

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

A recovered old Newsletter

From the Steering Committee

Welcome to the last year of the 20th Century—what a significant time as we contemplate moving from one millennium to another. There have been such vast developments in the last century itself and if we consider changes in the last millennium they have been enormous. Many an interesting evening could be given over to discussing all the changes that have happened in the last ten centuries and imagine how a person living in 999 would comprehend our world if they returned today! There have certainly been vast areas of progress in the last millennium but also we humans have not always considered the environment and as a result the human race has caused huge amounts of devastation and obliteration of species.

For all those who have enjoyed summer holidays I hope that you feel refreshed to embark on all those activities that you participate in during the year, plus the new avenues you have planned for yourself for 1999.

The Steering Committee met on 13 February for its all-day meeting in Wellington. We fully discussed the concept which had been introduced at last year's Conference of making travel grants available to local groups for speakers and workshop leaders. The guidelines and application forms for these grants will be sent to local group contacts within the next month.

Suzi Thirlwall has purchased a few books for the Resource Centre [see the attached list - ed]. If you have any reasonably recent publications that you no longer wish to keep but you consider would be of interest to other Sea of Faithers, Suzi would be delighted to add them to the Resource Centre.

The main business of our February meeting was to discuss the 1999 Conference. A reminder that this will be at Christchurch College of Education from 26-28 November and the theme will be an eco-theological one. We are delighted that Jeanette Fitzsimmons and Lloyd Geering have both agreed to be keynote speakers at this conference and we are waiting confirmation of our overseas speaker. In the next Newsletter (May) the Steering Committee hopes to be able to announce the name of this overseas speaker.

At the conclusion of a Conference, participants fill in questionnaires which records their impressions of the Conference. These are invaluable to the Steering Committee in our planning of future conferences as we always take careful consideration of the trends and comments made. As a result of the 1998 questionnaires, at Christchurch there will be opportunities to enjoy *two* sessions of elective lectures and *two* workshops without compromising chances to relax informally. As we discussed the programme for Christchurch I found myself becoming more and more excited about this year's conference. Christchurch at the end of November should be a beautiful place to be.

For those of you who are truly future planners the dates of the 2000 Conference have been confirmed when we will be in Havelock North from 6-8 October, 2000.

It has been most helpful receiving letters and e-mails from members with ideas for the Network generally and for the forthcoming Conference. Do keep sending your ideas (you can email me at griffith@globe.net.nz) so that the Steering Committee can, as fully as possible, reflect the thoughts and concerns of Network members.

Jane Griffith, Chairperson

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Workshop Reviews

The Prospects of Living in Cyberspace

With contagious enthusiasm, Noel launched us into the high tech. world of Cyberspace in the most low tech of ways. Flip cards, 12 in all, with a proposition for debate on each.

See what you make of these:

1. Y2K, the year 2000, and the possible hardware consequences of shortsighted software served to stimulate discussion and to whet the appetite. Opinions on this subject vary from global disaster to Y worry. We can be sure that time will tell.

2. Is the World Wide Web a development as significant as Gutenberg moveable type?

It did not take long to agree that the Web is likely to be more significant. The immediate and global nature of its coverage at a person to person level demolishes historic boundaries. Your neighbour is now only a PC away across a desk, or the world, and a chat now spans cultures, continents and conventions.

Like that of the spider this Web can be a cause for great wonder or a trap for the unwary.

3. Your next house may have its own computer network and you will be able to hire videos, via satellite, from – you guessed it – the USA.

This is possible now and is certainly a technically mindbending feat. Will that add to the quality and appreciation of the video I wonder?

4. Given that the Web allows us to purchase world wide should we buy from the cheapest source?

This proposal generated much discussion about possible social consequences. Would large scale direct purchasing off-shore affect this country? There was acknowledgement of the issues raised but no consensus.

5. Computers will shrink to fit your wrist, as did clocks, hardly raised an eyebrow. We have grown indifferent to the rate of change and it takes a lot more to surprise us.

6. As for the suggestion that my Toaster might have its own URL

(Uniform Resource Locator). Let me tell you that I would be cutting the crusts off any downloaded cyberspace sandwich popping out of this device. You never know where it might have come from??

7. How about religious services via the Web? Nothing too technically novel here and an opportunity perhaps to live out, in real time, the international ideals of major religions.

8. Continuing to reach out: how about a chat via a Web phone with someone in China?

Language differences solved electronically by real time translation. Brings a whole new meaning to ringing up and ordering Chinese. It is getting easier by the day to enlarge our world view so that there are less of "them" and more of "us" – and "mankind" assumes real meaning.

9. Is there a real threat that the world will soon be controlled by Bill Gates, Rupert Murdoch and Ronald McDonald?

Thinking laterally the underlying theme here is nutrition, the most basic source of power, food for mind and body. A varied diet by way of personal informed choice works well for food in packets. When it comes in bytes should it be any different?

The Gates to the new millenium may well have a Bill attached. The two Scots offer fibre in different forms. Bulk without content may be good for the body, less so for the mind.

10. The citizens of Cyberspace, Web wanderers, whatever, have no geographic or historic boundaries to constrain them. Will the borders be defined by customer preference?

The virtual nation or the global village will be equally valid realities for those living here. It will be easy to be a semidetached and a cyber-gypsy at the same time. Live here for long enough and you may need a cyberspacesuit to survive in the "real" world??

11. Does New Zealand risk cultural annihilation from all of this? Maybe this is an accelerating extension of already obvious Americanisation. Is

the Web the big blender in the sky? Will the balloon go up before the flag? Maybe the potential threat will be the stimulus to define a Kiwi culture.

12. Has Bill Clinton been a victim of the Web? Certainly the Web that glistens in the morning dew is a potent snare for a wayward fly. The electronic web may prove to be just as sticky – time will tell.

Thanks to Noel for posing the questions and loosening the ties. The freedom to wonder and to soar is enhanced by the Web. To pull on a PC and go with none of the limits of a 747 is economy travel at its best. Web wise is the way to go and the way to become?

Daniel Phillips

"Once upon a time there was a person who came from heaven and lived among us. That person touched the sick, and said a lot of meaningful things and enraged those in power. That person died at the hands of those who persecuted them for so long, went to heaven and, within a year, a movement of devoted followers rose up, and signs and wonders followed ... But enough about Princess Diana."

From Movement, an SCM journal, quoted in the UK Sea of Faith Magazine No. 35 p23

Letter to Editor

In re "Why Do I Need Religion", Newsletter 29 page 6.

The unknown author on the Web states that the question: "what is life/existence for?" is the "question that sets a seed of doubt into complacency and takes life to a level where everything else is meaningless except the search for meaning ..."

This concept or practice of "searching for meaning" appears to be one that the SOF has (long) accepted, if not encouraged. It seems to be taken for granted that Sea of Faithers are spending their days, and maybe their dreams as well, searching, searching, searching ...

But, I am uncomfortable with the thought that I belong to a national group that praises this process and the attitude of constant searching, yet offers no reward, not even a hint that anything may ever be found. Under such conditions, how can the goal be anything but fuzzy?

I hasten to add that I don't advocate adopting the kind of certain-outcomes that fundamentalist believers take for granted—I've had more than enough of that in my life. But I consider that the matter is more than one of semantics. Surely the nurture of an unrewarded attitude of searching can only mislead first-time enquirers into what the Sea of Faith is all about.

Personally, I don't think that I am engaged in searching at all. Instead of saying that everything is meaningless except the search for meaning, I prefer to say something like "everything else is meaningless except what we ourselves make significant and meaningful (for ourselves)."

I take heart in Don Cupitt who (in The Life To Come, 1982 and Our Dual Agenda, 1995 etc) encourages us to see ourselves as artists (in living). And who would begrudge an artist some joy and sense of achievement when viewing the products of her/his creativity?

Irvine Roxburgh, Mana

Editorial

This Newsletter, our 30th, is riddled with unreality. Or is it just that reality is so elusive? Lloyd's review of Don Cupitt's latest book finds in it "deep thoughts" that "are not always easy to grasp; my review of Bishop Brian Carrell's book discovers a church singing itself to sleep; and SOFTies on the Internet got themselves all confused by failing to distinguish between the two forms of "non-realism". Val Grant asks whether sexual orientation, such a defining part of us, is "given or gotten".

Grasping the nettle of reality as the millennium looms, local Groups are starting up their activities for 1999. We print the intentions of some of them—those that have informed your editor. If you are a member of the national SOF organisation but not of a Local Group, you ought to consider the extra benefit of joining in. There's a list of contacts attached.

Noel Cheer, Editor

1998 Conference Papers

The full papers for each of the three Keynote Speakers at the 1998 Conference are available from the Resource Centre (see the accompanying list). There were no tapes produced.

"The modern world is the child of doubt and inquiry, as the ancient world was the child of fear and faith".

Clarence Darrow
counsel for the defense in the
Scopes "monkey" trial, 1925

Book Reviews

The Revelation of Being

Reviewed by Lloyd Geering

Hard on the heels of The Religion of Being Don Cupitt produced a second book The Revelation of Being (SCM Press, 1998). It was sparked off by an experience he had when sitting at his desk at Emmanuel College and gazing out of the window while writing the former book. He saw the whole scene before him "covered over with and made legible by language". The sudden realisation that the human world consists of three worlds in one—the worlds of Being, of Meaning and of human life—constituted for him a "violent explosion of pure happiness", a momentary beatific vision which blew him away.

Don refers to this as a complex language-event. The rest of the book consists of his philosophical exploration and analysis of that moment. Although it is a only a short book (about 94 pages of text) it takes a long time to read. As with most of Don's recent books one has to read carefully and ponder.

Not having Don's extensive knowledge of the history of philosophy I am not in a position to judge how correctly he has interpreted earlier philosophers though his claims are consistent with my more limited knowledge of them. More importantly, the many striking observations he makes about our current understanding of the human predicament suggest to me that he is still working at the growing edge of western thought.

Whereas ancient philosophers started with Being, and modern philosophy from Descartes onwards started with Man, post-modern philosophy starts simply with language. Don discusses in turn Being, Man and Language and then turns to the way they relate together in pairs.

Finally he discusses qualities such as contingency, temporality and outsidelessness which apply to all three.

He ends up by seeing Being, Man and Language forming a kind of secular trinity which transforms and replaces the classical Christian dogma of the Trinity. Thus the Revelation of Being brings the Holy Trinity into finitude and time.

Being is the quite-unfathomable outpouring of everything and is prior to language. Being reveals itself in Man, which is the language-based common world in which we live and move and have our being. Language is the complex web of symbol and communication, which makes that world possible and is the medium of our social and historical life.

There are some deep thoughts here but they are not always easy to grasp. This fact leaves us with some questions. Since language, as Don rightly affirms, is so important for our humanity, what are we to make of sentences which we do not wholly understand? Is it because we are dull of understanding? Is it because the words are attempting to describe the ineffable? And how do we distinguish between deep insights which elude our understanding and gobbledegook? The latter term is sometimes applied today to some expressions of traditional theology just because we live in a world where traditional dogmas are not so much false as lacking in meaning.

Don seems to be aware of these questions even though he might not express them in that form, for he ends his book with an explanation of the chief words he is using. He even wonders to himself what sort of writing is he now doing. Is it theology, philosophy of religion, edifying philosophy? He is content to call it simply "religious writing".

Lloyd Geering

From The Holy Mountain

From The Holy Mountain by William Dalrymple, Flamingo, 1998 reviewed by Lloyd Geering.

This book has several levels. Ostensibly it is a travel book of a quality which, because of its wit and

human interest, has been compared by reviewers with that of Robert Byron, Patrick Leigh Fermor and Eric Newby. But it is much more, comparing religious life today with that of Byzantine culture before the arrival of Islam.

Dalrymple became fascinated with an ancient classic *The Spiritual Meadow*, written by John Moschos (550-619). Moschos retired from worldly life in 575 to become a monk in the monastery of St. Theodosius near Jerusalem. But he later journeyed widely to visit the most notable centres of monasticism. He gathered a large collection of anecdotes and holy stories of monastic life and turned them into a spiritual classic, which became a devotional manual for centuries to come.

how do we distinguish between deep insights which elude our understanding and gobbledegook?

Dalrymple decided to visit as many of the same sites as Moschos. He started off at the monastery of Iviron at Mt. Athos in Greece (hence the title of the book). He then proceeded to Istanbul, through Eastern Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel to Egypt—Alexandria, Cairo and the desert monastery of St. Antony, with whom monasticism had begun in the third century.

The book follows this journey at two levels. There is an exciting account of Dalrymple's own adventures, often facing tensions and dangers; and there is a better description of monastic life in the Byzantine period than you will find almost anywhere else. Dalrymple had carried through a great deal of research before he began. Yet in this travelogue, the academic material is never tedious but readily absorbed.

Who would have guessed, for

example, that there were once over 150 monasteries in the mountains of Judea, even though only three remain. How many realise that Jerusalem remained a substantially Christian city even after the Islamic invasion, that it has been controlled by Christians for a longer period than it ever was an Israelite or Jewish city and, as recently as 1920, more than half of the inhabitants of Jerusalem were Christian.

This book will startle any who think Christianity took only one form. What it included by way of belief and practice, both in the ancient world as well as the present world, will surprise and even shock. In these days when the orthodox Christianity of the West is coming under severe criticism, the kind of things discovered by Dalrymple, himself of Roman Catholic background, will demonstrate how necessary it is to exercise a critical mind.

This is a book both to enjoy and to learn from.

Lloyd Geering

Does Society Need Religion?

This is the title of Lloyd Geering's latest series of lectures (October 1998) and booklet (December) from **St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society**.

As a preface to the first lecture, Lloyd observed that this might have been an appropriate lecture with which to inaugurate the SATRS lectures 15 years ago.

The first two chapters cover a range of definitions of the word "religion" and trace the benefits to society ("superglue") and the dangers ("dynamite") that it poses.

Chapter 3 looks at attempts at creating societies without religion and leave us with the view that the more rigorous—the attempt, the more like a religion the attempt becomes.

The last chapter returns to a theme much in evidence in Lloyd's writing these days: the need to elevate ecological matters to the status of a religious concern. He moves us from the phenomenon of "globalisation" (which, in Chapter 3 gets a mixed press) to "global

consciousness"—a move which is utterly essential to our survival—and therefore the required centre of religion in the 21st century.

Although the "bottom line" is similar to that of his *Tomorrow's God* (Bridget Williams Books, 1994) he arrives at it via a consideration of traditional religious ideas, traditional antipathy to religion and the need to start again with Tillich's "conscientious concern for what really matters" rooted, literally, in the earth.

And, along the way, SOF people will be glad to be told that heresy (your making a choice in the face of dogmatic authority) is a spiritual duty!

Noel Cheer

Inability To Move?

Reflections on Moving Between Times, Modernity and Postmodernity: A Christian View by Brian Carrell (published by the DeepSight Trust, New Zealand, 1998)

There is a touching story about the aging Archimedes who, engrossed in a mathematical puzzle, was unaware of the hostile soldiers who came to kill him. Bishop Brian Carrell, while acknowledging the existence of forces hostile to Christianity, has produced a similar, inappropriately inward-looking book. Even the Foreword by the (now) late Archbishop Brian Davis acknowledges a changed world when he refers to "the attitudes, ideas and values that shape Western society today". But Bishop Carrell seems transfixed like a possum in the headlights, as the postmodernist future bears down on him.

But first he must deal with **modernism**. It is easy to mistake what the term "Modernism" signifies. It is not merely a posh way of saying "up-to-date". Modernism is usually thought to have come into being with the (European) Enlightenment. It is the name of a set of worldviews

that arose when more and more people realised that their own culture was different from that of their neighbors and, by implication, was challenged and threatened by them.

In what would be regarded as a paradox by proponents of the Enlightenment, that view had a lot in common with Christendom, the worldview that it was seeking to replace. From early Christian times and right up to the present time, the central power structures of societies took the view that there was one, and only one, (proper, appropriate, permissible) way of looking at things and that what they were promoting was that way. (A current example is the United States' efforts to gift "democracy" and "capitalism" to all corners of the world.)

The philosophical term for a "way of looking at things" is **metanarrative**. The Enlightenment largely succeeded in providing rivals for the metanarrative of Christendom with, first of all Reason, and then Science. Marxism is an excellent example. The battle of the modernist metanarratives continues with, for example, anti-evolutionists on one side hurling abuse at those scientists (such as Richard Dawkins) who are openly hostile to religion.

For a variety of reasons, the Christian metanarrative is in decline. The philosopher would have to count the Christian metanarrative as one among many, while the Christian counts it as the best, and not only the best but, at those points where it conflicts with other metanarratives, **the correct one**.

Modernism, (the desire "to get everyone on the same page" as Walter Truett Anderson writes in *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader*) whether in its early form of Christian witness, imperialism and missionising or in its later forms of the Enlightenment Project which promoted Reason and Science, has run its course.

Postmodernism is, in essence, a

claim or an admission that the Enlightenment Project (as well as Christendom which preceded it) was merely a set of arbitrary claims by the current leaders of society that where they were was the only place to be.

In response to Yeats' "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold", the postmodernist observes (joyfully or woefully), that, not only are there are **many** "centres" (or **none**, if you want to be purist) but also that none of the centres can hold. The Buddhist motifs of *anatta* and *anicca*—no permanent soul and no permanent reality—anticipated this view, and so the Buddha has been cited as an early Postmodernist.

What I find most astonishing about a book that sets out to discuss how Christianity (actually New Zealand Anglicanism) might deal with postmodernism is not what is in it, but what is not in it. Christianity has, over its 19 or so centuries, encountered many challenges, many of which came from "inside".

From time-to-time people labelled as "heretics" arose. Many were slaughtered in the name of the God of love, to keep the faith pure, but some escaped and went on to materially change the direction of Christianity.

I believe that it is reprehensible of Bishop Carrell to have written a book that omits (apart from one fleeting reference) any mention of these classes and examples of the challenges that historical Christianity is currently facing. It may be that Bishop Carrell is unaware of these challenges and, if that is the case, then that is doubly reprehensible. It is possible to discern at least three groups of unacknowledged challenges:

Challenges of Authenticity

To confine our survey to recent times, we could usefully start with John A.T. Robinson's *Honest To God* (1963) and end (for the time being) with The Jesus Seminar's publications: *The Five Gospels* and *Honest To Jesus*.

In one way or another, these works challenge the implicit and explicit claims to authenticity by mainstream Christianity—that there is an historical continuity between the life and teachings of Jesus and the movement that developed in his name. Chief among the challenges that mainstream Christianity has not been able to meet is the awareness, apparent in the extensive scholarship of the Jesus Seminar, that the picture of Jesus promoted by them is a reading back (into already fictionalised accounts of the "life" of Jesus), of post-Resurrection perceptions of Jesus as **the Christ** and as, in some sense, the "founder" of the Christian Church. The balance of probabilities supports the view that Jesus disowned the title "Christ" ("Messiah") and that the last thing on his mind was to set up a Church. Yet assertions in favour of these attitudes lie at the heart of contemporary mainstream Christianity.

Challenges to Direction:

There are many within Christianity who believe that the direction that it is taking will guarantee its eventual extinction. Those who are guiding the major denominations seem oblivious to the rocks ahead, dismissing them as mere fabrications of an increasingly God-less world. This blindness has been pointed out in earlier works of Don Cupitt (Taking Leave of God and The Sea of Faith especially) and more recently and passionately by John Spong in Why Christianity Must Change Or Die. It is strange that Bishop Carrell made no references to any of this genre of "loyal opposition" within the Christian Church. New Zealand's Lloyd Geering has been clearly articulating these concerns for over thirty years (see especially Crisis in the Christian Way available from St Andrew's Trust) but, apart from a footnote comment, his warnings have not been referred to.

Challenges to Relevance:

Postmodernism is increasingly giving us a religious climate more like that of the first century Roman Empire than that of any time since. It is a time of speculative largesse, a time of genuine spiritual enquiry, a

time of charlatanry and quackery, and a time of reactionary blandeur on the part of the older religious establishment. To dismiss, as the Bishop does, all religious positions other than Christianity, might provide a momentary rush of adrenalin to those faithful who remain, but it is not an adequate response. Right under his nose there are organisations whose members regard religion as of profound importance but who have been bruised by the inability or unwillingness of the traditional Christian churches to treat them as intelligent adults. Our own Sea of Faith Network, now healthily

established in local groups throughout New Zealand, is one such organisation. These people are not wilfully turning their backs on religion, but are rather going further into spirituality, unhandicapped by a wilfully anachronistic Church. For them, Postmodernism is not a threat but a series of opportunities.

The flyleaf quotation by Jim Wallis describes the situation felt by us all: "We are caught in the middle, stranded between paradigms". We are all in that situation, but not all respond as passively as does Bishop Carrell.

Noel Cheer

What's Real?

(or Keeping Your Feet On The Ground)

"The Theory of Relativity is more than just a matter of social construction, because, *regardless of your belief system*, a single nuclear explosion can ruin your whole day."

found on the Web

"Once I, Chuang Chou, dreamed that I was a butterfly. I was conscious that I was quite pleased with myself, but I did not know that I was Chou. Suddenly I awoke and there I was, visibly Chou.

I do know whether it was Chou dreaming that he was a butterfly or the butterfly dreaming that it was Chou."

Chuang-Tzu 399-295 BCE

There was a faith healer of Deal
Who said, "Although pain isn't real,
When I sit on a pin
And it punctures my skin
I dislike what I *fancy* I feel."

Anon

When any principle, law, tenet, probability, happening, circumstance, or result can in no way be directly, indirectly, empirically, or circuitously proven, derived, implied, inferred, induced, deduced, estimated, or scientifically guessed, it will always for the purpose of convenience, expediency, political advantage, material gain, or personal comfort, or any combination of the above, or none of the above, be unilaterally and unequivocally assumed, proclaimed, and adhered to as absolute truth to be undeniably, universally, immutably, and infinitely so, until such time as it becomes advantageous to assume otherwise, maybe.

Found on the Web

Rev-ving it Up!

Rev-ving it Up! by Irvine Roxburgh, Cadsonbury Publications, Christchurch 1998, reviewed by Mike Palaret.

Subtitled "in the farback Wanaka Parish of the 1950s", this little book is carried by the nexus of motoring on mainly un-paved, dusty country roads and ministering to a sprawling Presbyterian parish covering some 2,500 square kilometers. Irvine has placed his story in the context of the Presbyterian Church's Book of Rules and Forms of Procedure, from which he provides apt quotations in between his chapters. The book is also laced with some of Irvine's (and others') poetry, and the odd extract from another of his books. The atmosphere of a bygone age is enhanced by pencil drawings, mainly featuring Irvine's faithful Vauxhall Velox, drawn by his daughter. He has changed the names of his family and the many colourful characters encountered during seven years' tenure as *Locum-Rev* of the Wanaka Parish, but has promised to restore the names of his wife and son in the next edition.

Irvine notes that although his book may have a serious impact, it was intended to entertain, and entertain it certainly does. Its appeal lies in the contrast between pioneering, practical and very human attitudes of the local people, and what now appears to be an almost archaic and imperious set of guidelines which Ministers were expected to apply. Irvine does not flinch from drawing humour, even at his own expense, but the signal message is the need for newcomers to adapt—or perish! Irvine and his family plainly relished adapting. A delightful aspect is that he was able to preserve honour on both sides: he was an early exponent of what is now described as "win-win".

Mike Palaret

In case you didn't already know

You have a "Final Vocabulary"

"All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives.

I shall call these words a person's "final vocabulary".

It is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. These words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only hopeless passivity or a resort to force.

A small part of a final vocabulary is made up of thin and ubiquitous terms such as "true", "good", "right", and "beautiful".

The larger part contains thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, "Christ", "England", "professional standards", "decency", "kindness", "the Revolution", "the Church", "progressive", "rigorous", "creative".

The more parochial words do most of the work.

I shall define "ironist" as someone who fulfills three conditions:

- (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary [that] she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books [which] she has encountered;
- (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts;
- (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, [or] that it is in touch with a power not herself.

Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old."

Richard Rorty in *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader* pp96-97

Oh Really?

For much of last December and January a debate raged on the Internet among some of the subscribers to the Sea of Faith Network's email list. At the heart of the debate was the word "non-realism". Permission was obtained to print excerpts from that dialogue. We are grateful to David Boulton, editor of the UK SOF Magazine (see "In Brief"), for this clarification of the terms.

When the Sea of Faith Network began in the 1980s, many of its members latched on to Don Cupitt's label "nonrealist" to describe their religious or philosophical position. Like Cupitt himself, they tended to use the term in two different (but related) ways:

- Sometimes "nonrealism" simply meant not believing in a real objective God, or in understanding God as having the same kind of reality as abstract "love" or "justice" rather than the reality of a person or thing. This was dubbed **theological nonrealism**.

- But to some, and increasingly to Cupitt himself, nonrealism had a wider and much more radical meaning. Following philosophers like Derrida in France and Rorty in the US, Cupitt argued that there is no "way that things are", no thing, no truth wholly independent of the human observer and her/his language. This has been called **ontological** or philosophical nonrealism, a form of postmodern humanism (since it is human language- and culture-centred). [See Newsletter 28, p8 – ed]

Since "nonrealism" contained these ambiguities from the start, it is not surprising that there has always been confusion within the Network, let alone outside it, as to what the term means! Some of us are full-monty philosophical nonrealists, some of us are theological nonrealists who are happy to understand God as a human construct but don't want to say the same of a chair or the "natural world" or of mathematics. Some of us are realists (or "semi-realists" or "critical realists") who understand God as an ultimate benign power or purpose beyond all religions, which we recognise are human creations. And some of

us just find the distinction between nonrealist and realist unreal and unhelpful, and would like to ban the brain-scrambling words altogether!

Anthony Freeman, author of *God In Us, A Case for Christian Humanism* (reviewed in Newsletter 5), amplified "ontological realism":

[Ontological] Realism is the philosophical view that there is "a way things are", independent of all observers, according to John Searle, University of California, Berkeley.

Anti-realism or nonrealism is the philosophical view opposed to realism: the view that there is no observer-independent "way that things are".

Since the eighteenth century there has been a wide acceptance of the view that there is an unbridgeable gap between "the way things are" (ontology) and "what can be known by us" (epistemology). Immanuel Kant used the term "things-in-themselves" for the former, and said that we can never have complete access to things-in-themselves. All science, in his view, necessarily deals with things-as-they-appear, not with things-in-themselves.

John Searle says that [ontological] realism is essential to rational discussion. He does not claim that we can know "the way things are", rather that we must believe that there is "a way things are" in order to talk rationally about things at all.

Traditional theology would go further. It says that by divine revelation we have been given access to knowledge (about God and the creation) that by nature we could not have had. On this view, revelation does tell us about "the way things are".

Among philosophers of science there is a division. There are anti-realists, who say that all science and maths is a human construction; and there are critical-realists, who say that science does tell us something about the way things are and that—as science advances—the gap between our descriptions and the underlying reality they describe is gradually being closed.

Critical realism is also fashionable among liberal theologians. John

Polkinghorne is a good example of someone who is a critical realist in his approach to both science and theology. SOFists, if they accept my analysis, will have to speak for themselves as to where they would place themselves on the "non-realist (anti-realist) / critical-realist / realist" spectrum.

I see myself as an extreme Kantian, who says that we cannot know anything about things-in-themselves, not even whether they exist. I therefore remain agnostic as to whether there is any reality behind our perceptions and constructions.

Clive Richards, the founding editor of the UK SOF Magazine (he now lives in the USA), added an historical note, and suggested that (at least within the SOF debate on the subject) we stick to **theological nonrealism**:

A reminder as to how we thought we were using the term at the outset of SOF ... "Nonrealism" was used to describe a theological position that viewed God (and by extension religious faith) as a human creation. A nonrealist theology preserves a sense of utility and value in God-talk and religious faith/activity. It is therefore not the same as atheism...

Those rejecting traditional, largely anthropomorphic, models of God but retaining a faith in some extra-human originating and guiding principle or force behind the universe might be termed "semi-realists"—what has long been known as "deism"... SOF began, and I hope continues, as an exploration of the position of theological nonrealism. The dilemmas and practical concerns that derive from this—the "so whats?" of affirming value, defending religious activity, reconceptualising worship/spirituality etc—have proved to have sufficient overlap with a semi-realist stance as to attract a number of deists to SOF also.

I say stick to this **theological** understanding and usage of non-realism and don't scramble your brains with **ontological nonrealism**.

Summarised by David Boulton (UK) and Noel Cheer (NZ)

Local Groups

The information in this section is from local Newsletters sent to the editor—a practice to be encouraged!

Auckland Central

Their February Newsletter thanked the Manakau group for arranging the joint Christmas dinner. It recorded that Dr. Leo Hobbs spoke on last year's UK Conference and noted that Dr. Valerie Grant, a lecturer in behavioural science at the Auckland School of Medicine would speak on "Sexual Orientation — Given or Gotten?" (see the next item). Contact is Graham Shearer 09-524-9941

Mana

The Mana group, hosted by Mike and Eva Palaret, has already mapped out its 1999 programme. Their year started with a BBC audio tape of Ruth Robinson and John Bowden commenting on the 30 years that had elapsed since the publishing of Honest To God. In March and April your editor will deliver a paper discussing the relevance of Jesus in the light of Jesus Seminar findings. Irvine Roxburgh will follow with "The Invention of Christianity: the first centuries". By mid-year the group will be listening to an eco-theological topic a eating a (politically-correct) pot-luck dinner. During the last four months they will study Lloyd Geering's Does Society Need Religion?, having bought copies at a discount (see "For Discussion" in the In Brief section). Their activities for the year, the decade, the century and the millennium will end ... with a Christmas party. Contact is Mike Palaret 04-232-8297.

Tauranga

Fifteen to twenty of their members meet in the evening of the third Wednesday of each month. The group encourages participation and discussion.

They find Conference material (such as the workshops: "Re-imagining the Church" and "Defending Reality") as well as reports from members who attended useful. They have used books from St Andrew's, videos such as Joseph Campbell's The Power of Myth and books such as Don Cupitt's After God and Marcus Borg's Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time.

Last year they suspended their usual annual seminar in favour of visiting the Jesus Seminar roadshow. They had a visit from Lloyd Geering ("Who Owns The Holy Land") and a visiting Ratana minister who spoke on Maori spirituality.

Each year, two meetings are of a "social" nature: one involved a quiz on The Sea of Faith.

Most of their members subscribe to this Newsletter which their Group Leader describes as "a life-line to the thinking and writing of people engaged in a similar quest."

Contact Mary and Brian Davies phone 07-576-0305

Christchurch

They meet twice-monthly on Fridays at 5pm. Some of the topics planned for 1999 are as follows. **Icons—Inspired Art:** Ian Crumpton shows some of the most well-known icons of the Orthodox Church and leads discussion on them. **The Bahai Faith:** April Spurdle will explain the history, teaching, and

worship of the Bahai faith. **Bicultural Issues:** Hugh and Rhona Thorpe share their thoughts in response to Making Peoples by James Belich. **Don Cupitt and the Religion of Being:** Laurie Chisholm presents Don Cupitt's latest book in which he turns to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Contact Laurie Chisholm, phone 03-325-2141

Dunedin

Their year starts with a meeting on February 25th. Last year they looked at subjects as diverse as: artificial conception; animal rights; poverty and riches; the Code of Social Responsibility [where did it go? — ed]; the Year 2000.

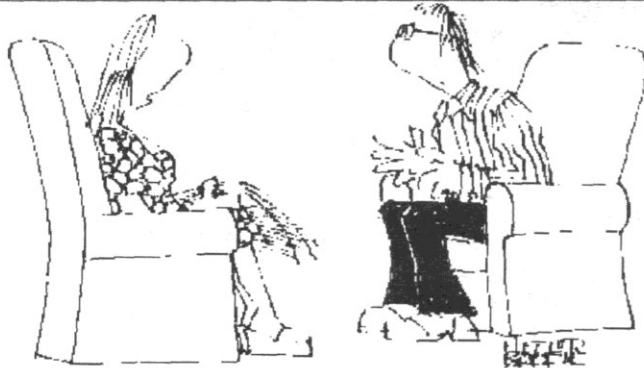
Contact Andrew Meek phone 03-471-0698

Sexual Orientation — Given or Gotten?

Val Grant (a lecturer in behavioural science at the Auckland School of Medicine) recently gave a talk with this title to the Auckland Central group.

She noted that throughout the middle decades of this century, homosexuality was regarded as a pathology. This was intensified by the denial of biological explanations, an attitude brought about by the use of such explanations by the Nazis.

By the 1950s the American Psychiatric Association was classifying it as a "personality



Theological non-realism is perfectly clear to me. Its your analogies I can't understand.

disorder" and, by the late 1960s a "mental disorder".

People thought that homosexuality could be "cured" by various treatments, including psychotherapy and behaviour therapy. When these failed, it was said to be because of poor motivation on the part of the patient rather than because ideas about the origin of the orientation were wrong.

A turning point occurred with the "Stonewall Riots" (at the Stonewall Inn in New York) in June 27, 1969 which launched assertiveness and activism on the part of the gay community.

Val spoke of Leonard Matlovich, a homosexual who was discharged from the US airforce — "a medal for killing two people and a discharge for loving one."

Although the biological basis of human sexual orientation is now widely accepted, some gay and lesbian people do not want emphasis to be on genes, because they fear that there might be more medical interference. While all acknowledge that there is no choice, some ("constructionists") prefer a social and political emphasis while others ("essentialists") prefer the biological emphasis.

But the evidence (especially from study of the chromosomes) is that everyone is born with one sexual orientation or the other, and therefore is not a matter of choice.

Among the books in the bibliography is one by Selwyn Dawson (*Church or Sect*) which reminds Methodists that there has always been "ample room" in the [Methodist] church for "those with differing convictions about the many unresolved ethical issues".

Reported by Noel Cheer

In Brief

Help With Travel

By now your Group Leader should have received details of a Travel Grant to be made available by the national Steering Committee to help Local Groups with the travel expenses of visiting speakers.

For Reading

The following Sea of Faith (UK)

publications are available for \$7.00 each (including post and packaging) from Roy Griffith, 249 Te Moana Road, Waikanae:

- *A Reasonable Faith* (Introducing the Sea of Faith Network) by David Boulton;
- *There is Another World—But It Is This One* by Jean Hardy;
- *The Faith of a Quaker Humanist* by David Boulton;
- *Signposts to the Future* (Creation-centred spirituality and the Sea of Faith) by Josephine Teagle.

For Discussion

Many Groups already use publications from the St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society (SATRS) as group study material. We now have an arrangement with SATRS that, if a local group leader (or secretary) approaches SATRS with an order for 6 or more copies of any publication then they can receive them at wholesale rates. In addition, the Trust is working on producing a series of supplementary "Questions for Discussion" sheets for at least the more recent publications. They will be available on request and at no charge. You can find out what is available from either the website at:

www.futuresgroup.org.nz/satrs.html or from Constance Dreaver at St Andrews on the Terrace, Box 5203, Wellington (phone 04-472-9211, fax 04-472-9336)

For Debate

Suppose that, due to some huge catastrophe, every human being (and frozen embryo and cryogenically preserved corpse) was wiped out. What (if anything) happens to God?

Part of a SOF Internet debate

UK Website

Its now at www.sofn.org.uk
Ours is still at

www.futuresgroup.org.nz/sof.html

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 £11 sterling to: Ronald Pearse, 15

Burton Street, Loughborough LE11 2DT, UK. Please write you cheque or money order to "Sea of Faith (UK)".

Copy Request

Your Newsletter is your opportunity to have the voice of the Sea of Faith Network in New Zealand heard, not only in New Zealand, but in several overseas countries. Please send Letters to the Editor, Book Reviews, and Articles. Next copy deadline is April 25.

I welcome copy in the form of emails, attachments to emails, floppy disk (IBM), typewritten, or (legibly) handwritten. Mailing details below.

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, 249 Te Moana Rd, Waikanae, Phone 04-293-1954.

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