

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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A recovered old Newsletter

The 1998 Conference: A Retrospective

Steering Committee

Three days after conference, the Editor has requested material for the Newsletter. My thoughts quickly return to the Conference—to seeing people arrive at the Central Institute of Technology campus, the buzz of activity as the Arrangements Committee ensured that every person had their registration pack and were directed to their rooms.

The beautiful floral arrangement in the foyer to greet us as we arrived bringing Spring into the Conference venue. Conversations quickly started as people registered, renewing friendships and welcoming new people.

Our three keynote speakers this year all provided us with much to ponder from their respective views on **Inventing Reality**. It was interesting having a musicologist, a philosopher and a psychiatrist as speakers as there was very little overlap between the three lectures but a diversity of approach and style. The range of elective lectures and workshops was tantalisingly large just like going into a sweet shop and having to choose from rows and rows of wonderful boxes of chocolates and other goodies. I was pleased with my choice but also would have liked to have tasted some of the other choices offered.

Once again Core Groups were most successful and gave each conference attendee an opportunity to discuss the lectures and topics of their choice with a small group of other people. After three sessions in the core groups you do really feel as though you are getting to know those people pretty well.

The whole week-end went so quickly—it seemed such a short time between catching up with news from people around the country and saying goodbye and planning to meet up again in Christchurch in 1999 when the

Conference theme will be an ecotheological one.

*Jane Griffith: Chairperson,
Steering Committee*

Arrangements Committee

Well it came, and it was, and it went ... Conference that is.

If you will pardon this old midwife's analogy, the nine months 'gestation' of this the sixth Annual Conference of the SOFN (NZ), ran like an uncomplicated pregnancy, to an easy 'labour' and the 'birth' of a beautiful Conference weekend.

Planning began shortly after Christmas. In May our little Arrangements 'core group' of Sheila Reed, Barbara Millar, Ian Crabtree and I began the serious stuff of budgets, mail-outs and data bases. By July, and the major posting of Conference material to all members, the momentum was up, we were in full swing through to Conference weekend itself and the recruitment of an expanded Arrangements Team of the most willing and able helpers.

Mike and Eva Palairat, Rosemary Ward, Jenny Watson, Margaret and Ralph Pannet, Marion Blackburn, Margaret Becker, and Neil Lambie came to the party. With a great burst of energy and enthusiasm they created a pleasant welcoming ambience in the CIT venue and kept the programme flowing smoothly throughout the weekend.

It was fun and rewarding. We had lot of laughs and not too many sleepless nights.

At the conclusion of it all we were left in little doubt that it had been successful. People had enjoyed themselves, their bodies and minds had been well nourished by all that was offered. People went home feeling glad they had come.

And (even though old midwives are

wont to mutter 'hope is not method') that is just the way we hoped it would be.

My sincere thanks to all.

*Janet Lambie: Chairperson
Arrangements Committee 1998*

Editorial

This issue of the Newsletter contains major extracts from the papers presented by the three Keynote Speakers at the 1998 Conference. We publish these for those members who, for various reasons, are unable to get to the Conference. But, the Conference is a moveable feast and in 1999 it will be held in Christchurch.

We farewelled Lloyd Geering from the Steering Committee and marvelled that since it all started in New Zealand in 1992 (from invitations made by Lloyd) with about 6 members, the Sea of Faith Network in New Zealand now has about 600 members. At a growth rate of about 115% p.a. compounded, we can feel very pleased.

But we're not all spring chickens. Could that be because the approach to matters of faith that we SOFers feel most appropriate is a "second half of life" thing? In order to "let go" to the extent that we do, do we need to have developed a certain knack for risk taking?

Patti Whaley ended her paper with words that just might sum it all up: "Belief clings, but Faith lets go."

Noel Cheer

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Conference Papers

These are extracts and "gems" from the three Keynote Speakers. Copies of the full papers are available from the Resource Centre.

John Bishop

John Bishop is Professor and Head of Department of Philosophy at the University of Auckland. The following is a slightly-abbreviated version of the last third of the paper presented by him titled "Radical Theology: Inventing or Discovering Reality?" This section was called: "Constructing New Theories of the Divine." The full paper is available from the Resource Centre. Its number is P16.

Let me ... embark on a sketchy attempt to construct a naturalist, realist, radical theology. Let me try making my own contribution to "inventing reality"—where that is construed consistently with realism. That is, what I am inventing—based on existing resources from the tradition—is a *theory* of that reality—that *natural* reality—which God-talk aims to describe.

What realist and naturalist alternatives could be proposed, then, to the traditional concept of the supernatural God?

One obvious candidate is, of course, pantheism: God is All That Is; God is the Universe, understood as forming a single all-inclusive unity. To understand belief in God as belief in the all-inclusive natural unity does account for some of the important functions of belief in God.

One of these is the way that belief in God functions to place ourselves and our own lives in true perspective, so that we overcome our self-centredness and accept our dependence on what is beyond our own control. (You might call this the "avoidance of hubris" function.) ... I think this is a valuable function: we need to avoid making an idol of our own autonomy; we need to avoid fantasies of self-sufficiency and domination over the natural world. We need to recognise that we are dependent on Something Other for every moment of our existence, and that whatever autonomy we do have is limited by that dependence. Traditionally, belief in the supernatural God functioned to underpin this proper sense of dependence. All too often, however, the emphasis was skewed, so that the belief that we were dependent upon the will of

a supernatural being obscured our interdependence with the rest of the natural universe and allowed us to justify limitless human domination and exploitation of the rest of the natural world, conceived simply as a "resource". I say that this was a skewed emphasis, because I think that the principle that humans are just as much creatures as the rest of the natural universe ("dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return") was always, in traditional theology, more fundamental than the principle that humans are to exercise a degree of control over the natural universe. True, humans can exercise control over other creatures—but their control is the conditioned control that belongs to fellow-creatures, and provides no warrant for the exploitation of nature as a mere resource. Rather, it requires respect for nature and good stewardship.

It is easy enough to see, then, that taking God to be, not the supernatural omniGod, but the all-inclusive Unity of the Natural Universe itself, would preserve and enhance the function of belief in God as providing us with a proper perspective on our own existence and our own powers in relation to the rest of the natural world. In a related way, religious experiences of awe in the face of something immensely, unimaginably, greater than ourselves might plausibly be taken as having for their object, not a supernatural being, but rather the Universe as a whole.

Pantheism faces problems, however, with some of the other arguably valuable functions of belief in God. In particular, I cannot see how understanding the divine to be Nature Herself could secure the *salvific* functions of belief in God which have been so central to Judaeo-Christianity. In my earlier list of four arguably valuable functions of belief in God, this function was represented by the idea that belief in God is belief in that which vindicates our hope that living life lovingly does indeed have value and meaning despite finitude, evil, suffering and death. If God is Nature, then we get a natural and realist concept of God ... but we don't get a concept of God such that God's existence warrants hope. We don't get a God of the Christian Gospel, whose mighty acts may be received as ultimate good news.

What happens, then, if we reflect on the resources of inherited Christian theology in an attempt to construct a naturalist concept of God such that belief in God according to that concept does play this salvific role?

I think there are resources for such a construction. I suggest using three traditional Christian doctrines. [Incarnation, Trinity, "God Is Love"]. The use made of these doctrines may seem unorthodox—but I'm not prepared to concede that they are unorthodox, since I would wish to leave open the possibility of arguing that this naturalist understanding of God is consistent with orthodox historic Christianity—and, indeed, superior to the traditional realist understanding of belief in God as belief in omniGod. ...

The alternative naturalist realist concept of God I have in mind arises from the following ways of interpreting these three doctrines. Start with the **Trinity**. One way to dispel the paradox from this doctrine is to interpret it as affirming that God is primarily a *relationship*, rather than a single person or "supreme substance". On this understanding, the name "God" refers to a certain kind of interpersonal, social, relationship. Where persons are related in this way, they may each, in a derivative sense, be described as God or as participating in God, though, of course, none of them is any more or less entitled to this honorific description than any of the others. (Thus, to put it in received terms, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God—each, and equally, God in the secondary sense—and yet there are not three Gods but one God, since, in the primary and strict sense, what is God is the social relationship amongst the three. This is the "social" doctrine of the Trinity, which dates back at least to the Scottish theologian, Richard of St Victor, in the 12th Century.)

This interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity fits well with a certain literal interpretation of the claim that "God is love". If God is, not "a" person, but rather a certain kind of interpersonal relationship, then the claim that God is love may be understood as characterising the *kind of* interpersonal relationship which constitutes God, namely *loving* relationship, the supreme form of interpersonal relationship.

This line of thought also fits well with a certain understanding of the doctrine of Incarnation. Typically, this doctrine is understood as a claim about the special dual status of a unique historical person, Jesus Christ. But it may, alternatively, be read as a doctrine about the nature of God: God's existence is incarnate existence, situated within and through concrete personal existence. Taken together with the suggestion that God is the supreme form of interpersonal relationship, this understanding of the Incarnation has the effect of holding that God exists where, and only where, concrete persons stand in the required kind of relation. The being of God thus becomes something to be found in the human experience of interrelatedness (both with other humans and with the wider Universe), rather than something belonging to a supernatural realm.

This concept of God—as emergent from and constituted by loving relationships amongst persons—is certainly a naturalist concept of God. As well, belief in God according to this concept would be a form of realist belief in God. But would it be reasonable to think that there actually is a God of this kind? And, anyway, is it really clear that belief in God according to this concept could provide a justification for hope—could play the salvific role which belief in God needs to play?

To tackle the second question first: to justify hope in the midst of adversity, God has to be an active power in whom it is reasonable to place one's ultimate trust. What I am suggesting is that that active power could amount to something which emerges from the network of loving relationships amongst natural beings. ...

People do succeed in loving one another, and the power of love is displayed in their lives. But why dress this up as the power of God? It may be clear that, if we are looking for something purely natural on which to base our hope, then the best we can do is the power of agapeistic love ... but isn't it also clear that identifying God with the power of human love is too reductionist a concept of God, too ultimately feeble a concept of God to sustain the kind of "resurrection hope" which is proclaimed in the

Christian Gospel?

Perhaps so. But this objection doesn't quite meet the proposal I am making. The proposal I am making is not that "God" refers to the mere agglomeration of loving relationships achieved within the natural Universe. The proposal I am making is that "God" refers to *that which emerges from and transcends these relationships*. What do I mean by this? I can explain it only through an analogy. ... Out of the enormous physical complexity of the physical central nervous system, there emerges a whole new level of reality—mental reality, which requires a complete new vocabulary—a psychological vocabulary which cannot be translated back into physical terms and which, in that sense, transcends the

"omniGod"

"The transcendent world of the supernatural, with its omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent personal Creator God ... at its centre, may have been an appropriate cultural construction in mediaeval times. But it is not appropriate to modern scientific culture."

Prof. John Bishop

physical. ... What I am suggesting is that, just as individual neurones complexly interrelated assist in constituting a human mind with its varied mental states, so historical persons, in their loving relationships, assist in constituting the reality of the divine. And, just as it is a mistake (though a prevalent one in Western Philosophy) to hold that the mind which emerges from the physical belongs to some other world beyond the natural, so it is a mistake to hold that God's reality, emerging as it does from the world of loving interrelationship, belongs to a distinct supernatural world. Rather, God's reality, on this view, is the culmination of the evolution of the one natural universe. (The only sense in which God can be Alpha is the sense in which God

is first Omega!)

Could it be reasonable to believe that God—understood in this way as an emergent reality within the Universe—really does exist? If what is meant is whether it could be scientifically reasonable to hold this belief, then I think the answer is "no". But then I would want to retain a dominant view at least within Protestant theology which holds that, although theistic beliefs are about the real world, they need to be accepted by an act of faith which goes beyond (though, I would argue, never against) what can be established as a matter of scientific rationality. ...

Here, then, are a couple of ways in which the project of a naturalist, realist, radical theology might be pursued: first, in a pantheist direction; and second, in the direction of postulating God as the highest level of emergent "spiritual" being within the natural universe, whose nature we know as Love. These are two very different directions—and I cannot therefore resist the speculation that perhaps we need to recognise two concepts of God. In traditional theology, God was supposed to be both immanent and transcendent—and these two aspects of the divine were constantly in danger of flying apart. In the context of naturalist realist radical theology we have a similar problem—though the contrast isn't exactly between divine immanence and divine transcendence ...

It is a similar contrast, though—a contrast between, on the one hand, the unimaginably vast and impersonal God or Nature on whom we ultimately depend, and, on the other, the God who emerges within Nature, who is so intimately bound up with us that we participate in constituting its reality, and who—though emphatically not a person—is somehow even more "personal" than any individual person could be because his or her essential nature (and, yes, the personal pronoun is forced from us) is that best and brightest of all things capable of being revealed in the interpersonal: Love. Maybe the right thing for the naturalist realist radical theologian is just to acknowledge that these concepts of God are distinct, and that we need both of them in constructing our best attempt at a theory of the divine.

Patti Whaley

Patti Whaley is a member of the Steering Committee of the UK SOFN. She spoke on "Exploring Reality and Meaning in Absolute Music". The following are extracts from her paper which is available from the Resource Centre and is numbered P17.

I've studied music, in some way or another, for about 40 years now, and until I came to SoF, I assumed without question that music had meaning, and in fact had more meaning than many other things that seemed ostensibly more real. After my belief in traditional Christian doctrine began to decay, music was a way of orienting myself in the world, morally and metaphysically: I derived from it an almost religious sense of the goodness of the universe.



When I joined the Sea of Faith, one of my first reactions to non-realist linguistic philosophy was to ask how one would understand music in this schema. The answer was that music was just notes; no more, no less. There was not, nor could there possibly be, anything "behind" the notes. All meaning was linguistic meaning; or, as Cupitt phrased it in his book *Mysticism after Modernity*, "only language can turn an event into an experience of something." It was unclear whether Cupitt meant "language" to refer only to verbal language, or whether other types of symbolic order could also convey meaning.



Let me start by isolating the source of the problem—what we call *Absolute Music*, or music that exists only for its own sake. There are some types of music where the question of "meaning" is answered by something outside of the music itself. All music that accompanies a text falls into this class; the text defines the context in which the music is heard and understood, and the music intensifies the feelings proclaimed by the text. Other music is intended to accompany physical movement, and so we have forms that are based on dances or processions. Essentially all music through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and a great deal of the music of the Baroque period, falls into

these two classes, music to be sung to or music to be danced to. Possibly the first important music where a subject is explored and worked out for its own sake is the Baroque fugue. From this period that is, the early 18th century comes the sudden flowering of absolute music; within a relatively short period of time, say 50 years after the death of Bach and Handel, the classical symphony, string quartet and sonata had become mature art forms, and it is these forms which still primarily define our standard of "serious" composition and the body of work to which the concert-going public is most deeply attached. If we're going to explore meaning in music, this body of work is our primary laboratory: music which refers to nothing outside of itself and serves no obviously useful purpose.



If we begin by exploring what it means to say that music could be a language, one of the first things we must clarify is that if music is a

Fig.37 *Animato*
Violins
pp dolce



language, then it is a language in the non-realist or post-modern sense, that is, it is a cultural construct, not a naming of an "underlying" reality.

For most of our musical culture, music has been regarded as a sort of "naming", an expression of inherent physical qualities of sound, and as a universal, God-given language. The argument went something like this: we have known, since Pythagoras, that the vibrations that cause musical tones are complex (and result in overtones, intervals and concepts of consonance and dissonance). ... It was a short step from this acoustical theory to the "harmony of the spheres", expounded by Boethius and later "proven" by the astronomical studies of Kepler, the theory that the planets and stars, moving through space, would produce an equivalent series of tones.

Like most absolutes, this one has taken a severe beating over the past decades. ... Furthermore, the whole notion of specific tones, divided into whole steps and half

steps and specific intervals, is an invented language. Like many languages, its refinement as a system depended on the refinement of the physical means of capturing the system, in this case, the development of musical notation. ... We have created, in effect, a musical culture where we can sing only in mathematical integers, not in fractions. When we meet a culture, such as India, that sings in "fractions", that is, in quartertones and microtones, we are quite baffled. We think of our musical scale as absolute because we are as accustomed to its pattern as we are to the order of letters in the alphabet; but both are cultural inventions. Nothing about them is God-given or inherent in nature; they are truly human creations.



We can certainly say, then, that music is a language in the sense that it is a human construct. It does not represent any sort of physical reality; it is a powerful and complex

set of mythological and metaphorical structures specific to our culture. Any meaning that music has, or any message that it can convey, has to come from the music itself; it cannot come from anywhere else. ... at its most basic level, music is the imposition of order on sound. Humans are order-making creatures. We create order in an attempt to rescue ourselves from chaos ... the creation of order gives us an almost metaphysical reassurance that the world itself is orderly, and therefore understandable, and perhaps even hospitable. The imposing of order is one of the most fundamental requirements of meaning.

The flip side of this coin is that we hear things as music because we perceive that order has been imposed ... at its most basic and irreducible level, music is any series of notes that makes sense to us.



We do not want to hear simply sounds, even if they are lovely sounds; we want to hear musical events. ... Stravinsky or Bartok, although they are much less "logical" than Schoenberg on paper, are much easier to comprehend as music; once your ears have adjusted to the level and type of

dissonance that they use, the syntax is perfectly clear.



Often musicians prefer to leave things at that, and simply say that musical thought is musical thought and it cannot be translated into anything else. There is a story that Robert Schumann was asked the meaning of a piece that he had just played, so he sat down and played it again; the piece meant what it said, and there was no point in trying to say it any other way.



So one could say that the notes are the notes and there is nothing more to be said. Or, as Cupitt would say, the language of music is outsideless, as is every other language. But if I were satisfied with that answer, I wouldn't be making this talk. If what we want is order, or a sense of propositions very elegantly explored, we could equally well go to public demonstrations of mathematical proofs. The fact is, and meaning no disrespect to mathematicians, we don't. Music and mathematics are often compared, and they do have many things in common, but the nature of their appeal is quite different. ... Music seems to exert an enormous pull on people with no talent or training whatsoever.



The intent of the emotion may be to arouse the same feeling in the listener, but this is not necessarily the case. For example, hearing Othello sing about his jealousy does not make us feel jealous; it is more often true to say that we contemplate the emotion that is expressed and experience a sort of arousal and wonder in that contemplation, rather than in the specific emotion itself.



In Brahms I often sense that I am not only hearing someone who is a kindred soul, but someone who reflects back to me the sense of character that I would most like to find in myself, the person I would like to think of myself as being. If I say that, then I begin to view the piece in an almost spiritual way; that is, in a way that is not simply emotional but aspirational; not just in harmony with how I feel but with how I aspire to be.



Listening to it is an exercise in

what Foucault called the "*pratique de soi*", the practice of your best self, the modelling of your best self. Or, I could express this slightly differently as a sense of being restored to my own inner life, to my underlying sense of self which does exist but which I lose touch with in the process of battling through my daily getting and spending. I know pieces, for example, that can manage in one or two bars to wipe away layers of defensiveness, stress, tension and disappointment that could have taken me weeks to accumulate. ... a Buddhist would say that it restores the quality of spaciousness, the ability to be open and accepting and full of gratitude towards life.



... there is no doubt that nonverbal language and nonverbal thought are deeply meaningful. That meaning may not be representative of any physical or metaphysical reality; it is not propositional, logical, or translatable. But it creates and structures experience as surely as verbal language does, and in the same culturally conditioned sense. We can and must discuss nonverbal meaning in verbal terms in order to place it in our cultural context, in order to be able to treat it as an object, but that verbal discussion can only be metaphorical. It can point at the nonverbal meaning, but it can never contain it. Music's power as a language seems to exist precisely in its inability to be pinned down, in its ungraspability ... That very ungraspability is what allows us ... to recognize the infinite within our own finiteness, to understand how a material thing can be boundless.



... we must take care, in throwing out the supernatural, not to throw out the imaginative, the symbolic, and the inexplicable. SoF language and SoF thought often sound rigorously and exclusively rational, as if we are afraid that to admit the existence of mystery is tantamount to ascribing that mystery to a metaphysical Other. Not so. We need not be so frightened by what is beyond our rational and conscious mind: the imaginative is also human, the symbolic is human, the inexplicable is entirely and most deeply human. We see in music that we create things that we ourselves cannot account for, objects of

beauty before which we stand speechless, universes that we fall in love with but can never really fathom.



The fact that we create something does not necessarily mean that we can understand it or control it; we seem to need a medium, even one that we have created ourselves, which can receive from us and reflect back to us things that we cannot otherwise articulate to ourselves. I am reminded of a discussion that took place among SoF members about how a God whom we had created, whom we describe as "the sum of our values", could summon us to values that we do not yet hold, or inspire us to acts of courage and sacrifice that are not rationally conceivable. Somehow we are able to project into this God needs and aspirations that we do not consciously know we have.



... is it not precisely this uncontrollable and unknowable quality that characterizes real faith? We often treat SOF theology as a belief system, that is, as something we know. We claim that all thought systems are humanly created, and then we treat our own thought system as absolute. We state that all meaning is linguistic meaning, humanly created, and then treat the boundaries of linguistic meaning as absolute boundaries rather than humanly created boundaries. We take a position of "knowing" that there is nothing beyond our linguistic boundaries, rather than stating that anything beyond our linguistic boundary is "unknowable".

Music always pulls us beyond that boundary. It is the nature of verbal language to define, and therefore to pin down, to grasp, to close off some possibilities in order to clarify others. It is the nature of symbolic language to point rather than to tell, and to leave open rather than to close down. The difference between verbal and symbolic language, between words and music, echoes the difference between belief and faith. "Belief", as Alan Watts said, "... is the insistence that the truth is what one would 'lie' or wish it to be ... Faith ... is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions; it is a plunge into the unknown. Belief clings, but faith lets go."

Thakshan Fernando

Dr. Thakshan Fernando is a psychiatrist and was born in Sri Lanka. He speaks from a Buddhist background. The following are extracts from his paper titled "Some Reflections on Illusion, Reality and Relevance" which is available from the Resource Centre by quoting number P18.

I have tried with only modest success to lead a life informed by the teachings of the Buddha. For me, the most attractive and, paradoxically, the most daunting aspects of the teaching have been:

- The need for self-reliance and self-discovery, albeit guided by the Buddha's teachings ("Atthahi Attano Natho" or "One is one's own refuge")
- The injunction to exercise personal choice, based on experience and practice of the teaching
- The uniquely Buddhist, existential focus, which could be disturbing without the right tools and without the development of requisite skills.

... in a somewhat serendipitous way, I discovered Psychiatry, rather late in my career as a doctor. In psychiatry and, in particular in psychotherapy, one is constantly challenged to discover within oneself feelings of Maitreya (loving kindness), Karuna (compassion), Muditha (joy at the success of another) and Upekha (equanimity). These are important Buddhist concepts regarding thinking, feeling and behaviour. Needless to say one does not always succeed

I shall often rely on Myth, Legend and Narrative to provide foci for our "Reflections". So let me start with three rather well-known stories which illustrate some thematic aspects of Illusion, Reality and Relevance. The first two are Sufi legends as narrated by Idries Shah.

The first is well-known and is the story of the Elephant in the Dark.

A number of blind people, or sighted people in a totally darkened enclosure, grope and find an Elephant. Each touches only a part. Each gives to friends outside a different account of what s/he has come to believe an elephant is like. One thought that it was a fan, having felt the

ear; another that it was a pillar, having felt a leg; a third, a rope having felt the tail and so on.

Idries Shah analyses the satirical significance of this story at various levels:

- It makes fun of scientists and academics who try to explain things through the evidence which they can evaluate, and none other
- It laughs at the stupidity of people who come to conclusions on such little evidence
- It says at a philosophical level, that man is blind and is trying to assess something great by means of inadequate tools
- It says at a religious level, that God is everywhere and everything, and man gives different names to what seem to him to be separate things, but which are in fact parts of some greater whole which he cannot perceive because "he is blind" or "there is no light".

In the next two stories, you will have to invent your own analyses!

The Mulla Nasrudin was sent by the King to investigate the lore of various kinds of Eastern mystical teachers. People recounted to him tales of the miracles and the sayings of the founders and great teachers, all long dead, of their schools.

When he returned home, Nasrudin submitted his report, which contained the single word "Carrots". He was called upon to explain himself. Nasrudin told the King: "The best part is buried; few know - except the farmer - by the green (above) that there is orange underground; if you don't nurture it, it will deteriorate; there are a great many donkeys associated with it."

The third story concerns a disciple of the Buddha named Malunkya-putta and I have adapted it from the Rev. Walpola Rahula's narration. Malunkya-putta asked the Buddha ten classical questions on metaphysical problems and threatened to leave the Order unless he received answers. These included:-

Is the universe eternal, or is it not eternal? Is the universe finite or is it infinite? Does the Thathagatha (Buddha) exist after death, or does he not exist after death? etc.

The Buddha answered as follows:-

"Suppose Malunkya-putta, a man is wounded by a poisoned arrow, and his friends and relatives bring him to a surgeon.

Suppose the man should then say: 'I will not let this arrow be taken out until I know who shot me ... what his name and family may be; whether he is tall or short; the kind of bow with which I was shot, the kind of bowstring used ... etc.'

Malunkya-putta, that man would die without knowing any of these things. Similarly, if

anyone says 'I will not follow the holy life unless the Buddha answers these questions such as whether the universe is eternal etc' he would die with these questions unanswered. I have not explained them because they are not fundamentally with the spiritual life, they are not conducive to aversion, detachment, cessation, tranquillity, penetrative thought, awakening, Nirvana".

The exponential growth of scientific knowledge constitutes one aspect of Reality. The lack of a synchronistic development of the spiritual / moral sensibilities of Man gives rise to an Illusion of supposedly righteous behaviour, which however, is dominated consciously or unconsciously by Self-interest.

It is fascinating to note however, the synthesising influence of certain over-arching concepts developed by some great scientists who first became aware of them through their own disciplines. For example:

• Neils Bohr's and Heisenberg's "concept of complementarity" which emphasised the participatory role of



the scientist who in the act of making measurements interacts with the observed object—in other words incorporates a sensuous or subjective element.

•Stephen Hawking's "no-boundary proposal" which led to the view that talking about the beginning and end of the universe was as meaningless as talking about the beginning and end of a sphere! Perhaps the Buddha was right!

They appear to have, at the very least, a metaphorical significance.

Let me reflect briefly on the ways in which Illusion and Reality surface in my work as a psychiatrist and in the work of other therapists in the field of mental health.

The patients we see are often anguished in ways that those who do not suffer from such conditions, with the exception, of course, of their relatives and very close friends, cannot even begin to imagine. The anguish is compounded by the stigma that attaches to their illnesses.

These are the starkest of Realities.

If, when, and to the extent that these patients are able to trust their therapists (doctor, nurse, psychologist etc.) an important lever for a positive change is "invented".

Trust, at the best of times is fragile, in this context it can only be initiated or sustained if there is a remarkable degree of empathy and understanding—in my view, the essence of *Maitreya* and *Karuna*. This is far from easy.

Some of the patients have nearly succeeded in killing themselves, because of their suffering, often while in our care ;

A few of them have even killed or maimed others because of their anguish and its consequences ;

Some of them are out of touch with Reality, as previously experienced by themselves and as usually experienced by most people. They live in a tormented world;

Others—in fact the vast majority of our patients—suffer from conditions which all of us have experienced to a greater or lesser degree—grief and depression, fear, anxiety.

In many instances there are paths that lead to the relief of suffering and one of these is psychotherapy (more correctly, the psychotherapies). Nina Coltart, an English psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, has succinctly portrayed the

correlations, and similarities between some of the key concepts of psychotherapy and Buddhist teaching and practice. Time does not permit a full discussion. I shall ask you simply to reflect for a moment on the elements of the Eightfold Path :

- 1.Right Understanding (Samma ditthi),
- 2.Right Thought (Samma sankappa),
- 3.Right Speech (Samma vaca)
- 4.Right Action (Samma kammanta)
- 5.Right Livelihood (Samma ajiva),
- 6.Right Effort (Samma vayama),
- 7.Right Mindfulness (Samma sati),
- 8.Right Concentration (Samma samadhi)

There are two themes that have kept recurring in these reflections.

The first, is the anguish of the human condition. The second, is the paradox of man as hero, despite his human frailties.

This was not contrived. I suspect, that these themes can inevitably be discerned in any serious consideration of our spiritual values, although sometimes they appear in disguise.

They are very relevant to the Buddha's teaching. Some have perceived it as "nihilistic" because of a fundamental premise in the teaching, sometimes referred to as the Three Signs of Being—Impermanence or Transience (*Anicca*), Anguish or the state of 'unsatisfactoriness' (*Dukka*) and No-Self (*Anatta*). The Venerable Saddhassa makes the important point that "these are not articles of faith but facts of life realised by every searcher after the truth who must perforce reason out each step of the path by himself, having recourse to his own experience as the one, sure guide". Hence, the claim that this is a Reality.

Steering Committee Report 1997-1998

At last year's Annual Meeting of the Network it was agreed that the Steering Committee would become national in its representation and one year on I report the success of this innovation. Having representatives from Auckland (Joy and Owen Lewis), Tauranga (Suzi Thirlwall), Wellington (Noel Cheer, Yvonne Chisholm, Janet Davidson, Lloyd Geering, Roy Griffith, Janet Lambie and myself) and Dunedin (Andrew Meek and Marjorie Spittle) has enabled more groups to be involved in the Network, through the local

representatives and provided a much wider base of ideas and vision.

The Steering Committee met twice person to person: immediately after the Conference last year and a full day meeting in Wellington in February. This full day meeting was primarily to plan for this Conference. We also had four teleconference meetings: initially being a little hesitant meeting over the phone but, by the fourth meeting, I think that we were all feeling comfortable with this method of communicating.

This new form of operating was certainly an added challenge to our minute secretary, Yvonne Chisholm, who has done a magnificent job keeping a record of what was discussed whilst also managing to contribute herself to the discussion.

As with previous Steering Committees our work during the year has been divided into two distinct parts: keeping the Network running smoothly and arranging the programme for this Conference.

Just as the Steering Committee have been acutely aware of the need for good communication between its members so we have been keen to maintain sound communication within the Network. Noel Cheer, as Editor of the Newsletter, has done an excellent job providing members with a high quality production which presents challenging new articles and discussion starters as well as keeping people up-to-date with Network news. Thank you Noel and thank you also to those Wellington members who have photocopied the newsletter, franked and stuffed envelopes.

This year the Steering Committee has also tried to maintain improved contact with local groups through the Chairperson writing occasional letters to the local contacts. I have very much appreciated the replies received in response to these letters.

When the Network brochure was republished it was decided to send copies to every member and to Local Group contacts and from our Membership Secretary's comments there has been a small but steady flow of new members as a result of this initiative.

Throughout the year Roy Griffith has kept membership records up to date as well as keeping a track of finances. On behalf of the Steering Committee I thank him for all his work.

This year we advertised for an archivist to keep our Network records and we were delighted that Alison Eng from North Canterbury agreed to do

this task. Thank you Alison and I know that she would appreciate receiving from you any material that you think is relevant to keep in our archives.

Two new initiatives being proposed by the Committee for next year are the acquisition of books for the Resource Centre and grants being made available to enable Local Groups to help finance the transport of speakers to their meetings. The finer details of both of these initiatives are yet to be worked out.

Much of the work of the Steering Committee has been involved in preparation of the programme for this Conference. The advantages of a national committee have been evident in this task as members from around the country pooled their ideas for speakers, elective lecturers and workshop leaders and members in the various geographical locations undertook key organising tasks. It has been of great assistance having Janet Lambie as co-ordinator of the Arrangements Committee. Having previously done this job when the conference was last in Wellington, Janet has used her administrative skills to liaise with C.I.T. and ensure the smooth running of this conference.

In conclusion I would like to thank all the members of the 1997-8 Steering Committee for their work throughout the year. Two members of the Committee are not seeking re-election: we will miss you Janet Lambie and Lloyd Geering and thank you for contributions that you have both made over the years.

Jane Griffith: Chairperson

So You Want To Be A Postmodernist?

The following is my re-working of material in The Fontana Postmodernism Reader, editor Walter Truett Anderson, published by Fontana Press, 1996. Although this is a paraphrase it reflects my "take" on his arguments. I can recommend that you acquire this book.

Worldviews

Contemporary Western societies have at least four distinguishable worldviews (p107):

1. the **scientific-rational**, in which truth is discovered by disciplined research.
2. the **social-traditional**, in which truth is found in the heritage of Western Civilization, including religious traditions.

3. the **neo-romantic**, in which truth is encountered through harmony with nature and/or oneself

4. the **postmodern-ironist**, which sees that truth is socially constructed

"I am not a poet, but a poem"

*Jacques Lacan
quoted in The Fontana
Postmodernism Reader p145*

Times are Changing

Many of us are conscious of living in the transition from "modern" to "post-modern". The terms are explained (p6):

- People in **premodern**, traditional societies had an **experience** of universality but no **concept** of it. They could get through their days and lives without encountering other people who had entirely different worldviews and, as a consequence, they didn't have to deal with pluralism.

- People in **modern** civilization believe in the Western "Enlightenment Project" (pp215). They have a **concept** of universality—based on the hope (or fear) that some genius, messiah or tyrant would figure out how to "get everybody on the same page" [same religion, language, politics]—but they are unable to **experience** it. Instead, every war, every trade mission, every migration brings more culture shocks.

- Now, in the **postmodern** era, the very concept of universality has dubious merit. The old strategies of conquest, repression and conversion are still being strenuously applied in many places—labeled now by euphemisms such as "ethnic cleansing"—but they aren't very effective. At the present time, premodernity, modernity and postmodernity co-exist (p215).

Strategies for Coping

Those who hold different worldviews are likely to adopt different strategies for coping (p106-110):

- The **neo-romantic**, who is out of step with both "modern" (its too coldly logical and scientific) and "postmodern" (its too uncertain) is likely to adopt New Age spirituality or at least nature mysticism. They might get involved with a primal culture, a practice known as "primitive chic".

- The exponent of **social-traditional** will defend some form of nationalism or "established" religious tradition. She will generally defend her religious tradition against the attacks of modern "radicals". She will often voice specific rejections of postmodernism as, for example, in decrying "liberal theology". A typical book in this genre is Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (p203).

- The secular counterpart is the **scientific-rational** who is likely to promote secular humanism and skepticism. But she will still subscribe to the central core of reliable knowledge (scientific in this instance) which we are slowly building up. These last two groups are what the current power structure (Presidency, Monarchy, western governments, mainstream churches, mainstream scientific and educational institutes) support. To them, it is the "real world". Because they are thematically adjacent to each other (p175) in that they both believe in a corpus of objective knowledge (religious or scientific) to which everyone ought to subscribe, these groups can coexist. An example of coexistence is the imaginative use by Creationists of "scientific" discoveries.

- The **postmodernists** divide into three groups. What they have in common is that they all agree that its not just a question that "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold." The postmodern view is that there is **no centre**. Even the notion of "self" is fluid and is sliding away into "relationship" (p.123) or into the Buddhist "no-self" (p.141). Postmodernists differ in these ways:

- The **players** "browse among cultural forms, play mix-and-match with all the pieces of our various heritage. They invent new religious rituals ... dabble in nostalgia ... explore virtual reality ...". Some SOFN people are found here.

- The **constructivists** (such as Richard Rorty and Thomas Kuhn (p175)) generally take a positive view of the situation and set about exploring the landscape, not for landmarks but for opportunities. They are not just "browsing", they are constructing what they take to be a valid (but provisional) world view out of whatever they can lay their hands on. And they **know** that that's what they are doing. Sea of Faith people would be present in abundance in this group.

- The **nihilists** observe that there are many conflicting views and conclude that, since they can't all be true, they must all be false. Its exponents are to be found in the punk rock subculture and other groups who see the future as inevitably leading to alienation, hedonism, ridicule and contempt for the

mainstream.

"Some confusion is unavoidable. We don't precisely know where we are going. But then neither did Columbus, and ... that didn't prove there was no America." (p220)

"... if I am who I am because you are who you are and we both are who we are because others are who they are; if we accept that when we enter into dialogue we both change; if it is true that we co-create reality, which in turn creates us—then we are called to a new kind of community. If I can make culture [then] I must act responsibly. If I can only ever be part of creation [then] I must act humbly." (Maureen O'Hara on p151)

reported by Noel Cheer

Book Reviews

Who Is Jesus? by John Dominic Crossan (Harper Paperbacks) 1996, reviewed by Alan Goss of Napier.

John Dominic Crossan is Emeritus Professor of Biblical Studies at De Paul University in Chicago. He left the priesthood in 1969 in order to marry. He has written extensively, including the best-selling *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*.

The book reviewed here is written in a popular question-and-answer style and makes available a lifetime of scholarship about the historical Jesus. Each chapter opens with a selection of brickbats and bouquets—mainly the latter—from readers of Crossan's previous works. His aim is to help the non-specialist understand better the man Jesus and his times and the impact that his life had, and continues to have today.

In my view he succeeds.

Crossan is a member of the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars whose methods have attracted much media attention. They use red (most likely) pink, grey and black (very unlikely) beads when voting, to indicate their views about the historicity of Jesus' words.

In this book Crossan sifts out what, in his view, is likely to be historical and what seems to be interpretation, e.g. the disturbance in the Temple is historical, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday) is interpretation. Crossan also argues that the story of Jesus' burial by his friends is unhistorical, he was probably buried by his enemies, not in a tomb but in a shallow grave. The niceties of the empty tomb stories were invented to give Jesus a burial with dignity. And there's much

more.

Many people are helped and their faith is strengthened by this more open, critical approach to the gospels. But how many of them are in church on Sunday is another matter.

Alan Goss

Local Groups

Auckland Central

In August, Dr. John Salmon addressed the topic "Post Modern Ethics"? in which he suggested possible new bases for ethics:

- Narrative: talk through, give my story and your story, no absolutes, no power dominance, use logic and let the values, priorities and interests show through.
- Relationship: break down the opposition of subject and object; we are in this world together.
- Rhetoric: Talk about it. What will work? Use persuasion. We are "bounded open space".
- Character: Who we are, rather than what we think or how we act. Quality of life, an holistic approach.
- Liberation: For us her and now, social, freedom from oppression, a group, communal, the key motive is life.

Their September meeting featured Dr. John Hinchcliff on the subject: "Myths and Mindsets for the new Millenium".

Contact: Graham Shearer, 524-9941

South Canterbury (Ephesus)

Audrey Stephen writes: "We have many such ['like-minded friends'] here in South Canterbury. Of our Ephesus Group about half subscribe to the Sea of Faith Newsletter. We have about fifty members and meet monthly on a Sunday afternoon and always have a high attendance. We always have a high level of participation in the discussions and it is grand to be able to speak one's mind however outrageous, and share with others the concerns for the church, the state of our society, and review new and old ideas. We are about equally men and women.

Our last meeting was with Chris Nichol [and was] largely about the re-invention of the church, even the re-invention of God. He used the symbols of the church, the narrative being what we say these symbols mean, and finally the sub-title being what the modern generation think the symbols stand for. ... The previous month we heard a talk by Kim Bathgate on the topic "Monotheism as a destructive

force in world affairs". Quote from his paper: "Is it monotheism, *per se*, or is it the many cultural accretions laid upon it that is the problem?"

A large party of us went to Christchurch to hear Bishop Spong [in 1997] and recently a group of 14 went to the Jesus Seminar lectures given in Christchurch.

I am 83 and the whole of my lifetime has been full of change. My grandchildren are showing a new way, and I am sure that the church will inevitably change."

Dunedin

In September they planned for Bruce Spittle to address them on "Finding Faith: Magical Thinking and Projection". This was to cover how the concept of a real, objective, personal God is formed and how, for some, when there is a sense of fragility and vulnerability, this leads to obtaining support from a community where accepted ideas aid individuals to live in faith.

In October, Barbara Nichols will talk about the ethics of artificial conception. November's meeting will feature Dr. Chrystal Jaye who, as part of her Ph.D. looked at the different ways in which suffering and healing were viewed by different groups in our community: Pentecostals; Christian Scientists; and health professionals.

Their contact is Andrew Meek, phone 471-0698.

From the UK SOF Magazine No. 34

This issue dealt extensively with the 1998 UK Conference. In her opening address Patti Whaley (yes, the same Patti Whaley!), asked "What is the role of the irrational, the subconscious, the imaginative, in the otherwise reasonable and completely linguistic creation of human values? And what does 'the spiritual life' have to do with these less rational, but also very human qualities? ... These are not just rhetorical questions. I actually think the SoF will have a hard time moving forward until we have some clearer sense of whether we intend to *talk about* or *be* religious. We're terrifically good at talking about religion, and there's nothing wrong with that. What this conference ['What On Earth Is Spirituality?'] does is look a bit closer at 'being religious', and see if we can define what we think that means for us."

One of the keynote speakers, Diarmuid O'Murchu, a Roman

Catholic priest, said "My fundamental conviction is that spirituality is a universal phenomenon ... predating the formal religions we know today ...". He went on to suggest that linguistic competence developed long after humans had already developed "a sense of the numinous, immanent and transcendent ..." and that "we invented systems of belief (called religions) to validate our anthropocentric insatiable instinct to divide and conquer the entire creation ... [including] ... divinity itself. ... All of which forces us to conclude that religion [as distinct from spirituality] could well be the most destructive and outrageous form of idolatry that our world has ever known."

Robert Ashby, director of the British Humanist Association, continued the theme of keeping "spirituality" and "religion" apart. In that way he could set out a list of personal experiences that he could concede we "spiritual" without compromising his Humanist status. He emphasised the personal and spontaneous, as against communal, nature of these experiences. He drew a sharp distinction between spirituality as a withdrawal from life and as "a greater contact with one's real life", opting for the latter.

These are excerpts from Don Cupitt's keynote speech which is available from our Resource Centre as number P15: "we should also be looking for the development of a global religious vocabulary ... [for this] will surely help all the faiths to escape from their respective cultural ghettos, expand their sympathies, become porous and mingle with and into each other ... The dilemma ... is this: it is very difficult to use any religious vocabulary today without invoking a history of extreme Two-Worlds dualism that one must hasten to disclaim. Most religious liberals today try to go on using the traditional religious vocabulary, whilst at the same time repudiating the old cosmological beliefs and valuations that used to give that vocabulary meaning. It is no wonder that we end up sounding vague, woolly and confused ... Christian spirituality to a very high degree attempted to deny this world, and with it the body, the entire secular realm, the passions, sex and time. ... We don't like flesh-spirit dualism any more, and we do not approve of the kind of self-hatred implicit in some traditional ascetical practices. One should not try to crush one's own biological nature ... In opposition to that kind of dualism, I

am suggesting that we should now simply equate the religious life with our attitude just to life itself, experienced as temporal being. Life pours itself out, spontaneously and ceaselessly, and so should we ... I'm arguing then that spirituality in future needs to become fully this-worldly and timebound."

Reported by Noel Cheer

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 £11 sterling to: **Ronald Pearce, 15 Burton Street, Loughborough LE11 2DT, UK**

In Brief

Expanding the Resource Centre

The Steering Committee has O.K'd a suggestion that the Resource Centre add appropriate hard-cover books to the material available on loan. Suzi Thirlwall, who manages the Resource Centre has two request of NZ SOFN members.

(1) do you have any suitable books that you would like to **donate**?

(2) have you any suggestions for titles for the Resource Centre to **buy**?

Suzi is looking for modern books in the ethical/spiritual/scientific areas and even some titles written from a fundamentalist viewpoint, so that interested SOFN members can make comparisons. Suzi can be contacted at 34 Briarley Street, Tauranga, Phone/Fax 07-578-2775)

It Is "Red Dot" Time

It is that time of year when we issue a final reminder to all those who have not yet paid their subscription for the new year. If your Newsletter/envelope has a red dot on it then this is the last Newsletter you will get (unless you do something about it!).

The annual subscription is still \$10 per household. Please send it to:

Membership Secretary,
Sea of Faith (NZ),
82 Kinghorne Street,
Strathmore Park,
Wellington 3.

SOFTies on Internet

At the AGM a rough show-of-hands indicated that about three-quarters of those present were on the Internet. This is about twice the percentage in

last year's poll.

For those who are not and have no plans to be, fear not! A Newsletter on paper will still come winging your way—provided that you pay your subscription, of course!

Next Conference

Ngaio Marsh Centre, Christchurch from September 3 to 5. Mainland hospitality, excellent theme and programme, surprises!!

First-class venue at the University, accomodation at College House. Enquiries:

John Goffin, tel/fax 03-348-3479
email: goffinjp@netaccess.co.nz

Next Newsletter

It will contain reviews from the Conference Workshops. If you want to submit copy (including Letters to the Editor) then please send it to me (address below) by December 1.

I can accept these input methods: email (noel.cheer@ibm.net), floppy disk (IBM compatible, Word 6 or ASCII), typed (I have a scanner) or handwritten (provided that its legible!)

Noel Cheer

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/sof.html

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.

The only copy appearing in this Newsletter that may be construed as reflecting Sea of Faith policy is that which is accompanied by a by-line of a member of the Steering Committee.

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, email: noel.cheer@ibm.net