

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

[www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)

A recovered old Newsletter

## SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NZ)

NEWSLETTER 13

October 1995

### The Third Annual Conference

*A Report by Ian Harris,*

*Chairperson of Sea of Faith (New Zealand) Steering Committee*

The third annual conference of the Sea of Faith Network (New Zealand) attracted 232 people to the Central Institute of Technology in Upper Hutt from the evening of Friday, August 25 to the afternoon of Sunday, August 27.

Judging by the positive comments, those present particularly appreciated the stimulating lectures, variety of workshops, closing celebration and the chance to meet like-minded people from Kaikohe to Invercargill. They did not appreciate two frosty nights, compounded by the failure, despite all assurances by the CIT, of the heating system in the gymnasium where the main sessions were held.

In the opening session **Lloyd Geering** and **Abbot Ajhan Vajiro** discussed aspects of Buddhist and Christian faith. It became clear that there are big differences in the way the two faiths are responding to the challenge of modernity.

In the first conference lecture, **Dr. Val Grant**, who lectures in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences at Auckland Medical School, commended active exposure to the stories of religion as critical in the development of people who want to know what it is to lead a good life.

She highlighted three key dimensions for *Passing It On—Transmitting Values Between Generations*. They are: love and security in infancy; telling stories which have shaped our faith and linking them to action; and being open to debate ideas and values when teenagers question them.

**Lloyd Geering**, discussing *Perspectives on the Future*, noted the contrast between the future concerns of the first Christians and those felt today and said: "For them the future was not in human hands, whereas for us it is."

He also warned the network against falling into the traps of self-promotion and institutionalism, saying SOFN is "simply a very loosely-knit collection of people who feel that they have a number of things in common, though we are not quite sure what they are."

A lecture by the English theologian **Don Cupitt**, *Our Dual Agenda*, which had been delivered to the British Sea of Faith Conference in July, was read by **Noel Cheer**.

In a panel discussion on Saturday evening, **Peter Donovan**, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Massey University; **Jean Holm**, former head of the Religious Studies Department, Homerton College, University of Cambridge UK; and **Ian Harris**, Chairperson of Sea of Faith (NZ) Steering Committee (standing in for **Jill Denny**, who was ill), spoke of the hopes and hesitations of their faith journeys. **Barbara Calvert**, former Professor of Education at Otago University, also took part.

The theme developed by **Maxine and Jim Cunningham** in the Sunday Celebration (when all participants were encouraged to share something of their own life stories, developed around a sea of faith theme, rounded out with suitable shanties and motifs).

The Annual General Meeting approved a process for formulating a constitution. This will be presented for approval at the next AGM, after consultation with members of the network.

Next year's conference will be held in Dunedin from August 23 to 25, when it is hoped that **Don Cupitt**—whose *Sea of Faith* video series give the network its name—will be present. (The series started playing on TV1 on Friday October 6th at 9:05am).

Auckland will host the 1997 conference.

The text of the lectures by Val Grant, Lloyd Geering and Don Cupitt as well as audiotapes of the lectures and panel discussions are available—see the enclosed order form. After the end of November they will be available only from the SOFN Resource Centre, managed by **Suzie Thirwell**, P.O. Box 262 Te Puke.

A videotape of the addresses and the Saturday evening panel can be borrowed from Suzie.

## Conference Workshops

There were nearly thirty workshops at this year's conference. Here is a sampling of what attendees enjoyed:

**Chris Bloore**, in his refreshing workshop *Science—from Complexity to Simplicity* introduced the concept that the universe is simple, explicable and consistent. The universe is not capricious. The whole system is inherently self-organising; structures form of their own volition; flowers can make themselves; indeed everything there is can make itself; life is bound to happen. Cosmos, not God, made the world.

This being so, words like "mystery", "transcendence", "awe" and "wonder" are not qualities which reside "out there" in some unexplainable, unfathomable realm. Because we are limited human beings, mystery, awe, wonder and transcendence are feelings which we experience, arising solely within ourselves.

In his workshop *Myth and Psychology*, **Bruce Spittle** told us that myths may help us to tackle the various stages of our lives by providing ways of looking at a situation, models to follow or warnings of what to avoid. The power of myths may be greater if they are accepted in an uncritical way as being "true". By involving distant and symbolic figures, myths may make it easier for us to reflect on situations that we are involved in. Acquainting ourselves with myths may help us to see more clearly the issue that we face as humans on earth.

Psychology is concerned with our inner world of thoughts, desires and feelings. As individuals we develop and move through the stages of the life cycle with greater or lesser degrees of awareness of the reasons behind our behaviour. Biological, psychological and social factors may all contribute to how we experience our lives.

Both myth and psychology can be seen to be involved in helping us to tackle the challenge of living. Bruce drew examples from Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth*; Rollo May's *The Cry for*

*Myth*; Don Cupitt's *What Is A Story?*; and Lloyd Geering's *Tomorrow's God*.

In the workshop *Evolution, Ethics and Free-will*, which was presented by **Rob Harris**, members looked at the dynamic ever-changing nature of the environment; the impact of this on the modifications necessary in living organisms as they constantly adapt through biological evolution; and the responses required in our culture leading to cultural evolution.

The nature of the planet we inhabit is limited by its physical construction. The rocks, the earth, the seas, the atmosphere, the sun, and temperatures all set up broad boundaries within which living organisms, including people, have to live. So

we have to exist in the kind of world that was able to give rise to us. Living organisms have evolved through aeons of time adjusting to the changing conditions of the world's surface. Within the parameters of this changing world life has to modify and adapt or perish. The speed of biological change has been and remains very slow but inevitable.

Within communities, change is also observable in societies. Again, there are somewhat fixed parameters within which these changes can occur. The reality is that societies do evolve over time. However, the rate of change may be very rapid. The ethics of a society also evolve as the society moves on. Although more flexible, these changes are also limited by external parameters to some degree. So, ethics

arise from our social experience and they are contained within the boundaries of our experience.

Within the broad constraints of the physical, social and biological environments, individuals have options open to them. Free-will can be thought of as a bundle of options open to the individual. Free-will does not exist in a fixed or pure form. Again, it is subject to evolution over time.

### Workshop 11 *The Sea of Faith Towards 2000* raised issues rather than conclusions

- 1 Does the Network exist for its own sake or could it make a contribution to the religious dimension in the wider community?
- 2 If we are to be a searching, listening network of groups looking for new knowledge, then we need to be aware of new material that is available.
- 3 We need to go beyond thinking and discussing into experience and action.
- 4 How can we pass on knowledge and membership to the next generation?
- 5 While being open-minded we need to maintain relationships with the churches.
- 6 We look to a minimum of structure in the SOF and autonomy of local groups.
- 7 While promotion and publicity could be considered, one-to-one contact is a better way to grow the network.
- 8 The Newsletter is an important means of keeping in touch.
- 9 The public should be invited to the main lectures of the Conference.
- 10 How will leadership of SOF evolve?

**Val Grant's *Passing On Values*** left the attendees more in agreement that values *should* be deliberately handed on to future generations than they were about just *which* values. They didn't so much disagree about which values but were unable to clearly define them.

The broad areas that emerged of values that were considered worthwhile included ecology and an empathy with life.

Two related areas were recognised as needing to be kept an eye on: the often distorted value-systems promoted by the advertising profession and the actions of protest groups. The latter are not so much handing on values as addressing current issues from what may or may not be a value-position that we should accept.

As to how values might be handed on, Val Grant suggested that for young children the telling of stories is the most appropriate. For young adults she advised us not to always attempt to provide answers to their questions but often to respond with further questions which encourage further reflection on their part.

It was agreed that the *visit to the Buddhist monastery* was a highlight of the Conference. On the opening evening of the Conference, there was an inter-faith dialogue between **Lloyd Geering** and **Abbott Ajahn Vajiro** of the Bodhinyanarama Monastery in Stokes Valley, near the Conference venue. The next day a group of Conference members went with Lloyd to visit the monastery.

The monastery has a simple and aesthetically-pleasing main building and was recipient of an architectural award. It is set in grounds at the edge of native bush surrounded by smaller buildings which provide sleeping accommodation for the monks, and a library.

Visiting SOF members sat on the floor facing the assembled monks and heard something of the routine and meaning of the life they live. In smaller groups, they visited the library and the sleeping quarters.

**Barrie Allom**, who wrote a report of the visit, said that strong impressions for him were the

sense of tranquility; the focussed stillness of the monks—even when speaking and moving; the powerful expression of suffering and compassion on the face of the Buddha image rising behind the seated monks; the awareness of that wall between his Christian tradition and the Buddhist tradition is very thin—that in fact there isn't a wall at all. He concluded by saying that there are profound differences of approach and understanding but that nothing should hinder a wide-eyed exploration of each other's spirituality.

### **The Network On The Net**

If have an Internet address and would like to join in the cyberspace version of the Sea of Faith network then send an e-mail to Ralph Pannett at [pannett@flagstaf.wgtn.planet.co.nz](mailto:pannett@flagstaf.wgtn.planet.co.nz)

### **Contribution**

## **Synergy**

In certain circumstances a synergy emerges: **1 and 1 add up to more than 2**. The word was first used in pharmacy. It was found that the combined effect of using two or more drugs exceeded the sum of their individual effects.

The word was taken up by education and human psychology to describe a seemingly mysterious phenomenon that can occur (especially) in small groups. A group of eight persons (an optimum size originally discovered by trial-and-error) is seen to be more efficient, more productive, more aware and more caring for its individual members than would be the case of each person acting individually.

Put more than eight persons together in a group and the tendency to break into two groups seems to be progressively increased in proportion to the numbers above eight. Is this because it is humanly impossible to be close to more than a few people at a time?

It seems to me that synergy is another name for experiential spirituality. The Society of Friends recognises the phenomenon of synergy: they call it "the nearer presence". But it works whatever you call it. I feel sure that other groups could tune into this phenomenon and profit by it.

Of course, there are individuals who are more self-contained than most: examples in their day were Edward Wilson and Dag Hammarskjöld. But I find that even if I—in solitude—contemplate the mystery of Orion, or the beauty of a painting, or a piece of pottery, or an engineering masterpiece then I eventually need someone else with whom I can share my wonder. There is a sense in which this becomes a synergistic experience.

**"The Buddha put spirituality  
above theology by exalting the Dharma  
above the Gods.**

**The Way comes first,  
get the Way right and talk of the Gods  
can be allowed to make its own kind of  
sense as best it can."**

Don Cupitt *Taking Leave Of God*



I see synergy operating both in and from contemplation of the natural world and in human relations. For example:

- In the mystery of human consciousness and our ability to interrelate.
- In knowing that one has a place where one belongs.
- In giving and receiving living care.
- In acknowledging (and receiving acknowledgment of) personal worth.
- In appreciation of, and in exercising, one's own potential in the arts.
- In identifying one's own story in biography, poem, novel or incident.
- In wonder, in the presence of natural emotional experiences.
- In caring for and relating to all living creatures.
- In caring for and in conservation of the planet.
- In scientific enquiry and discovery.
- In knowing that we come from the earth and that we return to it.
- In nostalgia and memory.

*Irvine Roxburgh*

## News from Branch Groups

### *Hawke's Bay*

At this year's Annual Conference, **Hawke's Bay** was taken to task for a piece which appeared in an earlier Sea Of Faith Newsletter suggesting that the SOF's "mission" might be to offer people a world-view. This, it was said, smacked of dogmatism. Is not the Sea Of Faith Network—through its local groups, seminars, literature etc. already offering a world-view?

We wholeheartedly reject dogmatism but not a willingness to share a non-realist, non-evangelising, creedless option.

### *New Plymouth*

The **Digging Deeper** group has enjoyed an interesting winter, despite the rain, with discussions arising from Prof. Geering, Don Cupitt and Bishop Spong on *Connexions*, BBC4 on *God In Us*, and the UK SOF Conference speeches of *Karen Armstrong* and *Hugh Dawes*. They now look forward to the lecture *A Single New Humanity* from Canon Oestreicher, and the four BBC

programmes looking back after 30 years since *Honest To God* was published.

If there are other SOF members who would be interested in joining them, please ring **Hilda** on 757-9787.

### *Te Kuiti*

A group has recently been formed in Te Kuiti and is meeting regularly with eight to ten participants. They are currently using Ian Harris' *Creating God* as a basis for discussion.

The contact person is **John Earwaker** phone 07-878-8062.

### *Wellington*

They have started a Sea of Faith group: phone **Barbara Millar** 476 3858

### *Dunedin*

They meet on the fourth Thursday (February to October) from 5:30pm to 7:30pm in the Stevely Room, First Church grounds, Moray Place.

The meeting format is a presentation followed by a discussion, in plenary or in small groups.

Topics in 1995 have included:

- Spirituality in short stories
- "Redemption": its contemporary meaning and as portrayed in the film *The Piano*
- Eco-spirituality

Interest groups (running simultaneously) seek to explore the non-realist implications:

- *Power of Myth*: the Joseph Campbell videos
- *Meditation*: Mark's gospel, poetry, art
- *Science*: Simplicity and Complexity
- *Roots and Routes*: the background to our ecumenical journeys
- *A New Sexual Ethic* (planned for October)
- *Euthanasia* (planned for October)

Contact phone 467-5058 (evening), 473-0109 (day)

## News From Sea of Faith UK

**Anthony Freeman's** book *God In Us* (SCM Press) is about to go into its seventh printing while he still faces difficulties with the Church of England. "I continue to be refused permission to exercise any ministry of Word or Sacrament." If you have Internet access, you can extend your good wishes to him at [anthony@imprint.co.uk](mailto:anthony@imprint.co.uk)

While in England in June, the chairperson of the NZ steering committee, **Ian Harris**, and his wife **Jill**, called on the secretary of the UK network, **Ronald Pearse**, and his family in Loughborough, and on the editor of the Sea of Faith magazine, **David and Anthea Boulton**, deep in a valley of Cumbria.

"Spirit is not in the I but between I and Thou.

It is not like the blood that circulates in you but like the air in which you breathe."

Martin Buber *I and Thou*

Ian says that these were lively and stimulating contacts, made more so by the opportunity to meet over a meal members of the network committee who live near Loughborough, and people from local groups. As with any Sea of Faith group, their diversity was immediately more apparent than what held them together. Greetings were exchanged, information shared about the networks, and invitations issued in the hope that further contacts would be possible.

In a personal letter to Lloyd Geering, **Ronald Pearce** foreshadowed Don Cupitt's address to the UK Sea of Faith Conference. That was the address read by Noel Cheer at our conference and which is available as a transcript. Ronald Pearce summarised the address (*Our Dual Agenda*) as an attempt "to address the subject of the network's dual role—that of catering for people still within organised faith systems and those looking for your more naturalistic spirituality." He goes on to say, "I feel the tension, obvious in the correspondence that I receive, between the two constituencies—and indeed in myself."

**Shirley Wood** was one of the New Zealanders who attended this year's UK conference. She/he described how the conference operated on three "strands" of which an attendee had to choose just one. The strands were: Theology; Political and Green Issues; and Worship, Ritual, Symbolism and Mysticism. She/he remarked that UK Sea of Faith membership is about 75% Anglican. The emergence of new dogmas is an ongoing concern of all members: "There is an awareness of the danger of the Sea of Faith becoming another Church with its own dogma, ritual and symbols."

Snippets from the June edition of the Sea of Faith (UK) Newsletter:

- They have 654 members
- Anthony Freeman's book *God In Us* has steered members towards SOF.
- They have sold 160 copies of Lloyd Geering's *Tomorrow's God*
- They sell quite a lot of the booklets from The (NZ) St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, many of which are printed versions of Lloyd's lectures.

**"Sartre's view is that we define ourselves by what we do, that human beings have no essence, but create themselves by their actions.**

**Merleau-Ponty expresses the same idea as, "You are what you do to others."**

Carol Ochs *Behind The Sex Of God*

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Sir,

Contrary to Alan Goss' letter (July '95) many do find the statement of intent as set down by the AGM to be sufficient and understandable. As Hugo Vitalis discovered in his thesis survey (May '95), 80% of members were attracted by the "open and tolerant discussion of religious thought."

Most of us don't see SOFN as "being the framework to orient our lives by" at all, but rather through its diversity we explore, and can then decide for ourselves, what our beliefs and responsibilities should be.

Is this suggested goal or mission amplification just the first of a whole new cluster of creeds? Once dogmas sneak in, freedom and openness fly out the window. Sir, and your committee, please preserve us from that.

**M.D. Whitwell  
Blenheim**

[The editor welcomes further letters on appropriate subjects.]

## SOFN Subscriptions

It costs just **ten dollars** per household per year for membership of Sea of Faith (New Zealand). Contact:

**Jane Griffith,**  
82 Kinghorne St.,  
Strathmore,  
WELLINGTON

If there is a **red dot** on this copy of your Newsletter, then your subscription is due.

## Contributions

Contributed articles and Letters to the Editor are always welcomed and should be sent to the Editor (who gratefully acknowledges that, for this edition, most of the work has been done by Noel Cheer):

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

**"Life is uncertain: eat the dessert first"**  
Author Unknown

**Contribution**

## **Multi-Faith Religious Education: A Plea for Help**

**Jean Holm**

former head of the Religious Studies Department, Homerton College,  
University of Cambridge UK

There have recently been important developments in the field of religious education in public schools. RE has now been officially recognised by the NZ Qualifications Authority as a 'conventional subject'. It will be available for the 5th, 6th and 7th formers within the NZQA's national framework, and a large number of the unit standard titles have been prepared. Almost all the schools which will, in the first instance, be entering their students for assessment are church schools, and most of the unit standard titles cover the kind of syllabuses which were already being taught in those schools. However, the NZQA has agreed to the creation of a religious studies sub-field, the approach of which would be that of the Religious Studies departments in the universities: it would not be 'confessional', i.e. it would not be teaching belief, which would make it appropriate for public schools.

### **What would it look like?**

Its aim might be something like this: To enable students to understand the nature of religion, its expression and influence in the lives of individuals and societies.

It would normally involve the study of more than one religion, and its focus would be on the way in which the beliefs and values of religions are expressed through, and encountered in, such phenomena as festivals, rites of passage, places and forms of worship, and community traditions, rather than focussing on the beliefs themselves.

Although the NZQA's national framework relates only to the senior forms of secondary schools, this kind of RE could easily be integrated into the primary curriculum. For example, a topic on food could include the special foods that are associated with festivals; a topic on seasons could include seasonal religious festivals; the children's experience within their own families of rites of passage—birth, initiation, marriage and death—could be used to help build up an understanding of the significance of the rituals for the adherents of a religion. There is a wealth of resources for such teaching, both in books and audio-visual material and within religious communities.

### **Where would the teachers come from?**

Over the years the universities have produced a large number of graduates with qualifications in Religious Studies. Some of these will already be in schools, teaching other subjects; others might well be keen to teach RS if the opportunity arises.

### **What can we do?**

We need a consciousness-raising campaign! It is almost universally taken for granted that Bible in Schools is the only form of RE that can be taught in Public Schools in New Zealand, so there is an urgent need to make people aware of other possibilities. We can, for example, talk to teachers, principals, school board members, parents, students etc., and explain the nature of a Religious Studies approach to the subject.

It was suggested at the conference in August that SOFN members might be prepared to take up the challenge of working for the introduction of a multi-faith religious education. There was a generally favourable reaction, and some members gave their names and addresses for further contact. Anyone else who would like to be kept in touch with this 'project' should write to me at 87b Island Bay Road, Birkenhead, Auckland 1310 or phone 09-483-2450.