

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

Newsletter

What's in a name?

Many SoFers are not happy with the name Sea of Faith. In particular, the word “faith” is a stumbling block. It gives an impression that we are an organisation that promotes faith, which many people associate with American Christian fundamentalism and understand as belief with a low degree of evidence if not downright superstition. When I introduce our organisation to others, I’ll describe it first as “a religious discussion group” or “a group that loves discussing religious ideas” and only later reveal its actual name, because I’m rather embarrassed by it.

Most of us know that the name is an echo of Matthew Arnold’s poem *Dover Beach*:

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Far from being in favour of faith or advocating for faith, this poem laments the loss of faith. It’s saying that once, faith was full and encompassing, but has now, sadly, been lost. This echoes the reality that the nineteenth century saw the undermining or

at least the questioning of traditional Christianity on multiple fronts. Matthew Arnold felt a deep sadness at the loss of traditional beliefs but he saw the loss as irreversible. Don Cupitt’s BBC TV series brilliantly analysed the way a series of thinkers undermined the assumptions of such a simple faith. This means that, for those without an in-depth understanding of the poem, our name is quite misleading. Far from being propagandists for faith, our organisation is oriented towards understanding the way modernity has undermined (traditional) faith.

Our name also encourages a nostalgic orientation towards the past. It looks back to 19th century Britain as a golden age, idealising the beliefs of the time, instead of looking forward, exploring values, meaning and spirituality appropriate to the contemporary world. What's to envy about believing that the world is about 6000 years old and controlled by a not-so-benevolent Dictator? Today we have a better understanding of the true age of the earth, we recognise that religious ideas evolve over time, we understand that humans are just a rather odd kind of animal. We no longer regard ourselves as the purpose of the whole cosmos. This is surely progress and not something we want to go back on. We live in the modern world and it’s up to us to deal with this.

The Editor

Internet Corner

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of the Internet. It has brought about a huge revolution in communication, following the invention of the alphabet and of printing.

The Alphabet

The first revolution was the invention of the alphabet. Having a series of symbols representing the individual sounds of words was way better than hieroglyphs, that were abstract representations of each object.

Illuminated Manuscripts

Before printing, each copy of a book had to be painstakingly copied by hand, often by monks in a scriptorium. Lloyd Geering told us that a single book would be about as expensive as a farm, i.e. more than a million dollars. Books were a luxury only available to the nobility and to royalty. A serf might learn how to read but would be unable to afford even a single book. Public libraries hadn't yet been invented.

Printing

Printing dramatically brought down the cost of publication. Books, in particular the bible, became affordable to the new merchant class, greatly enhancing the effect of Martin Luther's ideas and ushering in the Reformation.

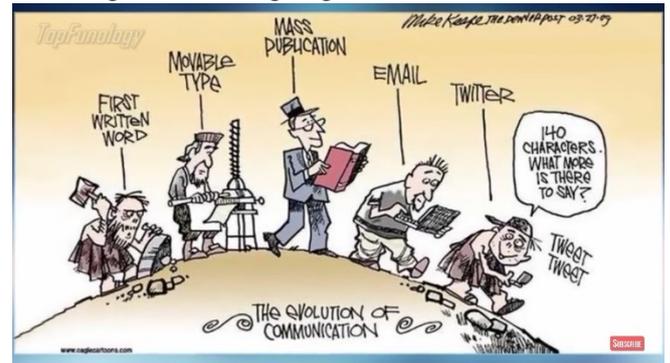
The Internet

The Internet began as a way for scientists at different US universities, who worked on military contracts, to communicate more easily with each other. Since then, it has exploded and been highly disruptive.

Email has decimated post offices. Wikipedia has destroyed the business case for the Encyclopedia Britannica, e-books have disrupted the book publishing industry, Spotify makes over 50 million songs available (for free, if you don't mind the advertising) and President Trump conducts his public relations campaign via Twitter.

Carl Miller, in *The Death of the Gods* explores the changed realities of power in the digital age. He writes (loc 24):

The old gods are dying. Giant corporations collapse overnight. Newspapers are being swallowed. Stock prices plummet with a tweet. Governments are losing control. The old familiarities are tumbling down and a strange new social order is rising in their place. More crime now happens online than offline. Facebook has grown bigger than any state, bots battle elections, technologists have reinvented democracy and information wars are breaking out around us. New mines produce crypto-currencies, coders write policy, and algorithms shape our lives in more ways than we can imagine. What is going on?



The Editor

The School of Life

theschooloflife.com

Let me draw your attention to the above website of The School of Life. This is a many-sided organisation. Its founder and chairman is the popular philosopher Alain de Botton. As well as its website, there are Youtube videos, books, classes, conferences and an in-person and online therapy service.

They write:

We believe that the journey to finding fulfilment begins with self-knowledge. It is only when we have a sense of who we really are that we can make reliable decisions, particularly around love and work. Sadly, tools and techniques for developing self-knowledge and finding fulfilment are hard to find – they're not taught in schools, in universities, or in workplaces. Too many of us go through life without ever really understanding what's going on in the recesses of our minds.

That's why we created The School of Life; a resource for helping us understand ourselves, for improving our relationships, our careers and our social lives - as well as for helping us find calm and get more out of our leisure hours.

The Editor

All about us

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" 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 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 from those with no attachment to any religious institution.

Committee

Our national Committee publishes a newsletter, maintains a website at www.sof.org.nz, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

Chairperson: Doug Sellman

email doug.sellman@otago.ac.nz

Secretary: Steve Collard

email rosteve@xtra.co.nz

Treasurer: Phil Grimmer

email grimmerphil@gmail.com

Membership Secretary and Webmaster: Peter

Cowley email prcowley@gmail.com

P O Box 321 Gisborne 4040

Other Committee members: Ian Crumpton, Brian Ellis, Jan Calvert, Andrew Calvert.

Newsletter Team

Editor: Laurie Chisholm

email laurie.chisholm1@gmail.com

mobile 0212010302

Copy Editors: Shirley Dixon, Maria Cash and Jocelyn Kirkwood.

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

Assistance is also provided by John Thornley (john.gill@inspire.net.nz) and Maria Cash.

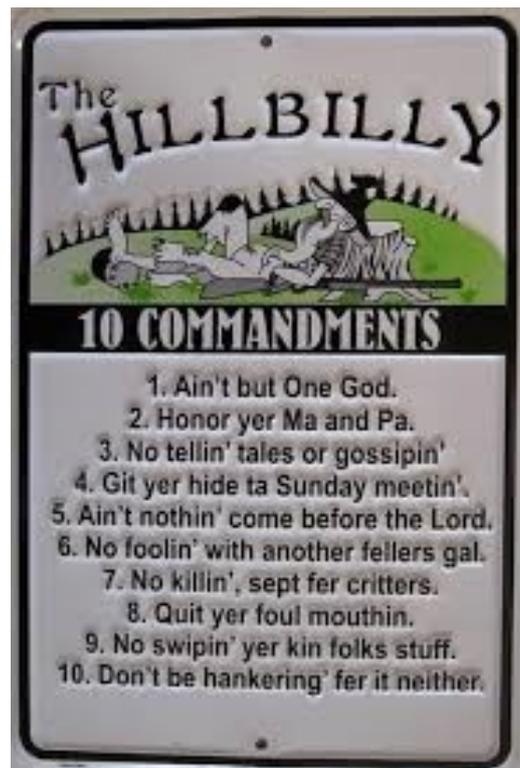
Life Members

Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Ian Harris and Noel Cheer (deceased). Also Suzi Thirwell, Yvonne Curtis and Peter Cowley.

Publication deadline for the next Newsletter is 15 November 2019.

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Conference 2019

Transforming Communities: Finding Meaning in a Consumption-driven World

Midday Friday 1 November – 4.30 pm Saturday 2 November

All Souls' Church Complex, 30 Church Lane, Merivale, Christchurch

Lloyd Geering Lecture: Bronwyn Hayward

Self-Transcendence and the Assurance of Meaning: Merv Dickinson

Making Meaning and Transforming Community: a Father and Daughter Reflect:

David Hanna/Hana Olds

▶▶ **IMPORTANT: Register and pay your registration fee by 18 October.**

The Registration Form was sent out with the previous newsletter and can be downloaded from sof.org.nz. See page 12 of the previous newsletter for the Programme and Newsletter 141 for accommodation options.

AGM 2019

The Sea of Faith Annual General Meeting will be held at 4 pm on Friday 1 November. There, financial members will be asked

- a) to vote on two alternative names and then
- b) to vote on whether they prefer the winning alternative name or our existing name (Sea of Faith).

Your committee has been hard at work evaluating a large number of possible new names and has reduced them down to two. The following puts the case for and against each name in turn. We have included the byline together with each name, to give a better impression of how each will read as a whole. The name plus byline could for example be used on the newsletter front page, but ordinarily, just the name would be used. Please read the following discussion carefully and come to the AGM at Conference ready to vote on your preferred options.

Rethinking Religion: Values, Meaning and Spirituality

Our Chairperson, Doug Sellman, argues the case for this option.

Why I think “Rethinking Religion” is a good new name for the Sea of Faith

Three key elements of a successful name for a non-profit organisation have been identified:

1. The name embodies the purpose of the organisation
2. The words are short, powerful and descriptive
3. The name is memorable.

Rethinking Religion ticks each of these boxes.

Rethinking Religion sounds solid, adult, and progressive. It states what the Sea of Faith is – a group that is dedicated to thinking, contemplating, and discussing religious ideas. In contrast, the name Sea of Faith sounds like a religious sect to many New Zealanders. Although many of us within the Sea of Faith have a strong attachment to the word faith, equating it with trust or determination, this sentiment is not shared by most outside our organisation. Many are likely on first glance to associate Sea of Faith with dogmatic belief, the very opposite of what the Sea of Faith is.

Faith and religion are off-putting words to many in contemporary New Zealand *unless* the words are linked with a sceptical sounding word. Questioning Faith could be a contender for a new name; but Rethinking Religion I think works better and grasps the central nettle of our organisation's purpose – thinking and discussing religion and religious ideas.

The idea for this new name came in part from Sir Kim Workman's Rethinking Crime

& Punishment which has turned out to be an excellent name for his group advocating for change in the Justice system.

In considering a new name for the Sea of Faith we must remember the main reason for considering a change of name, which is to assist with the turning of the tide of the slow decline in membership. By refreshing the organisation, including a change of name, we will be in a better position to attract new members. It is likely a good number of new members will be people who have exited from mainstream churches (like most of us). New members could be very well wondering “what was that all about”. Rethinking Religion might sound just what they are looking for – an organisation focused on and interested in religion but, importantly, an organisation reflecting and reasoning about religion.

We are not an organisation trying to become a new religion or seeking to become a national spiritual exploration network. We are, as the late Noel Cheer often reminded us, simply a grown-up talk fest on religion. We discuss religion rather than do religion. But this simple thing is extremely valuable providing a safe, respectful venue to discuss religion, past, present and future.

Finally, Rethinking Religion passes the Morning Report Guyon Espiner test: “We have here in the studio Mr Laurie Chisholm, spokesperson for Rethinking Religion, to explain the continuing appeal of Christian fundamentalism in New Zealand... good morning Mr Chisholm...”. Rethinking Religion in a media context sounds authoritative and solid; and having a credible media presence is likely to be an important new aspect of our organisation if it is to survive. We need a name that works well in this setting. Rethinking Religion is memorable, sounds commanding, embodies our purpose, and thus I think is a good new name.

Doug Sellman September 2019

Response

Laurie Chisholm, your friendly newsletter editor, explains why he is not so attracted to Rethinking Religion.

Perhaps I have been in Sea of Faith for too long, but ‘rethinking’ sounds old hat to me. There’s been a rethinking of the Christian tradition at least since Schleiermacher in about 1810. There’s also a long history of misguided apologetics, trying to use rational arguments to defend the Christianity you already believe in. In the process, the experience that gave rise to the Christian beliefs being argued about was lost sight of.

‘Religion’ is another one of those words like ‘faith’. American fundamentalists and zealous new atheists have ruined it. The ordinary person does not have a broad concept of ‘religion’.

I see Rethinking Religion fitting well with the agenda of Sea of Faith in its earlier days, when it was a wake-up call to a conventional religious culture. Then we concluded that religion was a human creation (rather than a divine revelation), that Jesus was a prophet or a wise man, that man had no immortal soul, that Paul was the real founder of Christianity and that many of the sayings attributed to Jesus had been put into his mouth.

Today, we realise that ‘religion’ does not lend itself to a narrowly cognitive approach (‘rethinking’); it’s not like arguing whether the Loch Ness monster exists. It is more like poetry, music, even literature. It requires an imaginative entering into the subject matter. Its language is more symbolic than objective and factual. It aims to engage us personally or existentially.

Doug replies

Laurie has raised two main concerns about the new name Rethinking Religion:

1. It is too restricting in terms of what might be explored and reflected upon; and
2. It is harking back to the Sea of Faith of the past.

1. The byline to Rethinking Religion - “Values, Meaning and Spirituality” - provides a very wide scope for the agenda of Rethinking Religion. Every conference theme to date would work well under this new name. Conference themes for the future could certainly address the following questions under a Rethinking Religion banner:

- Is organized religion good for mental health?
- How to make life and death quality experiences?
- Is “Rugby, Racing and Beer” a useful substitute for “God, Church and Communion Wine”?
- Is the threat of climate catastrophe bringing about the rise of new spiritualities?
- How just is the current justice system?
- Are personal growth and spiritual growth the same thing?

2. This is an interesting observation from Laurie who knows the history of the Sea of Faith far better than I do. However, remembering that many new members are probably going to be disaffected individuals from existing churches, as was the case at the outset of Sea of Faith, I don't see any great difference in the continuing appeal and need for an organization like ours that provides a safe, intelligent and respectful venue for adult discussion about religion and religious ideas. Indeed, the next phase of our organization arguably needs to be the development of a new cohort of younger people who feel the same excitement and sense of freedom that we have felt; the excitement and freedom that comes from thinking through spiritual, moral and philosophical issues for ourselves rather than relying on revelation and dogma. This new cohort could perhaps include a greater proportion of disaffected younger people involved in fundamentalist Christianity than perhaps has been the case over the past 25+ years; especially if we market Rethinking Religion to these people.

Quest Aotearoa: Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

Laurie Chisholm puts the case for Quest.

Quest attracts me, because there is something intriguing, fascinating and inviting about it. You can argue that Quest is really just a fancy name for search, one with an association of mystery. Indeed, we

are on a quest for truth and for insights into values, meaning and spirituality.

To be on a quest is to be on an adventurous journey, requiring effort. It is to be forward-looking with a sense of purpose. Quest is open-ended; it doesn't suggest a particular direction for the future, though the byline does give broad guidance.

Quest has religious connotations: Joseph Campbell, in the book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, believed that he had found a structure common to many religious traditions and folk tales. This he called the 'monomyth'. It describes how the hero embarks on a quest, making a journey that entails unusual experiences, transforming him and enabling him to bring great benefits to humanity.

The concern of Quest includes but is not limited to religion, as usually understood. It can be of interest to those who see themselves as spiritual but not religious. We can for example be awestruck by the conclusion of modern cosmology that we humans are stardust. In other words, the various atoms that constitute our bodies only came into existence after the first generation of stars had been born, poured out their energy and died, forming atoms heavier than hydrogen and helium for the first time. We can also see that in us, the cosmos has become aware of itself, the miracle of consciousness. Such new insights can become building-blocks for a modern spirituality.

We can for example also become interested in mindfulness, in a critique of neoliberal economics, and in Gaia (earth as a self-regulating system). In this modern secular world, we are not restricted to any (or even all) religious systems. With Quest, we can appeal to those who see themselves as 'spiritual but not religious'.

Laurie Chisholm September 2019

Response

Doug gives five reasons why he thinks “Quest Aotearoa” might not work well as a new name for the Sea of Faith

1. It isn't immediately obvious what an organisation called Quest Aotearoa is about

2. Quest sounds perhaps a little fanciful, like an episode of Dungeons and Dragons

3. Quest alludes to being a New Age spiritual movement

4. Quest is already the name of a well-known apartment chain

5. One of the words in Quest Aotearoa is mis-pronounced by the majority of New Zealanders.

Laurie replies

1. The byline (Exploring values, meaning and spirituality) makes the scope clear. It is true that Quest will fail the Morning Report test until it becomes well enough known. The name ACT (Association of Consumers and Taxpayers) gives no hint of its neo-liberal ideological basis.
2. I'm not familiar with the world of computer games, so can't comment.
3. There may be a whiff of 'New Age' about Quest, especially for those who are already suspicious of the name. I'm not worried about the Sea of Faith becoming New Age. I'm deeply skeptical about some New Age ideas, but others, for example the founding convictions of Esalen deserve serious consideration. We need to be wary of tarnishing our name with negative stereotypes.

I'm more worried about the opposite danger; turning into a Skeptics Society on religion. I spoke to a young man at a Sunday Assembly, who told me he had suddenly concluded that there is no God, so therefore, all religion was illusory. If we are going to be 'rethinking' religion, we will need to do a better and more thorough job than such a superficial rationality.

4. Having Quest Aotearoa as the expanded name serves to distinguish us from other organisations using the word 'Quest' and to help protect us against court action.
5. If this is true, we need to work on improving our Maori pronunciation.

Helping You Decide

1. What is your immediate, intuitive response. Which appeals more to you?

2. If you are looking for the outcome of our discussions to make a difference to your life, you are already on a quest.
3. Is 'rethinking' enough? Can there be such a thing as a purely rational and objective religion?
4. Look at the bulleted list of Doug's suggestions for possible future conferences. Which name fits them better?
5. Which name will be more attractive to younger generations, particularly those alienated from mainline or fundamentalist churches?

Not at Conference?

If you aren't attending Conference, you can still express your views on the alternative names. Send an email to the Secretary, Steve Collard (rosteve@xtra.co.nz). While not officially recognised as votes, your views will be taken into account, tallied and communicated to the AGM.

Constitutional Review

Your committee has also been busy reviewing our constitution, with the aim of bringing it up to date. Our constitution is essentially defined in the Rules, which you can find here: sof.org.nz/rules.pdf. It's a good idea to have this in front of you when reading about the following proposed changes. Replacement text is given in italics.

- **Registered Office.** Delete the reference to a specific address. Add the following clause: *The registered office of the Society shall be at such place as the Committee shall from time to time appoint.*
- **Objects.** The idea of creating an Affiliate membership was not agreed to.
- **Membership.** Subclause 4a to be deleted (this lists the initial members)
- **Subscriptions.** Existing sub clauses 5a. and 5b. amended to read as follows, and new sub clause 5c added.

5 a. *The annual subscription shall be proposed by the Committee and determined by members in Annual General Meeting or at a General Meeting called for that purpose.*

5 b. *All subscriptions shall be paid yearly in advance. The subscription year of the Society shall commence on the first day of the financial year with subscriptions payable on that date.*

5 c. *The Committee can reduce or waive the membership fee for individual members at its discretion.*"

- **Steering Committee:** The term "Steering" to be removed and referenced simply as the "Committee". Clause 7 to read:

a. *The general business, management and control of the Society shall be conducted by a Committee comprising not fewer than 8 nor more than 12 members.*

b. *The Committee shall be elected at each Annual General Meeting.*

c. *Committee members may serve for no more than four years consecutively.*

d. *The Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer shall be appointed by the Committee from their number.*

e. *The Committee shall have the power at any time to co-opt any number of additional members as it thinks fit, up to the limit described in 7 a.*

- **Secretary and Treasurer.** Proposed that the accounting function accorded to the Secretary be transferred to the Treasurer's duties. Amended clauses to read as follows:

a. *The Treasurer shall attend to the accounting duties and ensure that all moneys received are paid into the Bank for the credit of the Society and shall furnish the Committee at each ordinary meeting with a detailed report of the previous period's receipts and payments.*

b. *The Secretary shall attend to the clerical duties of the Society, arrange for the taking of minutes of Steering Committee and General Meetings and such other duties as are conducive to the office.*

- **Auditor.** The role of Auditor is to be replaced by a Financial Reviewer. Clause 10 to be amended as follows:

10: Financial Review: The accounts shall be reviewed by a Reviewer appointed by the financial members at the Annual General Meeting. The Reviewer shall not hold any other office in the Society but have the right to attend any meeting of the Society at which financial affairs are under discussion.

- **Annual General Meeting.** Add the text in italics to clause 11 as follows:

Notice of such Annual Notice of such Annual General Meeting stating the nature of the business to be brought before the meeting shall be sent to the last recorded address of each financial member fourteen (14) clear days prior to the date of the meeting.

- **Conduct of General Meeting.** The 21-day restriction is loosened as follows:

13 b. Any financial member intending to move a resolution bearing upon the management of the Society during the past financial year or to amend the Rules unless the resolution can be founded on the Financial Report or Balance Sheet give notice of the motion by handing same to the Secretary twentyone (21) days before the meeting and such notice of motion shall be forwarded to each financial member with the notice of the meeting. On any other matter the notice of motion must be given to the Secretary before the meeting.

- **Voting.** Sub-clause 14b. Deleted as it duplicates clause 8.

- **Accounts.** Clause 16e amended. Insert after "cheques" the words "or Internet bank authority."

New Subclause (16h) proposed.

16 h. Any income money paid for a member's services shall be decided without influence of the payee and shall be no more than appropriate in a normal commercial transaction.

- **Transition.** New Clause added.

The Society was first registered when incorporated in October 1996. These rules supersede and replace any and all previous rules of the Society.

Finding Peace While Living in Diversity

Peace, as it stands, is an overrated commodity, and I'd like to share why I've come to that conclusion. Peace, according to the online Oxford dictionary, offers us freedom from disturbance, mental and emotional calmness and an absence of war. So at a personal level, it suggests tranquillity and calmness are the qualities we can recognise as peaceful. And we've cracked the code at a societal level if we aren't at war.

Is this really a stretch target? Calm and not fighting - job done. At first glance it might seem that a simple solution is to live with people like me so that I can have the peace I am entitled to. And further, that society's role is to support me to be peaceful. Surely this is fair? And, yes, I want this for others too, as long as my peace isn't disturbed.

And then there is a change in my street; someone new, not from around here. My new neighbour seems 'odd', I see things that are unusual around their house. I notice that they have a different faith than mine and I think they worship in a different way. When I think about these differences I don't feel calm. I am not tranquil. And this is right next door!

I'd like to offer a new meaning for PEACE and contemplate how we can use it to expand our ability to still achieve tranquillity and calmness when we find change coming to our street, our work, or our town (the absence of war I'm taking as a given).

English - Oxford Living Dictionaries (circa 2020)

PEACE

Abbreviation

People Enjoying Acts of Compassion and Empathy.

In Christchurch New Zealand, PEACE has allowed many new groups to live together in harmony.

Pronunciation

Peace /pi:s/

The first thing you might notice in the definition of PEACE is the concept of taking (and receiving) action. When we think about the current definition of peace, there is a passive quality to it. One of the dictionary examples for the word is 'he just wanted to drink a few beers in peace'. It comes with the idea of 'being left alone' - to be untroubled by others. Another very common usage is 'Rest in Peace'. We are certainly calm and tranquil once we are dead. The theme is to be undisturbed, untroubled - by another.

Which creates the question - why was the other disturbing, or troubling to us? What is it about certain aspects of other people that we find so threatening? As a species we seem to be threatened by differences in many guises - race, gender, sexuality and gender association, religious beliefs, parenting beliefs (e.g. abortion vs pro-life, vaccination vs not). And of course the list goes on.

Within our society these differences seem to be becoming more noticeable, especially as our community becomes more diverse. And it's not only new people, there seems to be a rise in conversations about gender association in young people, which makes them 'odd' too, with 'odd' appropriately standing in for another abbreviation, 'Other, Definitely Different'.

Other, definitely different. When we share 99.9% of our DNA the part that we are finding odd must be found in the 0.1%. The rest is all the same. So we wave a red flag at 0.1%, and feel disturbed and threatened. Instead, why can't we wave in greeting to the 99.9%?

Did you know that in CGI (Computer Generated Images) animation it has got to the point that we can generate extremely life-like animations for films. We don't see them on the big screen as early audience testing showed that people found these very close to life images disturbing. When we see an image that is very like us, but not quite the same, we find it disturbing. When we see

another who is very like us, but not quite the same, we are disturbed.

Being disturbed, as a sensation has a purpose, it is a signal. It signals that there is something in the situation that will change me in some way. Perhaps change what I believe, what I value, how I think. And, if I have associated those beliefs to my self-identity, then literally, I am at risk.

This risk creates a secondary emotion which varies from person to person - fear, anger, or excitement and eagerness. Hang on - fear or excitement? Anger or eagerness? How can that be a choice? And yet it is.

Comfort and a sense of equilibrium (peace) are important in our life story as times and places where we rest and consolidate. What we sometimes forget is that comfort is a step before stagnation. We can only rest so long before we decay. And then a fresh burst of new energy is vital for our own wellbeing. We have just forgotten the sensation that comes with the new energy, being disturbed, and sometimes we label it as something to be avoided.

Finding ourselves (or putting ourselves) into situations where we feel disturbed is simply a sign that we are ready to grow and change (even if parts of us are scared or angry). We have a choice to resist that change by making the other wrong. Or we can embrace growth by enjoying their differences and being open to the changes that will ultimately increase our humanity and increase our ability to find new places of comfort, and a new, more robust, equilibrium.

The irony of the process is that when I feel disturbed all I want is to be left in peace. Yet it is in that moment that I need to reach for my tools of PEACE, rather than sitting back and hoping for peace. In PEACE I take and receive actions, from a place of compassion and empathy, and embrace the change that is my own evolution. Over time, with practice, I feel less disturbed. I may even come to enjoy the process. And with that joy, comes the peace I was seeking.

Linda Curtis

Religious Fasting

I recently undertook a review of religious fasting for a presentation on fasting at the Sunday Gathering in Christchurch. Below are the highlights of what I found out. I thought fasting would be a significant feature of all the major religions. I was only partly right.

The big four religions of the world are Christianity (2.1 billion), Islam (1.3 billion), Hinduism (900 million), and Buddhism (376 million). Three smaller religions are Sikhism (23 million), Judaism (14 million) and Taoism (12 million).

Christian Fasting

Christian fasting can involve abstaining from food, drink, sleep and sex in order to turn attention away from the body and focus on God. Fasting isn't a requirement but is recommended, particularly when combined with prayer. It is traditional for Christians to give up something at Lent – the forty days prior to Easter in remembrance of Jesus' forty days fasting in the desert following his baptism, in synchrony with Elijah's and Moses' forty days of fasting. Many Saints fasted for long periods; for example, St Francis (1182-1226) received the stigmata of Jesus during a forty day fast. The Catholic tradition of not eating meat on Fridays is a form of religious fasting.

Fasting During Ramadan

In Islam, fasting is mandatory during the holy month of Ramadan (the ninth month of the Islamic calendar) and recommended at other times as well. It involves abstention from all food, drink, intimate conversation and smoking from sunrise to sunset, and is viewed as an act of obedience to God with the purpose of self-discipline and empathy for the poor. Failure to engage in fasting during Ramadan without a reasonable excuse is considered "a grave sin". Excused are children, the insane, and frail elderly, while the sick, travellers, and women who are pregnant, breast-feeding or menstruating are excused but are required to make up the fasting time at a later date.

Fasting in Hinduism

Fasting is a major feature of Hinduism but is flexible, ranging from light restrictions to extreme abstentions, the choice of days and the method of fasting depending on the community, the family or the individual. The most commonly observed fast, Ekadashi, occurs approximately twice a month, on the eleventh day of each ascending and descending moon. Another important fast is at the beginning of the year, in honour of Shiva. During the months of July and August many Hindus adopt a vegetarian diet and fast on Mondays and Saturdays until the evening. Many Hindu women fast on Mondays in order to have a good husband.

Buddhism

Buddhist monks and nuns generally don't eat after the midday meal each day. However, this is not considered fasting, but rather a spiritual practice aiding meditation and good health. Fasting is practiced at times by lay Buddhists during times of intensive meditation, such as during a retreat but overall fasting is not a feature of Buddhism. In fact the Buddha's spiritual awakening occurred on breaking a long fast rather than during one. He had come to the realization that desire was at the root of suffering and decided to stop eating to quell desire and gain liberation. However, despite six years of struggle including long fasts he didn't achieve Enlightenment. He is said to have gained strength through eating following a long fast and on doing this realized Buddhahood and subsequently taught the middle way of living.

Sikhism

Sikhism does not promote fasting for spiritual purposes. Sikhs believe that God has given humans a body - the temple of the soul - which needs to be nourished and cared for. Guru Nanak the first Guru (1469–1539) and founder of Sikhism said: "Penance, fasting, austerity and alms-giving are inferior to 'The Truth'".

Fasting in Judaism

Yom Kippur, the most sacred day of the Jewish calendar, is a day of fasting when no food or water is consumed for 25 hours. Yom

Kippur means "Day of Atonement" and fasting is a vehicle for atonement when believers spend the day repenting for their sins before God and asking for forgiveness. Yom Kippur comes from when the Jewish people were wandering in the desert for 40 years after enslavement in Egypt and began worshipping a golden calf instead of Yahweh. The day Moses returned from climbing Mt. Sinai where he had gone to ask for God's forgiveness for this idolatry became known as Yom Kippur.

Taoism

The practice of *bigu* in Taoism can be traced back to before the Qin dynasty in China, around 2,200 years ago. *Bigu* (avoiding grains) is like a modern health "detox" but goes deeper than a simple body cleanse, aiming to also increase the spiritual awareness of the person, considered the first step towards immortality. Meditation is viewed as an essential part of the process through fostering awareness of the body's changes during fasting. *Bigu* lasts 10 days to a month and is accompanied and aided by special Chinese herbs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the purposes for fasting vary widely according to the religion and include: honouring God, achieving a closer relationship with God, remembering God's forgiveness of sins, personally atoning for sin, deepening spiritual awareness, developing self-discipline and empathy, getting a good husband, and cleansing the body. But note: Buddhism and more particularly Sikhism don't advocate fasting.

I wonder if fasting will become an integral aspect of post-Enlightenment religions and spirituality as scientific evidence for the health benefits of fasting further accrue.

Doug Sellman

Advocate of fasting for health

Email doug.sellman@otago.ac.nz for a copy of "A Brief Guide to Fasting for Health"

Book Review

Religions in the Modern World

Religions in the modern world: traditions and transformations. Edited by Linda Woodhead et al. Routledge 2002.

This is an interesting survey of the situation of religion in the contemporary world. It has a variety of contributors and is edited by staff of the religious studies department of the University of Lancaster. It aims to be a textbook for students of religious studies but would interest a much wider readership. Far from showing a merely archival interest in the diversity of religious thinking in our historic past, it aims to point up the continuing role of religion. The approach is sociological rather than theological or philosophical; in other words, it explores the function of religion in the lives of individual and groups, rather than trying to distil doctrines or a particular essence from each religion. The book is intentionally international and tries to escape a centre of gravity focussed on Europe or the US.

Traditions and Transformations

The book is divided into two parts. The first, Traditions and Transformations, looks at major individual religious traditions. I especially appreciated the surveys of Hinduism and Buddhism. Already here, it is looking at the way each tradition has responded to modernity.

Themes and Trends

In part 2, Themes and Trends, the book takes an inter-religious look at each theme. Peter Berger, once a true believer in secularisation, but now a skeptic, argues that Europe is the exception rather than the rule, so that one shouldn't generalise about secularisation from the European experience. Other articles look at religion in relation to globalization, politics, and women. Paul Heelas argues that the movement is not from religious to secular but from religious to spiritual. The New Age

movement is just one example of life-spiritualities that are emerging. Even Pentecostal and charismatic movements can be regarded as modern. In them, personal conviction counts more than doctrine, the faith of ordinary members more than the teaching of the leaders. They address personal needs and have a therapeutic intent, especially in small groups that are often a feature. They still have a Christian frame of reference, but this has been detraditionalized.

The Editor

Can 'Faith' be Saved?

Can 'faith' be saved? By that I mean the word itself not the reality to which the word points. It seems that American fundamentalism and polemical new atheists have succeeded in ruining the word. And way back in 1956, Paul Tillich wrote:

"There is hardly a word in the religious language... which is subject to more misunderstandings, distortions and questionable definitions than the word "faith" ... Today the term "faith" is more productive of disease than of health. It confuses, misleads, creates alternately scepticism and fanaticism, intellectual resistance and emotional surrender, rejection of genuine religion and subjection to substitutes. Indeed, one is tempted to suggest that the word "faith" should be dropped completely; but desirable as that may be, it is hardly possible. A powerful tradition protects it... So, for the time being, the only way of dealing with the problem is to try to reinterpret the word and remove the confusing and distorting connotations, some of which are the heritage of centuries.

Paul Tillich *The Dynamics of Faith*

The Editor