

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

A recovered old Newsletter

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NZ)

NEWSLETTER 12

July 1995

Third Annual Conference

At the time of writing nearly 150 have already registered for the Third SOFN Conference, at Central Institute of Technology, Heretaunga, Hutt Valley, Wellington, August 25-27. More information accompanies this letter.

Members are again reminded 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.

News from SOFN Local Groups

1. **Northland.** The Kaikohe Group invited Elaine and Lloyd Geering to spend some time with them at the end of June. Matters of common interest were discussed over an excellent dinner at the home of one of the members. On a later evening a public lecture on "Tomorrow's Spirituality" in the Kerikeri Union Church was attended by about 200 people.

2. The **Auckland** Group which meets on the third Sunday of the month at 7 pm at St. Luke's, 130 Remuera Road, has been working its way through Don Cupitt's Rethinking Religion.

3. **Tauranga.** The Group hosted an event on May 21, led by Drs Susan Adams and John Salmon and entitled "Can Feminists Swim in the Sea of Faith?" There were two sessions with finger food in between. The first session, "Testing the Water" was an examination of feminism and the Sea of Faith in the light of post-modernism.

The second, "Taking the Plunge", explored the boundaries and purposes of feminism and the Sea of faith and some suggestions for the future. Forty-eight people attended from throughout the Bay of Plenty, including Rotorua and Hamilton.

4. A group has now started at **Palmerston North**. Any further people interested from that area should contact Dr Peter Donovan

5. **Invercargill.** Daniell Philips (03-217-6995) reports that 7 members met on April 7 for the first

time and intend to meet on the second Wednesday of each month. He reports — "Now that we are launched the "crew" are getting to know one another. Peter Blake has offered to teach us how to tack efficiently as we front the winds of change and there is an air of anticipation as we leave familiar shores. The odd jibe is inevitable and well tolerated and, while this crew may lack youth, given time Black Magic will certainly be up for a challenge."

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. Send a blank audio tape and a stamped addressed envelope for a copy.

Recently added to the collection (by courtesy of Angus Black of Dunedin) has been a set of five tapes by Thomas Berry on "The Human Presence within the Earth Community? (See Books of Interest for Thomas Berry).

What is the Goal or Mission of the SOFN?

The Napier group has spent some time discussing this in the light of the statement of intent approved at the AGM, and wonders if the latter needs some amplification. Alan Goss has offered the following: "Sea of Faith aims to provide people with a framework which will help to orient their daily lives in the world and equip them to meet the demands—and the crises—of everyday living. This is often referred to as a 'world-view'.

All the great religions of the world provide their followers with a world-view. They are like road maps in that they provide people with a series of images or symbols or concepts (mile-stones) in order to help them get their bearings as they journey through life.

Many of these images, symbols and concepts, as traditionally understood, are now no longer

workable or practicable and are being re-interpreted or reconstructed (Geering, Cupitt, Kaufman) in the light of our increased understanding and knowledge of the world and our place in it.

The symbol 'God' (which is also being reinterpreted and reconstructed and will continue to be so) is a unifying and focal symbol that we share in common, regardless of our differing points of view. This symbol affirms the awe, wonder and mystery of life as well as reminding us that none of our most deeply held views, convictions or values are ever final and absolute. All our ideas about God, and our symbols and images, are human constructions which are intended to express a reality, whatever that reality might be.

Sea of Faith's goal or 'mission'—to help people orient their lives in the world—therefore affirms the continuing importance of religious thought and practice (as against any exclusive modern scientific world-view) to assist us in our continuing quest".

(Ed. Do members have any comment or alternative contributions?)

Books of Interest

Alan Goss has written the following review of *In Face of Mystery* by Gordon Kaufman, Harvard University Press, 1993.

In this monumental work the Professor of Divinity at Harvard University offers readers a thorough-going reconstruction of the Christian world-view. He does this on the premise that a major function of religions, and theologies, is to present human beings with visions of the whole of reality.

Kaufman reminds us that the traditional Christian model or worldview where God is perceived as a quasi-personal reality "out there", who has a purpose for us and tasks for us to do, who loves and cares for each one of us, is now to be found wanting, even though this picture may evoke from us a powerful response. A powerful cosmic agent can become—and indeed throughout history has often become—an authoritarian tyrant. The author painstakingly and with passion reconstructs, not a swept-up fresh coat-of-paint version of the old, but a radically new world picture from a Christian perspective.

To be fair, Kaufman doesn't reject or downgrade the familiar traditional symbols, e.g. Christ, creator, trinity etc., (our downfall has been to reify, i.e. to make "a thing" of them, to literalize them); rather he reinterprets them and shows how they can fit into and give meaning to this reconstructed model of God, the world and our place in it.

Contributions

Shirley Murray has offered the following as a response to *Tomorrow's God*.

HOW SHALL WE FIND YOU?

How shall we find You,
God who is Holy,
captured by gender, colour and code?
how shall we worship,
God of the Presence,
action and essence, meaning and mode?

How shall we know You,
God who is Wisdom,
argued by scholars, proofed on a page:
how to imagine,
God of creation,
worlds beyond thinking, here on our stage?

How shall we trust You
God in the scriptures,
filtered through lenses biased and blurred:
how to revere You
God of tradition,
cased in our churches, Word bound to word?

How shall we see You
if not in people
knit to your Nature, focused in sight -
angels and artists,
teachers and healers,
heart-and-soul people, children of light:

How shall we love You
if not as human,
loving us wholly, fleshed in our frame,
known in our hunger
known in our meeting
spirit to Spirit, naming our name.

Kaufman contends that we need a new conception of God that resonates with our modern human experience. He explores in depth the evolutionary and historical development of life on planet Earth which provides a clue to the ultimate mystery of things and which can be regarded as "meaningful" and "good". Devotion to God (traditionally Creator/Lord/Father) consists in the

attempt to live in rapport with the movements of life and history that provide the actual context of our human existence. It is to attempt to be in tune with what we discern as the nature of things, to live and to work "with the grain" of the universe as apprehended in our part of it. Our received traditions about God are therefore inadequate, even destructive, of human life and the environment. God can no longer be imagined as a personal being in the heavens above with whom we interact. Our personal relationship with God (the ultimate reality and mystery, which is trustworthy) is to be found most fundamentally in and through our interpersonal relationships with our fellow humans, and our care for the environment.

This is a very important book and, as the author concedes, a very daunting read! (461pp). A popular version would be helpful.

It is a timely follow-up to *Tomorrow's God* covering similar ground and showing how the traditional Christian symbols (esp. Christ, incarnation, Holy Spirit) need to be interpreted. They no longer fit in the overall cast of life and must change in decisive ways if they are not to die out. This calls for momentous changes by the churches - in worship, in ministry, in the sacraments, in many hymns and our attitudes to the bible. It will only happen, says Kaufman, if there is a recognition that this is a life-and-death matter for the churches. Sadly this recognition seems to be slow in coming.

The Dream of the Earth, by Thomas Berry, Sierra Club books, 1990.\$24.95

Father Thomas Berry, an American Catholic priest and scholar of the history of human culture, has been called "the most provocative figure among the new breed of eco-theologians". In these very readable essays he discusses the very serious ecological issues of our time out of a background of deep Christian conviction which has also enabled him to be more severely self-critical and radically constructive than is often the case with theologians today.

Following in the footsteps of Teilhard de Chardin he displays a deep love of the earth and of all life upon it and brings home to us the responsibilities now lying on our shoulders. Here are a few quotes:

"There is no definitive Christianity or Hinduism or Buddhism, but only an identifiable Christian process, Hindu process or Buddhist process...All traditions have their grandeur and their limitations...traditions must constantly go beyond any existing expression of themselves to new forms of expression."

The time has come for the most significant change that Christian spirituality has yet

experienced, but this change is itself part of a much more comprehensive change in human consciousness brought about by the discovery of the evolutionary process. Discovery of this unfolding process of the universe can be considered a moment of supreme significance not only for the human community, but also for the universe itself, especially in its expression on the earth as the only biospiritual planet that we know."

This book would provide an excellent basis for study groups and could be accompanied by the audio-tapes referred to above.

Knowledge of Angels by Jill Paton Walsh, Black Swan, 1995, \$21.95.

Members may have heard the radio review of this novel by a writer better known for her children's books. It is best described as a medieval fable, set on an imaginary Mediterranean island in the fifteenth century. It was short-listed for the Booker prize and has received glowing reviews. Whether all readers will agree with this assessment is open to question, but its specific interest for the SOFN is that it is focused on the problem of God.

Palinor, a castaway from an unknown land (uncannily like the modern secular world), is an atheist who enters into friendly discussion with the orthodox priests of this medieval Christian society. All the traditional arguments for the existence of God are rehearsed and the plot is made more complex by the presence of a wolf-child who has not been exposed to Christian teaching. In many respects the novel is an attempt, by means of an imaginative fable, to compare the respective modes of thought in medieval and modern cultures and to explore how they relate to one another.

The Last Three Minutes, by Paul Davies, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1994.

The author is Professor of Physics at Adelaide, and is well known for his lucid yet reliable popular accounts of modern physics (e.g. *God and the New Physics*, 1983, and *The Mind of God*, Science and the Search for Ultimate Meaning, Penguin 1992). The title of this book was probably suggested by Steven Weinberg's book *The First Three Minutes*, a popular discussion of the "Big Bang" theory of the origins of the universe. So after sketching the origins and evolving nature of the universe, Davies here explores the possible futures of the universe. Beginnings and ends have always been an important part of the Christian world-view, so since modern physics has opened up an entirely new vista, it is essential we understand something of what it can tell us.

Here is how the book ends. "When human beings embark on a project for a purpose, they have in mind a specific goal. If the goal is not achieved, the project will have failed. On the other hand, if the goal is attained, the project will be completed and the activity will then cease. Can there be true purpose in a project that is never completed? Can existence be meaningful if it consists of an unending journey toward a destination that is never reached?

If there is a purpose to the universe, and it achieves that purpose, then the universe must end, for its continued existence would be gratuitous and pointless. Conversely, if the universe endures forever, it is hard to imagine that there is any ultimate purpose to the universe at all. So cosmic death may be the price that has to be paid for cosmic success. Perhaps the most that we can hope for is that the purpose of the universe becomes known to our descendants before the end of the last three minutes".

The Last Philosophy, by Don Cupitt, SCM Press, 1995.

This book is a little different from Don's earlier ones, though not by too much. Those who have been stimulated by the others will also find this very intriguing. Those who will not like it are the professional philosophers and theistic theologians. Indeed, traditional religious thought, with its "realist" view of God and its hope for another world, is completely undermined by the argument expounded here.

There is no easy way to summarize this book. I am not sure that I understood and/or agreed with every sentence but I responded warmly to most of it immediately; I found it remarkably consistent with what I had been coming to understand about the human condition while writing Tomorrow's God, particularly in the importance it attributes to language.

If we ask Cupitt what he means by "the last philosophy", he answers, "Recognizing as we must that this is the last life we'll ever live, these bodies are the last bodies we'll ever have, and this world is the last world we will ever know, the last philosophy seeks to persuade people that there's nothing structurally wrong with the human condition...[such as that implied by the Christian doctrine of sin] ..We are no longer in transition: we are there. We have arrived at our final

Contributions

"To be is to do" - Plato
 "To do is to be" - Aristotle
 "Do be do be do" - Sinatra

Noel Cheer *et al*

destination. The world is, in a very strong sense, our world, our home".

As traditional theology assumes there is an objective God "out there", so traditional morality appeals to a natural moral law "out there", which exists independently of us. Cupitt declares this to be obviously erroneous — "our moral principles and our values everywhere presuppose our own human mode of life and social relations. So we must have invented our moralities ourselves, just as we have invented our own languages".

This is not a book to be skipped through quickly. I have now read it twice, got more out of it the second time and intend to read it again. Those SOFN groups who are looking for something meaty to study should consider this. There is enough to chew over here to keep a group going for a year or more. It needs to be discussed and challenged as well as its implications being explored.

Lloyd Geering

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

Remember that if any of the Trust's publications are being used for group study and discussion, orders of six or more can be obtained at the wholesale price. (Apply through the Editor).

Personal

Anthony Freeman has been in contact with Ralph Pannett on Internet. He still has no license to officiate as a priest, but is working four days a week as Managing Editor of "The Journal of Consciousness Studies". He is also doing some freelance writing and speaking.

SOFN subscriptions

(TEN DOLLARS per household) are due for renewal each year at the time of the National Conference.

If you are not attending Conference your sub. can be sent to: Jane Griffith, 82 Kinghorne St., Strathmore, Wellington.

Next Newsletter

The next Newsletter is planned for November, 1995.

Any material or news you have to offer will be welcome and should be sent to the Editor:

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