

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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

Newsletter 134

February 2018

## Luther's Legacy

Last year's Conference was at least partly about celebrating 500 years since Martin Luther's 95 theses. I am left feeling that we rather too quickly finished looking backwards and moved on to the present and the future. **Lloyd Geering** saw Luther as a trigger that began the developments that resulted in the modern secular world.

**Rachael Kohn** widened the scope and looked at reformations across many religions and cultures. **Sue Bradford** took us beyond reformation to transformation, which can be personal, spiritual and/or political. **Hal Taussig** focussed on progressive Christianity and the emergence of interesting and healthy new developments. **Clay Nelson** looked at the radical reformers of the time.

This issue is an attempt to penetrate more deeply into the man Luther and the events of his time and to understand them better. Of course, it is a legitimate point of view that the world has changed an awful lot since those days and that it is better to concentrate on making life better or more just for those living now. Richard Dawkins thinks we can safely ignore thinkers who predate evolution, because Darwin's idea is such a fundamental revolution.

However, it is hard to argue for an open-minded tolerance and understanding of the many different cultures and religions in the world today if we close our mind to the cultures and religions of the past.

Rather, I believe that we are enriched by an understanding of past times. Although it

may be difficult to get inside the minds of people who lived so long ago and it may seem natural to dismiss their ideas after a merely superficial acquaintance, a deeper exploration and debate can bring benefits.

Accordingly, in this issue we look at Luther's central ideas. "How do I find a gracious God?" was his question and justification by faith through grace alone was his answer. Understanding these ideas is not straightforward, especially for those of us for whom theism is philosophically dead. Accordingly, we explore Luther from various angles. Often ideas are best explored through controversy and argument. In Luther's time, there was a big argument between Luther and the humanist Erasmus (see page 2).

English and Scottish churches received their reforming ideas indirectly via others such as King Henry VIII, Thomas Cranmer and John Knox, whereas European churches have an unbroken connection to Luther or Calvin. Luther therefore has a much greater importance for them, something hard for us in the English-speaking world to realise.

It was therefore quite a shock when Paul Schütz, a German theologian and a Lutheran, took it upon himself to attack the central themes of Lutheran theology head-on: "Grace alone, Scripture alone, Faith alone." He found fault in all three (page 9).  
The Editor

### Further reading

Roland Bainton Here I stand

Interview with Eugen Drewermann on Luther:

<http://goo.gl/dpxJfQ>

## Papal Bull against Luther

*Luther's challenge to the establishment wasn't just an invitation to a polite debate. This Bull and the following Edict shows the power play at work.*

"Arise, O Lord, and judge thy cause. A wild boar has invaded thy vineyard...We can scarcely express our grief over the ancient heresies which have been revived in Germany-[41 errors are enumerated] We can no longer suffer the serpent to creep through the field of the Lord. The books of Martin Luther...are to be examined and burned...Now, therefore, we give Martin sixty days in which to submit... Anyone who presumes to infringe our excommunication and anathema will stand under the wrath of Almighty God and of the apostles Peter and Paul. (15 June 1520)."

## Edict of Worms

"He has sullied marriage, disparaged confession and denied the body and blood of our Lord. He makes the sacraments depend on the faith of the recipient. He is pagan in his denial of free will. This devil in the habit of a monk has brought together ancient errors into one stinking puddle and has invented new ones. He denies the power of the keys and encourages the laity to wash their hands in the blood of the clergy. His teaching makes for rebellion, division, war, murder, robbery, arson, and the collapse of Christendom. He lives the life of a beast. He has burned the decretals. He despises alike the ban and the sword. He does more harm to the civil than to the ecclesiastical power. We have laboured with him, but he recognizes only the authority of Scripture, which he interprets in his own sense... Luther is to be regarded as a convicted heretic...No-one is to harbour him. His followers also are to be condemned. His books are to be eradicated from the memory of man." (26 May 1521)

## Luther's letter to Melanchthon

**1 August 1521.**

*This letter from Luther to his close friend and fellow reformer makes him sound like he denies morality per se and advocates*

*complete permissiveness: He exhorts Melanchthon to be a sinner; not even a guilt-ridden and repentant one, but a bold one. This is startling, but helps us to realise that Luther's thinking is very different from today's conventional wisdom.*

You should be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe more boldly and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.

There must be sin while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2 Peter 3.13) are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign. It suffices that through God's glory we have recognised the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day. Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meagre sacrifice for our sins? Pray boldly, also as a highly bold sinner.

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## Luther and Erasmus

Erasmus was a leading humanist of the time. He published a Greek edition of the New Testament that Luther used for his German translation. Erasmus and Luther got on well initially, but Luther attacked his views on free will. In 1524, Erasmus wrote a work "De libero arbitrio" (On Free Will). One year later, Luther wrote "De servo arbitrio" (On the Bondage of the Will). In an age of intolerance, Erasmus maintained a tolerant spirit and did not allow himself to be captured by any of the rival parties. Luther had a fundamentally different attitude to things, one that continued a line from St Paul and Augustine. *The Editor*

"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to no one. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." "All laws can only tell you what you should do. But they do not give you the strength to do it." – Martin Luther, The Freedom of a Christian, 1520

## 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. 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 the following **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, and Ian Harris. Also Suzi Thirwell, Yvonne Curtis and Peter Cowley (appointed at the 2017 AGM).

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**Newsletter Distribution** is by Yvonne Curtis (paper copies) and Peter Cowley (emailed copies).

Other Steering Committee members: Adrian Skelton, Doug Sellman, Ian Crumpton, Brian Ellis, Steve Collard, and Rob McKay.

To offer a comment on material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact Laurie Chisholm ([laurie.chisholm1@gmail.com](mailto:laurie.chisholm1@gmail.com)) mobile 021 2010302 or John Thornley ([john.gill@inspire.net.nz](mailto:john.gill@inspire.net.nz)).

**Publication deadline** for submitted Newsletter copy for the next issue: 14/04/18.

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### Common Ground Conference

The third Progressive Christianity conference will be held on 7-9 September 2018 at St Andrews on the Terrace, Wellington. Note it in your diary now!

# Sea of Faith News

## Membership and subscription changes

At the AGM last November, a remit was passed changing the subscription rate for members receiving the Newsletter by post.

What is the effect on You the Member of Sea of Faith?

Firstly, if you receive the newsletter by Email absolutely nothing changes. You will be sent an invoice for \$20.00 and as soon as you pay that you will become a financial member. This entitles you to speak and vote at the AGM, nominate Steering Committee members or join the Steering Committee. You will receive the Newsletter by email as has been the case in the past.

Secondly, if you receive the Newsletter by post there will be changes.

You will be invoiced \$50.00. You now have options –

- You can pay the \$50.00 and continue to receive the Newsletter by post.
- You can pay \$20.00 and provide us with your email address and receive the Newsletter by email.

Thirdly, household membership ceases. Each individual needs to become a member in their own right. This tidies up a historical anomaly.

**Note:** Paying a sub or koha to a local group DOES NOT MAKE YOU A MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL BODY.

Until the first of July 2018 you don't need to do anything. That date is the start of our new financial year and that is when the changes will take place.

Subscription forms will be sent out in June 2018 for the new financial year 2018-2019 commencing 01 July 2018.

If you pay, (for whatever option you choose) you will continue to be a member of Sea of Faith NZ and receive the Newsletter by whichever means you have chosen.

If you don't pay, your membership lapses and supply of the Newsletter will cease.

*Norman R. Ely, Treasurer, Sea of Faith Incorporated NZ*

## Steering Committee

The Steering Committee held its annual face-to-face meeting on Saturday 3 February at St Andrews on the Terrace in Wellington. We began with a round at which each member summarised their life story. The **webmaster** is now Peter Cowley. Send any change requests for our website to him.

**Conference 2017.** The committee received a report on this. We budgeted an attendance of 60 and had an actual attendance of 72. As a result, Conference made a small profit. 22% of the attendees were from Ephesus groups. Doug Sellman presented a helpful analysis of the feedback forms.

**Membership.** Peter Cowley presented a report on membership. There has been a small and slow decline as shown by the following graph:



The current value of 340 will drop to 303 in the new financial year, simply because there will be no household members. This drop does not imply any actual reduction in the number of Sea of Faith supporters.



**Conference 2018.** This will be held 2-4 November at the Silverstream Retreat (same location as last year). The committee worked hard on the theme and has a provisional theme. This will be announced once it is finalised.

**Newsletter.** Laurie Chisholm, as acting newsletter editor, presented his thoughts on the newsletter. He would like to form an editorial committee that would help organise the newsletter and plan future issues. **If you or someone you know would like to play a part, contact him** ([laurie.chisholm1@gmail.com](mailto:laurie.chisholm1@gmail.com)) or John Thornley (see page 3).

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## Wellington Ephesus Group

The group met on Sunday 4 February at the house of Pauline and David Patchett. The meeting began with finger food, conversation and a walk through their beautifully maintained garden, with Rimu, beech and Kauri trees as well as a very nice vegetable garden. Then we moved inside for more food and a brainstorming session led by Margaret Rushbrook. This was designed to provide suggestions to the organising committee for the year's programme. Ian Harris read Ephesus's statement of purpose, Margaret listed the meeting dates currently scheduled, we wrote down the kind of meetings that we liked, and then there was a lively and open discussion on programme ideas. Margaret concluded the meeting with an interesting meditation text. *The Editor*



*The Wellington Ephesus Group*

## Noel Cheer

Shirley has sent an email detailing Noel's current situation. He has had a very positive visit to the specialist at the Hospital. He has also just begun a six month course of chemotherapy; one week of medication followed by a three-week break, repeated six times. He is able to attend Tai Chi classes, doing many movements sitting, and intends to also attend the fortnightly Wellington Ephesus meetings. If you plan to send any texts or emails to Noel, **please copy Shirley** ([sbdixon@xtra.co.nz](mailto:sbdixon@xtra.co.nz)) **as well**, as he is not always in a position to reply.

# Evaluating Luther

Martin Luther made a giant step towards modernity. He challenged the power of the Roman Catholic Church and did this because of his personal faith. In this he moved away from faith as uncritically belonging to the collective and affirmed faith as an expression of the individual's personal conviction. Through his bible translation, hymns and catechisms, he did much to enable ordinary people to develop such a faith.

While Luther strode forward with one foot, his other foot was still located in the Middle Ages. The clearest expression of this is his belief in a personal devil and his fears that this devil was everywhere at work. But five centuries separate us from him, and there have been many other developments that give us a very different outlook on the world. Here are three:

For Luther, the bible was the authoritative Word of God, even though he could dismiss the Epistle of James as "an epistle of straw" because it contained nothing of his teaching of justification by faith rather than works. He used the bible as a quarry from which to extract texts to build theological doctrines. He had little understanding of the bible as a library of humanly constructed documents in which fundamental concepts evolve over time.

Earth was still the centre of the cosmos, even though Copernicus was about to fundamentally change this. He had no sense of the vastness of space and the billions of galaxies, of which our Milky Way is but one.

Psychology and sociology did not exist as disciplines. Luther argues theologically, i.e. from biblical texts rather than from psychological insight. The revolution that Feuerbach brought about, according to which statements about God are to be brought down to earth and understood as statements about humans has yet to happen.

This all makes it difficult to fairly assess Luther's ongoing relevance. In general we can say that he is best honoured by going further in the direction he indicated rather

than by slavishly adhering to his teachings. Today, we aren't easily able to empathise with the issues Luther wrestled with. Drewermann summarised the problem as follows:

"People don't even understand the presenting problem any more. The word **grace** is already obsolete. And **justification** – who talks about it? **Freedom** is a bourgeois concept, but it is very remote from what Luther had in mind when he talked about the freedom of a Christian. "How do I find a gracious God?" was his question. Where would you find someone today who attempted to answer this question as a central problem of their existence?"  
Eugen Drewermann *Luther Wanted More* 2016

Theologians have written whole books and organised conferences on Luther's themes. Catholic and Protestant have filled volumes arguing about different understandings of the relation between faith and works, God's grace and human action. But all of this takes place in a rarefied atmosphere that ordinary people have no understanding of.

The only way forward, it seems to me, is to use psychology to try to understand what led Luther to his convictions, something that Luther himself was unable to do. This leads us straight to Erik Erikson's book "Young Man Luther." This was one of the first 'psychobiographies' i.e. books that endeavour to explain the development of important people using the insights of psychology or psychoanalysis. Erikson's view is that a key task of adolescence is to forge an identity for going forward as an adult. He thinks Luther was conflicted over his identity. His experience in the thunderstorm led him to vow to become a monk, thus rebelling against his father and his expectations of a successful lawyer son. This rebellion in turn gave him practice for rebelling against papal authority. But once a monk, he had an over-scrupulous conscience that was fearful of not acknowledging and confessing all his sins, to the despair of Staupitz, his confessor. The liberation came with the insight that

everything depended, not on his ability to do good works and confess all his sins, but on God's grace. In the strength of this conviction, he was able to challenge papal authority. Once Luther had worked through his identity conflicts, he was able to be extraordinarily creative and became a pioneer in historical terms. *The Editor*



## Luther for Non-Theists

"If we were to translate the word 'God' into 'the background to an affirmation of all of life, in a way that nature does not provide, society does not provide, but which is absolutely necessary to be and remain human,' then we would have understood everything."

Eugen Drewermann *Luther Wanted More*.

There's no shortage of advice on what we ought to do. We should be loving and faithful in our relationships and always obtain consent before sexual activity. In our work there are our conditions of employment and a code of ethics for our particular line of work. We must strive to achieve and bring results. Only then do we find acceptance and recognition. As creatures with free will, we can choose to do what is right; all we need is encouragement and inspiration to go down the right path. So far, so good; you are following Erasmus's line. Your stance could be described as ethical optimism. 'Ethical' in that religion tends to collapse into ethics and 'optimism' in that there is a positive assumption that good intentions will suffice.

To understand Luther, you need to recognise that his is a quite different experience. To be sure, he expressed this experience in theological terms, and his followers argued vociferously about the correct theology. We need instead to explore Luther's experience; only then will he begin to make sense to us moderns.

When a psychotherapist relates to a client, she does not give advice, tell him what to do, or exhort him to pull his socks up and try harder. She accepts him as he is, explores what made him the way he is and endeavours to understand and support him.

Carl Rogers calls this 'unconditional positive regard.' The client has internalised demands and requirements from parents, friends, and the wider society (what Freud called the superego) and is reluctant to acknowledge that there are any issues here. The therapeutic encounter enables this internalised material to be brought into the discussion. It sets up a special space in which the client is unconditionally accepted. This can be extraordinarily liberating.

When I trained as a Presbyterian minister in the 1960s, we learnt a little of this, but it was only in a seminar in Germany, led by someone trained under Carl Rogers, that I experienced how powerful and significant this stance is. But it is not something merely pragmatic, a stance that therapists adopt because it seems to be useful. Rather, it is an attitude to life that extends beyond the therapy session.

Luther was subject to strict discipline as a child, quite customary for his time. The liberation for him was the experience of divine grace. For us it is the experience of being accepted as we are. This experience Luther saw as coming from God. We can recognise that it is not something that is demonstrable through empirical observation of the way the world is. On the contrary, we have real grounds to fear the consequences of crossing these authorities. *The Editor*

"What we call psychotherapy is encompassed by the permission to turn to a place of unconditional refuge. A human being, no matter what he has done, no matter what he has become, is entitled to be as he is. God accepts me, he forgives me, he encompasses me, not because I am so good, but because he is so benevolent.

Society can't say this; in particular circumstances it even lets the criminal law loose on you. Church law cannot say this, it has for everything the corresponding regulation. The public cannot say this; it will prime the tabloids. Talk of unconditional acceptance can truly only occur in the space of an absolute religious encounter and therapy happens in just that space."

Eugen Drewermann *Luther Wanted More*



# Luther's Bible and Its Successors

Luther's appearance at the Diet of Worms is probably a more important event than the publication of the 95 theses. Luther was under suspicion of heresy and only reluctantly granted the right to defend himself in Worms, as this usually happened in Rome. Following the Diet, the emperor Charles V issued an edict, declaring Luther to be a heretic. Heretics were automatically put under an imperial ban, which meant that anyone could imprison or kill them. However, Luther had been given assurances of a safe passage to and from Worms. Despite this, to ensure Luther's

safety, Prince Frederick had him kidnapped on his way home and hid him in Wartburg castle, where he produced a German translation of the New Testament in 11 weeks – an impressive achievement. Previous translations into German had been done from the Vulgate (official 4<sup>th</sup> century Latin translation of the bible) and were of poor quality linguistically. Luther translated from Erasmus's critical edition of the Greek original, published in 1516. He endeavoured to put things in the German of ordinary people. As a result, his bible had the effect of unifying the German language. He was helped by Melanchthon in the NT and by other experts for the full bible, which was published 1534 with 117 woodcuts, one of which is reproduced here. Even today, Lutheran churches favour an updated version of Luther's translation.

Recent times have seen many further bible versions, carrying on the work that Luther began and extending it to the

English-speaking world. Some of them are mentioned below.

## King James Version 1611

This became the standard English version, supplanting a variety of translations from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.



Elijah being taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire  
(2 Kings 2)

## RSV and NEB

The Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible were the popular versions when I studied theology in the late 1960s. Biblical scholarship and the discovery of new manuscripts necessitated numerous corrections to the King James Version.

## Jerusalem Bible

This was a translation made by Catholic scholars based in Jerusalem and followed a French translation. It was published in 1966 in two editions. The Readers Edition had comprehensive footnotes, effectively providing a one-volume commentary. Its use of 'Yahweh' instead of 'the Lord' as the name of God caused some controversy. *The Editor*

## Inclusive Bible (Priests for Equality) 2007

*Margaret Gwynn wrote in her letter to the editor:*

The final reading is always John 1:1-11 and here I was blown away by a rendering from the Inclusive Bible by Priests for Equality, 2007. This is a free translation, bringing "imagination and convictions of gender equality to bear on the ancient texts". Here is an extract:



In the beginning :

There was the Word, the Word was in God's presence and the Word was God.

The Word was present to God from the beginning. Through the Word all things came into being, and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being.

For the Word was life, and that life was humanity's light – A Light that shines in the darkness, A Light that the darkness has never overtaken ...

The Word was coming in to the world – was in the world – and though the world was made through the Word, the world didn't recognize it. ...

And the Word became flesh and stayed for a little while among us; we saw the Word's glory – the favoured position a parent gives an only child – filled with grace, filled with truth.

### A New New Testament: Hal Taussig

Hal Taussig, a keynote speaker at the 2017 Conference, has produced "A New New Testament" in which he combines the traditional books of the New Testament canon (in the Open English Bible version) with ten recently discovered writings from the first centuries of the church (for example, the Gospel of Thomas).

### A New Testament: David Bentley Hart

David Bentley Hart, an Orthodox theologian and historian, who has written interestingly on the new atheists and on God, has also produced a version of the New Testament, in which he tries to avoid reading back concepts from later Christian history into the NT documents themselves. See a review in the Atlantic Magazine here:

<http://goo.gl/qcH2Vx>. *The Editor*

### Letter to the Editor

A phrase in the Reflection on Christmas in the recent Sea of Faith newsletter resonated strongly for me – that the biblical images and symbols were attempts at "a cosmic synopsis".

I had just been to the Nine Lessons and Carols service at Napier Cathedral – with songs beautifully sung by the choir and very expressive readers of Bible passages.

The idea that Adam's fall was necessary for Christ to come switches me off entirely,

but the overall beauty of the service moved me deeply. Within the limits of their world view, Biblical writers did seem to be struggling to convey heartfelt hopes – that our blunderings and selfishnesses could be transformed, that darkness does not finally overcome light, that a world of love and peace is possible. *Margaret Gwynn*

### Paul Schütz: An Anti-Lutheran?

Lutheran theologies have three foundational principles: sola scriptura, sola gratia (or solus Christus) and sola fide. (scripture alone, grace (or Christ) alone and faith alone). Office bearers in Lutheran churches are obliged to accept them on ordination. In 1951, a German theologian, Paul Schütz, wrote an article contradicting all three. He retired in 1952, aged 61. It seems that he jumped before he was pushed.

Something of a contrarian outsider, Schütz argued that scripture is never alone. It always emerges in the context of tradition and is mediated to us through tradition. We have no access to scripture 'in itself.'

Against 'Christ alone' Schütz argued that the Christian doctrine of God is broader, being Trinitarian. Christian faith is faith in the triune God, not Christ-religion.

Against grace alone, he argued that it ignores the communion of the saints and ends up with the isolated individual, and a non-worldly God, as we see in Kierkegaard. In grace, God and the human being are both at work and you can't separate the one from the other.

In retirement, Schütz went on to write a major work *Parousia – Hope and Prophecy*, published 1960. *The Editor*

"What all religions supply to adherents: identity, a personal sense of who I am; community, a social sense of where I belong; and purpose, a spiritual sense of why my life matters. If faith communities don't provide them, death-dealing alt-religions will fill the gap." Brian McLaren patheos.com

# Protestant Dissent and the Dissenters

The following note on Protestant Dissent and the Dissenters in English history is drawn in large part from the first chapter of J Steven Kreis's M.A. thesis, "[\*An Uneasy Affair: William Godwin and English Radicalism, 1793-1797\*](#)," (University of Missouri-Columbia, 1984), pp.7-14. It was provided by Noel Cheer. You will be astonished at the misuse of power to privilege members of the State Church (in this case the Church of England).

The origins of eighteenth century English Dissent are to be found in the Puritan theology of the seventeenth century. Fundamental to English Dissent was a willingness to demystify the Christian faith by considering its principles in accordance with human reason alone. As such, Dissent signifies the shift from a reliance upon external authority in moral matters, to the internal authority of the self informed by reason. This shift was in part traditional, and in part inspired by the seventeenth century Newtonian world outlook. For those individuals who followed the tradition laid down by John Locke, the Cambridge Platonists and the later deists, an appeal was made to experience and conscious knowledge of the world of material nature. While the mysteries of Christianity were to be located and expelled, there was a simultaneous effort to preserve the virtues of Christianity while adjusting them to the new rationalistic and scientific temper. As Roland Stromberg has pointed out, "men were willing to submit to 'reason' because there was on all hands a sublime confidence that reason and religion were in harmony." (*Religious Liberalism in Eighteenth Century England*, London, 1954, p.10) The Dissenters felt that their advocacy of the reign of reason was directed by God alone. Hence, to go against the dictates of reason was to violate God's will.

It was this confidence in reason that forced the Dissenters to distance themselves from the religious controversy within English Protestantism. They no longer believed in the central idea of Christianity -- man as a weak and wretched creature in a doleful world, in dire need of being saved and solaced by the belief in a better world to come. The Dissenters faced a crisis. How could one come to terms with Christian faith in a world become increasingly secularized? This

question was part of the broader movement of liberalism within Christian culture which succeeded in eliminating the prophetic, other-worldly element in Christianity and adapting religion to the purposes of an otherwise optimistic secularism.

The efforts of the Rational Dissenters helped to clear the minds of their own followers and aided in efforts to form a habit of political discussion, inquiry and criticism. It was during the reign of George III that the political radicalism of the Dissenters assumed a more active role in the affairs of national politics. Up to 1760 they had, in general, been acquiescent in political affairs. But from then on their increasing awareness of their unequal status became unbearable. (Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution*, Cambridge, 1979, pp.71-2.) This was partly due to a changing economic situation in which the Dissenters prospered and a growing alienation from both the Hanoverian dynasty and the system of government of George III. They joined forces in the Wilkite agitation of 1769 and attempted to abolish compulsory subscription to the Articles of Religion in the 1770s. They also championed the cause of the American colonists in their bid for independence. Price and Priestley were also in close contact with Shelburne's "Bowood Circle" of reformers between 1769 and 1779 where they were brought into close contact with French liberal thought. (Goodwin, pp.101-104) These connections with political radicalism "formed part of the changed climate of opinion in which the Dissenters felt that action to relieve, rather than acquiescence in, their political disabilities would itself become a practical necessity. If toleration had failed, perhaps participation might succeed." (Goodwin, p.74)

The Rational Dissenters' political radicalism culminated with their efforts to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts on three successive occasions -- March 1787, May 1789, and March 1790. By the Corporation Act of 1661, no one could enter a civic or municipal office unless he had taken the sacrament according to the rites of the Church of England. Under the Test Act of 1673, all who held offices under the Crown were required to take the oaths of allegiance and supremacy, sign a declaration repudiating the doctrine of transubstantiation and to receive the sacrament according to the Church of England. (Goodwin, p.77) Both Acts potentially restricted the activities of the Dissenters, but the more ambitious Dissenters obtained what they had vainly sought through agitation by seceding to the Anglican Church and often achieved success in business and commerce. Others fought for the repeal of the Acts on the grounds of political equality and civic freedom until 1790, when their concerns became decidedly different.

To be sure, the Rational Dissenters became increasingly political by the time the French Revolution broke out in 1789. Richard Price's use of the pulpit at the Old Jewry, on the occasion of the commemorative gathering of the London Revolution Society on November 4, 1789, celebrated not so much the English as the French Revolution. Price even went so far as to send a message of congratulation to the French National Assembly. Price's sermon, entitled *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, asked that the London Revolution Society disdain "national partialities" and expressed

*its particular satisfaction over the glorious example given in FRANCE to encourage other nations to assert the inalienable rights of mankind, and thereby to introduce a general reformation in the governments of EUROPE, and to make the world free and happy.*

The Dissenters, frustrated by their failures to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts and their abortive pleas for civic equality, renewed their support for parliamentary reform and responded to the

new challenge of "Church and King" clubs by organizing new radical societies. These societies were open to all working men and their objectives were exclusively political. "In this way," writes Albert Goodwin,

*the failure of the campaigns for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts confirmed the inherent radicalism of Dissent and provided the new working-class reformers with the political leadership and intellectual stamina that enabled them in the years ahead to acquire political credibility and to develop unaccustomed powers of large-scale organization.* (Goodwin, p.97)

I suppose that what the foregoing discussion suggests is that late 18th century English radicalism was created by a number of forces, one of the most important of which was rational Dissent. There is no doubt that events in the American colonies in the 1770s as well as developments across the English Channel in the early 1790s played a major role in stimulating the movement for parliamentary reform. What we must keep in mind, is that political discourse in England was conditioned by series of complex forces, rational Dissent being one of the most potent.

## On Meditating Biblical Texts-Luther

In the evening, as you go to bed, by all means take a passage from holy scripture with you.

Know it by heart, and while you ruminate it, you quietly fall asleep like pure [i.e. ruminant] animals. This passage must be rather brief, but it must be well meditated. It must be understood, and, as you awake on the next morning, you must find it back [as ruminants do], like an inheritance from the past evening.

*Martin Luther Discipline for the Life of a Minister*



# Last Word

Ten years ago, in **“My View”** July 2008 I discussed the Mathew Arnold poem “Dover Beach” where in the fourth stanza Arnold refers to the Sea of Faith. In turn BBC television entitled a programme fronted by Don Cupitt - *Sea of Faith* and used rolling surf on Dover Beach as part of the title of the programme. The programme was so popular, Sea of Faith UK was started by Don Cupitt and others. In August 2008 in **“My View”** I discussed ‘where to next’.

20+ years after Sea of Faith NZ was started, is the name of the group [Sea of Faith NZ] and the group still significant?

This has been raised many times before, especially by one of our Steering Committee members – Doug Sellman.

Are we in some way competing with the Progressive Religion movement?

As we have an average age of about 80 and new younger members are few, should we: disband; rename; become a part of the Progressive movement. Or are there other options – Facebook; Twitter; or newer technologies to reach the younger generation?

Currently we have approximately 300 members with the average age above. We have a very high-quality Newsletter, Website and historically have run a very good annual conference with world renowned speakers.

Financially, we are in a satisfactory position with subscriptions one of (if not) the lowest in the country.

However, we are no longer a growing group and pressure is coming on to the Steering Committee as there are limited people to take up busy positions on the Steering Committee and conference organisation.

I personally don't think changing our name will do more than confuse the existing members, existing religious groups, the Sea of Faith groups internationally and prospective speakers, (many of whom attend because we are Sea of Faith).

The website is being accessed less and

less even though it has a large online resource to access. (The two articles I cited above are both available to look up).

Our resource centre has such small use it is questionable whether it should continue.

There is a very large group of people (probably well in excess of 80%) under 60 who use technology to access information. When you get to people under the age of 45 it is almost 100%.

Facebook has a very large following in the under 30's. Twitter and Instagram are also highly popular in the under 50 age group.

So, should we have sites on Facebook and Twitter?

My opinion is that we need to urgently move with the times.

We need to upgrade our website to a site that looks 21<sup>st</sup> century. We also need to launch a Facebook site plus a Twitter account.

When we have completed that process, we should again look at the name and consider what we should change it to. Certainly, Sea of Faith in the longer term is unsuitable. I am often asked what type of religion Sea of Faith follows. It is no longer satisfactory to have a “talk shop”. Let's leave that to others. What we need is a name that describes who we are, what we are about, what we represent and where we are going.

What are your opinions?

If we are to continue to be so successful in the future, should we?

- Upgrade the website
- Use the addition of Facebook and/or Twitter
- Continue with the Newsletter
- Merge with the Progressive movement
- Change the name
- Other options

Letters to the Editor are very welcome.

Please write your comments and send to [laurie.chisholm1@gmail.com](mailto:laurie.chisholm1@gmail.com).

*Norm Ely (Treasurer)*