

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK

NEWSLETTER NO.8 AUGUST 1994

2nd National Conference

At this time of writing, about 170 are already enrolled for the Conference at Bryant Hall, Hamilton, September 2-4.

John and Gillian Denny have devoted much time and energy to the project and most of the work of the Steering Committee since the last Newsletter has been the arranging of some 20 workshops to be held on the Saturday. These cover a wide variety of topics, from which participants will be invited, during August, to nominate their priorities for the two they wish to join.

Some adjustments have been made to the original draft programme which was distributed. The lecture by Alan Webster will open the Conference and that of Lloyd Geering will be on the Sunday morning, prior to the Celebration which will close the Conference. Following the successful pattern established last year, each of the Workshops will be expected to provide for the Celebration a contribution of two to three minutes in the form they deem most appropriate. This will enable the rest of the Conference to experience the gist of what they were doing.

The holding of a short business meeting on the Saturday afternoon is a practical necessity to review and approve some basic organisational details of the Network, such as finance, but it is intended to restrict these to a minimum. In particular we do not wish to have valuable time consumed with the kind of constitutional wrangles which beset so many AGM's. For this purpose there is no intention to provide the Network with a constitution (as the UK Network is doing this year). To facilitate the business and the discussion of future planning the chief issues

are set out in a statement accompanying this Newsletter. The chief issues will be the site of the next Conference and the location of the appropriate committees.

EXPLORING THEIR FAITH

This is the title of a report received by the Steering Committee from the Christian Research Association of Aotearoa New Zealand, who had been given permission to circulate a questionnaire at the First Sea of Conference, September 1993. Of the 211 present 130 completed the questionnaire. It was assumed by the researchers that those attending the Conference "were likely to be thoughtful articulate people" and it was hoped to gain some indication as to what attracted people to the Sea of Faith Network and learn what light this may show on the current state of the Churches.

Here is a brief summary.

More than 80% of participants were 50 years of age and over and this raises but does not solve the question of why those under 50 are relatively few both in the SOFN and in the churches (except the Pentecostal type of church). Though females slightly outnumbered males, they were much more in balance than in the churches, where females often outnumber males by three to one.

Ninety per cent claimed they have been exploring their faith for more than five years, but while 42% saw the SOFN as an alternative to the church community of faith a larger number did not see it that way. Less than 20% conceive God in anything like the traditional image of a divine person.

Although 95% have been actively involved in church life in the past, only 18% claim high involvement now, 20 % have no

involvement at all and the rest vary between these extremes. Asked whether the Bible helped to make sense of life, 75% answered in the affirmative and 22% in the negative.

Some of the issues which the researchers see as arising from this survey are: What is the difference between beliefs and faith? What are the implications for those churches which require assent to orthodox beliefs as a pre-requisite for holding office? What are the boundaries of exploration into more truth? What are the implications for the contemporary communication of the Gospel? How does one deal with this kind of diversity if it is present in a local congregation?

When Hugo Vitalis has finished his research (see last Newsletter) it will be interesting to see if it differs in any significant way from the above. Incidentally, Hugo has received a very good response to his questionnaire, nearly 80%, and is very grateful to SOFN members.

News from Local Groups.

Reports of regular activities have come from North Shore. Auckland (Remuera), Hawkes Bay, Dunedin, Wellington (Ephesus), Kapiti (Ephesus), Timaru (Ephesus). SOFN groups have started at Wanganui, Masterton and Mana.

Auckland has an attendance of about 30 and keeps in contact with an even larger group by means of its own Newsletter. It has discussed *Thirty Years of Honesty* (see earlier Newsletter) and is planning to study John Spong's *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*

The Wellington Ephesus Group meets twice a month and is spending a week-end together studying the Joseph Campbell video series *The Power of Myth*. It has discussed Colin McCahon, entertained Bishop Spong and his

wife, and plans to discuss the feminist theology conference held at Tauhara in May, "Reclaiming Worthship", "Ephesus as Community", to share a meeting with the Kapiti Ephesus, "Networks of Identity", to go Walkabout at the end of November, and to celebrate "An Ephesus Christmas" in December.

The Timaru Ephesus has organized a day seminar led by Lloyd Geering on August 13.

The Dunedin group meets twice a month in Cameron Centre and reports as follows: About 25 members attend. At the first meeting many topics for discussion during the year were suggested. The most popular were :- 1. What do we mean by God? 2. The New Physics. 3. Essential Christology - Can we do without Christ? 4. Honest Worship. 5. How to live a Christian life without feeling miserable. 6. The Changing Face of Ethics. 7. Re-interpreting Christian Tradition. 8. Spirituality and the family, the State and groups. For each of these topics three or four members have agreed to organise, prepare and run the meetings. The presentation therefore differs for each meeting and the outcome has been lively and often provocative, opening further lines of enquiry and giving encouragement to individual thought, study and meditation.

Visit of Bishop Spong

Bishop Spong spent a very busy ten days in N.Z. lecturing to crowded auditoriums in Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. His own Anglican communion appears to have supported his visit in some centres and been quite critical of it in others.

Prior to Bishop Spong's visit to Wellington, Archbishop Brian Davis published an article in "The Dominion" intended to raise doubts about Spong's

credibility as a scholar. He himself defended what he called the New Testament witness to the Resurrection understood as "an objective supernatural event that occurred inside history".

He then quoted a number of scholars whose reviews of Spong's books are strongly critical. The Jesuit scholar, Gerald O'Collins, wrote a particularly vicious review in the *London Tablet*, attacking the author rather than the book. O'Collins conceded that Spong "seems a kindly, caring, prayerful person but this and lots of fine rhetoric cannot make up for the lack of scholarship and critical judgment shown throughout his book". He then proceeded to list some of the many errors he found in the book and ended by advising the bishop to show his next book to some real experts before he goes ahead with publishing it.

When scholars and ecclesiastical leaders attack others in an emotional and personal way like this it is often a sign that the defence of their own cherished beliefs is not as assured as they would like it to be.

There is no doubt that three of the themes expounded by Bishop Spong are debatable. They are: (i) that the disciple Judas was not an historical figure but a fictional creation of the early church, who personifies the then emerging spirit of anti-Semitism, (ii) that Jesus was a married man, his wife being Mary Magdalene, and that this fact became gradually suppressed in the evolving tradition, and (iii) that the Easter narrative was shaped in part by the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. Spong consistently emphasized that these theories were unproven; but he impressed his hearers by the number of clues to be found in the biblical text, which make them

very plausible. It is often not appreciated outside of the academic world, and sometimes not even within it, that as soon as the Gospel material is acknowledged to have come from late oral tradition and can no longer be treated as eye-witness historical evidence, all sorts of reconstructions become at least possible. Thus one cannot simply reject out of hand the reconstructions of Spong or of anybody else just because they conflict with the traditional picture; only calm and honest discussion will enable us to make progress in understanding Christian origins.

One of the criticisms made of Spong by biblical scholars is that he writes and speaks as a preacher rather than as an impersonal and objective scholar. His lectures and books are also testimonies of faith. Even Brian Davis acknowledges that "Spong is a lively, provocative and gifted communicator with a genuine desire to make faith in Christ meaningful in the contemporary world". In view of this it seems strangely ironical that the Archbishop regarded his fellow bishop as a threat to Christian faith rather than as a valuable ally.

Books of Interest

Accompanying this Newsletter is a flyer announcing a new book by Lloyd Geering, *TOMORROW'S GOD, How We Create Our Worlds*, published by Bridget Williams Books, and to be launched at St. Andrew's-on-the-Terrace, Wellington, on 21st August at 2.30 pm. Ross Stevens will chair the launching and discuss the contents of the book with the author. All interested are invited to attend. The book will also be available at the SOFN Conference, probably at a small discount.

Herewith you also receive a flyer concerning a new

publication of the St. Andrew's Trust entitled *CREATING GOD: Re-imagining the Christian Way in a secular world* and written by Ian Harris, currently chairperson of the SOFN Steering Committee.

Jesus, a Revolutionary Biography, John Dominic Crossan, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994 (available from Epworth Bookshop, PO Box 6133, Te Aro, Wellington, \$27.95)

This is no simple life-story of Jesus for it is now acknowledged by scholars that we do not have the historical material to write such a book. Crossan is a Roman Catholic scholar, who is Professor Biblical Studies at DePaul University in Chicago. He has spent "25 years of scholarly research on what actually happened in Galilee and Jerusalem during the early first century" and in 1991 published his findings in *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, of which this book is a more popular version. He concludes that the stories of Jesus' birth are legends created to link him with Jewish prophecy, that the Resurrection of Jesus is a myth, meant to show how his teaching and example endured in the lives of his followers, and that Jesus himself was more radical and threatening than any political revolutionary of his time or since because he espoused absolute equality in a society segregated by class and gender. It is a most exciting book to study and digest.

When it says that "the popular version of Moses' birth served Matthew as the model for the birth of Jesus" he is describing the process which Spong refers to as midrash. There are thus are certain similarities between this book and those of Spong. This is certainly no less radical in its conclusions.

Since attention was previously drawn to Karen Armstrong's recent book *A History of God*, readers may be interested in her two earlier, biographical books. In *Through the Narrow Gate*, she provides a fascinating description of her seven years of life as a nun in the convent. In *Beginning the World* she writes a very frank and illuminating account of the difficulties she faced in becoming adjusted to life in the outside world as an Oxford University student. Both books are very interesting and throw a good deal of light on what has come to interest her in her later books.

To date these include:

The First Christian: St. Paul's Impact on Christianity, Pan Books, 1983 (this accompanied a TV documentary she prepared for BBC); *The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West*, Elm Tree Books, 1987; *The English Mystics of the Fourteenth Century*, Kyle Cathie, 1991.

Renewal of Subscriptions

September 1 is the renewal date for the annual subscription of TEN DOLLARS for the Newsletter. It is hoped that all who attend the Conference will take the opportunity to pay Jane then. Others should send their subscription to Jane Griffith, 82 Kinghorne St., Strathmore, Wellington. (Any who have joined the Network only in the last two to three months are not due for renewal).

The next newsletter is planned for October. It is hoped to provide a summary of the activities of the Conference. Any material or news you have to offer should be sent to the Editor:
Lloyd Geering,
5B Herbert Gardens,
186 The Terrace,
WELLINGTON.