

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

More Conference Workshop Reviews

The first three of these reviews first appeared in the Newsletter of the Auckland Central SOF Group.

Towards a Creed for Our Times, conducted by Ian Harris

Following Bishop Spong's powerful attack on the creeds, it was timely indeed for us to answer the question: "What can those who have been brought up in the Christian tradition still say they believe?"

At the outset, some members made the point that we, as seekers, should be very wary of any statement that might suggest that we have arrived at any finality.

Discussion in groups of three was lively, and in the best SOF tradition, honest and supportive. We looked at two questions:

1. What do you want to say about what you put your trust in?
2. What, in broad terms, do you want to say about God, Jesus, men and women, meaning, purpose, destiny, good and evil, values – and anything else?

It was obvious that time would not allow any reporting back. My group shared some very diverse and challenging ideas. We agreed that the process had been valuable, but that the process never ends.

Joy Lewis

Gates and Journeys, conducted by Alexa Johnston

Alexa Johnston, former Principal Curator of Auckland Art Gallery, was very knowledgeable and dedicated to her subject.

'Gates' are the obstacles which an artist encounters and passes through, while 'Journeys' are the progress which he or she makes afterwards. This lecture was an overview of the responses of New Zealand artists to religious references and images, how they dealt with them, and how they moved onwards to establish their own form of expression.

One hour was simply not sufficient time for a study of such a vast canvas and I felt that had Alexa concentrated on just two or three artists, rather than all of those of note from 1890 onwards, she would have made her point more powerfully. I could have happily listened and watched 60 minutes devoted to, let us say, Colin McCahon, Lois White and Ralph Hotere. As it was we fairly tore through New Zealand art

history at a rate of knots, with little or no time to absorb the slides, let alone the wit to grasp the names of half the artists mentioned.

As someone who knows little about New Zealand art, I was both frustrated and disappointed, for here was a professional who had a great deal to offer but who had not 'cut her coat according to her cloth'.

Anne Todd

Feeding the Soul, conducted by Nicola Campbell

Nicola gave us the picture of how she came to set up her Auckland Mail Operation to supply tapes and other material to people who wanted to learn and enjoy wisdom gathered over a wide range of backgrounds both religious and worldly. She was associated with the Women's Spirituality Group in Auckland and explored the mystical through yoga, ritual groups and life-enhancing activities. She told of her experiences in a great tapestry of life-enriching projects which included: egolessness; wholeness; the divine feminine and Goddess religions; the seasons of nature, new age thought and practice; chanting; meditating; naming fears; expressing anger; problem solving; guiding imagery; Jungian exploring of the Shadow; loving; dissent consciousness; endarkment; and many others.

She recounted her experiences in guiding 20 people through a 15-minute journey through a void. After each had taken this imaginary trip, they were encouraged to report on their emotional and visual kinaesthetic experiences. There was a lot of pain uncovered and resistance against opening closed doors experienced. The last person to reply said "Nothing

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happened". This was a paradoxical revelation of non-being (in a void), naming the profound in the ordinary. These insights gave power for healing through magnified sensory perception.

Three tapes were played. John O'Donahugh's "Wild Presence of the Divine" graphically revealed that wonder is the sister of the divine, that the eternal is within us and ever new to us. Kenneth Moore's tape emphasised the adventurousness and drivenness of our spirit and the meaningful, creative beingness of our soul. Matthew Fox's tape on pattern for creation discovered the fathomless huge mystery of the soul and the way that it connects to the cosmos. We don't have a soul until compassion enters our life.

In question time Nicola said that compassion came from the acknowledgement of pain. Diana had compassion. She named her own pain.

Graham Shearer

Meditation and Spiritual Progress, conducted by Swami Muktirupananda

The Swami helped us to understand the mind. Meditation is the understanding of the mind. Just as we are evolving people (we are not the same person we were ten years ago), so our minds are evolving. We are evolving our divinity. When we reach perfection our evolution stops and we have inner divinity.

The body plays a secondary role in our civilised society. The mind is our supreme ruler and is the centre of our thoughts and feelings. If we are unhappy or depressed we blame the external world but this is not the cause: the mind is responsible. This mind goes on demanding and we try to meet the demands. We listen to the dictates of the mind and we are miserable. Even if we sit down we are thinking all the time, ceaseless hundreds and thousands of thoughts. The mind is chattering all the time.

Unless we establish some mastery of the mind we are miserable. Meditation is the instrument given to us to unfold and understand the mind. We are not the mind. The mind is separate from us. Just as the observer is not the seen object, the seer and the seen objects are not one. God is the seer and knower inside us. The seer is consciousness. The knower is prior to all our thoughts.

To meditate we need to disassociate ourselves with [from?] our mind.

We need to stop, to let the mind be alert without any thoughts. Then the whole world becomes beautiful. It is silent. It is quiet. It is a blissful state. Silence of the mind is peace and, without this, life is without meaning. Choose the early morning when the whole of nature is quiet, or the evening when the daylight melts into dark. Breath with the two nostrils, count to one hundred, sit with a straight spine, think of Christ as a beautiful image. Think of one word and one image. Then the word and image gradually disappears and the mind is quiet. Insights and [the] mystery of what we really are become clear to us. God is not far away from us. The microcosm and the macrocosm is inside of us and reflects the whole of this cosmos.

Spiritual practice is life long.

Maureen Roxburgh

THE STRANGE DANCE OF RELIGION AND SEXUALITY

Bishop John Spong contributed a foreword to David Hart's new book, Linking Up: Radical Christianity and Sexuality, published by Arthur James, June 1997. The following are excerpts:

"Religion and sexuality have been united for centuries in a strange kind of co-dependence. Both seek to define something basic that lies at the heart of human identity. Both are sources of enormous and intensive power. Both create fear. Both enslave and free the human psyche."

"Sometimes religion and sexuality were separated so totally that they were portrayed as enemies locked in a mortal struggle. In some traditions the prerequisite for being religious was to deny and to repress all aspects of sexual energy. In this tradition the holy man was defined as the sexless man. The holy woman was defined as the "undefiled" virgin." "One has only to observe the cultural definitions that are still operative today regarding what it means to be a man, a woman, a virgin, a homosexual man, a lesbian and even a bisexual to be aware of this reality."

"The traditional Christian marriage service in the West has always assumed the definition of the woman as a male possession. The bride took solemn vows to obey her new husband and master. The ring on the brides' finger marked her as the property of a man. The customs that surround the wedding, from the shoes attached to the get-away vehicle (which were symbols of the husband's ability to physically punish his wife), or the carrying of the bride over the threshold of the wedding bed where her worth was determined by her ability to be the source of her husband's pleasure, all reflected the stereotypically religious definitions of a woman. The man had the God-given right, it was assumed, to exercise total control over his wife's body."

"... even more deeply did the issues of birth control threaten the male-dominated Church. Both birth control and abortion represented emancipation proclamations for women. Both suggested that the body of the woman was her own possession to control. It was not the property of a man, nor was it subject to the control of a male-dominated Church."

"The intense negativity in some segments of the Christian Church toward the opening of the doors of the all-male priesthood to women has also been quite revealing. If the Church believed that it spoke with the voice of a God understood only under masculine images, and that it was the Church's task to control sexuality in the name of this Father God, then having women in the councils of ecclesiastical decision-making as priests was anathema."

"When the issue of homosexuality arose in the life of both the Church and the world, the same threatened dynamics once more appeared. No issue is more viscerally resisted, condemned and debated in the churches of the Christian west today than is the subject of homosexuality. Surely the Church has had gay clergy forever. The priesthood has been for centuries the primary closet in which gay men could hide."

English Poetry on the Margins, conducted by Elaine Geering

This was a delightful workshop and everybody appeared to enjoy themselves. To illustrate her theme, Elaine Geering had selected works from Anglo-Saxon times, through succeeding ages, up to the present day -- all of them gems, all of them indicative of poets exploring the extremes of human existence and often 'on the edge of the abyss'. The cry of forlorn love on the edge of despair in an age long gone still haunts ...

'Do you hear me, Eadwacer, our wretched whelp
A wulf shall carry to the woods.
Men may easily put asunder that which was never
joined --
Our song together.'

We read the poems aloud and discussed them with reference to the theme and, had there been time, would have divided into groups for detailed discussion and analysis.

Perhaps fewer poems (sad thought) would have made the hour and a half stretch further.

Anne Todd

Tomorrow's Religion: Going With The Flow, conducted by Alan Goss

In this workshop we talked about what we thought the Sea of Faith Network stood for. We thought that, while the world had been changing, church life hadn't changed: that the traditional model of faith -- ready-made formal religion -- no longer grips many people (although many [others] still respond).

We saw that a new model is needed, [one] based on this earth being all that we have (there is no other world to which we are going). In this model there are no absolute, objective truths -- we make the truths.

We need to capture every fleeting moment of life, and live life to the full. Go with the flow and let go of the things that keep us safe and secure.

The religion of the future will be concerned with:

- Having a concern for the cosmos.
- More time for celebration -- recognising that the real self is on show all the time.
- Developing forms of relating to one another.
- Ensuring social justice.

The institutional church is dying and the new body will be much more open. It will be like the synagogue of old but will have much more place for women.

These ideas -- including those drawn from Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering -- had the general support of the group. However, not all group members were convinced that we should let go of the things that keep us safe and secure -- perhaps we should keep them, provided that we were not dependant on them?

At the end of the workshop Alan handed each of us a five page statement of what he takes the Sea of Faith Network to stand for and which nicely summed-up the propositions which we had been discussing, and rounded off a most worthwhile workshop.

Ian Crabtree

Sea of Faith or Voyage of Faith, conducted by John Goffin

"Discussing and learning great ideas are OK but the time has come for charting a clearer purpose. This may comprise a shared celebration of life and nature, activity to ensure a sustainable future and education to expand the work, drawing on the best of our cultures and expanding knowledge"

In looking at the question "Where are we going to?", the group considered briefly whether we should as a group have a role or influence in social or political fields. But there was strong resistance to the SOFN developing defined aims in such areas, or building the hierarchical structure to achieve the same. **The primary focus for the SOFN should be to provide a free forum for ideas.**

Similarly, there was no enthusiasm for the idea of SOFN developing its own symbols and/or rituals.

The influence of values and ideas from SOFN should be allowed to diffuse into other groups in society through the individuals involved.

The group came back with the statement of identity of the Sea of Faith Network, noting that its presents our aims positively and succinctly, and felt that it provides a valuable basis on which to discuss our position with people wanting to know more about the Sea of Faith. *[The following appears in the SOFN Membership brochure -- ed]*

IT **AFFIRMS** the continuing importance of religious thought and practice as a vehicle for awe and wonder and for the celebration of key social and spiritual values;

IT **DRAWS** freely upon our spiritual heritage without being bound by it;

IT **PROMOTES** the quest for meaning and fulfilment as a human activity;

IT **PROVIDES** encouragement, stimulation and support in fellowship with others engaged in the quest.

The group further decided that the above "Sea of Faith Affirmation" should be more widely disseminated, for example by printing it on A4 in a neat format (like the Rotary 4 way test) and providing a copy to all present and especially to new members. *[As a starter its on our World Wide Web home page at www.futuresgroup.org.nz -- ed]*

Alan Brown

Peter or Paul

This review of St. Paul versus St. Peter: A Tale of Two Missions by Michael Goulder (Westminster John Knox Press) was contributed by Alan Goss

This modest book (196pp) is worth its weight in gold. Bishop John Spong acknowledges his great debt to Michael Goulder in his latest book *Liberating the Gospels*. Goulder is Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK and like Don Cupitt, is an "atheist priest". As a biblical scholar, Goulder is worthy of Spong's accolades and presents a compelling case. His findings are based on a careful examination of the biblical texts along with the gift of an acute and sensitive theological nose. The claim on

the cover -- that Goulder writes "with wit, force and clarity" -- is thoroughly justified.

In opposition to views that the New Testament writings are a sign of an existing harmonious unity, Goulder maintains -- as many are aware -- that from the earliest times (40AD approx.) there never was a simple united church. There were two missions, one operating from Jerusalem under the leadership of Peter and the sons of Zebedee, and later James the brother of Jesus, and other members of his family. The other mission was run by Paul, from various centres.

The two missions were agreed about the supreme significance of Jesus, but little else. On most other matters -- the validity of the bible, whether or not the Kingdom had arrived, sex (Paul's liberal and common-sense views prevailed against the nobility of Petrine ideas of celibacy), money, work, tongues, healing, Jesus' divinity (The Jerusalem mission taught that the human Jesus was possessed by a spirit from his baptism to his passion [whereas the Pauline view was that] Jesus Christ was an eternal unity -- both a spirit and, in some way human). There were deep disagreements.

The New Testament gives the impression of a united developing body of belief for two reasons. First, because it is simply a **selection** of writings. Secondly, it was selected by the **mission which won**: the Pauline mission. [That] is why the New Testament consists of the Epistles of Paul (and his followers) and four Gospels, three of which are Pauline (though Luke is friendly to both sides), supplemented by "bridge" writings to Jerusalem (Matthew, James, The Apocalypse).

Precisely how the Paulines won -- and that wasn't finalised until relatively late, perhaps around 190AD -- is uncertain and would make fascinating reading.

The primary source for the "two missions" theory which Goulder developed over twenty years, is [the book of the] Acts and [the writings of] Paul -- but especially the latter. Acts is a doubtful asset because Luke -- who invented the theory of a virginal and united church -- did a masterful job of papering over the cracks. It is the epistles which help us to see what was going on in the churches in the fifties.

Paul had been successful in converting some Gentiles to Christianity, and the question had arisen as to how much of the Jewish Law in the bible those Gentiles needed to keep. They had to keep the **moral** commandments, but Paul -- the liberal! -- turned a blind eye over the **ceremonial** commandments such as circumcision and the eating of kosher meat. Paul dug in his heels (Gal.2:1-4) and, in the end, his party won the day after a great deal of tension (Gal 2:11-14).

Today, Christians do not have to eat kosher meat or be circumcised, and we can be grateful to Paul for that. At the same time Goulder exhorts us to be fair to Paul's opponents James and Peter. If you accept the bible as the word of God (as both sides did) then God's word must be honoured, especially when the issue of Jewish identity was at stake. As Goulder points out, "you have issues for which men will die,

and kill. It is probable that both Paul and Ignatius died in partial consequence of the hatred of **Jewish** Christians (those loyal to Peter and James); and we shall see that the **Pauline** Christians, especially St. John, hated the Jewish Christians with equal ferocity".

This, then, was the basic tension between the two factions and it is the only one for which there is direct support in the New Testament text. Goulder explores the other tensions mentioned above and acutely remarks that "to understand what those differences were, and why they arose, is to understand the New Testament."

In a fascinating section on Jesus' resurrection Goulder gives a convincing explanation for the conversion-visions of Peter and other Christians at Pentecost. Prior to Pentecost all of them were beaten men, especially Peter who must have seen himself as a total spiritual failure. It is not uncommon for spiritual crises to find their resolution through visions and voices -- or a saint, a dead partner, a Joseph Smith, or the founder of a religious tradition such as Jesus. Today, psychologists collect such experiences -- and they are not rare -- some people even identifying themselves in their crisis with God of Jesus. Peter, after Easter, didn't come to his conversion-experience "cold" and nor did the other disciples. They knew from Daniel about the resurrection of the dead at the end of history and their vision of Jesus alive follows naturally from this. It was, as it were, "pressed upon them". Yet, as Goulder wittily explains, the spreading of an experience does not mean its confirmation. When a few people reported seeing flying saucers, thousands followed suit. "Such stories quickly gain credence, and sightings multiply, in small communities with limited education and under threat -- like the early church -- especially when there is a psychological payoff. So it does not add anything important to Peter's experience to hear that 500 Christians later saw the risen Lord. Under other circumstances they might have seen UFOs, or Bigfoot".

Goulder ends his chapter on the resurrection by stating categorically, after much reasoned and sensible argument, "that Jesus did not really rise from the dead, either physically or spiritually. Rather, his followers had conversion-vision experiences which they interpreted in line with the biblical categories of their time". That's one more giant step towards developing "a religion for grownups" (Noel Cheer, National Radio, October '97).

This very readable book is a vision experience in itself. It is not a lightweight read and demands time and study, so much so that I'm returning for a second helping.

Alan Goss

**"Christianity is the
missionary position:
men on top"**

David Boulton in the UK SOF Magazine No. 30.

Bringing Some Realism to Non-Realism

In response to a comment made by another SOF member on the Internet, Anthony Freeman, author of God In Us, A Case for Christian Humanism wrote:

We may start with Kant's distinction between things-in-themselves and things-as-we-perceive-them.

Full-blown non-realism (which I take to be more or less identical with traditional idealism) holds that things-in-themselves simply do not exist. There is **nothing** "out there", no physical material world and no Platonic world of forms. The only world is the world in our minds, things only exist in so far as we perceive them.

A realist position (Kant's own) says that things-in-themselves do exist, although by definition we can know nothing of them.

My own view is this:

1. I take Kant's position, but extend it by saying that "what we can't know" about things-in-themselves includes whether or not they exist. We must therefore remain agnostic about this. I call this "practical non-realism". It says that for **all** practical purposes we have to live in the world-as-we-know-it, and it is therefore idle to speculate about other possible worlds. This does not deny that there may be something in existence of which we are currently ignorant, but it says that (a) while we are totally ignorant of it, it can have no practical consequences for us, and that (b) the moment we become aware of it (however obliquely), it will at that moment become part of the (now enlarged) world-as-we-know-it.

2. The shibboleth question is: if no human being, or comparable conscious being, had ever existed, would anything exist? (a) Some full-blown non-realists would probably say "no". (b) Bishop Berkeley, the most famous Christian idealist, would say "yes", because God is conscious of his creation, even in the absence of any conscious creatures. (c) Any realist would answer "yes", whether or not they believed in God. (d) I have to say: "I do not know; the question only makes sense in a 'realist' context, which I do not accept".

3. God is a special case, since even on the most traditional theological understanding God is not part of the universe, not part of the creation, not one of the things that exists; but God is that which underpins the universe, the creator of all things visible and invisible, that which "is" and causes all else to "exist". To take G.F. Stewart Allen's two questions in turn:

(a) **"what about a monism (a panentheism) that finds reality expressed in what is?"** Traditional Christianity says something like: "We can only know God as he is manifested in his Word and works, not as he is in himself. But we accept by faith that his Word and works give a true picture of God." Monistic pantheism would seem to be saying: "We can only know God as he is manifested in his Word and works, and therefore that is the extent of what God is." I think most pantheists would be realists where the universe was concerned, so would say God is "real". I would say: "We can only know God as he is described

in our humanly constructed religious traditions. 'Faith in God' means a commitment to the values and ideals represented by the Word and works of God in that tradition. God becomes real when that commitment becomes real."

(b) **Does the inward experience of unity with the divine as found in mystical understanding imply assertion of 'realism'?** One's interpretation of mystical experience will depend upon one's general attitude to human perception.

(i) Some people hold that there is a ready-made world "out there", which we passively record like the film of a camera or the tape in a tape-recorder.

(ii) Others say that there is a mass of "raw data" out there, and we impose our own meaning upon it. Both these are "realist" positions.

(iii) Others again (non-realists) say that there is nothing "out there", that all our experience is internally generated by the mind. The experience of unity with the divine is compatible with any of these three positions.

Personally I hover between (ii) and (iii).

Anthony Freeman, anthony@imprint.co.uk

Religious Education for Schools

Jean Holm presented a workshop on this subject at the recent Conference. This is a summary of her paper. The full paper is available from the Resource Centre.

A distinction is made between "confessional Religious Education" ("teaching for belief") and "Religious Studies" which requires the teacher (and students) to set their own beliefs to one side. The ambition of the latter is:

"To enable students, by the time they leave secondary school, to understand the nature of religion and its expression and influence in the lives of individuals and society."

This involves teachers teaching about more than one religion. A list of specific student learning objectives is detailed followed by such practical issues as what kind of things can be learned at what age. Other important considerations include the (cultural) background of the students and avoidance of over-simplifying the material.

Two specific objectives (skills and knowledge) are illustrated in discussions of, respectively, the use of religious language and the recognition of sacred writings.

The author concludes with the hope that Religious Studies could soon be introduced into New Zealand schools and two questions to SOFN readers: "is this the form of RE that SOFN members would be happy about?" and "what are we going to do about it?"

Ban Dihydrogen Monoxide!

This substance has been shown to: be a major cause sweating and vomiting; be present in acid rain; cause severe burns in its gaseous state; contribute to soil erosion; be present in cancer tumours. Continued on the last page.

Lloyd Geering's Reflections

This marked the 10th UK Conference. Held in the beautiful surroundings of a University College of residence in Leicester, it was remarkably similar to ours, in numbers, programme format (plenary speakers, workshops, core groups) and in general spirit.

However, there was much less cohesion than ours was this year in the topics and personalities of the plenary speakers. They were: Don Cupitt, Daphne Hampson, Tom Altizer and a London scientist, who was not quite sure why he had been invited and whose lecture on science was not wholly understood by all present.

Daphne Hampson is a feminist post-Christian who lectures in theology at St. Andrew's University, Scotland. Because of her fairly militant feminism she no longer identifies with Christianity and regards the Christian myth as highly dangerous. (See her latest book, *After Christianity* [a review appears in Newsletter 22 -- ed]). But neither does she identify with the non-realist view of God that is common in the Sea of Faith. Yet when, in answer to a question,

Old Testament prophets. [See page 8 for a review of one of his books -- ed] His pronouncements of imminent doom upset some, mystified others and caused a few to think more deeply. He said he was glad to find in the Sea of Faith "a body of serious enquirers into ultimate issues" but thought that we were as yet not nearly radical enough and encouraged us to go back to the most radical streams in the Christian tradition, including the apocalyptic writings and the prophets: "Jesus is our most radical prophet".

After these two, Don Cupitt seemed almost prosaic and unprovocative by comparison. He took the opportunity to review where the Sea of Faith had come to in its ten years. His central theme was this: The new technological culture which has brought about the downfall of the old world-view and its certainties, and which has liberated us and given us the chance to be a world-maker, seems also to have made us unable to respond to the challenge. Nowadays we use machines to do our thinking for us and seem less able to do it for ourselves.

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she spoke of God as "the power of an underlying goodness, beauty and order" it was not clear that the difference was anything more than verbal. Her assertion that "we should find God among us and between us and not out there" sounded very much like Martin Buber's "God of relation", which fits into the non-realist category more than the realist.

She gave an enthusiastically received lecture on an ethic for the 21st century, constructed on the feminist theory that the human self must be seen as "centred-in-relation". This led, she maintained, to quite different emphases in both ethics and politics than those found in their traditional, male-constructed counterparts.

"Things which men have found trivial become important, such as that everyone should find a voice. Such an ethic requires listening, honesty and compassion". Most present fully agreed with what she said but some wondered if she exemplified this very clearly in her own relationships with people. They observed that she acted very much as a fully-self-contained individualist who had no hesitation in warning other people to keep their distance.

In strong contrast with Daphne Hampson, Thomas Altizer, American leader of the "death-of-God" theologians in the '60's, spoke with all the dogmatic declaration and accompanying dramatic acting of the

Religion Still Matters

The following are some excerpts from this lecture by Don Cupitt. It is reproduced in full in the UK Sea of Faith magazine which is available on subscription (see "In Brief" below).

"[over the last 9 years] the decline of religion has accelerated. The churches have lost most of their former moral authority and social standing, and their intellectual credibility could hardly be lower. ... Contracting fast, the churches are going downmarket and becoming absorbed in silly internal controversies and scandals."

"Traditional Christianity was -- and remains -- locked into a dream of agricultural civilization, an authoritarian system of government, pre-critical thinking, and a supernatural world-view."

"Codified religion ... is dead religion, whereas living religion is something that we must make up, all the time and as we go along. ..."

"The real life of religion was always what I used to call "active non-realism", and what Sea of Faith calls 'a human creation'. People have always invented great numbers of allegiances, ritual performances and gatherings that symbolize the human struggle, enrich life, and give it meaning. ... if people ... can see the point of football, they should surely be able to see the point of religion."

Book Reviews

After God

After God. The Future of Religion by Don Cupitt
Weidenberg & Nicolson, 1997, reviewed by Lloyd Geering.

Don Cupitt was commissioned by Basic Books (of HarperCollins) to write this book for the Master Minds Series, a publishing venture consisting of original books by leading thinkers round the world. So it first appeared in USA.

It sketches a theory of religious meaning for the future. It is "religion without metaphysics, religion without creed, religion no longer focused around a power centre outside ourselves, religion without a structure of authority, and religion without a gathered community of people -- the elect".

But first he analyses the religious history of the past. So the book is in three parts: The Coming of the Gods, The Departure of the Gods, Religion after the Gods.

This is not exactly bedside reading but SoFers will find a great deal in it to excite, to stimulate and to ponder upon. I have read it three times. I do not agree with all of it and perhaps I have not understood the full import of every sentence. Yet each time I find more of interest in it, so much so that my copy is becoming heavily marked.

Cupitt draws upon many ideas and assertions that are to be found in his earlier books, such as the absence of absolutes and the way we build our worlds out of language, but he carries them further and with much freshness of expression. For example, "everything nowadays is beginning to float on a free global market -- not only money and prices but also linguistic meanings, religious truths, and moral and aesthetic values". He suggests that protagonists of the Right, who set themselves up as defenders of traditional values, are quite illogical if they do not acknowledge that moral values sink or swim just like economic values.

After rejecting four current methods of attempting to preserve traditional values in the current "sea of meanings" where nothing is fixed, Cupitt proceeds to his radical redefinition of religion. To do this he goes back to ask why the gods were created by human imagination in the first place and why they have recently disappeared.

Cupitt's general contention at the outset is that the spirits of the ancient world, when demythologized, turn out to be the power of words, and that the supernatural world of ancient religion is really a mythical representation of the creative power of language. This could have been even better illustrated from Zoroastrianism, where the spirits are actually called by such names as Truth, Right-mindedness, Immortality and the supreme God Ahura Mazda literally means "Lord Light".

This supplies the key as to why "the gods have departed", when understood as external and objective beings. There is nothing permanent or absolute about language. Words come and go and change in meaning. Every word has a history. Every culture has a history. Every religion has a history. And, as Karen

Armstrong has made so clear by her book, even God has a history.

In attempting to salvage something of God-language after "the death of God" for the religion of the future Cupitt selects three themes which he calls, the Eye of God, Blissful Void and Solar Living.

The first draws from the mediaeval mystic Meister Eckhart who said "The eye with which I see God and the eye with which God sees me are one and the same eye". To believe in God, suggests Cupitt is "to live as if under the eye of God and to assess oneself and one's world from the standpoint of eternity".

The Blissful Void draws upon the Buddhist concept of Sunyata, which means Emptiness. In a world where nothing is solid, permanent or changeless, Cupitt finds this to be a suitable replacement for the old metaphysical God.

Solar Living, or the outpouring of one's life and energy without trying to hold on to anything, Cupitt made clear in his Solar Ethics. Incidentally, it is a very apt modern expression of the Christian invitation to "take up the cross".

Like most of Cupitt's books this is a book to be discussed, debated and thoroughly chewed over before it can be finally digested.

Postscript

An advance copy of Don Cupitt's next book has just arrived. It is called *Mysticism after Modernity*, published by Blackwell, 1998 (!). Rumour has it that Don sees this as his penultimate book. We hope not. He is already well on the way with the one which follows; it has something to do with Heidegger. A review of the book on *Mysticism* will appear in the March Newsletter.

Lloyd Geering

Second Postscript

We can report that *After God* was reviewed in the October 12, 1997 issue of the *Guardian Weekly* on page 20 of the Features section. The article was less of a review of the book and more of a background to Cupitt and his writings. Some quotations:

"Cupitt categorises his present religious views as 'eclectic and improvised -- 50 percent Christian, 20 percent Jewish and 30 percent Buddhist'."

Quoting Cupitt, "By all means let us look at a sunset with the eyes of a physicist when it is appropriate to do so, but as a corrective let us learn also to look at a sunset with the eyes of a Turner."

"Cupitt rejects the idea of a one-truth universe, teaching instead what he calls 'cosmic democracy: everything is seen as depending upon open debate, healthy institutions, and a human consensus refreshed by frequent injections of new metaphors, new valuations, new angles. If the price of liberty is eternal vigilance [then] the price of truth is endless openness to criticism and innovation.'"

"Just as painters, 'beaten' by photographers, learnt to paint in new 'post-realist' ways, so religious thinkers and philosophers can show 'what it is to live religiously or to think philosophically: what needs we are trying to meet, and what questions we try to answer.'"

reported by Noel Cheer

The Genesis of God

This review by Ian Stubbs originally appeared in the June issue of the U.K. SOF Internet Newsletter "Portholes".

The Genesis of God. A Theological Genealogy by Thomas J.J. Altizer (1993). John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky.

I'm sitting in Pizza Express in Islington. There's a buzz of conversation around the young clientele. I'm reading Genesis of God. I have two problems, what does this book mean and what can it possibly mean for these people here?

Genesis of God is not an easy book. It is heavily philosophical and theological. It assumes some prior knowledge of a range of literary and philosophical works (some of which I have in my collection, though still with the bookmark after the first couple of pages!) It is written in an erudite and at times (for me) inaccessible style. But I think it's worth the effort. A bit like eating a pizza, you need a sharp knife and to work around it a bit, find and enjoy the softer, juicier bits and come back to the hard crust.

Altizer is one of the founding fathers of the 'Death of God' school. He is a radical theologian whose theology is founded on the loss of the transcendent God which he sees as the hallmark of the modern age. His project is the theological implications of this loss which is the great realisation of the contemporary world exposed by literary heroes such as Milton, Blake and Joyce.

The first person to spell out this loss, claims Altizer, was Hegel. Building on ideas of Kant, Hegel developed the notion of the processes of the mind shaping reality rather than the reverse. Hegel is the first philosopher to propound the notion of the imminence of God. This theme was taken up by one of the young Hegelians, Feuerbach. Just as modern philosophy can be understood as a continuing commentary on Kant and Hegel so Altizer's theology is a continuing commentary on that of Hegel. It is also one that he brings into a dialogue with the poet Blake, his lifelong passion. This book, along with an earlier work Genesis and Apocalypse are fuller developments of earlier work summarised in William Blake and the Role of Myth in the Radical Christian Vision published in 1966 in Radical Theology and the Death of God.

In traditional theology, especially as seen in Augustine, (and reflected in neoplatonic philosophy) the answer to human alienation lies beyond the soil of human experience. Finite humankind is alienated from an infinite God through the Fall. This alienation is reversed by the creative act of God in Jesus who is the source of grace and abundant life. The answer to suffering, alienation and finitude is faith in the infinite love of God. "Believe", says Augustine, "in order that you may understand". God holds within Godself, and holds out to us, eternal life or eternal death, at the same time. Altizer following Blake identifies the traditional, transcendent God with Satan or Selfhood. He holds death within the promise of life.

Altizer argues that modernity has given birth to a very different reversal, the actual dissolution of the transcendent God. The fullness once associated with

the Godhead is, as it were, emptied out and become imminent. But the God that is now "in us" is not the old "full of life God" but the God who is constantly "emptied out". We can no longer speak of God as "is" at all. In Jesus the self-sufficient "other" God self-annihilates thus reversing or redeeming God's satanic form. The crucified God is Christianity's great gift to the religious experience of humankind. This self-emptying God, the crucified God, must at the same time be the God who "is not".

Altizer points up a distinction between this understanding and some forms of Buddhism. In the latter there is a progressive detachment from the fallen and distracting world of experience back to an ultimate Reality which exists in and through itself and which the mystic knows as quiescence. The kenotic God of Christian faith cannot be known in quiescence only in activity – in transformative outpouring, in a Kingdom which is dawning.

God "who is not" is the new creator and redeemer because it is out of the nihilism of contemporary life that comes our creativity – our best science, our deepest expressions of imagination, our greatest poetry. Here perhaps we come back to the young people in Pizza Express. Altizer explores his theological ideas with reference to Blake. For Blake it is not reason which will change people's lives but imagination and vision. The new theological task is how to help them and others like them to make works of art out of their lives and the life of society. But, as Blake cautioned, it doesn't come cheap...

**"I rest not from my great task
To open the Eternal Worlds,
to open the Immortal Eyes
Of man inwards into Worlds of Thought,
into Eternity, Ever expanding in
the Bosom of God,
the Human Imagination."**

Ian Stubbs

Accepting Futility

Patti Whaley of the UK Sea of Faith recently sent this via the Internet.

I've been reading a book by Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun whose books are much loved by Shambala people. [Shambala was started by a Tibetan Buddhist some 25 years ago as a way of making essential Buddhist teachings available to Westerners.] I was particularly struck by a chapter called "Hopelessness and Death". In Buddhism hopelessness is very important; it encompasses a range of meanings like acceptance of futility and meaninglessness; working with things as they are rather than expecting things to change; giving up the hope that there is an escape from working with life as it is. It somewhat reminds me of Cupitt's description of Kierkegaard in "Sea of Faith", where he says that only after accepting the absolute futility of life can one learn to love God and become an individual.

Pema carries this a step further and explicitly relates hopelessness to non-theism, to giving up the expectation that someone or something "out there" will take

responsibility for us or save us. She says "The difference between theism and non-theism is not whether one does or does not believe in God. It is an issue that applies to everyone, including Buddhists and non-Buddhists. **Theism is a deep-seated conviction that there's some hand to hold: if we just do the right things, someone will appreciate us and take care of us.** We are all inclined to abdicate our responsibilities and delegate our authority to something outside ourselves ... From this point of view, theism is an addiction. We're all addicted to hope -- hope that the doubt and mystery will go away Nontheism is relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves In a nontheistic state of mind, abandoning hope is an affirmation, the beginning of the beginning."

"My Way"

This is an excerpt from the truly exceptional 1990 Reith Lectures given by Jonathan Sacks, who soon after, became the Chief Rabbi of the U.K. The Lectures were subsequently published under their title The Persistence of Faith by Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London. This appears on pages 41-42.

"One of the great motifs of moral thought of the last century has been the crucial importance of private space, the territory in which we are simply free to be ourselves. Rarely in human history has the idea of an obligation imposed on us by others seemed so constricting and suffocating. ...

"But what is missing ... is the idea once thought to be definitive of morality: that there can be obligations which constrain our choices, and duties that place a limit on desire.

"It is not that we have stopped thinking morally altogether. It is, rather, that our moral imagination is bounded by three central themes -- autonomy, equality and rights -- the values that allow each of us to be whatever we choose.

"The central character of our moral drama is no longer the saint or hero, but the free self, unencumbered by attachments, unobligated by circumstances, freely negotiating its temporary contracts with others: Frank Sinatra singing, 'I did it my way'."

Local Groups

Auckland Central

Activities planned at the time that this Newsletter was composed include: a talk on "Theological Education in Auckland" on November 16 and their Christmas party on December 14. Contact Graham Shearer on 09-524-9941

Ideas from UK SOFN Groups

Some of the subjects being discussed by UK groups include: the status of church union; postmodernism and patristic reading of Scripture; an astronomer's view of the star of Bethlehem; rites of passage from a SOF perspective.

From the Steering Committee

Our first experience of a teleconference meeting is now behind us and, although it was a new experience for most of the committee, we felt encouraged at the way we could successfully and succinctly undertake the business of the Network.

We were greatly heartened by the responses to the evaluation form from the last conference and have taken on board the comments made. Thanks also to those people who have written or faxed suggesting speakers for next year's Conference. Invitations have been sent to two overseas speakers and we will soon start approaching some of the excellent people within New Zealand who have been suggested. When we have some positive responses they will be reported in the Newsletter.

As Membership Secretary, Roy has been pleased with the responses to the red dots -- but there are still a large number of people who have not renewed for the 1997-98 year. If you hear plaintive cries from friends who have not received this Newsletter then please remind them that the "annual cull" has taken place and that a cheque for \$10 sent to Roy Griffith at 82 Kinghorne St., Strathmore Park, Wellington will rectify their dilemma!

On behalf of the Steering Committee I wish you a happy and relaxing holiday season and look forward to contact with many of you during 1998.

Jane Griffith, Chairperson

Doctors and Doctrine

At the conclusion of the inaugural Geering Lectures delivered by Bishop John Spong at St. Andrews on the Terrace, Wellington during October 1997, Lloyd Geering made this observation as part of his vote of thanks:

"It has always seemed to me extremely odd that the general public have quite a different attitude to the medical profession to what they have to the clerical profession.

How many people in the modern world would ever continue to go to a GP [general practitioner] who never read any of the latest medical literature? Not only that, but who even rejected much of the stuff they learned at the medical school because it was inconsistent with what the medieval practitioners did.

It would be sheer nonsense but that is the way that many of the public regard theology and the clerical profession -- it must stay the same as it was hundreds of years ago. That, of course, is not the Christian tradition in its living form -- and Bishop Spong has been able to help us to see that to be the case."

In Brief

More on Dihydrogen Monoxide

It is otherwise known as "water". The list of its harmful properties had its origin in a US High School science project "attempting to show how conditioned we have become to alarmists practising junk science and spreading fear of everything in our environment". We are grateful to The Stirrer, The Journal of the Universalist Association of New South Wales for this item.

Borrowing from the Hewitson Library

These books may be borrowed: The Contemporary Jesus by Thomas Altizer; After God by Don Cupitt (reviewed in this Newsletter); God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-Realism edited by Colin Crowder; In The Beauty of the Lilies by John Updike; Telling Lies for God by Ian Plimer; Knowledge of Angels by Jill Paton Walsh. The last two were reviewed in Newsletter 23.

Contact the Hewitson in Dunedin by phone 03-473-0106 or fax 03-473-8466. You will need to register as a borrower (its free) and to refund postal costs.

The State of Religion Today

This is the subject matter of Demos Quarterly Issue 11. Priced 8 pounds sterling from Demos, 9 Bridewell Place, London, EC4V 6AP, phone 00-44-171-353-4479. Contributors include Don Cupitt, Ninian Smart, Karen Armstrong, Satish Kumar.

Women in Biblical Texts

Otago University will be holding a week-long intensive course on this subject in July 1998r. It will explore both the portrayal of women in the Bible and the ways in which we read such texts.

For details contact the tutor Judith McKinlay by phone on 03-479-5392 or by e-mail at judith.mckinlay@stonebow.otago.ac.nz

Heresy Today, Gone Tomorrow?

Dr Jim Veitch recently presented two lectures on "The Geering Controversy" under the auspices of the St. Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society.

Their titles were: The Anatomy of a Heresy: The Presbyterian Church v. Principal Lloyd Geering, November 1967 and Presbyterians in Conflict, 1965-1970: Implications for Christians in New Zealand 1970-2000.

There are no plans to publish the lectures in book form but you can order the tape of both lectures (\$10, includes postage) from the Trust at Box 5203 Wellington.

The New Zealand religious magazine Stimulus devoted its May 1997 issue (Vol 5 No 2) to reflections on that event. It would be fair to say that apart from Jim Veitch's two articles and one by David Simmers, the magazine was out of sympathy with Lloyd.

The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society plans to have a World Wide Web site in operation before Christmas. Look for it after about mid-December at www.futuresgroup.org.nz

The SOFN (NZ) Web Site

The Steering Committee has decided to delay the project to expand the content of our website (also to be found at www.futuresgroup.org.nz) until we better understand legal matters, especially regarding the copyright on the papers which we had intended to display.

If any of our members have legal expertise in these matters and would like to share it with me, please contact me via one of the addresses in the box on this page.

Noel Cheer

Spong and Edwards

Bishop Spong referred to Brian Edwards as a "God-intoxicated atheist". Brian Edwards interviewed John Spong on his 'Top of the Morning' programme on October 4. You can buy a copy from Replay Radio, Box 123, Wellington for \$20, including postage. Quote tape number BE971004.

UK Sea of Faith Magazine

The UK Sea of Faith Magazine, published quarterly, contains well-thought-out articles by a variety of people and will provide you with stimulating reading in addition to our own Newsletter. Subscribers outside of the UK should send eleven pounds sterling to: **Ronald Pearse, 15 Burton Street, Loughborough LE11 2DT, UK**

Letters To The Editor

There were none. This is **your** platform to be controversial -- stretch some boundaries, break new ground, start a schism, risk excommunication. Luther could do it -- why not you too?

Next Newsletter: March

Copy deadline is **February 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

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. The WWW home page is at www.futuresgroup.org.nz

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, contact the Editor, Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay, Phone 04-236-7533, Fax 04-236-7534, e-mail noel.cheer@ibm.net