

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z. NEWSletter

The Conference Was Great!

Newly re-elected Chairperson of the now national Steering Committee, **Jane Griffith** sums up the Conference:

Many superlatives spring to mind as I think of the venue at Kings College, Auckland, the food, the quality of the speakers, elective lecturers and workshops. It was a very good conference with excellent organisation by the Arrangements Committee, which meant the whole procedure flowed so smoothly. The earlier start for the Conference on Friday afternoon seemed to gain general approval and enabled us to pack far more into the weekend.

The three speakers, **John Spong**, **Chamaïne Pountney** and **Lloyd Geering** were all quite different but each, in their own particular way, enthralled and challenged us both in their keynote addresses and in the panel discussion on the Sunday morning.

This year for the first time the concept of **Core Groups** was introduced. These groups met on three occasions and enabled us to discuss at depth the keynote speakers' addresses in small groups as well as other issues, which were important to Core Group participants.

The Annual General Meeting of the Network takes place at the annual Conference and this is the time when the Steering Committee for the forthcoming year is elected. Three members of last year's Committee did not seek re-election and we therefore thanked **Elaine Geering**, **Liz Robinson** and **David Simmers** for their contribution.

As you will be aware from the previous newsletter, the Steering Committee has now become a national Committee with representatives from Auckland, Bay of Plenty, Wellington and Dunedin. Naturally we will be working in a totally different way from previous years as we make use of telephone conference calls and fax messages, meeting as a whole Committee just twice a year. It is hoped that the Steering Committee will more fully represent the Network by using the skills of members in various parts of the country and it is likely that Committee members will co-opt others onto sub-committees in order to assist with Network business.

I encourage you to contact Steering Committee members if you have any ideas about the Network -- including the next Conference which will be in Wellington from 9-11 October 1998.

Jane Griffith

This is how the chairperson of the Arrangements Committee, **John Irwin**, summed up his experiences:

When my wife, Barbara Miller, and I offered to take responsibility for convening the Arrangements Committee of the 1997 SOFN Conference in Auckland, we knew it would be a challenge. It was, but it has been an exciting one and very worthwhile.

Together with our small committee of **Rosemary Calver**, **Beverley Dickey**, **Edward Fenn**, **Kelvin Grant** and **Cora Leenman**, we aimed to set up a venue which would do justice to the programme being planned by Jane Griffith and her Steering Committee in Wellington. A programme with new elements: Core Groups; Elective Lectures; Videos; and Book Reviews, meant that a tight schedule was necessary.

We were very fortunate in being able to have Kings College as the venue for the Conference. Kings made available to us all the facilities that we needed and our own liaison with Kings through **David English** ensured that we were able to plan precisely.

The new Centennial Theatre with excellent acoustics made our gatherings a pleasure and to be able to use the Great Hall, suitably adorned with large bowls of flowers arranged by the Committee and helpers, set the scene for truly "Happy Hours".

The Arrangements Committee was particularly pleased that we were able to have all the information that attendees required in their folders. Very few people required any help to find the way.

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Although the Core Groups, Elective Lectures and so on required greater organisation, the Committee felt that they all added a greater dimension to the Conference and were well worth the effort.

We expected that the allocation of people to the Workshops and Elective Lectures might be something of a headache but, in the event, most people were placed according to their first, second or third choices.

Kings is in the process of upgrading the boarding facilities so there was a variation in the standard of the accommodation, but all of the 133 live-in attendees were allocated the single or twin rooms that they requested. The Committee decided that supper would be offered in the residential "houses" so that people would better get to know those under the same roof. It seemed to work well.

We are now looking forward to returning again to Wellington for Conference '98. We wish both the new Steering and Arrangement Committees well as they make their plans.

John Irwin

Steering Committee 1997-1998

Your Steering Committee for 1997-8 is:

- **Noel Cheer** (Editor of Newsletter, Wellington)
- **Yvonne Chisholm** (Secretary to the Steering Committee, Wellington)
- **Janet Davidson** (Wellington)
- **Lloyd Geering** (Wellington)
- **Roy Griffith** (Membership Secretary and Treasurer, Wellington)
- **Janet Lambie** (Wellington)
- **Joy and Owen Lewis** (Auckland)
- **Andrew Meek** (Dunedin)
- **Marjorie Spittle** (Dunedin)
- **Suzi Thirlwall** (Custodian of the Resource Centre, Tauranga)
- **Jane Griffith** (Chairperson, Wellington)

The Steering Committee have already had their first meeting – straight after the Conference. At this meeting a point raised at the Conference was discussed – the need for the Network to store records of its organisation since its inception. I therefore ask that if there is an **Archivist** who would be prepared to take on this task, then please contact me on 04-388-1885.

For those who attended the Conference, I hope that you felt it was a worthwhile experience for you. For those were unable to attend, this Newsletter provides you with some of the material presented

Jane Griffith

Attracting Younger Members

The matter of attracting younger members was the subject of a report by **David Simmers**. The mood of the AGM was to declare that there was no need to try to attract younger members, that the Sea of Faith is inherently attractive to people who have had time to think over their faith position and that, as for all new members, they will find the SOFN if and when it

becomes relevant to them. But the idea of putting more content on our World Wide Web page was applauded as a way of getting more exposure to potential members of any age.

Network Finances

The audited statement of Receipts and Payments for the year ended 30th June 1997 was presented at the Network Annual General Meeting. Copies of this, and of the accompanying verbal report can be obtained by sending a stamped self-addressed envelope to the Treasurer (address below).

In summary, the accounts continue to represent a healthy state of affairs. The Network at the close of the 1996/7 year had cash assets of approximately \$19,000. Membership of the Network remains more or less constant (469 households as at September 24th).

The financial report was formally adopted by the AGM. Thanks were recorded for the work done by **Gavin Watson** who again acted as Auditor.

Subsequent to the AGM, the size of the cash reserves caused some comment in one of the Core Groups and suggestions were made on how some of the money might be used.

The meeting of the Steering Committee held on Sunday 5th October considered the issue, and in discussion the following points were made:

Fares for overseas speakers at conferences are paid from national funds. One payment for air-fares for speakers at this year's conference was outstanding as at 30th June; it is anticipated that similar or greater expenditure will be necessary for the 1998 conference.

The move to a nationally based Steering Committee is expected to incur additional costs – though how much is not, at this stage, clear.

The Steering Committee has on a previous occasion declined to make a donation to a non-related cause, believing that it is more important to keep the annual network subscription as low as possible.

This leads naturally to the next matter

The subscriptions for the 1997/8 year were due on 1st July. **If your newsletter and its envelope are marked with a red dot – this shows that according to our records you have not paid and before the next issue of the newsletter your name will be removed from the membership list.** Please send subscriptions to: The Treasurer, SOF Network (NZ), 82 Kinghorne Street, Strathmore Park, Wellington

Roy Griffith

Resource Centre Report

"The SOFN Resource Centre is firmly established and has been well used, although calls on its facilities have slackened off in the past six months.

"Videos are the most popular type of item with papers coming second. Videos appear to be needed by groups for discussion. The most frequently requested videos are:

- V7 God: For and Against (Karen Armstrong)
- V10 The Power of Myth (Joseph Campbell)
- V8 The Sea of Faith (Don Cupitt)

"Tapes were in demand when the centre started and there is still an intermittent calls for them. Over the life of the Resource Centre the most popular tapes are:

- A9 SOF UK 1993 (Karen Armstrong)
- A1-3 Thirty Years of Honesty
- A15 Jesus was a Jew
- A16 Life After Death (panel discussion)
- A11 SOF 1993 (Kulananda)

"People ordering papers occasionally identify themselves as new members. Occasionally the whole set is requested. [The most popular papers are:]

- P1 Perspectives on the Future
- P7 Asking The Right Questions About God

"Books are less popular and some have never left the Centre.

"Possible additions might be:

- sets of books for group study
- the purchase/donation of popular books for loan (if you have suggestions as to titles, please write to me at 34 Briarley St, Tauranga)
- a video loan centre on the South Island to reduce postal rates for South Island members.

Suzi Thirwall

P.S: I would like to record a special "thank you" to Graham Shearer for donating to the Resource Centre over a number of years, 55 tapes of Lloyd Geering lectures. They will be listed in the next update.

Using the Resource Centre

The Sea of Faith Resource Centre is managed by **Suzi Thirwall**. Her postal address is 34 Briarley St, Tauranga and her phone number is 07-578-2775. An updated listing will accompany the March Newsletter but, in the meantime, your group secretary might ask Suzi for the latest listing. Tapes, Papers and Books are available on these terms:

Audio tapes: There is no loan facility. Send a 90 minute audio tape and return postage to Suzi Thirwall and you will receive a copy of the requested tape.

Video tapes are available only on loan. One tape (or set) at a time. If your preferred tape is already out on loan then you will be put on the reserved list (unless you ask otherwise). Please enclose postage stamps to cover mailing costs: North Island \$2.80, South Island \$4.00.

Copies of some of the papers presented at past Conferences are available at \$2 per paper -- this covers copying and postage. **Of the papers presented at the 1997 Conference only Lloyd Geering's and the two by Swami Muktirupananda are available.**

Books are available only on loan. There is no postage fee but stamp donations are always welcome. Many of the books available on loan are offered for sale by the **St Andrews Trust For The Study Of Religion and Society** P.O. Box 5203 Wellington. The usual price is \$10 but with older books at \$5. Your group secretary should request a catalogue.

P.S: Tried the Hewitson Library?

The Hewitson Library is part of Knox College in Dunedin. They encourage postal borrowing and may

undertake CD-ROM searches. Available are all of Don Cupitt's books and most of Lloyd Geering's and John Spong's. Contact them by phone at 03-473-0106 or fax at 03-473-8466.

The New Logo

The new logo was introduced at the AGM and was well received by all attendees.

As you can see, we have adopted the same logo shape as is used by the UK SOFN but have used blue and green ("Pacific colours") instead of the brown and orange that they use. A simpler version of what you see on the masthead of the Newsletter appears on our correspondence stationery.

We received very helpful advice from **Suzanne and Neil Thornton** from Dunedin and we commissioned **Heather Kerr** of Karori to realise our requirements.

Thanks to all who submitted ideas.

Noel Cheer

We'll Do It All Again Next Year!

The Sea of Faith Network Conference for 1998 will be held from **Friday 9 October to Sunday 11 October** at the Heretaunga campus of the Central Institute of Technology, Upper Hutt.

For your comfort:

- the campus is situated in tranquil rural surroundings 25 minutes north of Wellington city
- all plenary sessions will be held in a state-of-the-art lecture theatre which has seating for 200
- all 'break-away' rooms are located within the same building as the lecture theatre
- morning/afternoon teas and lunches will be served in the spacious, sunny foyer of the main lecture theatre
- breakfasts and dinners will be served in the dining room located within the residential block
- live-in accommodation is plentiful -- there are single and double rooms, some with ensuite bathrooms
- the venue is warm, comfortable and totally 'user-friendly'

If any members living in the greater Wellington area would like to be in the team of helpers for the 1998 Conference then please contact:

Janet Lambie

Chairperson, 1998 Arrangements Committee

Phone/Fax 04-388-7090

"A Believer In Exile"

Bishop John Spong gave the first Keynote address at the 1997 Conference:

John Spong opened and closed his hour-long address by commending the Sea of Faith Network and said "I find myself drawn to the openness of this body". He regards himself as an apologist for Christianity -- "a passionate believer", and a "God-intoxicated human being". Though a bishop of the Episcopal ("Anglican") church in the United States, he does not see his mission as conservation but rather as reform. "My task is to call organised religion to be in a new place."

But many who might help him in his mission to bring

the openness characteristic of the Sea of Faith Network to the Christian church have already walked away or have been expelled. Historically the Church has always expelled its most creative thinkers and retained "religious security seekers who don't want to be disturbed". Institutional Christianity, he said, is fearful of enquiry, knowledge and freedom". It is an "increasingly irrelevant ecclesiastical institution".

The church has sometimes looked as though it was "the communion of saints" but it can also justly be criticised for patriarchy; religious chauvinism; racism; homophobia; slavery; and marginalisation of women. Furthermore, "the Church knows how to do guilt better than it knows how to do anything."

In this address, John Spong paid special attention to the creeds which he said were written against a radically different world-view from our own. In any case, creeds as such should now be regarded as less relevant because "God can only be pointed to and not captured in propositional statements." He said that the purpose for which the creeds were formulated was not to clarify the truth about God but to "rule out some contending point of view". They were made up of "raucous debates" and "politically-motivated compromises". "To call oneself an orthodox Christian is not to say one's point of view is correct -- it only means that this point of view won".

John Spong went through the Apostles' Creed in some detail and took issue with most of the major elements.

- The creeds are based on world-views that we no longer hold.
- He finds the title "Father" offensive because to regard God as male has been used to justify the oppression of women.
- The appellation "Almighty" runs right into the problem of evil: omnipotence is hard to square with the presence of suffering. We perceive reality quite differently nowadays.
- The term "Creator of Heaven and Earth" has been overtaken by modern scientific knowledge.
- To classify Jesus Christ as "his only son" is to wilfully overlook the holiness to be found also in non-Christians.
- "Born of the Virgin Mary" violates modern biological knowledge and is a formulation based on the earlier notion (prior to the 18th century discovery of the ovum) that the male planted the seed in the female who provided no genetic contribution.
- What could "judgement" mean in the light of what we now know about psychological inter-dependence? Is anyone truly an individual?

The creeds just will not do. We "must even revisit Chalcedon and once again do the hard work of re-defining the Christ experience for our time -- and do it in words and concepts appropriate to our world." And conceding that whatever we do will be temporary and provisional. Where does all this leave Christians? "Can we be a believer and a citizen of our century at the same time?" John Spong believes that we can: "Some of us cannot simply take the option to cease to be believers -- God is too real to us -- but we insist on

being honest believers". He will not submit to the "mental lobotomy" of fundamentalists. [In the interview with Mike Hosking on the previous Thursday, he characterised fundamentalism as "an hysterical reaction" to a confusing world.]

John Spong ended by justifying the title of his presentation and his own status of "Believer In Exile" in these words:

"I live in a state of exile from the pre-suppositions of my own religious past. I am exiled from the literal suppositions that shaped the creed at its creation. I am exiled from the world view in which that creed was formed. The only thing that I know to do in this moment of Christian history is to enter the exile -- to feel its anxiety and discomfort -- but continue to be a believer. That is now my own self-definition. I am a believer in exile

I am a believer who increasingly lives in exile from the traditional way in which Christianity has heretofore been proclaimed. To be a "believer in exile" is to claim a new status in religious circles. But I am convinced that countless numbers of people, who either still inhabit religious institutions or who once inhabited religious institutions will resonate with that designation."

Reported by Noel Cheer

"Living ... is Extraordinarily Beautiful"

Charmaine Pountney, former principal of Auckland Girls' Grammar, recently acting principal of Hillary College and part-time farmer, spoke on "Religion and Education".

After a summary of her early life which positioned her faith as Christian but outside formal church structures, Charmaine spoke critically about teachers who "sell short" the pupils they are supposed to support. She used this example as justification for "legitimate" rage. Love does not require "putting up" with everything. While developing this theme she cited John Spong's comments on God's omnipotence and say "if he's omnipotent and could fix it, he bloody well should!" The Business Round Table came in for criticism -- "They talk about 'The Natural Order'", she said. New Zealanders are divided between those who want to be co-creators of a better world and those who are trapped, by ideology or circumstance, in an unjust order.

Charmaine spoke of her attraction to the works of Teilhard de Chardin and Lloyd Geering in respect of the developing no-osphere and said that we are living in a fundamentally mysterious universe, that we live in terror of the bad things that can happen to us and that we have failed to be honest with our children about the pain and the beauty. "It's no wonder that so many of them turn to drugs and alcohol". She spoke of the corrosive effects of feeling powerless ("It's not about evil ... it's about pain") and made a distinction between eternal life and mere immortality.

She opened the final section of her presentation by asking "what do people of faith and commitment do?"

She expressed some optimism that education can help and heal and, along with John Spong, identified sexism and racism in the churches and, in the community at large, privilege becomes an obstacle to social change. But we have come a long way in the last 1000 years or so: "we are kinder and fairer and more rational and more caring and more creative". But nations sometimes "lurch backwards": New Zealand has been captured by ideologues. "New Zealander won't tolerate a continuation of laissez faire Victorian capitalism because it didn't work then and it doesn't work now ... its not The New Right, its The Old Wrong".

"Every person of good faith must refuse to use the language of bad faith". Always challenge the inequities because if we fail to then we are tacitly supporting them. There are appropriate things to do if we have a passionate commitment to be co-creators of a better world. An example is that she is aiming to set up staff and student changes and resource sharing among Auckland secondary schools.

The failure to use the God-given gift to make a better world is the worst evil: be of good heart -- we will make the world a better place -- and the Sea of Faith Network is part of the process. "Living, though painful, is extraordinarily beautiful."

Reported by Noel Cheer

Saying "Yes" To Life

These were the concluding remarks in Lloyd Geering's keynote address Faith and Doubt on the Margin given at the 1997 Conference. The full text is available from the Resource Centre.

It is my belief that there is no ultimate meaning or purpose permeating this universe, amazing and mysterious though it is. The universe just is as it is. If we want to find any meaning within the short time any of us is here, we have to create that meaning for ourselves. And we create the meaning of our lives by the way we live. For me "God" is a useful symbol, inherited from the past, to refer to that meaning, to those values I find to be supreme and to those goals I feel myself called to aspire. So when I say "I believe in God", I mean something like this "God is the symbol which holds together in a unity all my bits of knowledge about the world and all the virtues I have come to value, such as love, justice, compassion. The more I respond positively to all this and learn to trust my fellow-humans and the world at large, the more I find human existence to be of great worth and meaningful. Surprisingly, I find much of the language of the Bible and the Christian tradition is still very helpful to me.

For God, as I understand this word, is to be found in people, in human relationships, in my own thinking, as well as in the mystery of all living creatures and in the stars and distant nebulae." So when I say "I believe in God" I mean a whole bundle of things, including such things as -- I trust my fellow-humans. I trust the world. I say "Yes!" to life. I look forward to each new day in hope and faith.

Lloyd Geering

The Panel Discussion

The last session of the Conference was a panel discussion involving the three Keynote Speakers: John Spong, Charmaine Pountney and Lloyd Geering. These are some of the gems that emerged:

John Spong

- "If you stand outside the Church, then I will die inside the Church alone."
- The first creed was "Jesus is Lord". From then on, creeds were written in order to exclude unwelcome ideas.
- on the Golden Rule: "Those who have the gold, rule."

Charmaine Pountney

- "Statements of shared values are better than creeds".
- We have an "indecent society" and it shows in the view of the well-being of the individual at the expense of society.

Lloyd Geering

- "The age of creeds is over."
- The modern secular world is a "daughter of Christianity"
- It is not accurate to say that the Church has a "ghetto-mentality" because ghettos are locked from the outside. "Their 'ghetto' is closed from the inside."
- in regard to euthanasia: "we should have a positive view of life and a positive view of death."

Chaired and Reported by Noel Cheer

Hinduism at the 1997 Conference

Swami Muktirupananda from the Ramakrishna Mission in Fiji, presented an Elective Lecture and a Workshop. Below are excerpts.

Lecture: "The Universality of Hinduism"

"Because of our diversity, one religion cannot satisfy all mankind. ... Each religion has something to learn from the other."

"... there runs a strong thread of spiritual unity in Indian people. The spiritual ideals laid down by the Vedas [pronounced "vaydahs" -- the most ancient of India's sacred writings, regarded as divinely revealed to inspired seers -- ed], are accepted by all the Hindus unanimously.

There is no deviation from the injunctions of the Vedas. It is not social or political ideas that bind Hindus together but the religious ideas. So religion is the common ground." "Hinduism accepts all religions as different paths leading to God -- the ultimate human goal. Reason and faith both are the backbone of religion."

"The four cardinal principals of Hinduism are:

1. The non-duality of God, soul and universe. God Himself has become all these.
2. The divinity of the soul.
3. Unity in diversity.
4. Harmony of all religions."

"The Supreme Reality at the transcendental level is

called **Brahman** ... [which] denotes limitless, indivisible consciousness which pervades the entire universe and yet remains outside it. It is the source of the manifest universe. Brahman is identical with the self of man, known as **atman**."

"In the beginning only Brahman or God was there. He desired 'may I be many'. So he became this Universe and many ... [for] **lila** or divine sport."

"God has become everything. But instead of seeing God we see the universe of names and forms that is **maya**."

"There are different kinds of **Yoga** ["spiritual disciplines"] suited to different temperaments. ... There are four general types of Yogas: active, emotional, introspective and rational."

"**Karma Yoga** [is the way] to God through work. ... if a person cheerfully performs a duty because it is to be done, and renounces all attachment to its results, he obtains inner peace."

"**Bhakti Yoga** [is the way] to God through love. ... One cannot have pure love of God unless one rises above all worldly attractions. Spiritual love or Bhakti is directed only to God. ... All the basic principles of Bhakti are exemplified in Christianity."

"**Jnana Yoga** [is the] way to God through knowledge [*jnana* (Sanskrit) is cognate with *gnosis* (Greek) -- ed]. ... This path is a difficult one. It is usually pursued by monks who have renounced the world. The ultimate reality is realised through the method of negation. When you negate everything changing, you come to the unchanging ground or pure consciousness."

"**Raja Yoga** [is the way] to God through psychological exercises ... devoted to the study of the mind and its control. 'The mind alone is the cause of bondage and freedom' say the Upanishad."

Workshop: "We Need a Quiet Mind"

"It is through the mind [that] we know the world and react. ... With its activities begin worries, anxieties and grinding stress ... [but] ... when the mind is at rest and quiet it is very refreshing and joyful."

"The incessant and directionless activities of the mind heap unnecessary miseries on us."

"We have placed unflinching trust in its authority and guidance. Enjoying this unfettered freedom the mind wields enormous power ... [and] ... refuses all efforts to put it under reins."

"The fact that you can observe your mind, as you observe any object of this world, shows that you are not your mind. The mind is an object and you are the subject. [That which is doing the seeing] is the real you (**Atman**) and it cannot be seen."

"If you observe your mind a little, you know that it is always indiscriminately busy and active. It hardly knows any rest except during sleep."

"You cannot erase [a] memory but you can stop it from coming again and again in your mind. ... Try to keep your mind free from the burden of memory. ... All blessings flow to that person whose mind is quiet. ... That is real meditation."

"Meditation reveals our divine nature."

Summary by Noel Cheer

"Belief" Means "Trust"

*This is an excerpt from Lloyd Geering's keynote address **Faith and Doubt on the Margin** given at the 1997 Conference. The full text is available from the Resource Centre.*

When people today say "I believe in God", they often simply expressing their opinion or conviction that there exists a spiritual being called God. That is not what was meant by "belief in God" four centuries ago. Of course, at that time, it was their common conviction that a supernatural being called God had created and continued to control the world. To them that seemed self-evident, and did not have to be spelled out. When they said "I believe in God" they were saying something much more than that.

The difference between their use of the word "believe" and ours can be best illustrated by noting the way in which some today also say they "believe in the Devil". No medieval Christian would have dreamed of saying such a dreadful thing. Of course it was their opinion that the Devil existed. But to say "I believe in the Devil" in those days meant giving one's allegiance to the devil. The appropriate expression was not "I believe in the Devil", but "I renounce the devil", meaning, "I will reject all suggestions made to me by the devil". In contrast, when they said, "I believe in God" they did not mean "It is my opinion that a God exists. They meant "I give my allegiance to God" or "I entrust myself to God". It was unthinkable to say, "I entrust myself to the Devil".

Thus, as the Oxford English Dictionary explains, "belief was the earlier word for what is now commonly called faith". "**Belief in God**" used to mean "**putting one's trust in God**" but it now refers to an opinion about reality, namely that the world was created by and is ruled by a supernatural personal being.

This belief, like all beliefs, is human in origin and expression. Human beliefs and opinions are always changing in the course of developing culture. This belief has never been universal to all humankind, and in the Western world, where it was once practically universal, it is now held by increasingly fewer people. In mediaeval times no one questioned the existence of unseen spiritual beings, because such a realm seemed eminently self-evident. The supreme being they called God; but just as real to them also were angels, spirits and the Devil. They did not question their existence. These were all part of the body of beliefs which made up the mediaeval view of reality. What was at stake in that context was not what one believed (in our sense of the word "belief") but in which of these self-evident beings did one put one's trust?. And that is what they meant by saying "I believe in God".

Lloyd Geering

**"the Church knows how to do guilt
better than it knows how to do
anything."**

John Spong

Reports on Conference Workshops

Black Gospel Music, conducted by John Thornley

"[I find it] very hard to make an objective comment on this workshop because the music players moved me so much. It was fully attended and all except two participants agreed that listening to the music and hearing the background to the tracks was an uplifting experience.

Described by John Thornley as the 'second diaspora', we were led from early Presley of the rock-and-roll era to Stevie Wonder of today. In the first examples, the voice was the dominant force -- stretching the very words and notes to extract every particle of meaning. Later, the 'Beat' had taken over but the message of the lyrics was as powerful as ever. These mostly identified social injustice, personal struggles and hard times -- all underpinned by that wonderful Beat.

I believe this workshop should be run again and that, at future SOFN Conferences, some music (preferably this music), be included in the main sessions.

C. L. Millar

Society's System(s) and Faith, conducted by John Earwaker

This workshop was attended by 16 people. It looked at how the individual's aspirations and needs could respond to conflicts with various systems set up by society. The options for an unsatisfactory situation could be:

1. Carry on as-is (usually unacceptable)
2. Leave
3. Communicate and improve the situation
4. Deal with one's own responses (this option is often overlooked)

John referred to Kate Birch's Positive Parenting and to her suggestion:

problem → produces emotion → belief system → solution

We worked through the situation -- when new ideas are presented: "the system changes" or "it retreats into a more rigid position" or "people leave the system".

We discovered options for unsatisfactory situations and worked through to the possibility "love yourself so you can love others".

It was good to see the way John worked us through a lot of material.

Carne Clissold

Spirituality on the Edge -- or the New Centre, conducted by Jane Griffith.

Spirituality on the Edge met all my criteria of an excellent workshop. The preparation was superb right down to being greeted by music on our arrival.

The title was chosen to fit in with the theme of the Conference and every participant was involved in contributing in a major way to its success. After brief introductions we were invited to get out of our "heads" and into our "gut feelings" by doing a drawing illustration what Spirituality meant to us personally. Time was then given for two or three people to share their

drawings. These varied from a very strong tree with good roots, a solid trunk and a new life at the top -- to the whole of life: beauty, energy relationships.

With the use of the overhead projector we were then given some definitions of spirituality that had been researched from books. Examples: "the inner dimensions of a person", "the deepest centre of a person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimensions, here the person experiences ultimate reality."

All the time the group was drawn into discussion. Books were suggested for extra reading. Examples: Care of the Soul by Thomas More; Man's Search for Meaning by Victor E. Frankl; Faces of the Goddess by Celine Kearney. This last has just been published by Tandem Press and is where New Zealand women talk about their Spirituality. All books were available at the bookstall.

Finally, the workshop facilitator shared two case studies from her counselling experiences which encompassed Spirituality on the edge in a very real way leaving me, and I'm sure the other participants of the group, with a feeling that we had in a very short time covered an in-depth exploration of "Spirituality on the Edge. Thanks must go to Jane for the excellent way she put the whole workshop together.

Ngara Earwaker

Withholding or Withdrawing Medical Treatment, conducted by Val Grant

All good students realise that, when faced with a big test it is a good idea to prepare for it and to practise answering typical questions. As students of life we therefore should realise that if we want to be good students we must prepare ourselves for life's big tests. Val Grant gave us the chance to practise for what must be one of life's biggest tests -- taking part in decisions about medical treatment, not only on our own behalf but also in those situations where -- literally -- the lives of others may depend on our choices.

After an initial seeding with a few essential definitions, we were set loose to inspect our own responses to one of the landmark U.S. decisions concerning a young woman condemned to a persistent vegetative state as the result of a traffic accident.

Undoubtedly difficult, emotionally consuming and totally absorbing! Our discussions were incomplete when "time up" was announced. For homework we were given copies of the New Zealand Medical Association's pro forma for living wills to consider completing with our families.

Given that participants were limited to a maximum of 15, this is a workshop that could -- and, in my view, should -- be repeated at future conferences.

George Dodd

Relationship in the Participatory Society, conducted by Leo Hobbis

This is a brief summary of the Notes provided before the Workshop:

The prevailing western materialist paradigm has resulted in a failure on our part to recognise the value of a "participatory" society. Relationships play a

crucial role in our development. **"We are beings in relationship, thereby continually becoming."** Given that a healthy society is a participatory society, ours is not healthy -- a significant number of people find themselves excluded.

The modern scientific world-view which underpins our culture, values only "rational knowledge in the public domain". It fails to account for the subjective and the spiritual. It was a small step from this to a society based on the "autonomous individual acting freely in his/her own interest within a free market economy". We participate only in a limited way.

We must give "more weight to the interaction between people and less to individualism."

We might draw on Skolimsky's model of reconciling dualities in his The Participatory Mind, Penguin 1994 [reviewed in Newsletter 15] because it takes a wider view than does current science.

Summary by Noel Cheer

Workshop participants were asked to work through questions provided by Leo. These are their answers:

1. **Should we be aiming at a fully participatory society?** Everyone agreed and noted that, while we have the emergence of a global culture, simultaneously we have reassertion of ethnic diversity.

2. **What would be some of its main features?** This question brought great diversity of opinion. Some features could be:

- opportunity for all to participate at the level of one's ability and interest
- universal basic income (debated)
- the individual needs to feel they contribute
- contribution and responsibility
- what is the responsibility of the rest to those who choose to opt out?

3. **Can we move far in that direction without a paradigm change?** (this question was left unanswered)

4. **What, if any signs of change are already emerging?** Leo provided answers -- examples of positive moves in this direction e.g. Greenpeace; Foundation for Peace Studies; mediations in disputes; Noam Chomsky's unmasking of governments and big business.

Reported by Mae Cairns

Any More?

If you are "sitting" on a Workshop review, I would appreciate receiving it by November 15 so that I can include it in the December Newsletter. Either mail it to 26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay or e-mail it to noel.cheer@ibm.net

Noel Cheer

Book Reviews

At this year's Conference a number of book reviews were offered as oral presentations and some were distributed only in written form. This is a selection of the abstracts:

Finite and Infinite Games; James P. Carse; Penguin 1987; reviewed by Louis Statham. "James P. Carse is a professor of Religious Studies at New York University, a

winner of the university's Great Teacher Award an author of "Death and Existence, A Conceptual History of Human Mortality and The Silence of God". An easily read little book of 150 pages in 1001 bite-size segments in seven sections. A truly unique and brilliant book. The author writes 'There are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game is for the purpose of continuing the play.'

A Course In Miracles; anonymous; Viking Press 1975; reviewed by Graham Shearer. "[It] began with the sudden decision of two people to join in a common goal. Their names were Helen Shucman and William Thetford, Professors of medical psychology at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City. Helen was surprised to find herself following the words of an Inner Voice, and writing them down. Bill was later to type the words. The Course begins: **Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists. Herein lies the peace of God.** The Course makes a fundamental distinction between the real and the unreal; between knowledge and perception. Knowledge is of the law of love or God. Perception concerns the world of time and change."

Universal Wisdom (A Journey Through The Sacred Wisdom Of The World); Bede Griffiths; Fount; reviewed by Ivan Frost. "Universal Wisdom' is an extraordinary collection of the world's great spiritual teachings from Hinduism, Taoism, Sikhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Arranged in order of religious tradition, this essential spiritual guide provides an indispensable resource on the essence of world beliefs. Illuminated by Griffiths' insightful introductions, each text in this remarkable book explores the deep connections between traditions."

Sacred Words (Selections of Spiritual Writings of All Ages); Paul Ladouceur; Findhorn Press 1996; reviewed by Ivan Frost. "Being unable to find a book that offered him a selection of major sacred writings, Paul Ladouceur decided to compile one himself. Here we have some of the great treasures of humanity's sacred texts. They provide a vision of the divine and a gateway to God, as well as inviting the readers to open their hearts and minds to their innermost selves, to their highest aspirations, to divinity itself. Whilst the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the Koran and many Buddhist sutras are obvious choices for this book, a very liberal attitude has been taken for the definition of 'sacred words' and many less-known and modern writings have been included in this anthology."

The Road Less Travelled and Beyond; Scott M. Peck; Rider (UK) Ebury Press 1977; reviewed by Ivan Frost. "The author leads us to a deep awareness of how to lead rich, fulfilling lives in a world fraught with stress and confusion. The greater challenge, he says, is to learn to deal with life's conflicts, problems and paradoxes in order to find the true simplicity that lies on the other side of complexity. He shows us how to: *Think with integrity; know the difference between good and evil; love and be loved; accept the consequences of our actions throughout life; come to terms with dying and death.*"

SRI Ramakrishna, The Great Master; Swami Saradananda; SRI Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre; reviewed by Frank Eaddy. "This book leads us through the different disciplines of SRI Ramakrishna from Christianity, Islam and Advaita Vedanta -- the non-dual path which culminates in Nirvikalpa Samadhi. This Samadhi is called 'Mystic Union' by the Christians, 'Nirvana' by the Buddhists, and the 'Seedless Samadhi' by the Samkhya philosophy of Kapila and Patanjali. He found by practice that all paths are true if followed and practised by a sincere heart. The errors are left

behind on the way. Hence his 'As many faiths, so many paths'.

Cosmos, Chaos and the World To Come: Norman Cohn; Yale University Press 1993; reviewed by Irvine Roxburgh. "Sometime between 1500BCE and 1200BCE the Iranian prophet Zoroaster broke from a static yet anxious world view and re-interpreted the Iranian version of the combat myth. For Zoroaster, the world was moving through incessant (supernatural) conflict towards a conflictless state "cosmos without chaos". The time would come when, in a prodigious battle, the supreme God would utterly defeat the forces of chaos and their human allies and eliminate them forever, and so bring an absolutely good world into being. Cohn points out that the continuity that we so often speak about as the Judeo-Christian tradition was in fact **not** an unbroken succession. Cohn reveals how the basically Zoroastrian metaphysical vision of the future (eschatology) was in certain critical respects resisted by Judaism but [that it] met no such resistance from the Jesus sect and early Christianity. It became, substantially, the world view of traditional Christianity."

God – A Biography: Jack Miles; Alfred A. Knopf 1995; reviewed by Ian Harris. "This is the life story of God as a literary character, the hero of the Old Testament. The God whom Miles traces through the centuries of that story is torn by conflicting urges. He is by turns creative and destructive, vain and modest, subtle and naive, ruthless and tender, lawful and lawless, powerful yet powerless, omniscient and blind. In his search for self-knowledge he creates humankind as his mirror, the better to examine his own reflection. But humankind turns out also to be his rival. From his first appearance as creator from beyond history, to his immersion in the history of the Jewish people, and then to his closing scene as the ancient of days, the character of God proves to be infinitely complex."

Telling Lies For God: Ian Plimmer; Random House Australia; reviewed by Ivan Frost. "Ian Plimmer is currently at the University of Melbourne and has long been writing and speaking on the subject of 'creation science'. Telling Lies for God is a powerful and controversial analysis of creationism. Ian Plimmer examines in detail the arguments of the creationists, and draws on his own scientific background and the expertise of many of his academic peers to refute them point by point – there are nine pages of references. He details the implications of treating the Old Testament as a scientific text and takes an equally searching look at the material used to back up the more unusual statements made by some of the creationists here and overseas."

Unwrapping His Message: Alun Richards; Alun Wild, Auckland 1997; reviewed by Jack Murray. "The Good News that Jesus brought into the world was addressed to minds accustomed to thinking in the pre-scientific terms of 2000 years ago. During the next 100 years it was restated in the words of the New Testament. Two or three centuries later it was "re-packaged" to suit the then current neo-Platonic thinking (e.g. the Nicene Creed) and has remained in that form ever since. That packaging is no longer congenial to twentieth century thinking as is shown by dramatically falling church attendance; but the Good News itself is still not only relevant but most urgently needed. Unwrapping His Message addresses this problem." [The author was present at the SOFN Conference and distributed no-charge copies of his book to attendees – ed.]

Unwrapping His Message Jesus' Good News as understood by people of the new millennium

Alun Richards; Alun Wild, PO Box 1764, Wellesly St, Auckland 1997; reviewed by Ian Jenkin. [This review was

received independent of the Conference – ed.] "In introducing his book the author sets out concerns which are very familiar to S.O.F people.

"The Christianity we inherit is proving itself unable to enter the third millenium AD – as both statistics and observation abundantly show.

"For its contents – a Great Person in Charge, all humanity's sins forgiven by one man's death-sacrifice, our 'going to heaven' when we die, and Jesus as God Junior along with God Senior and something called 'The Holy Spirit' – appear grotesque and unconnected with any realities to people whose minds have entered today's psychological, ecological and 'new science' worldview." He goes on to express a further concern, raised frequently in S.O.F circles:

"but this new world view..... leaves people leading bleak lives and provides them with no vision of where the universe is going that will guide its creatures' lives and warm their hearts with gratitude and a desire to assist it."

This 105 page book sets out to meet this concern, and on the way draws together in simple and arresting terms some of the most significant findings of contemporary thought in the fields of developmental psychology, quantum physics, and the work of biologists such as Sheldrake and Birch. His conclusions are that the universe as we presently understand it is constantly recreating it self, so that our thought-frames – the spectacles through which we see it, must constantly be abandoned in favour of new ones. But he sees change in the cosmos, and in this planet as positive – or in his words 'climbing' – so that we can be motivated to assist this process rather than merely seeking further opportunities for disastrous exploitation.

In a very short compass it provides a helpful overview of the culture we inherit, and which provides us with assumptions and techniques which can trap us, just because they add so much to the comfort and excitement of modern life.

Ian Jenkin

The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life; Barry Schwartz; W.W. Norton and Co. 1994; reviewed by Val Grant. "This book makes a heady contribution to both politics and religion. The author, an American academic (psychologist) describes how 'market freedom has insidiously expanded its reach into domains where it does not belong' – domains such as the professions (especially medicine and law), sport, relationships, friends and family, and finally democracy itself. By 'market freedom' he means that the most pervasive and persistent measure of them all – money or profit – is, or has become, the only measure of value."

The New Testament in Modern Translation Arranged in Chronological Order; James Veitch; Colcom Press; reviewed by Rinney Westra. "This fresh modern translation without divisions into chapters and verses makes for particularly vivid reading. Each volume is preceded by introductory and thematic notes, with particular attention to when the writing began to be circulated and how faith in Jesus developed and grew. The result is an historical picture of the growth of Christianity 'as it developed from a reform movement within Judaism, to a new religious movement in the Roman Empire, to a religion amongst others in the Empire, until in the fourth century it became the official religion of the Empire.' This is a very different picture from the canonical one that most of us have grown up with."

Heretics – The Other Side of Early Christianity; Gerd Ludemann; SCM Press 1996; reviewed by Rinney Westra. "This book shows that the official view that early Christianity

was marked by a great harmony and that heresy emerged only at a later stage is wishful thinking. The first two centuries of the life of the early church were highly fluid and open, where Gnostics and 'Judaizers' also had their place alongside such people as Paul. In fact Paul can be seen as one of the main heretics of the early church, with Jewish Christians in Jerusalem led by James as the original orthodox party. In the course of time, however, Paul came to be seen as 'orthodox' and the Jewish Christians were turned into heretics! Power has as much to do with this as faith and theology. All this and much, much more is thoroughly outlined, discussed and documented. Included are some 90 pages of end-notes which are, in themselves, worth their weight in gold! Both Veitch and Ludemann treat their material as historians [do], and do not allow theology to over-ride or manipulate the historical data. In doing so they manage to bridge Lessing's 'unbridgeable' gap between faith and history, and provide us with a much sounder basis for Christian faith in the 21st century."

Creation: Claus Westermann; Fortress Press 1976; reviewed by Laurie Chisholm. "I recommend this book to Sea of Faithers who would like to rethink the teaching that God created the world. If you have read your Geering and Cupitt, you already know the sorry story of church opposition to the discoveries of Galileo and Copernicus. You are aware of the failed attempts by Christian apologetics to prove that divine creation is the only satisfactory way of explaining the world, and you have probably concluded that the concept of God is in deep trouble. Westermann writes against this background. He thinks that the Church took a wrong turning in its response to the rise of science and the Enlightenment. He wants to help us get back on track, and his contribution is a fresh look at the Genesis stories of creation in the light of modern biblical scholarship. He wants to open up their meaning to us as modern people, and he is eminently qualified in this field. Not only is he the author of probably the most authoritative (and large!) commentary on the book of Genesis, but he also spent time in the field of adult education. Westermann knows how to explain the significance of his research in ordinary language to those without specialised knowledge.

Want More?

Look at Amazon Books' home page at
www.amazon.com/philosophy-and-religion

In Brief

Holyland Tour 1998

Lloyd Geering will lead another tour to the Holy Land between 29 April and 2 June 1998. Cost: \$7900 ex Auckland, \$7995 ex Wellington, \$8070 ex Christchurch. For full details, contact Global Encounters, 28 Forest Road, Raumati South. Their phone number is 04-299-5900; their fax number is 04-299-5205 and their e-mail address is ken@global.kp.planet.gen.nz

Oops

Vladimir Loncar has offered a correction to his review of *The Other Half of My Soul* which appeared in Newsletter 21. Paul Knitter is not a Protestant, he is a Catholic theologian and his book *Jesus and Other Names* is well worth a read.

SOFN and The Internet

A show of hands of those attending the AGM at this year's Conference indicated that about one-third of

those present have Internet access. While paper will be our preferred means of communications for the foreseeable future, Internet e-mail and the World Wide Web will provide additional resources for those equipped to exploit them.

Sea of Faith Internet Discussion List

This is a private list for members of the Sea of Faith Network. The list administrator is Patti Whaley of SOFN (UK), whose e-mail address is 101335.3561@compuserve.com. The list is not moderated; that is, she does not approve either the subscribers or the specific messages on the list; but as she wants the list to remain private, people must e-mail her to find out the address for the list.

SOFN World Wide Web Sites

SOFN in New Zealand and in the UK both have web sites and each cross-references the other. Our NZ site is currently quite small -- just a variation on the membership brochure -- but we are exploring ways to expand the content. Find it at www.futuresgroup.org.nz

The SOFN (UK) have their home page at www.emma.cam.ac.uk/fellows/cupitt/sea_of_faith/s_offhome.html

Got a Red Dot?

If your newsletter and its envelope are marked with a red dot, this shows that according to our records you have not paid and before the next issue of the newsletter your name will be removed from the membership list. Please send subscriptions to: The Treasurer, SOF Network (NZ), 82 Kinghorne Street, Strathmore Park, Wellington

Next Newsletter: December

Copy deadline is November 15th. To offer a contribution, send a floppy disk or manuscript to Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay or e-mail to noel.cheer@ibm.net

Contents will include copy from the UK SOFN Conference 1997 and further copy from our own Conference.

The Sea of Faith Network (NZ)

The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) is an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.

The Sea of Faith Network itself has no creed. It draws its members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions.

It publishes a regular newsletter, assists in setting up of local discussion groups, and holds an annual conference.

For membership details and for the address of your nearest local group, contact the Membership Secretary, Roy Griffith, 82 Kinghorne St., Strathmore Park, Wellington, Phone 04-388-1885.

To offer a comment on any material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact the Editor, Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay, Phone 04-236-7533, Fax 04-236-7534, e-mail noel.cheer@ibm.net