpts do not form a continuous text.

The Evolution of Human Community from Family to Global Community



**Emeritus Professor
Sir Lloyd Geering**

We live in a post-theistic age in which we humans find that we are now responsible for our own destiny, and even bear some responsibility for the future of life on this planet. No one individual is adequate for this task and we can meet our responsibilities only by working together as a global community. We are still some way from becoming one but we are much closer than we ever were in the past, as I shall now try to show.

I begin by pointing to a basic feature of the evolving cosmos in which we live, one that was first observed and brought to our attention by two creative thinkers. But being very different persons, they coined different terms to describe it.

In 1926, (Jan Smuts (1870-1950), [the prime minister of South Africa in the early 20th century] wrote a book titled *Holism and Evolution*, in which he set out to show that all change taking place in this evolving universe reveal a proneness of the cosmos to form increasingly complex wholes. He called this proneness ‘holism’. His approach was in contrast with the interests of many scientists of that time -- concentrat[ing] on the analysis of complex substances into their component parts, as illustrated by the then goal of seeking how to split the atom.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), Catholic priest and scientist. His magnum opus, *The Phenomenon of Man*, he had completed by 1940 but it was not published until 1959. Teilhard referred to evolution as ‘cosmogenesis’ – the coming into being of the cosmos. And what Jan Smuts called “the proneness of the cosmos to form increasingly complex wholes”, Teilhard simply labelled ‘complexification’ - the tendency of the universe to form more complex entities [including such phenomena as atoms uniting into inorganic molecules and organic mega-molecules; the spontaneous

restoration of health in our bodies; and the evolution of human community].

The evolution of community arises initially out of the natural need to regenerate the species. The human community started with the family. After the family the next stage in the evolution of human community is the tribe. This is a community of families and hence a more complex entity.

The tribe became the standard form of human community from earliest human times, say 200,000 years ago down to the present.

But there is something else besides genes that divides the human species into tribes and races and that is language and culture. To appreciate this we must now turn back to trace the role of language in the evolution of human community. Almost certainly human language originated as a means of communication, using grunts and gestures such as those still found in our nearest biological relatives - chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans. Indeed, we humans still resort to gesture when trying to find the appropriate word.

But human language eventually became more than a mode of communication. What is so unique about it is this – sounds are used symbolically to become bearers of meaning. This is why the same object or idea can be indicated in different languages by greatly different assemblies of sounds. **It is not too much to say that language is easily the most important thing that the human species has ever invented, for it was the invention of language that enabled us to become human in the way we are today.**

In tracing the long process of evolution, Teilhard found two thresholds of change to be more significant than the others. The first was the transition from the mega-molecule to the cell, and this he called **biogenesis** – the coming into being of life. The second occurred when the invention of language gave rise to human thought. This transition Teilhard labelled **noogenesis** - the coming into being of thought.

Teilhard maintained that, as a result of noogenesis, the earth is now enveloped by a new kind of sphere in addition to the hydrosphere, the atmosphere, the biosphere and the stratosphere already there. He called it the noosphere and it consists of the sum-total of all human thoughts. I shall refer to Teilhard's noosphere as the human thought world.

We humans live simultaneously in two worlds – a physical world and a thought world which, from the age of about two, we absorb from our parents and others as

we learn to speak. This thought world becomes the lens through which we understand and interpret the physical world that we experience through our senses.

So, whereas for very long time, the sharing of genes was the basis of community in family, tribe and race, this genetic bonding gradually began to be supplemented with a different kind of bonding - the sharing of a language-based culture or a common thought-world. That brings us to the last few thousand years when genetically-based tribal and racial divisions gradually became secondary to the formation of a new kind of community - a civilisation.

The key to civilisation is the commonality of language and culture. Over the last two thousand years three particular religious traditions gradually spread out from their place of origin until they virtually carved up the surface of the globe among them. They are, in chronological order of origin - Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. By 1900 the world was roughly divided into the Christian West (including the Americas, Oceania and Australasia), the Islamic Middle East (stretching from Algeria to Malaysia) and the Buddhist Orient (China, Japan and Tibet and once including India). Each of these religious traditions had the capacity to create communities that transcended tribal and racial divisions. That which spread most widely was Christian

civilization, particularly after the 16th century. This marked the beginning of human globalization and so great was the spread during the 19th century that about 1900 Christian missionaries were spurred on by the catch-cry "The evangelization of the world in our generation".

But this movement came to a halt by the mid-20th century, due mainly to two factors. First, the Christian races of Europe, instead of proceeding to draw the whole world into the global Christendom they hoped for, became embroiled in two World Wars. Second, and even more importantly, a radical cultural change made itself evident, one that is most appropriately referred to as secularization.

Features of worldwide human society [such as the United Nations] today can be seen as the most recent examples of the proneness of the cosmos to form increasingly complex wholes. We should note that quite some time before we started to speak of globalization Teilhard coined the term 'planetisation'. By this he meant first, the way in which the human species scattered and diversified into races and cultures. Second, he prophesied that when humans had spread over the whole earth with nowhere else to go (and this has now occurred), a point in planetisation would be reached when the human race turns back upon itself to develop an even higher form of complexification. From now on, he said, all individual persons, all families, all tribes and all races will become incorporated into a new and even more complex entity - an harmonious global community. He said, "No evolutionary

future awaits human beings except in association with all other human beings".

In this next stage of evolution individual persons are to become integral parts of a higher form of human life, just as the living cells in our body are all part of a more complex living whole and just as bees contribute to and are shaped by the spirit of the hive.

To find out what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God we simply have to turn to the parables, which start, "The Kingdom of God is like this, and this". Whenever we treat one another like the Good Samaritan, like the father who welcomes home the prodigal, and whenever we turn the other cheek or show love to our enemies, there the Kingdom of God has already arrived. The modern secular and globalizing world emerged out of Western Christendom, taking with it the values learned from its matrix.

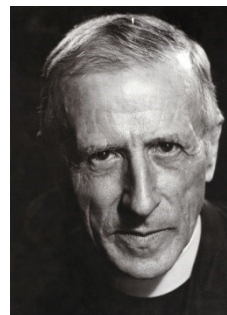
Think only, for example, how we have become concerned with human rights, enshrining them in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly. The first of its 30 Articles states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." The third states, "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and freedom of

person". Thus the United Nations Organization not only represents the institutional structure of the coming global community but has established a charter for life in the community that declares both

the rights and the responsibilities which all humans have towards each other. Moreover they are in keeping with basic principles of life outlined by Jesus and which he described in his teaching of the Kingdom of God.

Of course there is much in human activities on the earth today which fall so far short of the aims the United Nations or of the full realization of the Kingdom of God. In spite of that we are closer to becoming a global community than ever before in human history. It owes much to the Christian matrix out of which it has emerged. As Carl Friedrich von Weizsacker said, "the modern world is the result of the secularization of Christianity".

You are not a human being in search of a spiritual experience. You are a spiritual being immersed in a human experience.



We are one, after all, you and I. Together we suffer, together exist, and forever will recreate each other.

The world is round so that friendship may encircle it.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ

**The key to civilisation is
the commonality of
language and culture.**



God is The Good We Do: The Theology of Theopraxy

Professor Michael Benedikt

There are many objections to the assertion that ‘God exists’ and this paper and the book that it is based on addresses two of them very well: the so-called ‘problem of evil’ and the accusation that God is merely a human construction.

To take the view that there is a God but that there is only one God puts an awful lot of responsibility on that God. He (always “he”) has got to do everything — even the disagreeable things. The prophet Isaiah underscored this by having God say (Is 45:7) that he makes the bad as well as the good. Some scholars confine the bad to natural evils and not moral evils, but nonetheless the problem of theodicy arises. Wikipedia puts it like this “The goal of theodicy is to show that there are convincing reasons why a just, compassionate and omnipotent being would permit debilitating suffering to flourish.”

So we have always asked this: if God (the only God) is all-knowing and all-wise, then why does he permit rapes, murders and thefts from pension funds? In this book Michael Benedikt offers a radically novel answer: **We make God and God is only as good as the God we make.** Why did God permit Auschwitz, the Twin Towers, Stalingrad, the Inquisition ... and the myriad other obscenities? Because he wasn’t present — and that was because humans were doing evil and not doing good. God is (only) the good we do. As the author puts it:

“Whether or not God exists is entirely up to us. For God comes into being by what we do and do not do. Neither you nor I are God, but what we’re doing may be. This God, who lives as deeds not creeds, is the God we know firsthand. This God whose shape is action, not image, is the God we witness every day. This God’s presence is not guaranteed. “God is good, and God does good” the Talmud says, and Augustine said too. “God is what God does” we might add — or God does what God is, which is good. Goodness-of- deed is less God manifest than God instanced. God is in our hands and we are in ‘his’, as we choose the good and do it. Do good again, and again, and you ‘do God’s will’. **‘Do God’s will and you bring God into being.’**”

Rather than God being ancient and all powerful, God is “the youngest and weakest force in the universe, the force of the good.” And goodness is “self-evidently desirable”.

Whatever we each make of this thesis, it is a novel response to those who criticise religious faith with the

accusation that we invent God out of a feeling of insecurity. Benedikt agrees that we invent God but insists that it is our best invention. Our theopraxy (‘god-making’) is not weakness but instead a passion to fully-realise the gift of our humanness. God, therefore, exists as “goodness-in-action personified ... and sanctified.”

Could atheists buy into this description? We might ask first, do they need to? Isn’t the morally responsible life sufficient in itself without another layer of explanation? That is the choice open to us all. But for those who want to wrap cardinal values in narrative then this approach could appeal. If an atheist (of whom SoF contains a few) or a non-theist (who flock in abundance to SoF) want to assign a top-level value to life then it is likely to involve goodness of some sort — compassion, justice, fair-play and the like. Many such might give the name ‘Goodness’ to this set of virtues which inspire us and which hold us to account. A few might follow Michael Benedikt and use the name ‘God’, despite the wide spectrum of inconsistent and some downright unpleasant associations that have accrued over the centuries. (A dip into Karen Armstrong’s *A History of God* will give examples.)

Benedikt agrees that we invent God but insists that it is our best invention.

Over on the other side, red-meat theists might see this book as a bit thin. Where is the thundering Jehovah who “mounts the storm and rides upon the wind”? Where the quasi-historical narratives of escape from Egypt and covenant-forming at Sinai? Not to mention the Apocalypse. (Please don’t!) Benedikt is laid-back about that — any story or dogma or liturgy that entices one to do good is itself good. Note, here as elsewhere, that a story doesn’t need to be historical fact to be valuable. It’s a question of “deeds not creeds” with ‘works’ trumping ‘faith’ every time because, as Benedikt writes, “God begins and ends with us.”

Michael Benedikt is Australian by birth but has lived in Texas for many years. He is a university professor in architecture, a “not very observant Jew”, son of “parents who struggled with faith ever since their liberation from Nazi concentration camps in 1945.”

The above is from a review of Michael’s book, by Noel Cheer

After Michael had committed to come to NZ, he found that an obligation in Texas prevented him. We arranged that he video-record his talk in Texas and send it to NZ. Immediately after playing that recording in the Conference we linked to him by Skype for audience questions.

We also used Skype for his participation next day in the 4-person Panel Discussion.



Left to Right:
Geoff Troughton,
Gretta Vosper,
Lloyd Geering,
Michael Benedikt (on Skype),
Noel Cheer, Panel Chairperson.

[photo by Shirley Dixon]

With or With or Without God

Why the Way
We Live is More
Important
than What We Believe



The Rev. Gretta Vosper

The story of the god called God is a rich one. For millennia, it has been shared around tables, in religious houses and gathering places, on street corners, and before the lights go out at bedtime. It has created community, drawing together those who shared a common understanding of it. And it has split community as interpretations have divided those who call themselves believers, the details and the fine print building walls and destroying relationships.

Why have we told it? How have we nurtured it? What has it come to mean?

Without God: Are We Who We Say We Are?

The language of faith is shared in our liturgies, rituals, hymns, and sacred objects. We steep ourselves in it when we enter our places of worship. We recognize it when we hear and see it in the common space of our neighborhoods. And we use it to find that place within ourselves where we explore the questions of values, meaning, and purpose in our lives.

What do words mean and how are they used? What creates sacred space and what does 'sacred space' even mean to us?

With or Without God: Community without Barriers

Over the course of the last 15 years, the community of West Hill United in Toronto, Canada, a liberal congregation planted in the urban expansion of the 1950s, stretched itself beyond belief. It was exhilarating and innovative, exploratory and experimental. And, at times, it got downright ugly. What does it take to shift community beyond belief? Why should a congregation even bother to do it and if there is no community to begin with, why would you want one, could you create one, and if so, what would it take?

More:

<http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/afternoons/audio/201819993/the-atheist-minister>

The Religious State We Are In



Two big stories have been
central to the changing
shape of religious
identification and religious
diversity in
New Zealand since
the Second World War

Dr. Geoffrey Troughton

New Zealand has a well-developed secular reputation – not only as a secular state, but as a secular nation and society. By many measures, this secularity is well advanced and advancing. Yet, as I have noted recently in *Sacred Histories in Secular New Zealand*, this secular identity can be confusing and at times misleading – not least when secular language devolves into a set of mythologies. My aim here is to highlight something of what recent national census data tells us about religious identification in New Zealand, and to tease out that picture using data from the 20-year national longitudinal study, the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS).

Two big stories have been central to the changing shape of religious identification and religious diversity in New Zealand since the Second World War. The first story concerns changes in immigration law and the fostering of non-European migration. The Immigration Act, 1987 – and subsequently, the 1991 Amendment Act – marked the key turning point in terms of the shift from intra-Christian diversity to a broader religious pluralism. From that time, selection of immigrants on the basis of nationality became less favoured; assets and skill contributions were the new priorities, with the result that migration from Asia (and subsequently elsewhere) flourished. Substantial cultural and religious pluralization followed from this policy shift.

The other main shift has been the deinstitutionalisation of religion, and net disaffiliation from the traditional churches. I'll return to this point shortly. Whatever else this pattern indicates, in religious terms it is evidently associated with a greater sense of autonomy, and less and lighter institutional identification.

The Picture in the 2013 Census

The basic story represented in the 2013 census should be fairly well known in some respects, but is worth stating. In broad terms, affiliation breaks down as follows: 45% of the total population state that they are Christians of various kinds (including 1.2% Maori Christians); 38.6% no religion; 2.1% Hindu; 1.4% Buddhist; 1.1% Muslim. The Sikh community is one of

the fastest growing groups – it more than doubled in size between 2006 and 2013, but remains at 0.5%.

Between 2006 and 2013, the largest group change was simply a net switch between the Christians and no religionists – the former shrinking from around 52% to 45%, the latter rising from around 32% to 38.6%.

Among Christians, denominational identification is collapsing. The smaller sectarian and evangelically-oriented groups are largely holding their numbers, as are the Christian NFDs (no further definition) who now represent around 5% of the population. Numerically, this latter group is growing. Ethnic churches, especially of the evangelical and Pentecostal variety, proliferate.

The Puzzle of Non-Religion

It is well known that levels of ‘no religion’ in New Zealand are high – very high when compared with other similar nations. In the census, 38.6% of all New Zealanders fit in this category (42% of all who answered the religion question). By comparison, levels in the UK (2011), Canada (2011), and Australia (2011) are 25.1%, 23.5%, and 22.3% respectively. In New Zealand, the rate of census ‘no religion’ is growing at roughly 1% per year, and shows little sign of abating. In the USA, Pew Forum data suggests that the ‘unaffiliated’ are now growing at a similar rate – having risen from 16 to 23% of the population between 2007 and 2014. [see <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>]

It's clear, however, that lack of religious affiliation does not mean a lack of belief or even of practice. The religious ‘nones’ in the US believe less and practice less frequently, but these dimensions are not absent.

Most of the data we have suggests that there are fewer outright atheists or thorough-going materialists in New Zealand than the rates of ‘no religion’ might suggest – perhaps between 10-20% of no religionists fit this category (and we should also be cautious about presuming what atheism means in terms of religious commitments). ... Yet there are significant levels of God belief even among those who claim no religious identification; low identification with religion definitely does not indicate a lack of spirit/life force belief.

The Salience of Strength of Religious Identification

One thing that NZAVS data is showing with increasing clarity is that the simple yes/no religious affiliation question tells us very little about the meanings of religion for people – or how religion is mobilized. It is much more revealing to ask people how strongly they identify with the religion they profess. The ‘strength of identification’ issue carves at a more significant joint in this respect.

A number of examples can be used to illustrate this claim. The NZAVS asks questions about strength of religious identification. Again, some of the findings are

curious, and demand not only careful attention, but also further more systematic interpretation.

Secular mythologies tend to characterize religions – and religious commitments – as problematic; they are often viewed as a leading source of tension and intolerance between communities. Yet there is evidence that strong religious belief can be mobilized in precisely the other way.

Conclusion

So what does all this tell us about the religious state we are in? **Clearly, religion and spirituality is in a phase of extraordinary transition at present. So too are our forms of secularity.** It would be nice to think that we are progressing towards a more mature form characterized by ‘post-secular’ openness; that is, a secularity that is marked by respect for diversity, appreciation of the resources of religion, and engagement with diversity, rather than hard-edged repudiation of religion. This may be wishful thinking.



Laurie Chisholm: Subversive Scripture 3

THE WORD OF GOD

The bible is conventionally understood to be “the Word of God.” Mainline churches often preface biblical readings with the injunction to “hear the Word of God.”

I would like to critically examine and analyse this and ask whether scripture itself supports such a view or is subversive of it. Regarding the bible as the Word of God makes it qualitatively different from all other literature. Books may contain profound wisdom, but this can only be mere human insight, whereas the bible contains divine, authoritative truth. Advocates of this view tend to ignore questions about what a text meant at the time and to imagine that the text speaks directly and authoritatively to us in the present. They are likely to pull random biblical quotations from vastly different historical periods and combine them to advocate a particular doctrine.

Modern thinking has been approaching the bible very differently for centuries. Historical-critical scholarship asks about date and authorship. It recognises an evolution of thinking and tries to avoid reading back later concepts into earlier times. Early on it was troubled by the fact that the Pentateuch recorded the death of Moses, and consequently rejected the view that Moses was its author. That was only the beginning of an increasingly radical questioning that caused a conservative backlash designed to cement the traditional view that the bible is divinely inspired.

The word ‘fundamentalism’ was coined following the publication, in 1910-1915, of a set of 90 essays called *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. With wealthy conservative backers, 250,000 copies of this were sent free to ministers, professors of theology, and others.

Later conservative thinkers tried to defend the idea that the bible was ‘inerrant’ or ‘infallible’, bringing them into fruitless conflict with cosmology and evolution. They also tried to turn 2 Timothy 3:16, “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” into a proof-text for their views. Even today, the Christian Union’s Basis of Belief declares “God, in revealing himself, inspired the Holy Scriptures so that they are entirely trustworthy and have supreme authority in matters of doctrine, faith and conduct.”



A special privileging of the bible is still deep-seated even in the liberal church and it is only with people such as Greta Vosper and Eugen Drewermann that this is being deliberately abandoned. Greta Vosper integrates non-biblical readings into her Sunday gatherings and Drewermann, unlike any other biblical exegetes I can think of, has published, alongside commentaries on the gospels, depth-psychological interpretations of Grimm’s fairy tales, ancient Greek myths, Exupery’s *The Little Prince* and of *Moby Dick*, not to mention innumerable brief analyses of all sorts of literature in his more theological writings.

However, it will be helpful to develop a more contextual understanding of the notion of the Word of God. I note the following:

In early times, God spoke directly to humans, for example to Abraham and Moses. It is only later that God speaks indirectly through a written word. In that sense, believing the bible to be the Word of God is a weakening of an original immediacy.

The concept of the Word of God makes best sense to me through the OT prophets, something I learned from Claus Westermann. You have to think back to a time

before there were modern means of communication. If the King wanted to communicate with a distant part of his realm, he required a messenger. The messenger would memorise the message from the King then journey, perhaps over days, to his destination, then repeat the memorised message to its intended recipient, prefacing it with the words, “thus says the King.” The prophet’s message is completely parallel, except that the prophet says, “thus says the Lord.” In that sense, prophetic messages are “the Word of God.” The prophet is a messenger passing on a message from another.

It is a nonsense to regard the bible in total as the Word of God. The psalms, for example are human words addressed to God, not words of God addressed to humans. Wisdom literature is human reflections on the realities of life.

What is described as “the Word of God” is not a timeless, unchanging truth, but an event that takes place at a particular time. Think not so much about its content, as the process of a speaker addressing an audience at a particular time and place.

In the Old Testament, there are different types of the Word of God. There are prophetic announcements, ‘legal’ traditions (laws and commandments) and cultic traditions, in which the priest speaks in God’s name, for example to pronounce a blessing. These are each fundamentally different from one another and correspond to different life processes.

To claim that the bible as a whole is God’s Word is to illegitimately generalise from these specific and different themes. It also involves abstracting doctrinal teachings from the content of these themes and following the Christian equivalent of the Jewish teaching that there is no revelation after Ezra. In other words, there was a specific time in which God revealed himself but this has ended with the closing of the canon, so we are left only with God’s words from the past, which must be interpreted and applied to the present. The church fathers did not think like this, believing for example that the early church councils were also divinely inspired.



**Laurie Chisholm,
Outgoing Chairperson**

LAST WORD, NOVEMBER 2016

By Guest Correspondent Noel Cheer

"No, I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be ..."

wrote T.S. Elliot. Neither am I the Chairperson who usually writes this Last Word column. Our new Chairperson, Gretchen Kivell from Dunedin, has invited Steering Committee members to take turns.

For the Conference just gone I had the pleasure of acting as Convenor of the Conference Committee – greatly helped by Norm Ely and Peter Cowley. The three of us planned the overview of what was needed. Rather than have a full Committee facing the logistics of attending meetings together, we seconded SoF members to do specific tasks, or groups of tasks. For want of a better appellation, we referred to them as 'Minders'. We appointed a Minder to each Keynote Speaker: out-going Chairperson Laurie Chisholm worked with Lloyd Geering up to and including introducing him, fielding audience questions and thanking him at the end. Similarly, outgoing Steering Committee member Bernadette Krassoi did a magnificent job in respect of Gretta Vosper. Bernadette also maintained contact with Gretta and her husband Scott Kearns, and guided them through the processes that made their travel and accommodation arrangements work. Shirley Dixon chauffeured them from the airport to Silverstream and Pam Fuller back to Wellington.

Norm Ely managed contact with Michael Benedikt (who remained in Texas) and he also commissioned our audio-visual technicians to provide us with immaculate international dialogue via Skype. After playing a pre-recorded video file of Michael's presentation on Saturday, Michael had fifteen or so minutes of audience questions and, on Sunday we enjoyed nearly two hours of participation by Michael in our Panel Discussion – again via Skype.

I was the Minder for Geoff Troughton who brought the subject matter onto the everyday plane of "New Zealand, now".

Gavin Watson managed the Bookstall aided by Peter Cowley who (helped by Phil Grimmett) managed the Registration desk. Norm Ely provided signage, both inside and out. John Grant guided people parking cars and sat at the audio-visual desk when the experts weren't there. Margaret Rushbrook met people at the airport and guided them to our shuttle transport. Norm Ely and Archie Kerr were our designated First-Aiders. And Margaret Pannett dressed up the stage with a magnificent floral display.

Core Group leaders – Bruce Tasker, Jock Crawford, Ian Harris, Adrian Skelton, Shirley Dixon, Margaret Rushbrook, Yvonne Curtis and Daniel Phillips – guided the post-lecture discussion.

What a team! On behalf of the Conference Committee, the Steering Committee and the ninety people who attended the Conference – thank you all!

As to the subject matter that came up at the Conference, I was struck by the development that in recent years seems to have taken place in the religious life of the West and felt quite strongly in New Zealand.

I wrote a piece for the previous Newsletter (126) which took aim at the contribution made by the Apostle Paul to the development of early Christianity. The characterisation of Paul that I used was drawn from Paul Freeman's *The Closing of the Western Mind*. That book asserted the pivotal (maybe 'cardinal' in this context) role played by the emperor Constantine. He seems to have rescued fourth century Christianity from the losing side of history, imbedded it in the current scheme of things and then absorbed it into both the fading Western Roman empire and the surviving Eastern Roman empire. It is a persistent theme in Freeman's book that Christianity came to regard Greek philosophy with deep suspicion which was not allayed until the sponsorship of Aristotle by Thomas Aquinas 900 years later.

Current mainstream Christianity is standardised around the Nicene Creed that emerged from Constantine's attempt to standardise Christianity at the Council of Nicea in 325 in order for it to provide stability to his failing empire. Huge debates raged over the relationship between Jesus (as Christ) and God (as Heavenly Father). Constantine was not especially wedded either to the now-standard 'same substance' or the then-heretical 'similar substance'. In Greek, the two words are distinguished only by the smallest Greek letter, the *iota*.

Our recent Conference brought out into the light the realisation (at least to me) that the contents and focus of 'Christianity' has been divided by walls of definition, the most recent being the term 'Progressive'. We might look back through the last 20 centuries, climb these wall and marvel at the variant views available.

Giving that heretic-burning, at least in the West, is now unfashionable, we might take the opportunity to chose (that's what 'heretic' means) where we would plant the roots of our own faith. Is it, pre-Enlightenment? pre-Reformation? pre-Schism? pre-Nicean? pre-Constantine?, pre-John's Gospel? pre-Synoptic Gospels, or pre-Paul's writing? There's no right answer.

I was much taken by Lloyd Geering's claim that we live in a **post**-theistic age, also by Michael Benedikt's definition of God, as **"the good we do"**, and Gretta Vosper's insistence that its not the minutiae of what we believe credally that matters but rather its **what we do** in imitation of the historical Jesus. Geoff Troughton showed the cracks appearing in the religious life of contemporary New Zealand.

What a line-up!



Noel Cheer