

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 129, March 2017

We farewell

The Very Reverend John Murray former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of NZ

Most of this copy came from the website www.presbyterian.org.nz and was written by the Assembly Executive Secretary, Rev. Wayne Matheson.

Dear colleagues and friends

The Very Rev John Murray, ONZM, died on Friday, 17 February 2017 at Sevenoaks Matai Wing, Paraparaumu.

We not only pause and acknowledge John's life and the many contributions he made, but we also express our love, sympathy and support - and our prayers - to Shirley and the family.

John was born in November 1929, and attended St Clair School, followed by Kings High School, then undertook MA studies at Otago University.

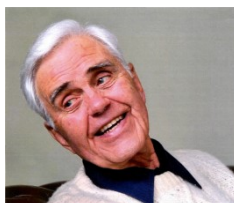
He attended the Theological Hall as a special student in 1952. John travelled overseas for further study at King's College in the United Kingdom and graduated with a MA from Canterbury in 1954.

He married Shirley in July of the same year in Cambridge, England.

John then studied at Bossey Ecumenical Institute, Switzerland before returning to New Zealand where he accepted a call, and was ordained at St David's, Taihape in June 1956.

John resigned from this role on 31 January 1962 and was appointed as ecumenical chaplain to Victoria University and Wellington Teachers' College from 1 February 1962. During these years John was actively involved in protests against the Vietnam war.

John accepted a call to Knox Church, Christchurch in November 1967.



He worked with HART (Halt all Racial Tours) and was involved with the NZ Race Relations Council.

John was then called to St Andrews on the Terrace, Wellington, in February 1975 and served there until his retirement in 1993. During these years, St Andrew's became a centre for social action and political debate.

John co-founded "Boycott" to stop the All Blacks tour of South Africa in 1985.

He served as the convener of the Presbyterian Public Questions Committee.

John also played an important part as a co-founder and later as chairperson of Te Kakano o te Aroha Marae Trust, Moera, Lower Hutt, in 1988.

John was installed as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand in 1990 and presided at the 150th anniversary celebrations.

He helped found the St Andrew's Music Trust and the St Andrew's Trust for Religion and Society.

John was the founder and chairperson of the NZ Hymnbook Trust, promoting and publishing New Zealand hymns and songs for all churches. In addition he was manager and the chief editor of "Alleluia Aotearoa", the first book of NZ hymns for all churches in Aotearoa, published in 1993.

John believed the church needed to speak into the social and political issues of the day – both within Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond.

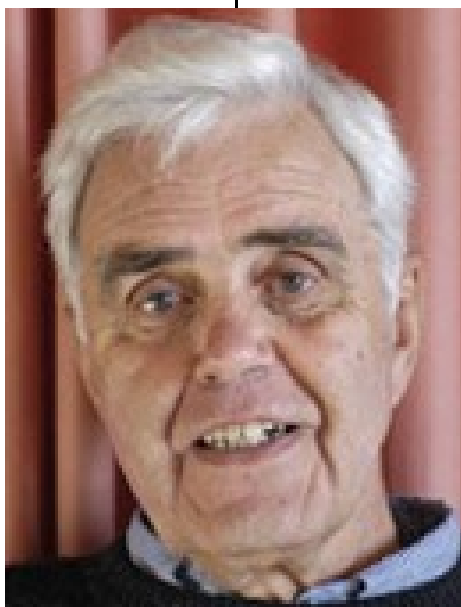
Not only to speak – but to act.

John was active in social engagement and the list of his passionate commitments is long and includes being a member with Amnesty International for many years; he was also actively engaged in the fight to save historic buildings and sites including the Bolton Street Cemetery and 22 The Terrace in Wellington; and was a strong supporter of the 1985 homosexual law reform bill.

John also served as chairperson of the national co-ordinating World Court Project committee to outlaw nuclear weapons at the International Court of Justice.

John was granted minister emeritus status by the Wellington Presbytery in July 1993, retired from active ministry and moved to Raumati (Kapiti Coast).

In retirement he remained active in many spheres including serving as president of Frederic Wallis House, an ecumenical retreat centre in Lower Hutt; as the national co-convener of Abolition 2000, the NZ movement to eliminate all nuclear weapons; and as a world church peace monitor for the first post-apartheid democratic election in South Africa in 1994.



He was involved in publishing "Songs of Praise from Aotearoa", the first video of NZ hymns in 1999 and published "Faith Forever Singing", 80 new NZ Hymns, in 2000.

John was awarded the ONZM (Officer of the NZ Order of Merit) for service to the community in 2000.

He was appointed as a member of the Race Relations Sector Advisory Group of the New Zealand Human Rights Commission in 2003.

John worked for causes close to his heart in his local community, actively working towards initiating local Kapiti Coast civic/community celebrations of Waitangi Day; and was part of an inter-iwi group promoting better race relations between different local ethnic groups.

He was a founding trustee of "Dignity New Zealand Trust" for law change on end-of-life decisions (voluntary euthanasia).

The Service of Thanksgiving took place at the Kapiti Uniting Church in Raumati South on February 21st. The building was overflowing. Speakers, in addition to family, included Sir Lloyd Geering, Alan Tristram and the Hon. Hugh Templeton. The video of the service is available at <https://vimeo.com/withloveweremember/johnmurray>

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, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

We have five **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, Ian Harris and Fred Marshall. (The late Alan Goss was, for a time, a Life Member).

Chairperson: Gretchen Kivell

email gretchen.kivell@xtra.co.nz

phone (03) 473-0031 mobile 0274-473-0031

Secretary: Bruce Tasker

email landbtasker@gmail.com

phone (09)827-0720 mobile 027-290-3056

Treasurer: Norm Ely

email n.ely@xtra.co.nz mobile 027-440-9267

Membership Secretary: Peter Cowley

email pcowley@paradise.net.nz

1/30A Dunns St, Silverstream, Upper Hutt 5019

Newsletter Editor and Webmaster: Noel Cheer,

email noel@cheer.org.nz

The **Copy Editor** is Shirley Dixon, **Newsletter Distribution** is by Yvonne Curtis (paper copies) and Norm Ely (emailed copies).

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

Publication deadlines for submitted Newsletter copy for 2017 are 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 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 extra charge*. Send an email requesting that to pcowley@paradise.net.nz

CONTENTS

1. Farewell to John Murray

Loved, admired and respected

3. All About Us

The who, why, when and where of SoF NZ

4. The Gospel of Reconciliation

Catholics and Lutherans shake hands

6. Adventures of a Would-Be Theologian part 2

Concluding Peter Donovan's account of his philosophical and theological studies.

8. Heresy at Home

Commemorating the 50th anniversary of “the Geering Heresy Trial”

9. Homo Deus

Laurie Chisholm reviews *A Brief History of Tomorrow*

10. Learning Gaia's dance

Ian Crumpton reviews the transformation of world-view.

11. This year's SoF Conference

Early data – updates will continue to appear on the website, www.sof.org.nz

12. Doug Sellman ...

..... has the Last Wor.

JOCK OWNS UP!

As the layout technician for this Newsletter I accidentally attributed a piece to Jock Crawford (Newsletter 128 page 10) and take full responsibility for doing so. Sorry. Jock later wrote:

“...the passage attributed to me as a reflection comes from Robin Meyers' *The Underground Church*. He has a much better turn of phrase than I although I wholeheartedly agree with what he wrote here. I wish I was as erudite and succinct!”

You can see some more of Robin Meyers on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1h7zyX0y3bc>

Noel Cheer, editor

THE GOSPEL OF RECONCILIATION

ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS TO THE PRESIDENT AND DELEGATION OF THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

Dear Lutheran brothers and sisters,

I warmly welcome you, the members of the Lutheran World Federation and the representatives of the Lutheran-Catholic Commission on Unity. This meeting follows upon my very cordial and pleasant meeting with you, dear Bishop Younan, and with the Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, the Reverend Junge, during the inaugural celebration of my ministry as the Bishop of Rome.

It is with a sense of profound gratitude to our Lord Jesus Christ that I think of the many advances made in relations between Lutherans and Catholics in these past decades, not only through theological dialogue, but also through fraternal cooperation in a variety of pastoral settings, and above all, in the commitment to progress in spiritual ecumenism. In a certain sense, this last area constitutes the soul of our journey towards full communion, and permits us even now a foretaste of its results, however imperfect. In the measure in which we draw closer to our Lord Jesus Christ in humility of spirit, we are certain to draw closer to one another. And, in the measure in which we ask the Lord for the gift of unity, we are sure that he will take us by the hand and be our guide.

This year, as a result of a now fifty year old theological dialogue and with a view to the commemoration of the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, the text of the Lutheran-Catholic Commission on Unity was published, with the significant title: *From Conflict to Communion. Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*.^{*} I believe that it is truly important for everyone to confront in dialogue the historical reality of the Reformation, its consequences and the responses it elicited. Catholics and Lutherans can ask forgiveness for the harm they have caused one another and for their offenses committed in the sight of God. Together we can rejoice in the longing for unity which the Lord has awakened in our hearts, and which makes us look with hope to the future.

In light of this decades-long journey and of the many examples of fraternal communion between Lutherans and Catholics which we have witnessed, and encouraged by faith in the grace given to us in

the Lord Jesus Christ, I am certain that we will continue our journey of dialogue and of communion, addressing fundamental questions as well as differences in the fields of anthropology and ethics. Certainly, there are no lack of difficulties, and none will lack in the future. They will continue to require patience, dialogue and mutual understanding. But we must not be afraid! We know well – as Benedict XVI often reminded us – that unity is not primarily the fruit of our labours, but the working of the Holy Spirit, to whom we must open our hearts in faith, so that he will lead us along the paths of reconciliation and communion.

Blessed John Paul II asked: "How can we proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation without at the same time being committed to working for reconciliation between Christians?" (*Ut Unum Sint*, 98). May the faithful and constant prayer of our communities sustain theological dialogue, the renewal of life and the conversion of hearts, so that, with the Triune God, we will be able to journey together toward the fulfilment of Jesus' desire that all may be one.

© Copyright - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

LUTHERAN CHURCH OF NZ CONVENTION AND REFORMATION COMMEMORATION WEEKEND (3-5 JUNE)

The 39th Convention of Synod of the LCNZ will be held on the 3rd and 5th June 2017. The host congregation will be St Paul's Lutheran Church, Wellington.

The convention will coincide with the Joint Commemoration (with the Roman Catholic Church) of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation – a Joint Worship Service on the afternoon of Sunday 4th June, followed by the Commemoration Dinner at Te Papa.

More information at
www.lutheran.org.nz/reformation-500

^{*} http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_2013_dal-conflitto-alla-comunione_en.html

ADVENTURES OF A WOULD-BE THEOLOGIAN

Part 2

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. In a previous newsletter he described his intellectual and spiritual adventures to the point where he began his academic teaching. In Part 2 he continues the story.

The move from Theology into Religious Studies, even if it takes place in small steps, is a big adjustment for a church-raised scholar. "Christianity's God" joins a host of other gods, and goddesses too. Angels and devils, holy spirits and divine incarnations, inspired prophets and miracle-workers are found to be widespread throughout human history. The Bible becomes one among many sacred books regarded by their followers as revealed, infallible, or uniquely authoritative. What is to be made of all this diversity in the world's faiths? Are there any criteria for spiritually ranking them, rationally evaluating them, morally critiquing or applauding them? Is there still a role for a would-be theologian? Having had the rare privilege of a (taxpayer-funded!) academic career spent studying and teaching world religions I feel a civic duty, almost, as well as a theological one, to try to pass on some personal conclusions. Here they are:

The (still rather few) Church-based theologians who find merit in appreciating other religions are usually either *inclusivist* or *pluralist* in their approaches. Inclusivists advocate a greater ecumenism, a cosmic view of Christ's saving work which embraces all people of faith as "other sheep" or "anonymous Christians". This can seem rather patronising or imperialistic to other believers, though some are quite willing to reciprocate in their own terms. ("Jesus is a *Bodhisattva*," say some Buddhists.)

Pluralist thinking, on the other hand, draws on the One and the Many theme, using some overarching theory or metaphor: The God of a Thousand Names, The Light refracted into a rainbow of colours, the Mountain up which many paths wind, and so on. Metaphors like these are useful if they help people talk tolerantly to one another. But they do not demonstrate the "oneness" behind the plurality, they merely suggest ways it might be imagined. Their main weakness is to blur real distinctions. A closer look at the faiths of the world shows that we certainly do not "all worship the same God" – some venerate their ancestors, some worship nature spirits, some pray to a host of divine beings, some direct their devotion beyond gods to an impersonal cosmic order, or to some nameless Void. Theories of origin, of creation or cosmic

beginnings, of sin and salvation and the human condition, of death and the afterlife and so on, differ widely. Understanding and appreciating this wealth of diversity is not helped by over-simple homogenization or assimilation. "Everything is what it is and not another thing," as the philosopher-bishop Joseph Butler once put it.

Theological pluralism (like globalism and multiculturalism) has much appeal to the liberal-minded and optimistic among us, as well as to the mystically-inclined. We may at times feel a profound sense of the oneness of all beings. We may have an intellectual urge to tidy up the spiritual domain as much as possible. We may trust that some Timeless Truth undergirds our various pious inclinations and moral perceptions. These are natural and often beneficial human desires and aspirations. But I have come to doubt the usefulness of relying on pluralism as an ideal approach for theologizing about religious diversity.

The problem is when we try to go behind the plurality of human experience to speak of "the Eternal One," "Existence in itself," "Ultimate Reality," or "the Ground of Being". It is not that we are necessarily mistaken in our attempt. It is rather that we simply don't know that we can meaningfully extend ordinary words like *real*, *being*, *truth*, *ground*, *exists*, to deal with topics so far beyond the ordinary. Situated as we are within time and space, with brains and minds that evolved largely to make sense of our material lives, we are hardly likely to have intellectual equipment adequate for this far more abstract and non-natural kind of reasoning.

Furthermore, trying to talk *theologically* in these ways tends to make us look on our main task as being some sort of top-down, metaphysical speculation. The far more useful and exciting option, I suggest, is a quite different one: it is to engage, in the most informed and empathetic ways we can, with real-life, here-and-now diversity in the spirituality and religious lives of ordinary people. How I have come to hold this pragmatist, experience-focussed viewpoint can be illustrated by returning to a sketch of our lives together and some examples from my academic and theological learning-curve in the years from 1971 on.

My first small steps in appreciating religious diversity began in Asheville in rural North Carolina, where I spent a few months in late 1971 as a visiting lecturer on our way back to New Zealand. Asheville's campus, like Massey's, an agricultural college recently raised to full university status, provided a useful down-to-earth transition after life in Oxford. I taught introductory philosophy there for a term. Some of my students were intrigued by Out-of-the-body Experiences and by Transcendental Meditation (then popular in the glow of the Beatles' fascination with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and his teachings).

To deal with their questions I began to read seriously on psychical research and mysticism and to study William James's classic *Varieties of Religious Experience* – none of these having been part of any theological curriculum I had so far encountered. This reading was to lead to a lunchtime lecture series and a short textbook *Interpreting Religious Experience* which I completed a few years later. Asheville also gave me a first glimpse of Jewish worship, as a friendly local family invited me home for their Shabbat meal and took me to their Hanukkah service.

Jo and I settled in Palmerston North in February 1972. As well as its pleasant provincial ethos, the Massey situation had other features suiting my interests - in particular its extramural teaching programme, and the growing presence on campus and in the city of international students and their families. By the 1970s the educational world in English-speaking countries had started to see value in studying religions as part of our global culture. In Britain, introductions to the major world faiths began to be taught in schools, and tentative moves into Religious Studies appeared in universities, notably at Lancaster, where a Department under Professor Ninian Smart became a hub for research and writing. Introductory readers and textbooks such as Smart's book, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* were soon widely available. Similar developments took place throughout the Commonwealth, and in the United States. We were to ride a wave of optimism among youth and in popular culture, about a tolerant, liberal and multi-cultural future - "the dawning of the Age of Aquarius". Looking back now all this might be seen as but one aspect of Western economic imperialism and expansionism, but we were not to recognise that at the time.

In New Zealand also there was interest among students in faiths and spiritualities other than Christianity. This brought rising enrolments in relevant university courses, with more staff positions being made available to meet the demand: lectureships at Otago and Canterbury and eventually Waikato, with Lloyd Geering appointed as professor at Victoria University in 1971 with the opportunity to develop a full department there. Our Massey position was unique, being promoted and half-funded for the first two years (1970-71) by a forward-looking group from the local churches.

Deciding how to approach the university-level study of religions was itself not only a professional challenge but an on-going personal quest. We had to establish credentials sufficient to counter the understandable suspicion of secular universities towards anything specifically "religious". One colleague liked to insist that a lecturer in Religious Studies had no more reason to be religious themselves than a lecturer in Tropical Diseases had to be leprous or malaria-carrying. But the fact was, most of us did come from backgrounds in Christian theology, and several were ordained clergy. Where else in the world of scholarship at that time (apart from a few ancient historians or linguists) was there the interest and expertise to teach at university level about religious matters? Despite my time in the Baptist theological college I had not in fact been ordained a minister, though I was once or twice addressed by correspondents as "Father", no doubt on the strength of my Irish surname. It was a nice irony to enjoy.

The choice for us in this new discipline, another colleague observed, was between being a *guru* and an *honest broker*. Some students expected the former, some were seeking the latter. My own approach was to aim for a non-partisan, across-the-board neutrality. This required not just having good intentions, but adopting a distinct role, like a judge, chairperson or umpire. It involved seeking accurate information about the different faiths, using non-prejudicial terminology, and trying to give all views a fair hearing. I realise now that even "professional neutrality" may carry cultural, gender and class biases. Nonetheless, it has always seemed to me a matter of principle, almost a sacred task, for scholars and teachers to at least aim for that as an ideal.

My colleague Brian Colless, appointed two years before me, had expertise I lacked in Asian history and in ancient languages. Following the admirable example of Albert Moore at Otago he had set in place a "phenomenological" approach to the main world religions. We trained students to gather the phenomena or ingredients of religions as found in practice, assembling them under various categories or types (creation and origin stories, laws and teachings, sacred times and places, religious specialists and the like.)

Such an entry-level approach might seem simplistic to higher-ups in religious and academic circles. But to those coming new to the subject our method quickly brought glimpses of fresh world-views and ways of thinking which could fascinate and inspire. Indeed, it is arguable that even the merest basics of the world's faiths (the Golden Rule and Two Great Commandments from Jews and Christians, compassion from Buddhism, *ahimsa* or non-violence from Hinduism, the Muslim *salaam*, harmony with nature from Taoism, and so on) if applied by followers in their true spirit, would be more than enough to transform the whole human enterprise. Clearly that has not yet happened!

Over the years, Massey saw the addition of women lecturers Enid Bennett, Renee Turner and Bronwyn Elsmore, each in turn bringing special strengths and in particular

pioneering courses on women in the world's religions. Among the many new directions we explored together was a study of the varieties of religious life already present in NZ society. To address this we compiled a *Directory of Beliefs and Practices in New Zealand*, making contact with spokespeople for religious groups and societies large and small throughout the country. Using a brief questionnaire we drew up agreed 1-2 page statements: who they were, where they came from, their main beliefs, teaching, observances and the like. Besides the major churches there were lesser-known Christian groups often overlooked as marginal or foreign, or scorned (by the mainstream) as sects, cults and heretics. There were also the other world faiths for us to approach and build relationships with: Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Baha'is in their various congregations and communities, even then beginning to grow in local numbers owing to refugee re-settlement and immigration.

The final Directory, alphabetically arranged from *Aetherius Society* to *Zen* with an appendix of even more minor or ephemeral groups, contained around 200 entries. Compiling it took months of letter-writing, phone calls and interviews, and involved me in fascinating encounters such as a family evening with Mormons, a Jehovah's Witnesses' Bible study day, talks to local Theosophists and Quakers, an Orthodox Easter liturgy and feast, negotiations with a Ratana MP, and many more, almost all of them warm and rewarding experiences. It was an ideal way to learn more of how to tolerate, appreciate and sympathise with religious diversity and difference, without even leaving our own shores.

Overseas conferences and study leaves did of course bring many further opportunities for inter-religious experience. A few months spent on secondment to the University of the South Pacific of Fiji was particularly memorable. I was there to prepare materials and help set up a course in World Religions for teaching extramurally and internally. My project was viewed with some suspicion among the churches (it did not survive the coup years) but I was warmly welcomed by other faiths. One Indian colleague in particular, a staunch devotee of the Sathya Sai Baba branch of Hinduism, had me speaking to his youth group, humming along with an hour of devotional *bhajans* before delicious meals in friends' homes, being painted with yellow in *Holi* celebrations, and sipping sugary *amrit* during temple worship - with Jesus looking benignly down on us from amongst the holy portraits above the altar. Sikh friends also took me to their *Baisakhi* festival with its shared meal to follow, served by the dignified elders. Local Baha'is also welcomed me to their feasts or gatherings for scripture readings and prayers.

Further generous welcomes and first-hand experiences of worship were to come in mosques, gurdwaras, temples and shrines which we visited during a 10-day inter-faith course when on study leave in Birmingham. There we also made friends with theologian Dr Jo O'Donovan (yes, to be sure!), a Catholic nun teaching religious studies in Limerick. We were

to stay as guests at her convent during a brief visit a few weeks later. Attending a genuine Irish Mass with wife Jo and Sister Jo, amongst candles, incense, images and prayers to the Holy Virgin, was something I felt just as privileged to be doing and also just as ambivalent about as I did with the non-Christian worship experiences in Fiji, Birmingham and elsewhere. Appreciating diversity, I came to realise, can be every bit as emotionally challenging within religions as between them.

Through my Massey years my wife Jo's career path was running parallel to mine. Trained in both nursing and primary school teaching and with a post-graduate diploma in second-language teaching, she taught elementary English and Kiwi living skills, organising support-networks and play-groups, arranged outings and shared meals for dozens of foreign students and new settlers. She held a succession of part-time and often voluntary positions, and eventually joined the staff at Massey as their Family Support person for international students.

Jo's work was invaluable in steering me more and more into the real-life world of religious and cultural diversity. Here other religions were to be encountered not in textbooks but in the messy lives of ordinary people, mothers and children especially, the basic living experiences of refugees, students and immigrant families, struggling to cope in a strange land – seemingly full of opportunities but also fraught with challenges, insecurities and disappointments. These contacts over the years brought her many lasting friendships and for us both, delightful memories, poignant moments and far deeper cultural understandings. For me it has been an essential factor in my theological and spiritual development. Here are a few examples:

- Sitting in their temporary homes with sponsored families who were speechless with excitement at the rare presence of a visiting monk to chant blessings over their gifts of fruit and rice.
- Hearing from Muslim and Catholic students in adjoining flats about the little voice from the bathroom, "Mummy, come and look. We're baptising Hakim."
- Listening to our guide, a former Massey student, as we stood as a family before a massive temple image in Bangkok, ask gently, "Would you like me to teach the children how we show respect to the Buddha?"
- Watching a shy and dignified Egyptian wife and her husband on an international students' day-trip to Ruapehu finally join in, along with hilarious Asians and South Americans, as they all slid on plastic sheets down the snowy slopes, her headscarf flying.
- Meeting a lonely Asian student who tells us he likes to sit at the back of empty All Saints Church to do his

meditations, as he has no temple of his own to visit in Palmerston North.

- For Jo, sitting in hospital wards with young mothers after difficult births far from home; encouraging young wives worried about husbands depressed by their struggles to write thesis-standard English; filling in official forms for complicated residency or welfare applications; helping with child-care and transport and shopping and coping with worrying news from their homelands....and much else.

In these family support, ESOL tutoring, basic living-skill situations, religious identity and diversity is incidental, not the central focus. Traditional faiths may be both helpful resources and at the same time serious impediments. What lies deeper is human need, interaction, care and friendship. Through their involvement in matters like these, the good-hearted teacher, family sponsor, patient social worker or nurse is, I believe, making at least as much progress in inter-faith relations as are academics and dignitaries with their international conferences and set-piece debates about Dialogue.

It is sometimes claimed that exposure to other religions should strengthen one's own personal faith. Taken in a confessional Christian sense of "faith" that has not been my experience. Instead, in a broader sense, I now have a stronger faith in the possibility of an adventurous and free-lance theology, open to fostering spiritual values wherever they may be found ("answering that of God in all people", as the Quakers say).

It will need to have at least a working knowledge of the main religious traditions, listening to and learning especially from their present-day followers. It will be concerned to remove old obstacles, expose divisive obsessions and get rid of wasteful ecclesiastical vanities. It will avoid making too much use of dichotomies like natural/supernatural, real/non-real, theistic/non-theistic, material/spiritual. These are of little value in appreciating the values and thought-worlds of faiths outside Western ways of thinking. And it's hard to see how we can ever be in a position to confidently draw such distinctions in any absolute sense.

The theology I envisage will be searching for reliable, life-enhancing paths and spiritual constants within our present and future human lives and experiences. For there do still seem to be sharable moments of faith and mystery, hope and piety and devotion, "salvific" strategies like care and forgiveness, patience and compassion; and a personal sense of wonder at the miracles of life itself. And if there actually are such universal truths and values and experiences we can appreciate and appropriate, we are surely better off to be looking for them at the down-to-earth, day-to-day level, rather than through abstract speculation and dogmatic debate.

Should this exercise be called Theology at all? Why not? Traditional pieties and terminologies will not be going away, and some of these may be the best we can ever have to work

with. Notions like "God" and "sacredness", rituals of blessing and well-wishing and consoling, devotional acts of prayer and thanksgiving, can evolve beyond the bounds of the branded religions and already are, as studies in "implicit religion" in popular culture show us. They are coming to offer a common currency for people of faith and good spirit to draw on, as populations from different countries and cultures continue to mix and mingle and inter-marry. Our children and grandchildren will move freely in ways we never envisaged - as I appreciated not long ago when Jo and I attended Easter worship in Kyoto, all in Japanese, where our Buddhist daughter-in-law happily plays the organ for the little Congregational services.

The two unmentionables among conservative theologians of my youth, the two intellectual evils most to be avoided, were *liberal theology* and *comparative religions*. As it turns out, I have come to have faith in both - but by no means uncritically. The liberal dream of a global free-market of ideas and commodities appears to have failed. The big players have been too keen to dominate and too slow to care about the needs of their lowliest consumers. Institutional religion is in disgrace world-wide for much the same reasons, its humanitarian record pathetic, its ancient rhetoric and capacity for partisan zealotry still disastrous in their political side-effects.

Picking over the ruins, helping survivors and refugees in real-life, small-scale situations, seems to be the one area in which hands-on religion and warm-hearted spirituality can still find a welcome role. Having had the chance to learn a little about religious diversity and human experience at this every-day level has given me, as a comparative religionist and liberal-minded theologian, a thoroughly rewarding career and good reasons for optimism ... for which I am (so to speak) truly thankful to God.

The wise teacher of the Dharma, the scholar in the Kingdom of Heaven, will use skilful means, drawing on resources both new and old.

HERESY AT HOME

The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, www.satrs.org.nz is based in Wellington under the auspices of that church, and plans to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the "heresy" trial of Lloyd Geering.

SoF has positioned its own Conference to not only get as close as possible to the 500th Anniversary of Luther's gesture (October 31) but also to act as a follow-on to the SATRS event which concludes their series of lectures named "**The Courage to Act**". This theme was inspired by Lloyd Geering's courage and the consequences for him in speaking about faith in a new and different way.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TOMORROW

A REVIEW BY LAURIE CHISHOLM OF CHRISTCHURCH

"The future isn't what it used to be."

Reading Yuval Harari's book *Homo Deus, A Brief History of Tomorrow* provides plenty of stimulus to appreciate the truth of this saying. Harari did a doctorate in history at Oxford University and is now Professor of History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The book is a successor to his best-selling work *Sapiens, A Brief History of Humankind*.

This is nothing like the history you learnt at school; dates of battles and lists of kings and their kingdoms rate scarcely a mention. It is racy and exhilarating, full of interesting and often obscure examples to illustrate the argument. Harari is a master of the grand generalisation and his point of view is often counter-intuitive and/or subversive. He does not attempt to predict the future, rather, he analyses trends and usually there are forces at work both pro and contra any given trend. SoFers will like his tendency to stray into philosophy in a way that most historians would be reluctant to do. They will find that he addresses many of the questions that interest them.

A long opening chapter sets the scene. For countless centuries, humanity has been hounded by famine, plague and war. Thankfully, these are now largely behind us. More people now die of obesity than of famine and malnutrition. We have eradicated smallpox and threatened plagues such as SARS Ebola and AIDS have effectively been countered. We are no longer helpless in the face of natural epidemics. In the early 21st Century, violent deaths are responsible for only about 1% of global mortality. Terrorism is a worrying possibility but it is a strategy of weakness. Other issues may of course emerge; in particular there is a lot of talk about global warming, pollution and climate change and little serious action to improve the situation. Harari seems to like three; there are not only famine, plague and war, there are also three varieties of humanism; liberal, socialist, and evolutionary, as well as three main characteristics of liberal humanism (individualism, human rights, democracy and a free market) and future agendas (immortality, bliss and divinity).

People often set science or humanism in opposition to religion, but Harari has a very broad understanding of religion, so he regards humanism as just another variety of religion. Religion is anything that provides a framework of values, something which science alone cannot do. Harari is unconvinced by Sam Harris's attempt to argue the contrary. The 20th Century has been a battleground between these different humanist sects, which makes more sense when you understand socialist humanism as communism and evolutionary humanism as Nazism. Harari describes this as "the humanist wars of religion."

Christianity and the other traditional religions essentially belong to the past. They are reactive rather than pro-active and not the source of innovation. But humanism, even though it is

the only game in town today, could well be completely undermined by future developments and its basic convictions could become unbelievable. In particular, the notion of the freedom of the individual is undermined by brain science; "free will exists only in the imaginary stories we humans have invented." Brain scans can predict people's decisions before they are aware of them. Similarly, the notion that there is a single true self at our core is also an imaginary story, and technologies such as transcranial stimulators may fundamentally change our personality. Humans could lose

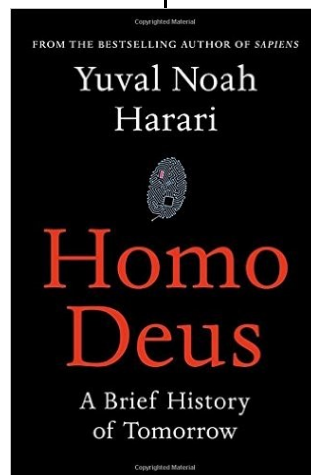
their usefulness, making the conviction that we are unique and precious unsustainable. Machines have already replaced manual workers; in the future algorithms will replace white-collar workers.

For future religious trends, look to Silicon Valley rather than to the Bible Belt. There are two main types; techno-humanism and data religion. Techno-humanism will use technology to enhance our human capabilities, turning us from Homo sapiens to Homo deus, humans that take the place of the divine. Data religion recognises that living things and computers have algorithms in common and that computers are about to gain far superior abilities, really

undermining the worth of humans and taking away their jobs.

Now liberal humanism is an impressive and respectable perspective and one that I appreciate, though I am not a true believer. I appreciate Harari's book most for the way he has articulated liberal humanism's core assumptions and undermined them. It's fashionable to describe God as a human invention, but Harari argues that free will and the self are no different. Having read and listened to lots of the new atheists' arrogant and superior polemic against religion, designed to ridicule and dismiss it, I feel a comforting but not-very-noble Schadenfreude when Harari gives the new atheists a taste of their own medicine by making a case that their convictions are no more fact-based than the religion they despise and are moreover time-bound and already being undermined by scientific developments.

Laurie Chisholm, Christchurch



Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow (Harvill Secker, \$40) by Yuval Noah Harari.

ALL NATURE IS ALIVE WITH CONSCIOUSNESS

A review by Ian Crumpton

EARTHDANCE: Living Systems in Evolution
by Elizabet Sahtouris, a Greek-American scientist, author
and lecturer whose field is evolutionary biology.

"We used to believe that we were put here to do whatever we wanted to with our planet – that we were in charge. Now we see that we are natural creatures which evolved within a great Earthlife system. Whatever we do that is not good for life, the rest of the system will try to undo or balance in any way it can. That is why we must learn Gaia's dance and follow its rhythms and harmonies in our own lives."

So writes Elizabet Sahtouris as she concludes the fourth chapter of her book – a book which explores the implications of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis's Gaia Theory, a theory which proposes that organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth to form a self-regulating, complex system that contributes to maintaining the conditions for life on the planet.

As Lovelock himself points out in the foreword, this maturing theory is now spurring a great deal of scientific research into the geo-physiology of our living planet, as well as philosophical and religious ideas of what it means to our species to be part of a living planet. Here, the metaphor of dance to represent the improvisation, evolution and myriad patterns that result from a few simple steps. One strength of the book is its treatment of those earliest steps, and the aeons of time through which primitive organisms reigned supreme. She writes,

"We really should talk about co-evolutions, ...to remind ourselves that no species can or does evolve by itself, but that all must co-operate by adapting to, or negotiating with, the others' steps in the dance of life. Thus they reach mutual consistency with one another and with the rest of their surround."(Ch.7, Evidence of Evolution).

There is careful treatment of the development of human understanding of our world:

"When we look at human history to see what a peoples' world-view was in a different time and a different place, we see that world-views have evolved along with visible aspects of culture, and that there is a very powerful

relationship between the world-views people hold, and the kind of society they construct..."

Had the more biological approach of the Greek Anaximander prevailed, rather than the more atomistic and mechanical views of Plato, Aristotle, and the like, scientific investigation and cultural history would have taken a radically different course. Mounting evidence set out here leads her to the conclusion that we must learn quickly to fit our lifestyles harmoniously into the rest of nature. For that reason, Elizabet gives considerable coverage to examining indigenous peoples who never saw themselves as anything but an integral part of nature, with immense knowledge of nature, and consciously choosing not to develop technological or consumerist societies.

Much evidence is produced to show how our cultural blinkers influence our understanding of the natural world:

"Not long after the theory of evolution became known, the Russian Revolution produced a new "social mechanism" known as communism, which was heralded as being based on co-operation rather than on competition. Russian scientists rewrote the theory of evolution accordingly, to show that co-operation in nature produced more fit natural creatures than did evolution!"(Ch.14)

Today, many scientists still believe in the Aristotlean/Newtonian mechanical world-view. But many others note the mounting evidence for an alive and integrated natural order. They see life as self-creating in a dynamically alive universe, rather than winding down entropically in a mechanical one. They also begin to see that life can create its own meaning and purpose. (Ch.14).

There are many memorable passages herein, all showing our species as being in a stage of profligate youthfulness, but on the cusp of a rapid maturing:

"We also saw that species living now can exist only because the earth spent billions of years burying atmospheric carbon in forests and underground. We noted that cutting and burning these forests and fossil fuels reverses the planet's system for keeping



atmospheric conditions and climate conducive to species health. It is not a sustainable way to live. It is the way of an immature species that gobbles up all available resources, like the weeds that take over land along our highways or in abandoned fields, where we have destroyed mature ecosystems.”(Ch.20)

There is documentation relating to the inefficiency of modern industrial-scale agribusiness, the damage it does to the environment, the dangers of pesticides, the piracy of patenting plants, and the dangers of genetic engineering. In the face of all this, the demand for organic food is rocketing. Bio-regionalism emphasises local production, and is consistent with grass-roots democratic and self-sufficiency movements which are cropping up everywhere, nurturing more viable systems as the old ones decay. Another positive development, Elizabeth claims, is the internet, unwittingly adopting the design and operating principles of living systems to create a viable living system to generate, process, sort and distribute material on a planetary scale.

But in the end, Sahtouris concludes,

“The more we learn about nature, including human nature, the more we can see that our living parent planet and our whole living cosmos are far more beautiful and awesome in the reality of their self-creation than is any myth we made as we struggled to develop our knowledge. At last our scientific and religious quests can merge in the recognition that conscious, sacred, and self-creating nature, both Gaian and cosmic, is our physical and spiritual source, the wellspring of our ancient inspiration to love, and the experienced guide we have always sought – the guide we need more than ever now that we stand on the brink of maturity.” (Ch.21)

The book is a clear summary of a deep transformation now under way in our world-view, our science, and our sense of the spiritual. It points out the damage we are doing, but looks with hope to the revolution now under way: a revolution in our understanding and behaviour that will undoubtedly dwarf those wrought by Copernicus and Charles Darwin.

The book concludes with a very comprehensive bibliography – in itself a further indication of the evolutionary leap our science, culture, and religion are now taking, as so many top scientists and scholars take up the theme.

(Reviewer’s note: I have been unable to cite page references to the quotations in this review as I only have an e-book version, where pages are not fixed or numbered. – I.S.C.)

You can see a Youtube clip at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkuxCPS4b7o>

CONFERENCE 2017

“Reformation 2.0

Luther lit a fuse, what happens next?”

Monday 6 to Wednesday 8, November 2017

Silverstream Retreat, 3 Reynolds Bach Drive, Silverstream

It is 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, protesting against corruption in the Church of the time. This provides a starting point for a consideration of how events have unfolded since then, and more especially, how religion and spirituality are evolving in our time. What are the present day corruptions? What are the reforming initiatives today? What new spiritual/religious developments are needed in our time as we face a cultural situation and ethical issues that were simply not there in previous centuries? What needs to be discarded, challenged, or radically renewed?

Western society’s history, development and ethics have evolved largely from its Christian inheritance. This has been the case in New Zealand since the arrival of Pākehā. It is not to exclude other influences, but to acknowledge our Christian heritage as a major contributor to New Zealand’s cultural development.

The mythologies that sustained Christendom, Islam, and other classic faiths have little meaning for many people today, embedded as they are in a materialistic way of life, and drawing down so dangerously hard on the earth’s diminishing resources and ecosystems. Any new direction may need a new spiritual underpinning (Reformation 2.0). How might this be facilitated among politicians, economists, business leaders, and citizens?

We see the critical importance of having some understanding of history if we are to move forward with any sense of purpose and meaning. So we want to pick up the symbolism of Reformation to help link past, present and future, and move beyond the current politics and economics of short term expediency with its goal of continual economic growth.

Speakers and Subjects

Lloyd Geering: “500 years: From the Reformation of the Church to the Reformulation of Christian Faith.”

Hal Taussig: charter fellow of the Westar Institute. Title yet to be announced.

Rachael Kohn: “The Call to Reform in the World’s Religions”.

Sue Bradford: former Member of Parliament. Title yet to be announced.

LAST WORD, MARCH 2017

By Guest Correspondent Doug Sellman

An important feature of the Sea of Faith in New Zealand is the presence of Local Groups, of which there are currently 16 functioning: Northland, Auckland, Hamilton, Tauranga, Gisborne, Hawkes Bay, New Plymouth, Palmerston North, Kapiti Coast (Ephesus), Mana, Wellington, Wellington (Ephesus), Blenheim, Christchurch, Timaru (Ephesus), and Dunedin. Two previously functioning groups – Nelson and Central Otago – are now in abeyance.

When Gretchen Kivell took up the role of Chairperson on the Steering Committee, she handed her previous role as contact person for Local Groups to me.

As a way of getting up to speed with the current state of the Local Groups I've recently completed an initial ring-around of the named leaders of the various Groups and conducted a short survey, which Gretchen and I put together.

I was able to talk with the leaders of 13 currently functioning Groups, as well as the past leaders of Nelson and Central Otago. I was unable to contact three other leaders at the time – New Plymouth, Palmerston North, and Wellington (Ephesus).

The results of the survey (below) therefore relate to the 13 Groups I was able to contact. The focus was on the functioning of the local groups from June to December 2016.

- The number of meetings held annually was generally 5, although for one group was 3, another 6, and another 10.
- The typical number of attendees at the meetings varied between 6 and 20, with an overall variation from 4 to 33.
- There was a wide variation in age of the attendees between 30s and 90s, but only two of the groups had had attendees under the age of 50.
- The gender split of groups averages out overall around 50/50 although they vary from 85% men in one group to 70% women in another.
- Sea of Faith local groups are almost entirely New Zealand European/Pākehā, with 11 out of the 13 groups with no non-Pākehā participants and the other two with <5% non-Pākehā.
- Overall, less than half of local group participants are maintaining some sort of relationship with a Church, varying between zero and 60% for the normal Sea of Faith groups, but 75% and 90% for the two Ephesus groups, indicating a key factor that differentiates Ephesus groups from ordinary Sea of Faith groups.
- There is a wide variation (5-80%) in local group participants who have been to a national SoF Conference in the past three years, but overall it is less than 50%.

- There is no charge for meetings for three local groups, \$2, \$3, and \$5 for three others, and a gold coin koha for the remaining seven groups.
- There is no annual membership fee for nine groups, \$5 for one, and \$20 for three.
- Six groups have a bank account and seven don't.
- The venue for local groups varies from a member's home for five groups, a Church venue for seven groups, and a community venue for one group.
- Who determines the content and format of meetings also varies from the whole group for two, a small subcommittee for seven, and a key individual member for four groups.
- The content of meetings is reasonably similar across all groups, with a variety of speakers (internal and external), DVDs, videos, book reviews and invariably plenty of discussion during the 1-2 hours of the various meetings.
- A meal is shared for three groups, tea/coffee/biscuits and/or savouries for eight groups, but two groups have nothing to eat or drink.
- There is a very wide variation in the local group mailing lists from 0-100 notices sent out. Three groups have no announcing of meetings - "no proselytizing".
- The number of new members who participated in a local group meeting in the six-month time period was very small – zero in three groups, one in six groups and between 1 and 5 in nine groups.
- Two groups (Dunedin and Christchurch) have a website, Auckland has recently voted to disband theirs, leaving 11 groups without a local group website.

Many thanks to the leaders who were all open to have a good chat about their particular local group. Through this ring-around I gained the impression that a vital aspect of most local groups was socialising with like-minded people, friends, and that the common thread was having a safe and fun place to discuss religious issues related to the meaning of life and values for good living.

The local groups have an intelligent, open enquiry, U3A feel to them for elderly middle-class Pākehā New Zealanders but with a strong religious bent. However, rather than attracting new members, the local groups are not renewing at the rate of natural decline. There is no strategy for such activity either.

The upcoming census being conducted alongside the referendum (about where to hold the national Conference) will provide more detailed information about our Network from which strategic plans for the future will be able to be formulated.

Doug Sellman, March 2017