

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

## SEA OF FAITH NETWORK

NEWSLETTER NO.10. . . . . MARCH 1995  
for EIGHT POUNDS per year.

### Membership

Jane Griffith reported that present membership is 629: 431 households had paid current subscription but, by February 9, 107 had still to do so, and will not receive this newsletter.

### Third Annual Conference

Planning is now well in hand for the Third Sea of Faith Conference, which is to be held at the Central Institute of Technology, Heretaunga, Hutt Valley, Wellington, August 25-7. The Steering Committee has set up a separate Conference committee, headed initially by Janet Lambie, who has also been engaged as the Conference Administrator. More details shortly.

### Don Cupitt

An invitation was sent to Don Cupitt to attend our Third Conference but he regrets that his health prevents him from such an undertaking as yet, as it has from accepting some invitations to USA. He is still writing, however. His next book, *The Last Philosophy*, should appear during March in UK and he is already working on the one to follow.

### Ronald Pearse

Ronald, the very assiduous secretary of the SoF (UK) has recently shifted to:15 Burton Street, Loughborough, LE11 2DT, ENGLAND

He has kindly become the distributor of books from New Zealand and has handled to date 156 orders of *Tomorrow's God*.

### SEA OF FAITH MAGAZINE

This quarterly magazine of the SoF (UK) is edited by David Boulton, Hobsons, Dent, Cumbria LA10 5RF. To help overseas subscribers it is now available

### Anthony Freeman

SoFer's will be interested to learn that, since being dismissed from his post by his bishop, this vicar is now living at Oxford and has taken a part-time job editing the new *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. The press release announcing his appointment added that he had received messages of welcome from both the local bishop and the parish priest. The Bishop of Oxford is the author of *The Real God*, a book hurriedly written to counter Anthony's book *God in us*. Anthony is already on the SoFnet (see next item).

### Contracting Time and Space (with Internet)

If H G Wells had any premonition of the Internet when he wrote *The Time Machine* (1895) or even *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), his scientific/social speculations might have taken a rather different turn. Today we are on the threshold of the 'Information Super-Highway' which will make text, sounds and images instantly available from across the world into our offices and homes. The Internet, which today is a world-wide interconnection of computer networks and their software linked by high-speed telecommunications, is the prototype information highway. The commonest application, electronic mail (email), provides an easily-used medium for the 'connection' of people's minds across the world, enabling news and ideas to be freely exchanged. Thus the distances that separate us and the lengthy time for personal visit or conventional mail to travel is enormously contracted. The problem of telephone communication across time zones is obviated as the messages are delivered to a computer 'mailbox' which the recipient can 'look into' when convenient. SoFers might consider both the practical and theological implications of this communications revolution.

Ralph Pannett saw this medium as a way of developing our Sea of Faith network to be more responsive and participatory (at least for those with computing resources). Following a letter published in a recent issue of the UK SoF magazine a small group of SoF members in the UK and New Zealand exchanged email addresses. Now messages are sent to a common mail list so everyone sees and may comment on any one contribution to a 'discussion'. The advantage of this mode is that it is non-hierarchical, everyone has equal access, and is part of the group, no matter their geographic isolation. So 'SoFnet' was born.

After just two weeks of experiment, with a membership of twelve (four in UK), exchanges have included personal information, comment on new books and videos, question and answer on a visiting theologian, and ideas for operating the embryonic electronic network. The text of this newsletter will be distributed on SoFnet.

To take advantage of Internet resources an individual's computer is linked by modem (a small box of electronics costing about \$300) through an ordinary telephone connection to a local computer system which is connected through the national telecommunications 'gateway' to the Internet. The user pays a subscription to a network operator for a selection of several types of services and is given an 'account' and a user address.

Any reader who has an email address and who would like to join SoFnet is encouraged to contact Ralph Pannett <pannett@met.co.nz>. Others who would like to know more about opening an email account may contact Ralph at 3 Percival Street, Wellington 6001, Phone (04) 384 4892 (evenings).

#### **Sea of Faith Resource Centre**

Suzie Thirlwell, PO Box 262, Te Puke, has kindly offered to manage a resource centre of books, tapes (audio and visual) and any other material of interest to SOFN members and groups. The Steering Committee

will shortly be sending her such tapes and material which have accumulated. Then discussion groups may apply to her for material that may help them in their programmes. It is hoped that later in the year it will be possible to include with the Newsletter the first list of what is available.

**The 8th Conference of the U.K. Sea of Faith Network will be held at Leicester, 25-27 July. The theme will be "Implications of Religious Faith as a Human Creation" and chief speakers will be Don Cupitt and Bishop John Spong.**

#### **S.O.F.LOCAL GROUPS &/OR CONTACTS**

The Tauranga Group plans to meet each month during 1995 on the third Wednesday of the month, commencing on February 15, when the topic for discussion was Unitarianism.  
(Contact: Basil Kings, 576-7665)

The Auckland Group held its first 1995 meeting on February 19, and discussed (with video) the Anthony Freeman case. From March 19th onwards it intends to use Don Cupitt's *Re-thinking Religion* as a basis for discussion.

The Hawkes Bay Group meets in the Napier Library Seminar Room (Contact: Alan Goss, 4 McDonald St., 835-9594) and has arranged a monthly programme on Sundays at 4pm in which "all members are invited to make a personal contribution from their own experience and knowledge, the general topic being "Where I am now", spiritually, theologically and any other "logically" under the sun".

In addition, on a week-night each month video cassettes will be viewed and discussed. It is hoped visiting speakers may be arranged and a public all-day seminar at the Polytechnic, as well as, on the lighter side, a mid-winter social gathering.

It is hoped to start a Group in Palmerston North. Any in that area who are

interested should contact Jane Griffith, initially.

Mana and Wairarapa Groups have joined to organize a two-day mini-conference, March 25-6 at Masterton, on The Environmental Crisis. Sessions will be led by: Barrie Allom, Helen Plume (just returned from an Environmental Conference in New York), John Newton, Irvine Roxburgh and Isabel Campbell. The fee for meals and accommodation is \$60. Numbers are limited to 24.

Contact: Barrie Allom,  
41B Cole St., Masterton.

The Christchurch Group, organized by Beverley Shalders (389-8978), Bob Perks (326-6476) and George Ridley (318-1545), has sent a newsletter to about 22 SOF members in the Christchurch area, meets at St. Ninian's Church Lounge in Puriri St. and has set up a programme to discuss at fortnightly intervals. first Ian Harris' *Creating God*, and then Lloyd Geering's *Tomorrow's God*.

The Dunedin Group of some 34, in addition to their monthly plenary meeting divide into 8 smaller groups to discuss such things as Biculturalism, Faith and Science, Meditation, Books etc.

#### **Contributions from Members**

John Maindonald has sent the following interesting response to the hymn of Carruth, published in the November News letter.

"A Human Oriented Standpoint",

The Sea of Faith Network describes itself as "an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint". An adequate human-oriented-standpoint must surely start from an understanding of human nature.

An unprejudiced view is, when we turn the spotlight on ourselves, hard or impossible. Hence the prejudice and discrimination that are based on race, colour, class, gender and sexual orientation. Stephen Jay Gould's "The

Mismeasure of Man" (Pelican Books, 1984) provides glaring examples of how badly even the supposedly scientific study of human nature has in the past often gone wrong. Fortunately, in the long run, science tends to correct itself. Claims that have obvious biases or are otherwise inadequate become a challenge to later scientists, perhaps with different biases, to do better.

Especially pertinent to those who seek a human-oriented religion is recent work that investigates how our animal ancestry affects the way we live today. Perhaps the best overview of the relevant science is Jared Diamond's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee* (Vintage Books, 1991). We are here because our ancestors, reaching back to the dawn of humankind, brought to the contest with rival groups a new and potent combination of animal urges with human intelligence. This potent mixture drives our destruction of the natural environment, our fierce rivalries, and the present huge explosion of the world's population.

We will survive as a species only if we can exploit effectively our ability to change. Sagan and Druyan in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (Arrow Books, 1993) make this point with particular force. "Whatever else may be hidden in those shadows, our ancestors have bequeathed us -within limits, to be sure - the ability to change our institutions and ourselves". Or as Robert Wright argues in "Our Cheating Hearts" (Time, 33, August 15, 1994), we have "at least the technical capacity to lead an examined life".

W.H. Carruth's hymn "A Fire-mist and a Planet", reproduced in the November SOFN Newsletter, evokes an older and more optimistic a view of evolutionary processes. Note especially the line "Some call it evolution, and others call it God". Is there any point of contact with the view of human nature that Diamond presents? Or are Diamond and Carruth at odds?

(We understand that W.H. Carruth (1859-1924) was a Congregational Minister. His hymn appears in various Unitarian hymn-books. Ed.)

Bronwyn White offers the following poem,  
composed in the Lady Goodfellow Chapel,  
SEA OF FAITH NETWORK CONFERENCE,  
September 1994

### Post-Christian Prayer

Let us give thanks  
for the stark grey beauty  
of a winter tree  
lichen-smudged  
and tipped with hint of green-  
Aging, gnarled,  
perhaps redundant  
yet standing  
staunch, on a carpet of grass  
with a backdrop  
of evergreen.

Let us give thanks  
for subtle, muted  
green and grey and fading colours  
and for the brilliance and splendour  
of carnation, camellia and daisy.

*But - who shall we thank  
for beauty and regeneration  
contrast and shadow  
for life which continues to pulse  
'though the trunk is sombre  
and the branches grope  
towards a sky  
which no longer holds an eternal  
someone to thank?*

*We thank each other  
for this time of contemplation;  
we thank the gardener who prunes and mows;  
the landscape architect, whose eye and wit  
designed this natural theatre.  
We thank those  
in our past and present  
who taught and teach us  
how to pause, look and appreciate.*

Let us give thanks  
for the stark grey beauty  
of a winter tree  
and celebrate the uncurling and unfurling in  
us

of the mystery  
and certainty of spring.

Ian Cairns wrote an excellent response to an article rather critical of the Sea of Faith, which appeared in *Candour*, a journal for Presbyterian ministers. He concluded on a personal note thus:

My background and personality type predispose me to the evangelical mode of religious faith and expression. Throughout my life I have thought of myself as evangelical. This for me meant two things:

- \* A passionate urge to discover relevant words and means for communicating faith;
- \* A responsiveness to the mystical experience which derives its dynamic from the person of Jesus.

Implicit in this mode is an openness to 'peak' or 'conversion' experiences, of which I have known several.

The most recent of these, and one of the most profound, was the one day seminar at Christchurch in August 1991, led by Don Cupitt. That for me was a powerfully integrating and life-giving occasion, affording release from uneasy and narrowing dualism's: of God and humanity, of the divine and the human in Jesus, of the bible and literature, of reason and faith.

As a result, I now see myself as non-realist evangelical! As such I believe I am in good company.

### Books of Interest

*The Universe Story* - From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era - a Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos, by [physicist] Brian Swimme and [catholic priest] Thomas Berry, Penguin 1994. (more next issue).

SOFN subscriptions (TEN DOLLARS per household) should be sent to:  
Jane Griffith, 82 Kinghorne St., Strathmore, Wellington. The next Newsletter is planned for May, 1995. Any material or news you have to offer should be sent to the Editor:  
Lloyd Geering,  
5B Herbert Gardens, 186 The Terrace,  
WELLINGTON.