

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK

Newsletter No 6. March 1994

Steering Committee

At a meeting in late January Jane Griffith reported that, to that date, 323 people, counting husbands and wives had paid subscriptions to the Newsletter.

It was agreed that, regardless of the joining date, annual renewals will not become due until September, the time of the Conference. Then, as the main outgoing costs are for the newsletter, subscriptions will be set at \$10 per address. Those receiving this newsletter, who have not yet paid a sub will be informed with this Newsletter that this will be their last unless they indicate, with a subscription, that they wish to continue. Those who have made substantial donations will continue to receive the newsletter regardless.

The committee has begun to plan the annual Conference for Hamilton, September 2-4. Please keep this in mind.

A promotional leaflet for SOFN is being investigated.

Overseas Visitors

Our links with the UK SoF Network were strengthened by two visits during January. Ruth Robinson, widow of John Robinson of "Honest to God" fame, was in New Zealand visiting cousins and spent some time with the editor.

On study leave in NZ were Stephen and Pam Warnes. Stephen is vice-chairman of the U.K. SoF steering committee and is a village vicar a few miles from Canterbury, (in Kent). Pam is South African by birth. She conducts retreats. Our NZ steering committee spent an evening with them both.

News from SoF (UK)

Membership is now well over 500. It is now five years since it

was set up and ten years since the BBC SEA OF FAITH TV documentary. SCM is now publishing a second edition (with new preface) of Don Cupitt's book Sea of Faith, which accompanied the TV series.

What is SOF policy?

David Boulton, Editor of the Magazine of the [UK] SOFN, answers those who ask what is the SOF policy by saying, "We do not try to hammer out an SoF 'policy' on this, that or anything. We discuss, and we agree sometimes, disagree sometimes. We learn from each other and constantly adjust our own sights as we learn.

There would be no point in exploring the implications of accepting religious faith as a human creation if we all agreed on what those implications were: implications moral, political, practical, philosophical. We explore together precisely because we recognise how much we have to learn in our diversity.

And there would be no point in promoting creative, human-centred religion, and affirming religious language and symbolism as expressions of our human values and human spirit, if our feet were all in the same starting-block and our minds in the same mould.

We have no corporate policy, no creed beyond our common understanding that religion, like art and science, is made by human communities. We think that's a useful insight in a world which clings to dangerous tribal gods."

Regional Groups

Although we do not have a complete or wholly accurate picture of the operation of regional SOFN discussion groups, the following list, with contact addresses, has been

compiled, so that recipients of this letter who are interested in joining such a group may make contact with the one nearest to them.

Far North: Stewart Anderson, P.O. Box 475, Kerikeri
Northshore: Clyde McLaren, 35 Craig Rd., Milford, Auckland 9
Auckland: (meets in Remuera), Barbara Miller, "Longbarn", Ngurahana Ave., RD3, Albany
Hamilton: Wilf Ford, 122 Totara Drive, Hamilton.
Otorohanga: Bill Johnstone, R.D. 5, Otorohanga
Katikati: Kath Kenyon, 11 Riverlea Cres., Katikati
Tauranga: Basil Kings, 60 Tilby Drive, Tauranga.
Te Puke: Suzi Thirlwell, P.O. Box 262, Te Puke
Wanganui: R & K Douglas, 76 Virginia Rd., Wanganui
Napier: Alan Goss, 4 McDonald St., Napier 4001
Hutt Valley: Brian King, 49 Tilbury St., Lower Hutt
Kapiti (Ephesus): Bee Salmon, 15 Moa Rd., Raumati Beach, (298-4992)
Mana (Porirua Basin): Irvine Roxburgh, 3 Picket Boat Lane, Whitby, Mana, Wellington.
Wellington (Ephesus): Ian Harris, 88 Evans Bay Parade, Balaena Bay, Wellington.
Blenheim: Allan Herron, 9A Manor Place, Blenheim.
Christchurch: Clive Pearson, 9 Puriri St., Riccarton, Christchurch
Timaru (Ephesus): John Meredith, 49 Broadway Avenue, Timaru.
Timaru: Bob Hayward, 9 Waipori Place, Timaru
Dunedin: Mae Cairns, 411 Moray Place, Dunedin.
Invercargill: Cliff Broad, 73 Russell St., Invercargill

Are there any volunteers to convene discussion groups in New Plymouth, Palmerston North, Nelson?

Brief reports of meetings already held this year have come from Remuera, Napier, Mana and some Ephesus groups.

Study of the Sea of Faith

The editor (under another hat) is supervising an M.A. thesis in Religious Studies at Victoria University. The topic is the rise of the Sea of Faith Network. (This choice was made on the initiative of the student and was not on the suggestion of the editor!). He has asked for the following to be included in this Newsletter.

"My name is Hugo Vitalis. I am beginning my MA thesis in Religious Studies at Victoria University. I intend to make the Sea of Faith Network (NZ) the subject of my thesis. I wish to examine the key factors in the appeal of the SOF, and the religious (or philosophical) direction developing within the Network. In order to examine these aspects I will be approaching central figures in the Network for face-to-face interviews. However, to get a full, comprehensive picture of the Network I would also like to send a mail-out questionnaire to the wider membership. Therefore, over the next few months I will be asking some of you for your participation in my project. Participation is completely voluntary and entirely confidential. However, I do believe this to be an important and interesting area of study and I would really appreciate your help! A summary of findings will be made available to the Network on completion of the thesis.

Thank you for your consideration - Hugo Vitalis."

As it is the policy of the Steering Committee not to make address lists freely available to any outside of the Network, the Committee at its next meeting will examine the best way of meeting the student's request without intruding on the privacy of subscribers.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM MEMBERS

The editor welcomes short contributions from members on any topic, or book, which would be of particular interest to the SOFNetwork. John Maindonald has sent the following review (heavily edited because of space) of:

Barbara Thiering, Jesus the Man, a New Interpretation of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Doubleday, 1992.

Thiering claims astonishing and extravagant connections between the Essene Community and Christianity. She argues that if one makes her identifications, then the whole jigsaw fits together. Much of the book reads like a series of bald assertions.

The Teacher of Righteousness was John the Baptist. The Wicked Priest was Jesus. Jesus was married twice, first to Mary Magdalene (which ended in divorce) and subsequently to Lydia. There were three children from the first marriage.

Thiering's hypothesis depends on the use of the pesher method of interpretation to provide the crucial key to the understanding of the Gospels and Acts. By finding the necessary codes and giving the interpretation to which this leads, statements, words and events that are otherwise mysterious come together, she claims, into a coherent story.

One must ask: "Are her tests sufficiently rigorous? Has she written the rules for testing her hypothesis so that anyone with sufficient inventiveness, could provide an interpretation along the lines that she gives?"

If Thiering is right, mainstream scholarly views on the literary origins of the Gospels and Acts are turned upside down. Barbara Thiering requires a first century date for the Scrolls that mention the Teacher of Righteousness. Most scholars have preferred an

earlier date".

Books of Interest

Some will have already heard one or more of the five BBC audio-tapes of the five talks broadcast last March to mark the 30th anniversary of John Robinson's Honest to God. These have now been published by SCM, in a book edited by the John Bowden, under the original title of Thirty Years of Honesty. It also includes an introduction by David Edwards, the SCM editor who published Honest to God, and some statements made immediately after its publication by Robinson, David Jenkins and others. The Remuera Discussion group has already decided to make it their study book this year and this year's Easter lectures of St. Andrew's Trust are focusing on it.

Don Cupitt's most recent book After All, was published this month by SCM and the editor has received an advance copy. Don first discusses the "emergence of Post-Christianity". He argues that since "Christianity contains within itself an impulse to self-criticism", post-Christianity is still a form of Christianity but it is one which is "being experienced as a religious liberation".

Don sees the need to reinvent a sort of metaphysics, in the "sense of sketching the view of the world and the human condition that a reasonable person might currently hold", and one chapter, called "How it is", (half of the book), is taken up with this. This is not always easy reading but there are so many challenging things in it that it is worth reading more than once.

Don makes much of the fact that we see and understand everything through the grid of human language (itself a human creation). He says he has "tried

to develop an antirealist vision of the world and the self, as a solution to the problems left by the demise of the traditional realistic religious belief".

To this end he has "redescribed religion as a way of world-affirmation and life-affirmation...Religion was always supposed to be a way of preparing for death and overcoming the fear of death, and I have argued that this can be done by making the world so beautiful that one can die content". He points out that Jesus, in speaking of the Kingdom, did not envisage a peaceful restored Eden but "on the contrary the Sermon on the Mount envisages the continuation of stress and conflict, persecution and suffering". But Jesus "promises joy in affliction: no more, but no less than that".

John Shelby Spong, Resurrection: Myth or Reality?, Harper, San Francisco, 1994. An advance copy of this has just arrived, to herald the visit of John Spong during July. The book will be the subject of a day seminar at Victoria University, in July 23. John Spong will also deliver lunch hour lectures at St. Andrew's Wellington on July 21, 22, and meet the Wellington Ephesus group. Details of his lectures elsewhere will appear in later newsletters, as will also a review of his book.

James Veitch, The Origins of Christianity and the Letters of St. Paul, Colcom Press, 1994.

Jim Veitch, Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Victoria University, is preparing a new translation of the New Testament, placing the books in the chronological order in which modern scholars believe them to have been written. This is the first of four volumes, the second to be printed shortly. Each book is prefaced by a short

introduction and the translation concentrates on trying to arouse in the reader the kind of emotions the first readers may have felt. It is very much in the contemporary idiom and has a racy freshness about it.

SOFN Reading List

Now available at Epworth Bookshop, P.O. Box 6133, Wellington are (as discussed in earlier newsletters):

Anthony Freeman, God in Us, A Case for Christian Humanism, SCM, 1993. \$26.95.

Thirty Years of Honesty, \$26.95

Soon to arrive are:

David Hart, Faith in Doubt, Mowbray, 1993. (This will be discounted to SOFN members).

Karen Armstrong, A History of God, Heineman, 1993. (Expected in paperback about May)

All these would be found useful for group discussion.

Also useful for discussion groups are the following publications of St. Andrew's Trust, available for \$10 plus post, from P.O. Box 2503, Wellington.

Don Cupitt, Rethinking Religion.

Cupitt, Spong, Geering, with Neville Glasgow, (Radio interview), Frontiers of Faith.

Lloyd Geering, Crisis in the Christian Way, Lunch hour

lectures from last October, scheduled to be delivered in shortened form over the radio Concert Programme, later this year.

Coming Seminars

"The Old Testament in Today's World", March 26: Victoria University, and April 16 at Auckland University.

The next two newsletters are planned for May and July. Any material or news you have to offer should be sent to the Editor:

Lloyd Geering,
5B Herbert Gardens,
186 The Terrace,
WELLINGTON.