

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

A recovered old Newsletter

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NZ)

NEWSLETTER 11

MAY 1995

Personal

It is with regret that we report the sudden death of Clyde McLaren, a founding and generous member of the SOFN. Leo Hobbs has supplied the following, on behalf of the North Shore SOFN Group:

"Clyde McLaren died suddenly on 22nd march, 1995 in his 72nd year. He had been convener of the North Shore SOFN Group since its inception in May 1993. The group met regularly in the McLaren home at Milford. Many will recall Clyde's frequent participation at lectures and conferences through question, comment and interjection, always in that unmistakable stentorian voice.

Our abiding memory of Clyde is of his enthusiasm, of an almost missionary zeal, not to convert people to any particular viewpoint, but that they might share his delight in enquiry and the search for understanding, and so to broaden their horizons. He was an erudite person with catholic interests in such fields as religion, philosophy, art and music, interests which he continued to pursue vigorously although not enjoying the best of health in recent years.

Clyde described himself as a humanist but such labels are no substitute for knowing someone personally. He recognized spirituality as an important human quality and acknowledged the great mysteries we encounter when we search honestly for meaning.

We are grateful for the life of this lovable man, for his openness and tolerance and the many ways in which he enriched our lives. We share a deep sense of loss with his wife, Jill, and all the family."

Jack Murray, a retired Presbyterian minister and a member of the North Shore SOFN Group, added, "Clyde called himself a humanist. In my opinion, he was a very Christian humanist, and his openness and tolerance in discussing the deepest things of life were an example and a great assistance. I thank my God, however he or she may best be understood in human words, for the opportunity of knowing Clyde. And I share the sense of loss which lies so heavily on his wife and family".

The editor not only concurs very warmly with the above tributes but has a particular reason for being grateful for that "stentorian" voice. On one

occasion he arrived in Auckland to conduct a full day's seminar only to find he had completely lost his voice. Fortunately his lecture notes were fully typed out and these were ably delivered by Clyde in a voice everybody could hear.

Third Annual Conference

Planning is well up to schedule for the Third Conference, at Central Institute of Technology, Heretaunga, Hutt Valley, Wellington, August 25-27. Registration forms accompany this letter. The Conference committee is anxious not to limit numbers, but, lest a limit becomes necessary, it is now informing all SOFN members first, before engaging in any wider publicity. Thus if you are intending to come, you are strongly urged to register as soon as possible.

A wide variety of workshops and discussion groups is currently being planned and a full list of them will be sent out with the next newsletter. Members should also remember that at the AGM, to be held during the Conference, it will be necessary to decide where the 1997 Conference is to be held (the 1996 Conference is already scheduled for Dunedin); the siting and composition of the Steering Committee is also to be discussed, as the Steering Committee is appointed for only twelve months at a time.

Academic Survey of the SOFN

During 1994 Hugo Vitalis chose the Sea of Faith Network as the subject of his thesis for an MA degree in Religious Studies at Victoria University. That work is now completed and the degree awarded. As promised, Hugo has presented to the Steering Committee a full copy of his thesis. In addition he has kindly supplied for members the following summary of his research:

"A central feature of the research involved a survey questionnaire which was sent to 370 SOFN members and elicited a 78 percent response rate. An almost equal number of males and females (142 and 143 respectively) participated in the study, with eight not specifying their gender. The majority of members are European/Pakeha (only 3 out of 293 respondents

indicated otherwise). Most respondents (82 percent) were between the ages of 46 to 75, and a further 9 percent were more than 75 years. Members are highly educated with 62 percent having completed a university qualification and a further 18 percent having some kind of tertiary or professional qualification.

Most of the membership (92 percent) indicated a previous affiliation to a church. Over the past two years there has been a significant shift to church non-affiliation (30 per cent of members are no longer affiliated to a church). However the majority of Network members continue to attend a church regularly (70 percent of members attend at least once a month or more often). Despite their regular attendance, a large proportion (60 percent) of members regard the church as becoming less relevant and less credible in the modern world.

The principal attraction of the Network for the majority (80 percent) of members is the exploration and intellectual discussion of an alternative theology with like-minded people. The "open and tolerant" environment of the SOFN meetings seems to provide those who remain active in the churches with a "safe" place to explore religious alternatives to traditional Christian theology.

The findings indicate that the majority of members are non-realist about God, in the sense that "God" is regarded as a human creation. The responses to the five survey statements which explored the concept of God in the Network fell into three distinct clusters: About 20 percent of responses to each statement were neutral, whilst 20 percent showed responses to each statement which were consistent with a more traditionalist (realist) view of God, and 60 percent consistently indicated a non-realist conception of God. The role of "God" as a link with Christianity and a symbolic focus for religious faith remains important to most members (65 percent). Similarly, the Bible is viewed as a humanly created document containing moral values which, while needing interpretation, are significant in the modern context. In summary, a non-realist-type theological approach provides a meaningful alternative to traditional realism in most Network members' religious lives.

At a more general level these results suggest that the emergence of the SOFN forms part of a wider trend away from traditional beliefs, particularly traditional beliefs about God, to be observed in New Zealand. One of the implications of this latter conclusion is that the Network will continue to grow so long as it is able to provide an attractive alternative to traditional forms of belief—a function currently achieved for SOFN members by using non-realist thinking. However, the

Network's ability to appeal to younger individuals may prove to be a key determinant in the rate and extent of the Network's growth in the long term.

Finally, to all those SOFN members who so kindly gave of their time to support this project I am very grateful and I thank you most sincerely!"

Contributions from members

WHY GOD NEVER RECEIVED TENURE AT ANY UNIVERSITY

1. He had only one major publication.
2. It was in Hebrew.
3. It had no references.
4. It wasn't published in a refereed journal.
5. Some even doubt that he wrote it himself.
6. It may be true that he created the world, but what has he done since then?
7. His cooperative efforts have been quite limited.
8. The scientific community has had a hard time replicating his results.
9. He never applied to the Ethics Board for permission to use human subjects.
10. When one experiment went awry he tried to cover it up by drowning the subjects.
11. When subjects didn't behave as predicted, he deleted them from the sample.
12. He rarely came to class, just told students to read the Book.
13. Some say he had his own son teach the class.
14. He expelled his first two students for learning.
15. Although there were only ten requirements, most students failed his tests.
16. His office hours were infrequent and usually held on a mountaintop.

S.O.F. LOCAL GROUPS and/or CONTACTS

Wairarapa and Mana Groups

Their mini-conference at "Arahura Country Lodge", Gladstone, Wairarapa, brought 18 people together for two days to focus on "**The Environmental Crisis**", and Isabel Campbell has provided the following report:

"Bruce Allom commenced with the "**Genesis Myth of Creation**", which, he proposed, is a myth telling the two stories of creation. After extension of this we were challenged to discuss "Is there freewill?" Our findings were—without free-will there is little hope.

Helen Plume's paper was read in her absence and spoke of the "**Global Environment**". This drew our attention through hypothesis and facts to the reality of global warming and its predicted effects on our land, sea and air.

"N.Z. and Environmental Destruction" was spoken to by John Newton. The years of

evolution up to the time of human population of NZ were simply displayed by pie-graph. Facts about subsequent desecrations, ie our native forests, were depressing. Here we faced the question: What can we do: personally, as a group, as a country?

"Inclusiveness or Exclusiveness" were the states that Irvine Roxburgh compared, with suitable pertinent scenarios from his own spiritual journey. For others in the group this raised questions about similar events or experiences in their lives.

In conclusion he put forward two tasks for the future: (i) creating community, (ii) contemplation and caring for the natural world.

We ended with a silent session for reflection, followed by sharing of our insights from the two days."

Wanganui

On the weekend of March 18-19 a similar mini-conference was held at the Friends' Settlement, Wanganui. Some forty people drawn from an area stretching from New Plymouth to Palmerston North, and including some from Wellington Ephesus, met to discuss, among other things, two of the workshops from the last Conference, led by Ian Harris and Terry Douglas, and to join in quaker worship.

New Plymouth

A welcome to any SOFN members in the area is extended by the "Digging Deeper" Group, which provides a forum where each person can explore in order to broaden their own horizons and their own being. They meet on Sunday afternoons at 2pm every two or three weeks and use videos or tapes to initiate a free-ranging discussion. They are currently viewing Joseph Campbell on myths. Contacts are: John Eaddy (751-1619), Hilda Bak (757-9787).

North Shore

Instead of their regular April meeting the North Shore joined a Saturday seminar held at the Takapuna Methodist Church on April 22. It was advertised as: **"Sea of Faith—style reflection and discussion on six contemporary religious issues"** and was attended by about 30. The six issues were: **"Postmodernism and Theology"** by John Salmon, **"A Feminist Looks at the Cross"** by Susan Adams, **"The divorce between Church style and lifestyles"** by Norman Brookes, **"The Current Significance of the Reform of the Mediaeval Monastery at Cluny"** by David Bell, **"Jewish-Christian Relations in New Zealand"** by Keith Carley and **"The Meaning of Life"** by Eric Laurenson.

Rotorua

Contact person is now: **Lindsay Vaughan**, 16 Windsor St, Rotorua (348-8666)

Sea of Faith Resource Centre

Suzie Thirlwell, PO Box 262, Te Puke, now manages a resource centre of books, tapes (audio and visual) and any other material for use in discussion by SOFN members and groups.

The following audio tapes are now available from her. Send a blank tape and a stamped addressed envelope for a copy.

1. Thirty Years of Honesty
 - (i) Eric James, "The Flowering of Honesty"
 - (ii) Ruth Robinson, "Life was Never the Same"
2. Thirty Years of Honesty
 - (iii) John Bowden, "A Loss of Nerve"
 - (iv) Ruth Etchells, "The Awful Truth"
3. Thirty Years of Honesty
 - (v) Alan Race, "Truth is Many-eyed".
Plus selections from BBC Radio 4, on religion
4. Faith all at Sea, Don Cupitt and Keith Ward in dialogue and on Talk-back BBC Radio 4, 1984.
5. The Heart of the Matter, Extracts from BBC news and programmes discussing the programme made on the Sea of Faith, 1992
6. UK Sea of Faith Conference, 1988, BBC interview with Don Cupitt plus Kaleidoscope, BBC 1984
7. Rethinking Religion by Don Cupitt
 - (i) Lecture 3: Restoring the Body.
 - (ii) Lecture 4: Mysticism and the Fleeting Moment.
8. God in Us, Collection of News items from BBC, concerning Anthony Freeman's publication of God in Us.
9. UK SOF Conference, 1993
 - (i) address by Karen Armstrong
 - (ii) address by Hugh Dawes.
10. UK SOF Conference, 1993
 - (i) address by Don Cupitt
 - (ii) discussion which followed.
11. UK SOF Conference, 1993 Address by Kulananda
12. Secular Ceremonies, Discussion on Secular ceremonies, BBC 4, 1991
13. A Secular Ceremony,
 - (i) The Funeral, BBC4 1991
 - (ii) The Wedding, BBC4, 1991
14. Lost for Love,
 - (i) Don Cupitt on Stanley Spencer.
 - (ii) Ronald Eyre examines the debate on the Gnostic Gospels, BBC4 1991.

15. Jesus was a Jew, Lecture by a liberal Jewish Rabbi, in St. Andrew's, Wellington.
16. Life After Death, panel discussion chaired by Sir John Marshall, including Lloyd Geering and others.
17. Christianity and Credibility, a discussion chaired by Lloyd Geering, with Wilf Malcom, John Murray, Jack Shallcrass and others.
18. Mystery, a discussion chaired by Sir John Marshall, with Lloyd Geering, John Coleman and Peter Reid (?)
19. An Age of Radical Change, Jan Schwass, for Radio NZ, interviews Lloyd Geering at the 1983 International Conference on Religious Studies.

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. (\$24.95). By uniting the expertise of a physicist with that of an historian of human culture this book provides a fascinating story of the universe from its origin until now, including the earth, the evolution of life, leading to the evolution of human culture. It is mind-boggling and thought provoking. It emphasizes our human unity with reality itself. Here are a few quotes:

"The [human] mind that searches for contact with the Milky Way is the very mind of the Milky Way galaxy in search of its inner depths".

"Our new sense of the universe is itself a type of revelatory experience. Presently we are moving beyond any religious expression so far known to the human into a meta-religious age, that seems to be a new comprehensive context for all religions".

"To glory in a rising Gross Domestic Product with an irreversibly declining Gross Earth Product is an economic absurdity".

"It is the special capacity of the human to enable the universe and the planet Earth to reflect on and to celebrate, not simply the present moment, but the total historical process that enables this moment to be what it is."

Doing Theology Ourselves, Neil Darragh, Accent, 1995 (94 pp).

This is not a book expounding Christian doctrines, as most theologies have been, but a simple guide on how to do theology, written by a priest who teaches in both Auckland and Melbourne. He wants to bring theology out of the seminary class-room to become an activity involving everybody. He describes theology thus—"Theology is about God. It is about that which is most worth living or dying for. For practical

purposes then, theology deals with those things which are most important in our lives".

Although the author is writing primarily for a Christian context and, to this end, has a chapter on "How to Read Scripture", much of the book can just as usefully apply to much broader discussion of religious and moral issues. In reading it one is reminded of Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who became the first modern theologian by making personal experience, rather than inherited church dogmas, the basis for theologizing.

Humanist Bookshop

Jeanne van Gorkom, who has recently joined the SOFN, is in charge of the Humanist Bookshop, where more than 50 Prometheus and British Humanist Association titles are immediately available. Others can be ordered with 2-3 months's delay. Rates are well below bookshop and private order prices. Booklist - \$1.00 in stamps; Prometheus catalogue available on loan. For either or both, send self-addressed A4 envelope to Jeanne van Gorkom, Humanist Bookshop, 26A Pembroke St., New Plymouth.

St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society

A new Trust publication will be available by late May, entitled, *A Faith Odyssey*, a sketch of the changing face of religion in New Zealand over three centuries, 1800-2100. This is a slightly enlarged version of a course of three lunch-hour lectures delivered in March-April this year.

If any of the Trust's publications are being ordered in bulk for discussion purposes, they can be made available at wholesale prices. (Apply through the Editor).

SOFN Subscriptions

TEN DOLLARS per household should be sent to:

Jane Griffith,
82 Kinghorne St.,
Strathmore, Wellington.

The next Newsletter is planned for July, 1995. Any material or news you have to offer should be sent to the Editor:

Lloyd Geering,
5B Herbert Gardens,
186 The Terrace,
Wellington