

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

[www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)

Newsletter 128, January 2017

## Away and in Danger (Carol of the Refugee Children)

Shirley Erena Murray

Away and in danger,  
no hope of a bed,  
the refugee children,  
no tears left to shed  
    look up at the night sky  
    for someone to know  
    that refugee children  
    have no place to go.

The babies are crying,  
their hunger awakes,  
the boat is too loaded,  
it shudders and breaks;  
    humanity's wreckage  
    is thrown out to die,  
    the refugee children  
    will never know why.

Come close, little children,  
we hold out our hand  
in rescue and welcome  
to shores of our land -  
    in *\*aroha*, touching  
    your fear and your pain,  
    with dreams for your future  
    when peace comes again.

\*Maori for 'warm embracing love'.  
The alternative to this line is:  
'in touching, in healing'

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The main impetus that has transformed Shirley over the years from an occasional writer of hymns into a prolific author with a distinctive voice, has been her desire to express Christian faith in a contemporary way from out of her distinctively New Zealand experience.



# HOLIDAY READING SUGGESTIONS

What your editor has been reading recently.

## PORTHOLES TO THE PAST

*from the book cover ...*

### *Reflections on the early 20th century*

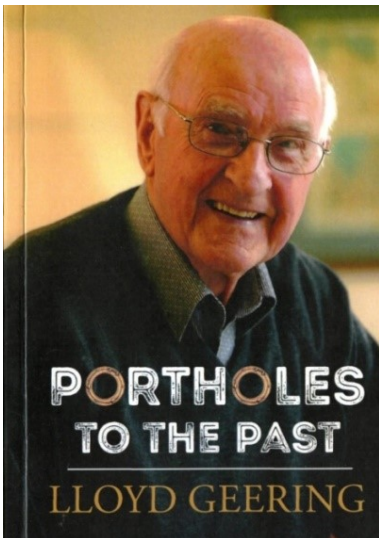
At nearly 99 years old, Lloyd Geering is well qualified to look back over the last century, consider the massive social changes he has lived through, and evaluate such progress as the human race may be making.

Born in 1918, Lloyd reflects on the two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the changes he has experienced in education, family life, growth of personal freedom, leisure and entertainment, life in the churches, and more.

He concludes *Portholes to the Past* with a cautiously optimistic look into the future:

“... it may not be too much to hope that from the fragments of dismantled Christendom we may rediscover and reinvigorate the moral values of justice, truth and environmental guardianship.

Together with the spiritual forces of faith, hope and love, these qualities may yet enable us to create a viable human future.”



SIR LLOYD GEERING was born in Rangiora in 1918, educated chiefly in Otago, and holds honours degrees in Mathematics and Old Testament Studies. Ordained as a Presbyterian minister, he taught at theological colleges in Brisbane and Dunedin before being appointed foundation professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. Since his retirement in 1984 Lloyd has continued to lecture widely throughout New

Zealand and overseas, has been a regular columnist on religious topics, and has published numerous books.

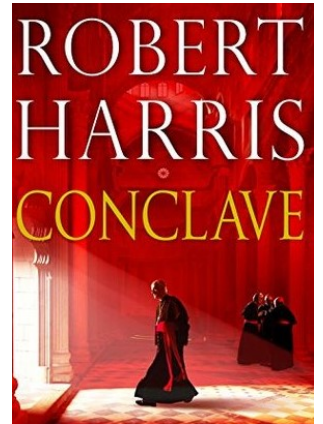
Admitted to the Order of New Zealand in 2007, Lloyd has three children, nine grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren.

*“Portholes ..” was published in 2016 by Steele Roberts Box 9321 Wellington*

## CONCLAVE

By Robert Harris

*From Wikipedia:* A history of political interference in papal selection and consequently long vacancies between popes, culminating in the interregnum of 1268–1271, prompted Pope Gregory X to decree during the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 that the cardinal electors should be locked in seclusion *cum clave* (Latin for "with a key") and not permitted to leave until a new Bishop of Rome had been elected. Conclaves are now held in the Sistine Chapel of the Apostolic Palace.



*From the book cover:* Behind the locked doors of the Sistine Chapel, one hundred and eighteen cardinals from all over the globe will cast their votes in the world's most secretive election. They are holy men. But they have ambition. And they have rivals. Over the next seventy-two hours one of them will become the most powerful spiritual figure on earth.

*What to make of it?* A fast paced, can't-put-it-down novel. I learned a lot about Vatican politics – which sounds rather gothic. This novel will no doubt make a better-than-Dan-Brown movie.

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## HERETIC

Subtitled “Why Islam needs a Reformation Now”.

By Ayaan Hirsi Ali



While the author concedes that not all Muslims are jihadists (or even beat their wives) she offers the opinion that with the unchallengability of the Qur'an, hadith and shariah, there is no prospect of the people (women especially) of many Islamic countries enjoying the freedom of belief and opinion, and the lifestyle enjoyed by Westerners. Wait for the backlash.

- See an interview at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71dBK0iCRro>
- See a more detailed summary on page 10.

# 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 via annual Conference and Newsletter, 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](http://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, 21/12/17.

**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](mailto:susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz) Refer to the catalogue on the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://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](mailto:n.ely@xtra.co.nz)

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## NEWS FROM DON CUPITT

Published in "Sofia", the magazine of Sea of Faith Network, UK, December 2016

Don can be thought of as the unintentional founder of Sea of Faith, an organisation which arose to discuss the implications of his 1984 TV series "Sea of Faith."

May I again use *Sofia's* columns in order to let members of SOF know what I'm up to?

I was keen on Peter Armstrong's idea of a second edition of our old BBC series, with one or two new programmes added, because I hoped it might bring an influx of new, younger people into our membership. Unfortunately, the whole idea proved a bit too novel for the BBC; but Peter is nevertheless pressing ahead in the hope of releasing at least one new film on the internet.

That has prompted me to work on trying to communicate my own ideas better through the internet. Clem has created a new page listing a dozen or so items by or about me for the SOF website, and my own webmaster has been busy enlarging and revising my own website [<http://www.doncupitt.com>].

There will be more to come: the British Library recently grilled me for nine hours on my life and thought!

I hope all this will catch on with at least a few people in the younger generation. Meanwhile, I am immobilised by arthritis, and have wet-form macular degeneration (AMD) in both eyes. I still get around a bit on an electric scooter and hope to be present at more - perhaps most - of next year's Conference.

Yours ever, Don





# CHRISTIANITY

## WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

An opinion piece which invites an avalanche of Letters To The Editor

### THE PROBLEM

Although you do not speak Swahili, perhaps fifty million other people do. Let us suppose that you have asked someone to describe that language, but, as part of that description, your informer uses a lot of Swahili words. How would you cope?

My problem is similar: that in order to discover whether I assent to, or dissent from, Christianity, I need to know what Christianity is. Like the Swahili problem, I have come up against a fundamental problem: definitions and descriptions of Christianity are mostly expressed in terms which draw their meanings from within the Christian path of faith. ‘Outsiders’ who are not familiar with what these specialist terms mean are at a disadvantage.

In the following paragraphs I have attempted to offer a definition of Christianity that does not use Christian-specific words:

**“Christianity is the name of a set of assertions as to fact, and expressions of value, which confer on a semi-legendary figure — Jesus of Nazareth — a reputation for advocating and demonstrating a compassionate way of living.**

**True to the times in which he lived, nearly twenty centuries ago, Jesus employed references to figures and passages from Jewish scripture along with everyday examples from his rural way of life in the Roman province of Judea. As was the fate of persons who gave trouble to the occupying Romans, Jesus was killed. He was probably judicially murdered in a conspiracy between officials of the then-current Jewish temple and the occupying forces of the Roman Empire.”**

Because these legends are couched in scripture, liturgy and tradition in the specialised lexicon of the Christian path of faith, such statements are not open to objective description or debate.

Note, however, that the above passage does not include specifically-Christian terms but instead uses terms most likely to be understood by an average, reasonably-educated person.

### THE CAUSES

I now turn to examples of Christian-specific terms which are in common circulation but which provide the reader, even Christian readers, with a potential for misunderstanding or, at least, puzzlement.

I am making no attempt to evaluate the claims made or implied in the Christian narrative. That is a different task but one which is made more difficult by the objections raised in this paper.

Each example starts with a statement of the problem. The words which, in my mind, create the problem, are additionally in **bold** type.

#### PROBLEM 1

*We believe in God.*

In everyday speech in our times, the use of the noun ‘belief’ or the verb ‘believe’ suggests to the hearer that the speaker is tentative as to the confidence she asserts in what she asserts. For instance, “I believe that it will rain tomorrow”, is an issue that cannot be known until the end of tomorrow. It is a tentative statement and meant to reflect hesitation. If the statement were “I believe that it is raining in Wellington”, then it could be settled by a phone call. The usual use of the word ‘belief’ assumes that what is under discussion is a rational proposition (viz ‘reasonable’, able to be subjected to reason) that can be assessed objectively and with appeal to evidence, even if we had to wait until the day after tomorrow. But then, the matter is settled and all reasonable people (that is people who use reason) would agree.

But most Biblical uses of ‘belief/believe’ are directed, not to fact but to opinion. Most Biblical uses depend on the Greek *pistis* translated into English as ‘trust’ – as in ‘I trust in democracy’. This is not an assertion of the *existence* of democracy but rather its *trustworthiness*. In the Biblical usage, ‘belief’ is a matter of heart rather than of head. It is readily conceivable that some people would trust in some thing that is not trusted by others. Political allegiances often reflect this.

Many debates involving belief in God founder (and flounder) because the parties are using different meanings of ‘belief/believe’.

#### PROBLEM 2

*Christianity is the religion based on the person and teachings of Jesus Christ.*

When ‘Christ’ is used in a Biblical-technical manner it may lead to the difficulty that this paper complains of – the confusion resulting from the use of a specialised vocabulary. Much of the New Testament uses the Greek ‘Christos’ as a direct translation of the Hebrew ‘Messiah’. This is a title and not a proper name although many authors – especially the Apostle Paul – use ‘Christ’ as though it were a name, a sort of surname.

While using 'Christ' as a proper name excuses people from the 'specialised vocabulary' error, it would be safer to translate the Hebrew as 'Jesus THE Christ' which puts such uses in line with the Biblical emphasis of 'Jesus' (as name) and 'Christ' (as title). To downgrade 'Christ' to a *name* – a 'label' – is to ignore the emphasis that the Biblical writer intended – as a *descriptor*, with all its implications.

### PROBLEM 3

*Most Christians believe in one **God in three Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)** and that Jesus is the **Son of God** who **rose from the dead** after being crucified. A Christian hopes to attain **eternal life** after death through faith in Jesus Christ and tries to live by his teachings as recorded in the New Testament. Furthermore, these professions of faith state that Jesus Christ, in order to grant eternal life to those who trust in him for the **remission of their sins**, suffered, died, was buried, descended into hell, and rose from the dead.*

*The Apostles' Creed speaks of:*

- belief in (and implied existence of) God the **Father**, Jesus Christ as the **Son of God** and **The Holy Spirit** the death, descent into hell, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.
- Jesus was conceived by the **Holy Spirit** and was born of [from] the **Virgin Mary**.
- the holiness of the Church and the **communion of saints**
- Christ's **second coming**, the **Day of Judgement** and **salvation of the faithful**.
- According to both Catholic and Protestant doctrine, **salvation comes by Jesus' substitutionary death and resurrection**.

The emphasised words come from a Christian 'insider's' vocabulary and are more likely to confuse than to inform an 'outsider'. This vocabulary is rich in expressions of supernaturalism, trinitarianism, divine incarnation and/or exaltation of a human being to divine status and much else. Such concepts today are draining out of Western expression. Even Christian devotees are not of uniform opinions.

In the earliest centuries of Christian history there were many theological (actually 'christological') disputes over the nature of Jesus, Christians mostly accept as objectively real the assertion that Jesus is **God incarnate** and "**true God and true man**". Jesus, having become fully human, suffered the pains and temptations of a mortal man, **but did not sin**. As **fully God**, he **rose to life again**. According to the New Testament, he **rose from the dead**, ascended to **heaven**, is seated at the **right hand of the Father** and will ultimately **return** [Acts 1:9–11] to fulfill the rest of **Messianic prophecy**, including the **resurrection of the dead**, the **Last Judgment** and final establishment of the **Kingdom of**

**God**. This too is a paragraph rich in Christian-specific prose.

The Holy Spirit came into Christian creedal statements in the 3rd and 4th centuries and the Trinity is an essential doctrine of mainstream Christianity, which came into being as part of the debates from earlier than the times of the Nicene Creed of 325, at the time when Christianity advocated the triune mystery-nature of God as a normative profession of faith. The Council of Nicea, supervised by the secular emperor, Constantine the Great, arbitrarily disallowed Arianism (non-Trinitarianism) and privileged the doctrinal view that Jesus (as Christ) was of the same substance (homooousius) as God.

### CONCLUSION

Unless you are an 'insider' or a persistent scholar of Christianity, then the words emphasised above do not illuminate the nature of Christianity. They confuse the reader who is attempting to understand something like Swahili.



'Christ the Redeemer', Rio de Janeiro

### REPAIRING A DIVORCE?

Lutherans and Catholics worldwide intend to use the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration as a time of growing together and healing the divisions that followed the Reformation, with the Gospel of Christ as the bond that draws us closer together. See <http://www.lutheran.org.nz/reformation-500>

See also the Youtube clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHjVsNFE60U> that talks not of Counter-Reformation but of Catholic Reformation in which (after the Protestant Reformation) the Roman Catholic Church began to reform some of its abuses with Jesuit guidance.

# ADVENTURES OF A WOULD-BE THEOLOGIAN

Part 1  
Peter Donovan

**Peter Donovan retired in 2000 as Associate Professor in Religious Studies at Massey University and until 2014 tutored in world religions and interfaith engagement for EIDTS, the Ecumenical Institute of Distance Theological Studies. He lives in Wakefield (near Nelson) and attends the Nelson Quakers' meeting. The following is a summary account by Peter of his intellectual and spiritual adventures throughout his philosophical and theological studies. We will publish Part 2 in a later Newsletter.**

I was brought up in a devout Baptist family, attended Sunday School and Bible Class, and at high school joined whole-heartedly in Scripture Union and Crusader activities. Once I went to university, I was an enthusiastic member of the Inter-varsity Fellowship's Evangelical Union with its daily prayers, weekly meetings, occasional university-wide missions and annual national conferences. Along with family life, local Baptist church attendance and Sunday school teaching, this evangelical world gave me a spiritual home within a community of friendly and like-minded believers. I had not much time for the wider world beyond.

My father, a public service lawyer and loyal Baptist layman, had many theological books. Some of these I had begun to read, with a view to equipping myself for a missionary or theological teaching ministry – the gold standard career, so to speak, for the committed evangelical with academic aspirations. I enrolled at university as both an arts and a law student, the latter because my father's love for the law had to some extent rubbed off on me too, and also because law was recommended as a solid basis for Christian ministry and study.

These were years when challenges to conventional Christianity were becoming more frequent and public. The British press was alive with controversy after the publication in 1963 of Bishop John Robinson's book *Honest to God*. This book and others like it became belief-changers for many, introducing them to Bultmann's *demythologizing*, Bonhoeffer's *religionless Christianity*, and Tillich's God as *ultimate concern*. While little notice was taken of radical theologians among my evangelical friends and mentors, as a would-be theologian I did begin to seek out some of these books and wondered about their implications for my own beliefs. It became clear to me that to handle theological challenges like these I needed a better

knowledge of philosophy and, in particular, its tools of logic and linguistic analysis. So I decided to do my arts major in philosophy, and also to fit in a couple of papers in introductory Greek, and one in Hebrew, as stepping stones to a theological degree at a later stage.

Philosophy at Victoria University at that time, under the much-respected professor George Hughes, took a classic historical approach. We began with the pre-Socratic thinkers before going on to a closer look at Plato and Aristotle. These writers dealt with creation and nature, metaphysical and material worlds, mind and soul, time and eternity, beauty and truth, logic and reasoning, in ways quite new to me. Here we were reading ancient texts other than the Bible; texts from which our Western intellectual history derived much of its direction and its spirit. It gave me a great sense of excitement, to be at last grappling with life's serious issues and acquiring the background knowledge to explore them intelligently.

Then, along with courses in logic and ethics, we continued on through major Western thinkers to more modern analytical philosophy with its focus on language, sense and meaning, verifiability and truth. Two philosophers who particularly influenced me were Kant and Wittgenstein, each in their different ways making me sensitive to the inherent limitations of human rationality itself, especially when it attempts to venture beyond the realms of everyday experience and ordinary life.

**What I learned from philosophy overall was the importance of examining questions themselves, before being in too much haste to answer or debate them. As also in law, if arguments in philosophy or theology are to be fruitful there are presuppositions and assumptions which need to be clarified first: what are we talking about – are we sure we know? what do our terms mean? what are we taking for granted? how will we decide when a conclusion is reached? ... and so on.**

With questions like these in mind I began to write a philosophy thesis for MA, on the topic “Religious Language and Matters of Fact”. Professor Hughes, himself an ordained Anglican priest with an interest in philosophy of religion, was my supervisor. While this thesis work was under way, I applied and was accepted as a preliminary student at the Baptist Theological College in Auckland. At the same time, I enrolled as an extramural student for the Otago University bachelor of divinity degree. It was time to get some formal theological study under way.

I enjoyed life at the Auckland college in its sheltered way, amongst a team of dedicated young Baptists, men and a few women; good friends and colleagues. It was my first experience of living away from home. The teaching staff (principal Ayson Clifford, and Drs Edgar and Thompson) believed firmly in the Bible-based, devotional and missionary-minded Baptist traditions. At the same time, they were confident that given care and honest study, those values could be preserved for the present day and passed on within a living church community.

As Baptists, not being particularly wedded to traditional creeds and confessions, they were ready to listen to the more radical theologies of the day, even though they might have been reluctant to express approval of them in the pulpit. And unlike many of the Evangelicals I had known, they were willing to take notice of critical scholarship’s challenge to traditional views of the Bible.

The underlying College theology would be best described as mildly neo-Orthodox, with a strong kerygmatic or preaching emphasis. We read Brunner rather than Barth, with some of us venturing into the theistic existentialism of John Macquarrie and personalist theologians like DM Bailey and HH Farmer (who was to feature in my doctoral studies later). Scholars like these sought in their various ways to present a modern Christian faith as still viable, while accepting the need for some serious rethinking of dogmatic positions inherited from past centuries.

After two years I chose not to pursue the College course further and, with the approval of the principal and staff proceeded instead to finish the Otago BD extramurally while seeking overseas doctoral study opportunities. The BD in those years was a tightly-defined post-graduate degree with two courses in Old Testament and two in New, two in Church History and two in Theology. The biblical courses involved learning Greek and Hebrew grammar and tackling set piece and unseen translations of the scriptures, as well as

introductions to the critical study of the textual sources themselves.

**Studying the Bible as a historical and literary reality was a revolutionary experience for me. Approaches to Scripture which I had known in the past had been devotional and inspirational, not academic and critical. Now I was facing up to challenging new questions. In what sense could this really be called God’s Word, when it turned out to be a compilation from many sources? How does the Bible differ from other products of history and contrivances of the church, like saints, clergy and bishops, Sunday worship, sacraments and creeds? Who were the actual writers? Who settled on a final collection? What about variant readings? Which are the best translations? All these were still contested areas amongst scholars, I learned, so how can these scriptures have the supreme authority claimed for them by Christians? I steadily became less convinced that they could.**

When it came to theology proper, doctrines about the person and work of Christ, incarnation, trinity, atonement and the like, I found myself equally unconvinced. Despite a childhood filled with wonderful stories of Jesus, songs about his love for us all, and wise teachings and parables for us to follow -- none of which have every really lost their power for me -- **I seemed to be always at heart a Unitarian rather than a Trinitarian believer.** If there is one God, transcendent source, or ultimate reality, then that is that, I felt. As I studied the formulations by early church theologians attempting to embody Jesus Christ eternally within the godhead and add in an additional person, the Holy Spirit, the whole exercise seemed like an over-zealous attempt to convert mystery into metaphysics, and devotion into dogma. Did Jesus really intend that?

What about the notions of sin and salvation themselves? Here was an even deeper source of concern for me. So much of the debate in early theology was intended to guarantee that Christ could be the redeemer the Gospel claims him to be; to ensure that his saving work could in fact be effective. Yet the alleged origin of human sin, the Adam and Eve story itself, I felt, had a simple logical weakness at its core. How could these two creatures, created sinless by God, allow themselves to fall into sin? “Because of pride”, is the usual answer. But pride itself is a sin! How could their pride come *before* the Fall? Yet on the strength of that flimsy argument, backed up by the notion that this original sinful nature is passed on through sexual intercourse to each new generation, Christian theology has built its

whole apparatus of guilt and punishment by damnation. According to this theory, humans need salvation by a means so desperate that only God can provide it, through sending into humanity a divine son, sinless and born of a virgin, to die and be resurrected.

It is a story we have been brought up to rejoice in, and proclaim with amazement and worshipful thanksgiving. But does it even add up, I asked myself, in a morally responsible person's mind today? In what possible way can such a story provide an adequate diagnosis of, and healing prescription for, the evils and frailties of human life as we understand them in the modern world?

Given these serious doubts about the sustainability of core Christian doctrines, plodding through the study of doctrinal and ecclesiastical history was a largely depressing exercise for me, even though there were of course some great works of literature and spiritual insight to explore along the way. Perhaps to a devout traditionalist there is real inspiration to be found in the lives and thought of the early church leaders, saints and martyrs, the rise of episcopacy and the ecumenical councils, framing of creeds and defining of doctrines and refutation and expulsion of heretics and so on, as the Church established its power and authority within the world.

**But to a simple Baptist like me there was much about all the whole business that seemed alarming and depressing. The church's increasing institutionalization within the Roman Empire, from Constantine onwards, in particular, seemed to me a thoroughly backward step – along with the rise of the papacy, the cult of saints, the adoration of Mary, monastic orders and clerical celibacy and sacramental theology and so on – these were all alien to me, taking place at great cost to the simple message and example of Jesus. I found myself feeling cheated by the whole process. There had been so many words, so much argument, politics, persecutions and conflicts. What had it achieved? Was this really what loving God and our neighbour was supposed to be all about?**

As church history marched on into the Reformation and beyond, there were glimpses of a return to early spiritual simplicity. But there was not much comfort to be found for me in the works of Luther or Calvin, who for all their courage and reforming spirit seemed to settle quickly into the familiar mould of dogmatism and distain for alternative opinions, like so many patriarchs of the church before them and after.

**This seemingly negative overall reaction to my studies at the Baptist College and for the Otago BD should not be taken as disillusionment with theology as such. I was still as interested, and indeed excited, with pursuing the idea of God. And a personal sense of God, or transcendence, or spiritual depth which I had enjoyed for as long as I could remember, continued to be a vital part of my life. But this was God of a different order: a spiritual presence or "imaginary friend", if you like, with whom I could share everything in inner and totally frank conversation. Any God worth knowing, I felt, would not be an antiquarian entity but a presence far greater than any past or present religious tradition, and way ahead of us in moral, spiritual and intellectual significance - and this is how I sensed things to be.**

I needed to turn to further post-graduate work in an environment where I might get some answers to my concerns and questions. In 1967 Jo and I married and I returned to work for a while in my former Wellington law office, while I wrapped up the BD papers and the MA thesis. I was keen to get overseas if at all possible. Given my desire to do further philosophical research in theology, Oxford seemed to be the ideal option, if only I could find a way to get there. I applied for various scholarships and eventually was successful in obtaining a World Council of Churches travel grant, available for travel to the UK so long as I was able to be accepted there for a suitable program.

With the encouragement of my Baptist College tutors I approached the only Oxford institution I had any knowledge of, Regent's Park College, a Baptist establishment which like other "dissenting academies" had in modern times been accepted into the Oxford university network as a Permanent Private Hall. Through Regent's I was able to be enrolled in the Oxford Faculty of Theology and admitted to the university's doctoral programme.

I arrived in Oxford in April 1968 and settled in, Jo joining me a few months later, finding work as a private nurse and live-in housekeeper. After I outlined my intended research area I was granted supervision by the newly-appointed Professor of Philosophy of Religion, Basil Mitchell, who turned out to be an excellent advisor and friendly overseer of my research. My field of interest, as with my MA, was the character and significance of language as used in religious contexts. In particular, what could be said, intelligibly, about such issues as truth and falsity, meaning, coherence, rationality, plausibility and such like, in relation to the



discourse called ‘theology’? What was theological talk all about?

I needed a clear source on which to focus, and already had a suitable book in mind, one which had impressed me both academically and personally during my study of theology in New Zealand. It was the work by the Presbyterian theologian and Cambridge scholar H H Farmer entitled *The World and God*, first published in 1942 and widely used in theological teaching circles for some years.

With Farmer’s book as a test case, I set about an analysis of theological propositions about providence, about God’s involvement in human life and the world. Was there any informative content to this discourse? What does it mean to believe in divine providence as a theological view or conviction? The title of my thesis was a bit ponderous but sums it up: *A Philosophical analysis of the Doctrine of Providence, with reference to the Theology of H H Farmer*.

My conclusion, in brief, was that the idea of God, as in the Biblical stories, being actively involved in human affairs and personal experience, can best be seen as a way of reading one’s life, that is, as an interpretative mode of thinking and responding, rather than the simple holding of a set of beliefs or the possession of a solid body of knowledge.

There are distinct advantages from a spiritual as well as a philosophical point of view, I suggested, in viewing theology as the on-going interpretation of living experience as a whole, rather than as the mere reaffirmation of established doctrinal tenets.

**Interpreting life theologically, whether done by people alone or within communities of faith, involves the here-and-now discovery and sharing of meanings. It is a flexible process, allowing growth, renewal, and diversity. Mere reaffirmations of received doctrine, on the other hand, tend to stifle fresh thinking and awareness, limiting spiritual experience to the examples and images of the past.**

Despite my having reached that conclusion, my upbringing still seemed to urge me to insist that we can still confidently make timeless affirmations in theology, and not merely interpretations, because the words and images to do so have been given us as divine revelation, taught authoritatively by Jesus and the inspired prophets and apostles. Isn’t that what the Bible and the Christian Church’s doctrines are all about? But it isn’t so simple, I came to realize, once proper notice is taken not just of Christianity but of the world’s many other faiths as well. **There are far too many prophets, sacred books and claims to supernatural inspiration for a simple appeal**

**to the authority of *special revelation* to carry much theological conviction today.** It was time to look more widely.

My doctorate was awarded in late 1971, after assessment and oral examination by Professors John Hick and Maurice Wiles, both generous-minded and liberal scholars in their respective fields of Philosophy of Religion and Theological Criticism. The next January we returned to New Zealand for me to take up a lectureship in religious studies at Massey University. I was to spend the following twenty-seven years sharing thoughts with on-campus and extramural students, clergy, laity, believers, seekers and doubters of many kinds, as we examined together the world’s faiths and spiritual paths and wondered about the great mystery behind them all. This was a tremendous privilege, bringing me in touch with a far wider range of religious experience and even more puzzling theological questions than I had ever imagined.

There were the ancient faiths of Hinduism and Buddhism and their present-day manifestations to become acquainted with their concepts like *samsara*, *karma* and *nirvana* viewing the human condition in ways quite different from the Biblical ideas of sin and salvation. The primal spirituality of Polynesia with its powers of *mana* and *tapu*, and the ancestor spirits, magic and sorcery of Melanesia and Africa, still have their power for many and deserve a modern hearing. The ancient religions of Egypt and Mesopotamia and the vast faith of Islam and its modern resurgence came into view, along with a host of minor and alternative religious movements and belief-systems. Women’s voices critiquing male religious domination world-wide called for urgent attention. And there was the growth of modern secularity, naturalistic critiques and scientific explanations of religion, and strident atheist pronouncements, all to take serious notice of.

**My investigations into what theology was all about had really only just begun.** *[to be continued]*



**Jo and Peter Donovan**

# WHAT WAS 'THE REFORMATION'?

Often referred to more accurately as the Protestant Reformation (from **Latin** *reformatio*, "restoration, renewal") it was a split from the Catholic Church initiated by Martin Luther and continued by John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, and other early Protestant Reformers in 16th century Europe.

The Sea of Faith has no doctrinal view on the Reformation or on other paths of faith.

## The Reformation Theme - Christian

### CONSTANTINE AND WHAT FOLLOWED

A reflection by Jock Crawford of Hamilton

The enduring lesson for the church is that it must *never* become entwined in the ways of Empire. It must *never* accept government funds to do its work. Once you are on the receiving end of a gift, your relationship to the giver changes. Constantine was just one of many who commandeered Christianity for his own personal ambitions, as leaders and politicians have been doing ever since.

The Jesus sect that was born as an alternative community of Judaism was later outlawed and then persecuted. It was an annoyance that became a problem that became a threat. Later, in a move to unite the realm, it was given a seat at the table of power. The underground movement that was once deeply committed to non-violence became a sanctifying force for endless war, supplying not only 'Christian' soldiers but approval for what became 'Christian wars'. The 'melancholy madness' of Jesus morphed into a muscular new religion of bishops, cathedrals built on the backs of the poor, rigid theological hierarchy, and all the abuse that goes with presuming to hold the keys to the kingdom while operating the only elevator out of hell.



It was post-Constantine theologians who gave us the doctrine of original sin (an inherited disease for which the institution that makes the diagnosis also claimed to have the only cure) and the blood atonement, the belief that Jesus came to earth solely for the purpose of dying for our sins, a doctrine not fully developed in the church until the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Both these ideas now separate conservatives and liberals in an unceasing stalemate. Are we born 'bad' and must be 'saved', as conservatives assert, or are we born 'good', as liberals maintain, but have all forgotten where we came from, where we are going, and to whom we belong? Was the death of Jesus on the cross necessary for the salvation of the world, or is this the ultimate form of child abuse?

—●—  
"We are not fallen angels, we are work in progress," John Spong

## The Reformation Theme - Muslim

### HERETIC

*Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*,  
by Ayaan Hirsi Ali  
(Harper Collins, 288 pp., \$27.99)

*Heretic* carefully separates Muslims into three categories.

"Medina Muslims," as Ali calls them, are the jihadists and their supporters, who intertwine the faith with seventh-century political and martial order, as Muhammad did during his time in that city. A low-ball estimate puts this population at 48 million, a tiny fraction of the world's Muslims—but, considering that it took only 19 men armed with box cutters and the "Medina" ideology to bring us 9/11, it's a number to be concerned about.

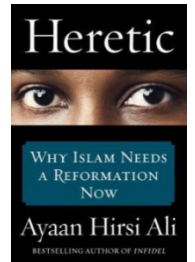
In the second group are the **apostates and heretics**, like Ali herself, who have left the faith altogether or are so critical of it that they can no longer be considered 'true' Muslims. This population is tiny but growing.

What Ali terms the "**Mecca Muslims**" comprise the majority of Islam's adherents. These are the hearts and minds to whom she preaches reform: devout Muslims who desire access to Western thought, education, technology, and civil law, but who find that 'pure' Islamic scripture and discipline (or their government's adoption of sharia law) renders accommodation all but impossible. Torn by this conflict, many of these Muslims find themselves ripe for jihadist plucking: better to side with the devil you kinda know (Medina Islam) than the one you don't (hell-bound apostasy).

The author dedicates whole chapters to diagnosing what she takes to be the five root problems in Islam that manifest themselves in violence and oppression:

- 1) The Qur'an's status as the immutable word of God and the infallibility of Muhammad as the last divine messenger;
- 2) an emphasis on the afterlife over the here and now;
- 3) sharia's claims to be a comprehensive system of law governing the spiritual and temporal realms;
- 4) the obligation of ordinary Muslims to command right and forbid wrong;
- 5) the concept of jihad, or holy war.

Part of a review by Katherine Ernst



# VARIETIES OF REFORMATION

The starting point of the [Christian, European] Reformation is usually given as 1517 when the German monk Martin Luther launched his protest against practices of the Church. Luther's requirement for Reformation laid stress, not on renovation but on return to primitive simplicity. Luther's theological reading led him to attack the central Catholic doctrines of transubstantiation, papal supremacy, and clerical celibacy. The snippets on this page offer suggestions that the range of uses that the word "Reformation" might enjoy.

## AS A RELIGIOUS CONCEPT

In seeking out definitions of the term 'Reformation', several themes can be detected.

The first is the most common: to return a church tradition to its former relative purity by the removal of impurities. While this is the mode of reformation unleashed by Luther, it was still only a partial reformation in that it was seen to be all that was required.

The second mode is to adapt the religious tradition to the present time so that, while its character and where possible, its doctrines remain the same, its implementation is modernised. The Roman Catholic celebration of the Mass in the local tongue and the modernisation of the habits of nuns, are examples.

The third mode is to argue that a religious tradition was malformed from its inception and needs radical changes in order to truly represent the motives of its founder(s).

A fourth mode is to abandon loyalty to any existing path of faith and, by digging down to the roots of the psychological (perhaps existential) religious urges that we all experience, we can discover and promote new forms of religious expression more suited to modern knowledge and values. Faith might then be the 'itch' for which religion is the 'scratch'.

## THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

While several people made reforming gestures, Martin Luther is the one most frequently referred to.

In the countries spawned by England, it is the divorce of the Church in England, galvanised by King Henry VIII in need of a viable male heir (he had one who died in his teens) that was transformed to the Church of England.

What follows are several Youtube links which, if entered into your browser, will show the lecturer (in this case Prof. Keith Wrightson) presenting a 45 minutes lecture from a series about "Early Modern England". The entire series contains 25 lectures.

Lecture 7 "Late Medieval Religion", for our purposes, what the Church in England was like on the eve of the Protestant Revolution. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kf-GsRGb3Y>

Lecture 8. "Reformation and Division". Professor Wrightson examines the various stages of the reformation in England, beginning with the legislative, as opposed to doctrinal, reformation begun by Henry VIII in a quest to settle the Tudor succession.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koJ6wcHU\\_Po&index=8&list=PL18B9F132DFD967A3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koJ6wcHU_Po&index=8&list=PL18B9F132DFD967A3)

## THE QUAKER'S "REFORMATION" OF LOVE AND BEAUTY

With the first Friends ("Quakers"), Christianity itself was 'baptized', reborn from a superstition-laden system of personal salvation into a living expression of love in the world. Through the awakening of the compassionate heart within them, the early Quakers redeemed the Christianity of their day and led their society closer to the vision of Jesus. As Quakers today, we are heirs to their experience. And as universalists, we are in a position not only to distinguish the wheat from the chaff in Christian tradition and practice, but also to bring into our own practice the best of the world's spiritual experience as we seek to discover and live from the heart of compassion, the Christ-Spirit, within us. In a time when mainstream Christianity is too often a force against human welfare and liberty, we, like the first Friends, can offer an experience of the Christ-Spirit that breaks apart the prejudices and constraints of common religious forms while appealing to the love and beauty from which those forms devolved. In our words and in our lives, we can show forth the love by which Jesus and the early Friends exploded superstition, challenged oppression, and witnessed effectively to liberty, justice, and peace.

by George Amoss, Jr.

Full copy at <https://universalistfriends.org/amoss-98.html>

## REFORMING: FAITH V. WORKS

A debate that might emerge concerns the affirmation by Luther that **faith** was paramount, the modern-day "Progressive Christians" promote **works**.

## REFORMING THE MALFORMATION

"We are urging that Buber's distinction [spirituality is when an "I" encounters a "Thou"] matters more than distinctions between eternity and time, infinity and finite, and many other distinctions that mattered to Christians in another age".

Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* p193, Pelican Books 1963

## NEW FORMATIONS

Any combination (sincerely held) of self-consciously assembled statements of faith which are separated from 'major' religious systems, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism. These might include, without limitation, Wiccan and other pagan, spiritualised evolution, Tarot, a vast array of masonic mysticisms.

This list would have no end.



# LAST WORD, JANUARY 2017

By Guest Correspondent Norm Ely (SoF NZ Treasurer)

## **The preliminary theme of Conference 2017 is Reformation. It may yet undergo some reformation itself.**

The theme is based on the fact that, on October 31, it will be 500 years since Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral, partly in protest at the Catholic Doctrine of Indulgences.

The questions then becomes “Are we going through another reformation in the 21st century?” and “Will it be as consequential as the Lutheran reformation?”

However, while the 500 years since Luther’s Theses is a time to reflect, it really has to be taken in context of the *other* Reformations in Christianity since the death of Jesus.

In the year 300, Christianity was struggling (to put it mildly) to form a foothold apart from a small group of people following on from the original followers of Jesus.

Constantine, in fact, was implicated (although thought not to have had any direct involvement) in the persecution of the Christians in 303 when Diocletian ordered the destruction of Nicomedia’s new church including condemning its scriptures to the flames, and seizing its treasures. In the months that followed, more churches and scriptures were destroyed, Christians were deprived of official ranks, and priests imprisoned.

Then nine years later in 312, when preparing to go into battle against Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge which crosses the river Tiber, in Rome, Constantine is said to have had a vision which led him to fight under the protection of the Christian God. Lactantius states that, in the night before the battle, Constantine was commanded in a dream to “delineate the heavenly sign on the shields of his soldiers”. Some commentators say that he followed the commands of his dream and marked the shields with the Chi Rho sign ‘denoting Christ’.

Constantine was the first emperor to stop persecutions of Christian and to legalise Christianity along with all other religions and cults in the Roman Empire.

In 313, Constantine met with Licinius in Milan, where they developed the Edict of Milan which edict stated that Christians should be allowed to follow their faith without oppression. This removed penalties for professing Christianity, under which many had been martyred previously, and returned confiscated Church property. The edict protected not only Christians but all religions from religious persecution, allowing anyone to worship whichever deity they chose. A similar edict had been issued in 311 by Galerius, then senior emperor of the Tetrarchy. Galerius’ edict granted Christians the right to practice their religion but did not restore any property to them. The Edict of Milan included several clauses which stated that all confiscated churches would be returned as well as other provisions for previously persecuted Christians.

Then, in 325, Constantine called a meeting of representatives of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches. This led to the Nicene Creed which explicitly affirms the co-essential divinity of the Son, applying to him the term ‘consubstantial’. It is the only authoritative ecumenical statement of the Christian faith accepted by today’s Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, and major Protestant denominations.

The ‘fine tuning’ continued in 381 and 451, and has continued up to the present.

Then in 1517 came Luther. Between 1517 and Luther’s death in 1546 there were numerous other modifications including Henry VIII; Zwingli; The Society of Jesus (Jesuits); and Calvin.

In 1521 Henry VIII wrote “The Defense of the Seven Sacraments” in opposition to Luther and was rewarded by Pope Leo X with the title ‘Defender of the Faith’.

The next ‘Reformation’ was in 1533 when the marriage of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon was declared null and void by Archbishop Cranmer, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, against the direction of the Catholic Church. Henry then went on to marry Anne Boleyn.

This led to ongoing complications between Henry VIII and the Catholic Church until, in 1534, Henry VIII brought down the ‘Act of Supremacy’ in which he became the supreme head of the Church of England thereby separating from the Catholic Church.

Between 1536 and 1540 Henry VIII disbanded all monasteries, convents, priories and friaries in England, Wales and Ireland.

In 1563 the 39 Articles of the Church of England were first published. These gave a summary of Anglican doctrine and practice. Originally, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer had written the 42 Articles in 1552.

Then, in 1685, Louis XIV of France revoked the Edict of Nantes. This led to an exodus of Protestants from France.

So, if we continue to use modern computer numeration shouldn’t the title be at least “Reformation 5.0”? Or, should we be more accurate with the title and say something to the effect that – “As the mainstream Christian Churches are in significant decline, are we entering the biggest reformation that Christianity has gone through since Constantine 1,592 years ago?” Or do we wait another eight years for that title?

Or, perhaps if we are celebrating only Luther’s specific reformation we should be using a title such as – “How do the current changes in the Christian Church compare to the Lutheran Reformation 500 years ago?”

**What do you, the readers, think? You have until February 3rd to let us know, preferably by email.**

*Norm Ely*

Thanks to Wikipedia for confirmation of dates and facts.  
Also to britannica.com and other sources