

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NZ)

NEWSLETTER 17

July 1996

A Movable Feast?

Has your Sea of Faith group considered offering your city or centre for holding the Network's annual conference? If not, we would like to encourage you to do so.

It is good for the conference to move around the country, but that can happen only if a centre has good conference facilities for up to 250 people, and if a local group has the initiative, talent and energy to attend to the arrangements (the Steering Committee looks after the programme).

The 1997 conference will be held in Auckland, but after that? The decision for 1998 will be made during the conference in Dunedin next month, and it would be good to have a choice — even better to have a waiting list. Please let the Steering Committee know if you are thinking about the possibility, and we can take it from there.

It is also not pre-ordained that the Steering Committee should be located in Wellington: again, members must decide at the AGM in Dunedin whether that will continue or whether the Steering Committee should move elsewhere.

If your centre has the talent and the energy, then don't be backward in coming forward.

If members approve the enclosed Constitution, this will formalise not only the opportunity to relocate the Steering Committee from time to time, but also to vary the way it operates. For example, there are good arguments for having all members in one centre, as at present; but there are also good arguments to broaden its composition to include people in different parts of the country.

So, if you're going to Dunedin, please give some thought to the future of the Steering Committee, and the kinds of people you would like to be on it.

We look forward to seeing you there.

Ian Harris
Chairperson,
Steering Committee

**"Always Carry a Corkscrew — The
Wine Will Provide Itself"**

Author Unknown

Conference Progress

Jeanette Scott writes from Dunedin:

"Planning for the Conference is well under way and the Local Arrangements Committee are getting quite excited about the prospect of the Conference being held in Dunedin.

"Registrations are pouring in, with people coming from Australia, the Bay of Islands and all parts of the North Island as well as a good representation from the South Island.

"Since the last Newsletter, many of the workshops have been confirmed. To give you a taste, some of the titles are **"The Conundrum of Morals"**, introduced by Noel Cheer of Titahi Bay, which asks us where our morals come from and whether they are good enough. Noel tests these against two current moral dilemmas: euthanasia and homosexual marriage. **"Whale Space: Songs for a Sea-going People"** in which Colin Gibson of Dunedin shares and discusses some contemporary songs that make room for grief, doubt, difference and some of the other facts about human experience which are ignored or suppressed by canutism. Charles Birch, one of the guest speakers from Sydney leads a workshop on **"Science and God"**, which gives a scientific technological world view in relation to a postmodern theistic worldview. Clive Pearson and Leah McBey of Dunedin address the issue of **"Eco Spirituality"**, while another Dunedin member Francis de Hamel introduces **"God in the Space/Time Continuum"**. Yvonne Curtis of Wellington explores the **"Possible Shape of The Institutional Church In The Year 2020"** and Colleen Saunders and John Craighead of Blenheim look at the three major themes of **"Care of the Soul"** by Thomas Moore.

"This is just a sample, there are many more, and I hope that there is something there which will attract your attention. There's music, art, meditation, and a just society. Even if I haven't mentioned the very issue that you want to hear about it, it's likely to be there when you come to the Conference in Dunedin.

"Plans for both the Ceilidh on Saturday and the Celebration on Sunday are sounding quite exciting and something well worth looking forward to. Knox College is a great setting for a Conference and I am sure that you will both enjoy yourself and find that your time has been well spent."

News From Branch Groups

News was a bit sparse this time, I hope that more will be made available for the next Newsletter — Ed.

At its last two meetings (April and May), the **Hawkes Bay Group** responded to Don Cupitt's address, Our Dual Agenda, which he gave to the 1995 UK Conference and which was read at the 1995 NZ Conference.

Some members expressed the view that an attempt should be made to open up lines of communication with the churches.

The group decided that, while the SOF undoubtedly has something to say to the churches — aspects of this were presented and discussed at the May meeting — it was neither timely nor appropriate for a local branch, lacking any real identity vis-a-vis the churches, to act unilaterally in conveying a SOF viewpoint. The matter therefore "lies on the table" and could possibly be picked up at the national conference or elsewhere if it was decided to pursue the Cupitt agenda.

"If the concept of God has any validity or use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving.

If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him."

James Baldwin

The Fire Next Time

Questionnaire

This questionnaire — which we're invited to not take too seriously — was put together by Patti Whaley of the UK SOFN. It was distributed at their annual conference in July 1995.

Answer the following questions as accurately as you can by choosing the number that is best for you.

A. Is God for you:

1. a Father in the sky; 2. the First Cause; 3. our heavenly creator; 4. my ultimate concern; 5. the highest spiritual ideal

B. Compare your personality today with that of 5 years ago do you think you are:

1. wiser; 2. more mature; 3. less volatile; 4. person that has undergone 5 years experience; 5. a completely different being

C. Which word do you associate most with "Faith":

1. doctrine; 2. belief; 3. attitude; 4. assent; 5. trust

D. Which of the following doctrines is most vital to you:

1. the Trinity; 2. Heaven and Hell; 3. the Creation; 4. God as Love; 5. a rejection of the selfish ego

E. What will happen when you die?

1. I shall go straight to heaven; 2. I shall sleep until the Judgement Day; 3. My soul will live on in others' memories; 4. I don't know really; 5. I shall no longer exist as a thinking being

F. Which of the following divine qualities do you think most important?

1. omniscience; 2. omnipotence; 3. immortality; 4. existence; 5. omnipresence

G. Which Old Testament figure do you empathize with most?

1. Abel; 2. Abraham; 3. Jacob; 4. Jonah; 5. Job

H. Which of these statements best expresses the truth of the Doctrine of the Resurrection for you?

1. Jesus rose up and pushed the stone away; 2. God raised Jesus from the Cross; 3. Jesus is alive today; 4. The disciples of Jesus re-evaluated their faith in his life; 5. A new and exciting Reality arose Phoenix-like from the dust

I. Is your sexuality best seen as:

1. your gender; 2. your orientation (hetero/homosexual); 3. your capability of attracting other people; 4. your desire for unity with another; 5. another expression for your life-force

J. Do the religions relate to each other as:

1. true (ours) and false (pagan); 2. progressive revelation; 3. different accounts of the same God's actions; 4. differing perspectives on the one Reality; 5. completely different human stories none any "truer" than another

Add up your answers to get your final score:

1—10 Solidly realist. Your heroes are Plato and St. Thomas Aquinas and you probably ought to go home now.

11—20 You're beginning to see the cracks in the foundation stones, but you don't think they need to worry you just yet.

21—30 Hovering between the two world perspectives of Realism and Non-Realism, you're needing to look at the situation again.

31—40 You're definitely on the radical side of faith, but at the moment you're keeping on the safe side of the heretical. Why?

41—50 Well, you've come to the right place, definite candidate for Non-Realism and membership in the Sea of Faith, if you're brave enough.

Editorial Comment: You may not agree with the weightings placed on the answers and you may have observed that the questionnaire draws its terms of reference from the Christian path(s) of faith. If you would like to suggest other weightings or other criteria, then write to the editor. Appropriate correspondence will be published.

What is "Postmodern"?

This item came off the Internet and was accompanied by explicit permission to reproduce. It was written by Bill LeFurgy.

I must confess that, until recently, I had only a vague idea what "postmodern" meant. Anything really way-out or aggressively avant-garde could usually be safely described as postmodern. When the term was mentioned by someone else, it was appropriate to nod sagely while thinking of a sentence with which to use a word like deconstruct.

Among the many virtues of Sherry Turkle's new book Life on the Screen is a most lucid explanation of postmodernism and how it differs from modernism, which has dominated Western culture since the Enlightenment. The heart of modernism is rational, systematic thought. Things consist of layers of depth that can be broken down, explored, understood, and explained. Modernism is driven by rules, procedures, logic, boundaries, and by a clear sense of what is right and what is wrong. Individuals are regarded as "unitary actors" — governed by a single set of ideas, motives, and desires.

As Turkle lays it out, postmodernism suggests [that] the world is actually too complex and messy for us to understand. Our attempts to establish rules based on truths are ultimately futile because

people and their perceptions of reality resist reduction. Life and its experiences are in the end opaque, mysterious, and open to endless interpretation. Individuals are not unitary actors but are "decentered" and capable of many different combinations of feelings and motivations. The self is multiple, fluid, nonlinear, even fragmented. How we present ourselves is merely an artificial social construct — a story subject to revision. From this point of view, the best way to deal with the world is by interacting with surfaces, reacting to how things look or feel at a point in time to achieve something that is neither right or wrong but reflects a unique perception.

**"postmodernism suggests [that]
the world is actually too complex
and messy for us to understand"**

Computers, the product of logical, rule-driven thought, ironically have become tools for reaching beyond our rational notions of reality. This reach is possible through interacting with text, icons, and other virtual "surfaces" offered by the computer, which for more and more users (this one included) works in opaque, mysterious ways.

Moreover, when communicating with others via the computer, one is much freer to present different aspects of the self than in real life. As the New Yorker cartoon put it, on the Internet nobody knows you're a dog.

Turkle observes that the computer has brought postmodernism down to Earth. I cannot claim to have done all her arguments justice here, but it is clear she provides a compelling notion of how computers might change our interactions with the world and with one another. On a more practical level, postmodern ideas also help explain the phenomenon of the web and how culture is depicted through it. Old ideas about "passive perfection" — books, paintings, sculpture, and other art forms — are challenged by the ability people have via the web to explore, rearrange, and reinterpret cultural representations. The extent to which this ability will move us away from rational modernism remains to be seen. There is, after all, much to recommend having at least a few rules.

This item came from the website "Culture in Cyberspace" which produced by Information Networking and Management Associates (INMA) World Wide Web creation, editing, and maintenance/ News and information services/ Computer system design, installation, and support <http://www.radix.net/~wlefurgy/welcome.htm>

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"Flickering To A Full Stop"

This is the title of a review (by Michael Morton) of Don Cupitt's *Solar Ethics* which appeared in the UK Roman Catholic Journal *The Tablet* in the issue of 23 March 1996. The review was, for the most part, sympathetic to the viewpoint of the author.

It noted that "[a]t a time when a fresh start in moral philosophy is badly needed, Cupitt offers an account of ethics which is not a moral code but an affirmative answer to the question: Is the good life possible, and if so, how". The review says that Don Cupitt's thesis "is that we can regard human life and its religious expression as a positive and affective outpouring."

It also notes the author's criticism that "Christian faith ... has invested too heavily in Plato ..." and that "[i]n Christianised Platonism, salvation is something that has to be postponed to the beyond." The reviewer seems happy to let the author propose that "[l]ike the sun or a fire, we burn up and pour ourselves away. Such a pouring out as we flicker and die is to be our salvation and our glory."

But the reviewer, after saying that whatever objections he had were not about the content but rather about the size (68 pages) for the price (7 pounds 95) observed that "[a]s far as solar ethics are concerned, the problem is that what they offer may be fine for a modern Walt Whitman or well-to-do intellectuals in reasonable health. But what about people who live lives of desperation, the chronically poor and marginalised and the citizens of Bosnia and East Timor? We humans are just as good as creating hell on earth as we are at describing heaven on earth, and ethics, however you define them, have to deal with both."

*There's the challenge then: are members of the Sea of Faith (to whom the book is so obviously targetted) in essence "well-to-do intellectuals in reasonable health" and, if so, would that fact reduce the value of Don Cupitt's *Solar Ethics*? The editor welcomes correspondence on the subject.*

Correspondence

H. A. I. Madgwick of Rotorua writes "I would welcome some guidance on books which put the fundamentalist's point of

view in a reasoned form — a sort of 'Rescuing The Bible From Liberalism'."

If someone else thinks that the quest is worthwhile, could you reply via this Newsletter?

Oops !

Our apologies go to **Rosalie Somerville** of Dunedin. She appears in the last Newsletter under the nom-de-typo of Rosemary Sommerville.

Subscriptions

Sea of Faith Network subscriptions are due for renewal each year at the time of the National Conference.

If you **are** attending this year's Conference in Dunedin then you should take the opportunity to renew your subscription along with your Conference registration.

If you are **not** attending the Conference and became a member (or renewed your last year's sub **before** 1 June 1996), then please send \$10 (per household) to

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Next Newsletter

Copy deadline 24 September. Send it to the acting editor, Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay. Diskette or e-mail (to cheer@vnet.ibm.com) are a boon but hard-copy is welcome too!

