



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

# NEWSletter

## Editorial From The Chairperson

The Arrangements Committee in Auckland is chaired by the same team of John Irwin and Barbara Millar who brought us the successful 1997 Conference. They are hard at work on the locale details for this year's Conference.

The Steering Committee is rounding up lecturers and leaders. We can already tell you that the Keynote Lecturers are:

- **Professor Lloyd Geering** (who needs no further description!)
- **Merepeka Raukawa-Tait**, the CEO of Women's Refuges of New Zealand.
- **Alison Cotes**, a founding member of the Sea of Faith in Australia and a journalist.

Lloyd has often spoken about the fallacy of assuming that the community is a simple aggregation of individuals.

Merepeka has established a well-earned reputation for taking to task those elements of the community who let-down the individuals whose care is entrusted to them.

Some of Alison's writings can be found on the SoFIA website: [www.sofia-in-australia.org](http://www.sofia-in-australia.org). In one she asks "what is it about religious belief that seems to breed fanaticism more than anything else".

I acknowledge that we always say that this Conference will be the "best ever" but the facts seem to be stacking up that each year they simply get better and better.

This Newsletter contains a review by myself of an entire magazine which is devoted to analysing the writings of John Spong and telling us where he's wrong. We also give a timetable of Spong's next visit to New Zealand in July of this year.

*Noel Cheer, Steering Committee Chairperson  
and Newsletter Editor*

What Happens this year  
2001?

SEA OF FAITH (NZ) ANNUAL  
CONFERENCE

Where?

KING'S COLLEGE, OTAHUHU,  
AUCKLAND

When?

SEPTEMBER 21, 22 AND 23

A Repeat of 1997?

NO!

The Theme

YOU MAKE COMMUNITY MAKES  
YOU: IDENTITY AND BELONGING

A Conference with a  
Difference: Make Sure You  
Enrol Early

REGISTRATION MATERIAL WILL BE  
MAILED TO NEWSLETTER  
SUBSCRIBERS LATE JUNE 2001

## Number 41: May 2001

From the Chairperson and Editor	1
Thoughts of God	2
deftWORKS	2
Conference Workshops	2
Focus on Spong	3
Spong in NZ, July 2001	6
Humanism Without Adjectives	6
City of God	7
Do The Arts Need The Gods?	7
The Meaning of Secularisation	7
Local Groups	8
In Brief	9
Faith in Cyberspace	9
Talking It Over	10

## Thoughts of God

*Submitted by Ted Abraham of Palmerston North*

Always he was to stay close to the earth; that earth which in the imagination of man, whether of the stone age Bushmen of the Kalahari, the Greek Hesiod or Homer, or the Roman of Virgil, was essentially feminine, a great Mother producing and nourishing all forms of living things. So much so that in Jung's case in both plants and trees he felt himself closer to the act and deed of creation than in any other physical manifestation of life. They were never just trees, plants or flowers to him. He was to call them "thoughts of God", expressing not only the mind of the Creator but also the magnetic beauty of the instant of creation. I remember one evening at Bollingen when a wind was raising a remote Merlinesque moan from the trees he had planted so thickly around his tower. The lake was lapping at the shore hard by. He could never, Jung said, go along with the concept that only man was created in the image of God. That wind, those trees, the water that we heard, those contemplative plants and flowers outside, the valleys and the great mountain tops with their fall of snow, reflecting sun, moon and stars beneath, all seemed to him, as a boy, to be an expression of the permanent essence of God, more true and wonderful than any in men and their societies. It was to them that he turned when the world, for a moment, defeated his questioning self. Animals, much as he loved them, were already one dimension further away because of their ability to move at will. They were, to put it symbolically, both in being and spirit already

uprooted and cut off from that which had made them. Although, he hastened to add, it was God's will that moved them rather than their own. But even with such a will they represented already a step towards the exile that men today call consciousness.

One has to stress this to show how all important this was to him from the beginning and how at one with his destiny. When his own resources of foresight and reasoning failed him, this pre-association and continuing bond with the earth provided a non-rational wayside hospice that refreshed him and set him on his way again.

*Laurence van der Post  
(Jung & the Story of Our Time,  
1976)*

## deftWORKS

This is the name of a journal of the Anglican Church which is published three times a year and available for \$15.

The editorial in the Spring 2000 issue details the fall-off of church affiliation in New Zealand (about 30% of attendees of mainline Protestant Churches are over the age of 70) and outlooks the probability of the Anglican Church losing its majority status.

There's an appreciative review of John Spong's *Here I Stand*, on page 4.

On the last page there is an extensive report on what the 1998 Hikoi of Hope has achieved.

**Contact: co-director of  
deftWORKS, P.O. Box 30-  
146 Lower Hutt.**



# You Make A Workshop Makes a Conference

... And workshops make a Conference lively. We value the diversity they offer, and the chance to meet interesting people with interesting ideas.

Would you consider leading a workshop at Conference this year?

A workshop is not a lecture. It is typically a brief (say 10 minutes) introduction by the leader, followed by discussion, or sharing of experience, or solving a problem, or creating something new--in words or by other means.

If you think you have a workshop coming on, then give us a call -- soon!

Joy and Owen Lewis, 80B Onslow Avenue, Epsom, Auckland.

Phone/Fax (09)-630-2933  
email  
lewisoj@internet.co.nz



# Focus on Spong

**This review, by Noel Cheer, deals with the recent double issue of *Apologetica* Volume 7 (2/3) - 2000, the Journal of the Wellington Christian Apologists' Society — a grouping of conservative Christians who are alarmed at what the US Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong is preaching and the amount of media attention that he gets.**

**This issue runs to 135 closely-typed A4 pages and follows the previous "Focus on Jim Veitch" which was reviewed in Newsletter 36. This journal announces, in passing on page 86, that future issues will focus on Lloyd Geering and Don Cupitt.**

The Editorial sets the scene: this issue "contains a careful analysis of Bishop Spong — the man and his message — from a conservative Christian position". Battle-lines are drawn: the media exhibits "fawning devotion"; "candidness" can get in the way of truth; there is error to be combated. All of which is undertaken. Conservative Christians will be well-pleased by this journal.

Letters to the Editor are followed by biographical and bibliographical background information about Spong. He is credited with 16 books and 101 articles up to the end of 1997.

Spong's **Twelve Theses — A Call for a New Reformation** (see Newsletter 27 p4) are reproduced and are savaged by the bulldog pen of George Duggan. One wonders how persuasive Duggan's assessments "garbage" and "nonsense" will prove to those not already against Spong. However, in a footnote, Duggan's better nature takes over and he gives a helpful analysis of how science, as we now know it, was helped into being by medieval natural theology.

This is followed by what promised to be a commentary on Spong's 1997 visit to New Zealand and which includes a misreference (p13) to the Geering "Memorial" Lecture. Their Editor also gets it wrong on page 17 by referring to the Geering "Fellowship" Lectures. The lectures are simply the

"Geering Lectures" and they are arranged by The St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society. However, the article barely mentions Spong and instead gives a history of all the other "intellectuals attacking the Gospels" as far back as Celsus in the year 180. A reference to Spong's approach to Christianity as "theological snake oil" only adds to a reputation for intemperance on Duggan's part which threatens to rival Spong's. As earlier, Duggan's mood brightens at the end of this article with an attempt at a helpful discussion on Fundamentalism.

Then follows 33 pages of well-articulated criticism of Spong, by the editor David Lane, under the overall heading of "Redefining God In Man's Image". This is followed by a 20 page critique of Spong's autobiography *Here I Stand*.

A mild rebuke of Spong by the late Brian Davies (Anglican Archbishop of NZ) straddles the fence — some agreement, some disagreement.

A further twenty pages follow, written by "Laymen" who restate the conservative Christian disagreement with Spong.

The book *Can a Bishop Be Wrong?* is introduced on page 93 and reviewed on page 116. Unsurprisingly the answer given, and with many details, is "yes".

Dr Stephen Smith, Professor of Theology and Ethics, rightly discerns that there is a "great gulf fixed" between Christian Theism

and Monism. He attempts to show that Spong is a monist and therefore on the wrong side of the gulf. (For a more accurate position read Lloyd Geering's article on Trinitarianism on page 10 of Newsletter 38, and in full on the website).

A fluffy article by Wayne Jackson of *The Christian Courier* is padded-out with two anecdotes which lower the otherwise serious tone of the journal.

Spong's *Resurrection: Myth or Reality* is reviewed by Kathleen Loncar in a style that avoids citing the conservative theology of the rest of the journal. If you are bored by liberal and conservative Christians slugging it out like punch-drunk boxers, then you might find this the best item in the journal. It is followed by a less satisfactory review of the same book by Gerald O'Collins, Professor of Fundamental Theology, Gregorian University, Rome. He dismisses Spong's arguments as "not new" and, without evidence, writes that Spong "pushes a midrashic theory to his own idiosyncratic extreme" in order to explain the restoration of faith in Jesus on the part of the post-crucifixion disciples.

An Australian, Frank Mobbs, reviewed Spong's *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* and sees it as a "recipe for the extinction of Christianity". He reasonably observes (p114) that Spong's reformulation of Christianity "means discarding all those beliefs which make someone a Christian ..".

George Duggan returns to review Jim Stuart's *The Many Faces of Christ* (St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society 1998).

As if his trial in the previous issue of *Apologia* were not enough, Jim Veitch sustains another 8 pages of criticism from Justin Carrigill, who brings in Jim Stuart, John Murray and Burton Mack to stand at the bar with Veitch.

I reviewed the previous issue of *Apologia* in Newsletter 36 and that review is republished (with my permission) in this journal. It is followed by a "Response" from David Lane, the editor of *Apologia*. I will respond separately.

## Observations

### "Antecedent Assumptions"

Liberals are accused by Duggan (pp14, 18) of having "antecedent assumptions". These are offered as evidence of a closed mind in regard to the existence of a supernatural order and of supernatural beings. But surely these conservatives also have "antecedent assumptions" as the **Statement of Belief** so eloquently sets out. If liberals like Spong can be accused of acting out their assumptions by wielding Occam's Razor with reckless abandon, then cannot the conservatives also stand guilty of using theirs' to transfix Christianity in potting cement?

### Are Conservatives Fundamentalist?

Yes ... and by self-declaration. On page 16, George Duggan attempts a distinction between "moderate" and "extreme" Fundamentalism, which may be little more than a difference of degree. The moderate form has its origins in a series of pamphlets issued around 1910 in the United States dealing with what the Protestant authors took to be "the fundamentals" of Christian faith.

*Apologia's* **Statement of Belief**, both in content and in creedal centrality, bears a strong resemblance. In recent years, Lloyd Geering has identified "fundamentalism" in areas of life other than the overtly religious. "What all fundamentalists have in common is their conviction that they are absolutely right". He quotes, as an example, "New Right" economic theory.

What Christian liberals appear to worry about in Christian Fundamentalism is not so much the reduction of Christianity to a credit-card-sized manifesto but rather the ferocity of its proclamation.

Fundamentalism starts with the view that "we" have the truth and that there is no scheme of thought, philosophy or discourse that can cast any doubt on it.

The implied licence to act from this base of such certainty (what, in the Christian sense, Geering refers to as "idolatry of the Bible") should keep the rest of us alert for our safety.

In his St Andrew's Trust lectures series *Crisis in the Christian Way* (1993) Lloyd Geering talked of a prediction made in 1923 by the scholar Kirsopp Lake, that the traditionalists would force out the radicals and then become gradually absorbed by the fundamentalists. "Thus, he said, the church would shrink from left to right". And, so it has.

### **Biblical Inerrancy and Figurative Language**

The first item in the **Statement of Belief** deals with Biblical inerrancy (not the same as "literally true") and it is the major plank of most rebuttal by liberals. However, on page 44 Lane writes "All conservative New Testament scholars would agree that the Gospels and the birth narratives do not have *only* a flat, literal meaning." He then goes on to deny Spong's claim that the Gospels are midrash, something which does not concern us at this point because we need to note that we are left with a hanging concession — if not "flat, literal" then what? Lane offers only "great artistry at the level of narrative and theology." Why not be specific and allow that there is parable, hyperbole, metaphor and myth? But it is not clear how one is to know whether a given text can be treated as "metaphorical" or even "mythological". Only a literal reading of the NT would allow Lane to write (p43) "the founder of no other religion in human history besides the Lord Jesus Christ, has predicted his own death and bodily resurrection, fulfilled that prophecy, and convinced generations of His followers ... that He overcame death and lives for evermore." To say that Christ believed the Scriptures to be inerrant seems like question-begging in that Christ's supposed beliefs are recorded in the self-same Scriptures.

### **Myths: Legitimate Expression**

Given the concession on page 134 that "some conservative evangelicals show a weak understanding of myth when they dismiss it as 'mere myth'", there appears to be an opportunity for *Apologia* to explore this more in the future.

### **A Plague on Both Your Houses**

In this edition of *Apologia* we find: Spong, Geering and Veitch described as "hucksters of modernity" (p37); Spong described as "Pickwickian", but soon transformed to "Don Quixote" (p46); and Cupitt described as an "atheist" (p68) in what appears to be a piece on name-calling.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, has accused Spong of intemperance and hectoring. Reading Spong's autobiography one can see merit in the charge. Spong is not a diplomat — what goes down well as a one-liner from a rostrum often looks threadbare in print. He is a charismatic speaker and personally charming with people he likes. It was as much lack of diplomacy that sunk Galileo and there may be a parallel here for Spong to consider — being "right" is only half the story.

If we can discount for Spong's errors and sometimes over-the-top forms of expression, we might end with an example of a theme that is central to Spong's challenge to conservative Christianity. On page 101 there is a quotation from page 147 of his *Living In Sin*: "The Levitical condemnation of homosexuality is a pre-modern illustration of ignorance." In that statement we see a clear example of the great gulf that exists between liberal and conservative Christians. The former are prepared to set aside the scriptural record of earlier expressions of faith in the name of an understanding and compassion now thought to have been lacking then. But conservatives see the Bible as the inerrant and unchanging record of the transactions between humankind and a sternly-loving and consistent God.

But, since our opinions on the nature of just about everything else has changed throughout the 3000 year life of the Bible, why cannot also our views on the nature of God and the requirements placed on humankind?

**After all, all Christians agree that there was a significant change of perspective 2000 years ago.**

Noel Cheer

## Spong in New Zealand

### **Sunday 1 July: Tauranga**

**9:30am**, Church service, Wesley Methodist Church.

**3:00pm**, Public Lecture, Windermere Complex,

### **Tuesday 3 July: Napier/Hastings**

**10:30am-3:00pm**, Seminar for People in Ministry, St Augustines, Napier

**7:30pm**, Public Lecture, St Andrew's Church Hastings.

### **Wednesday 4 July: Nelson**

**7:30pm**, Public Lecture, St John's Methodist Church, Hardy St.

### **Thursday 5 July: Wellington**

**12:15pm** Public Lecture 1 of 2, St Andrew's On The Terrace.

### **Friday 6 July: Wellington**

**12:15pm** Public Lecture 2 of 2, St Andrew's On The Terrace.

### **Saturday 7 July: Wellington**

**9:30am to 4:30pm** Public Seminar, refer Continuing Education VUW

### **Sunday 8 July: Timaru**

**7:30pm** Public Lecture, Commonwealth Trust Centre Lounge

### **Monday 9 July: Christchurch**

**12:30pm-2pm**, Public Lecture, Durham St Methodist Church

**7:30pm**, Public Lecture University of Canterbury

### **Tuesday 10 July: Dunedin**

**12noon-1:30pm** Public Lecture, University of Otago,

### **Monday 16 July: Hamilton**

**12noon-2pm**, Public Lecture, Garden Place Reception Lounge

**3pm** Talk to Clergy, Methodist Centre, 62 London St.

**7pm**, Public Lecture, Rose Garden Pavilion

### **Tuesday 17 July: Auckland**

Leadership event, Franciscan Site, Long Bay

### **Wednesday 18 July: Auckland**

**7:30pm** Public Lecture Anglican Cathedral

### **Thursday 19 July, Auckland**

**12:15pm** Public Lecture, Maclaurin Chapel

### **Friday 20 July, Whangarei**

**7:30pm** Public Lecture, Captain Bougainville Theatre.

Spong's NZ Contact: Liz Robinson  
(04) 568-2794

## Humanism without Adjectives

*This is the title of paper presented to the 1999 UK SoF Conference by Robert Ashby who is Executive Director of the British Humanist Association. The excerpts below come from the January 2001 issue of the SoF (UK) magazine "SoF". Subscription details appear on the last page of this Newsletter.*

"A humanist without adjectives follows something quite simple but of vast grandeur and importance. A humanist without adjectives takes courage and inspiration from something inclusive and positive, not exclusive and negative. This humanist might be seen as a combination of three elements:

1. **Temperament**: someone who is optimistic., retaining faith in the human race and its potential, who likes people, seeks solutions, who is willing to be happy here and now and is even willing to see others happier than himself.

2. **Appraisal**: someone whose examination of the world and consideration of voices and authorities leads her to think ... That this life is the only life we will know, as part of an entirely natural universe without guidance from supernatural powers and without a fixed destiny, but with her shared humanity being more important than secondary differences from other people.

3. **Undertaking**: someone who recognises that his happiness and freedom depend on the happiness and freedom of others, and who is prepared to take some responsibility for bringing this about. The extent of this moral undertaking can be frightening, but it is inspiring."



"Today, humanism is under threat from forces more destructive than theism: anti-human post-modern relativism, universal cynicism and greed, a lack of moral courage, and 'the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity'. Let all genuine humanists and we who aspire to humanism cooperate in our humanism. We will not truly be humanist unless we do."

**See also "Faith in Cyberspace" on page 9**



## City of God

*This is an excerpt from page 255 of the novel City of God by E.L. Doctorow. Many SoF people have been impressed by it. One of the main characters is a female Jewish rabbi:*

### **Sarah Blumenthal's Address to the Conference of American Studies in Religion, Washington, D.C.**

In the twentieth century about to end, the great civilizer on earth seems to have been doubt. Doubt, the constantly debated and flexible inner condition of theological uncertainty, the wish to believe in balance with rueful or nervous or grieving skepticism, seems to have held people in thrall to ethical behavior, while the true believers, of whatever stamp, religious or religious-statist, have done the murdering. The impulse to excommunicate, to satanize, to eradicate, to ethnically cleanse, is a religious impulse. In the practice and politics of religion, God has always been a license to kill. But to hold in abeyance and irresolution any firm convictions of God, or of an afterlife with Him, warrants walking in His spirit, somehow. And among the doctrinaire religious, I find I trust those who gravitate toward symbolic comfort rather than those who reaffirm historic guarantees. It is just those uneasy promulgators of traditional established religion who are not in lockstep with its customs and practices, or who are chafing under doctrinal pronouncements, or losing their congregations to charismatics and stadium-filling conversion performers, who are the professional religious I trust. The faithful who read Scripture in the way Coleridge defined the act of reading poetry or fiction, i.e., with a "willing suspension of disbelief".

### **Do The Arts Need The Gods?**

*From a review in the Guardian by Adam Phillips of George Steiner's Grammars of Creation (Faber £16.99, pp288)*

Steiner suggests in this book that our sense of ourselves as creators — and we can only bear ourselves in his view as creators and inventors, a distinction that is at the heart of the book — has quite literally depended upon our assumption of divine or supernatural creation. As though the existence of God (or gods) is the only thing that can make us at all god-like; and if we are not god-like, we are merely 'barbarous', to use one of Steiner's key words. 'Can there, will there be major philosophy, literature, music and art of an atheist provenance?' Steiner asks plaintively at the end of this book.

### **The Meaning of Secularisation**

This the title of an article by Rob Yule, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, published in a recent issue of their magazine *Candour*. The article seems to display two agendas: to congratulate Lloyd Geering on his award (See Newsletter 40) and to take issue with what he (Yule) takes to be Lloyd's promotion of secularism over religion.

**Alan Goss** of Napier notes that "The Moderator invites public debate as to 'whether his (Geering's) interpretation of religion is correct or not. There is no 'correct' view of religion. To hold a 'correct view' would eliminate the need for further thinking".

He also observed that "The Moderator refers to the 'failure of religion to roll over and expire'. Institutional religion is now (to use former Governor General Paul Reeve's phrase) dead in the water. The younger generation has deserted formal religion in their droves."

This invites a distinction between the religious impulse found in most, if not all human beings, and the institutional expression of it. Indeed, Alan writes: "Lloyd Geering and others are claiming that religion is taking new forms and developing in ways different from that practised in the main-line churches"

"The religious quest will continue in less formal, more imaginative ways."

## Local Groups

### Taranaki

Frank Gaze wrote:

'Taranaki has three groups loosely connected to the Sea of Faith Network. Two of them were set up by the Methodist Parish, given the title "Digging Deeper" and then more or less left to their own devices without much reference to the Church. Both meet fortnightly, at different times to suit different people, one on a weekday morning, the other at the weekend. Both groups rotate their venues.

The first group, co-ordinated by Hilda Bak, has a membership of around a dozen and is at present working through Ian Harris's booklet "Creating God". [From St. Andrew's Trust: see panel on page 10 - ed] Geoff Gilbert leads the other group, which has slightly fewer participants, and is starting a study of Lloyd Geering's "Paradise on Earth" [St Andrew's Trust]. Information contact for both these groups is John Eady of the Methodist Centre Office.

A third group meets every three weeks on Sunday evening. It too rotates its venue and has a varied programme of mutual support, social activity and serious discussion. This group is starting to discuss David Boulton's "Ten Hypotheses" at its next meeting. Contact person is Frank Gaze.

In addition to these three groups there are numbers of New Plymouth people who have expressed a desire to belong to such a group. All three of the existing groups are thinking about the possibility of inviting the Annual Conference to come to Taranaki some time in the future. See you in New Plymouth!

**Contact Frank Gaze (06) 752-7447**

### Dunedin

They wear name tags -- an idea that other Groups might look to adopting.

Like other Groups, they have been looking at David (editor "SoF" magazine, UK) Boulton's "Ten Hypotheses". They stress David's intention that they are meant to "open up a debate, not close it; to raise questions, not lay down answers."

Already they are anticipating this year's Conference theme with a discussion "Is enhancing favourable outcomes of child development the key to a better society?"

**Contact Marjorie Spittle (03) 481-1418**

### Christchurch

Subjects that they are looking at this year include: The Gaia Hypothesis; GM Food' David Suzuki's book *From Naked Ape to Superspecies*; Pan-Tribal Faiths; today's challenges (ethics, sustainability, economy).

They've put together an attractive brochure (A4, folded in three) to publicise their programme. If local groups need a soft-copy of the SoF (NZ) logo for such a purpose, contact your editor.

**Contact: Laurie Chisholm (03) 325-21414**

### Auckland Central

They were treated to Leo Hobbs' "Faith, Social Responsibility and Transcendence".

In March, Bev Smith talked of "A Season of Grieving" -- speaking the language of the people in their darkest hour.

John Irwin (09-413-8513) and Barbara Millar are co-Chairpersons of the Conference Arrangements Committee and would welcome offers of help.

**Contact Jim Feist (09) 630-7473**

### Hawkes Bay

They plan to look at Aline Pengelly's *Faith is a Journey* (reviewed in Newsletter 40); an introduction to Buddhism; E.L. Doctorow's SoFish novel *City of God* (see p7); a paper on The Jesus Seminar and, as Alan Goss wrote, "if we can pull it off, a mid-winter celebration of Christmas with a SoF flavour".

**Contact Alan Goss (06) 835-9594**

### The e-of-Faith

Wearing my Chairperson hat, could I ask you to forward me the email address of either the leader of your Local Group or of a member who would take emails on her/his behalf? I would like to continue Jane's tradition of sending out interesting snippets to Local Groups and feel that email is the best way to do it. If your group is utterly without email resources then let me know and I will send snailmail. Please respond to [noel.cheer@attglobal.net](mailto:noel.cheer@attglobal.net). Thanks

Noel Cheer

---

**"Kali (A Hindu Earth goddess) WAS SAID TO DRINK THE BLOOD OF HUMANS FROM A SKULL, AND GAIA MIGHT WELL DO THE SAME, IF WE SO MISTREAT HER PLANET AS TO MAKE US NO LONGER A FIT SPECIES FOR IT.**

James Lovelock



# In Brief

## **Value For Money?**

Please accept your Editor's apologies for receiving two copies of page 3 in the previous Newsletter. It was entirely my fault.

Noel Cheer

## **What Price Your Soul?**

In a recent article in the feature "Face to Faith" in the *Guardian*, Don Cupitt wrote: "Check the episode in which Bart sells his soul to Milhouse for \$5, and note the passage in which Lisa explains that, although there is not actually such a thing as the soul, Bart has done something wrong because our talk about the soul is a vehicle for certain important values."

## **The American Colonies!**

One of the members of SoFN (NZ) is an American, living as he once described "behind the Fundamentalist lines" in Kentucky. We won't identify him but here's a quote from a recent letter: "I am still in a very difficult, precarious situation. The whole area is a hotbed of very aggressive, radical fundamentalism. Everything in the bible is basically taken as literally and historically true. ... Thank goodness they (Fundamentalists) are not allowed to burn people at the stake anymore. However, with the recent election of Republican George W. Bush as president, all that might change." He concludes: "Thank you again for sharing your SoF ideas with the world. People like me really do appreciate them."

## **Oops**

On the SoF brochure that you received with the previous Newsletter, Suzi Thirwall's email address was incorrect: it should be **5thirlwalls@clear.net.nz**

## **Per Centum**

*This was quoted in 'Quadrant', a publication of Christian Research.*

If Earth's human population was envisaged as a village of 100 persons they would be,

- 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Americas and 8 Africans
- 52 women and 48 men
- 30 white and 70 of other colour
- 30 Christians and 70 of other faiths and none
- 1 would be near death
- 1 would be newly born
- 80 would live in substandard housing
- 70 would be unable to read
- 50 would be malnourished
- 6 persons would own 59% of the village's wealth
- 1 would have college/university education
- 1 would own a computer

## **Faith in Cyberspace**

The Friends of Religious Humanism is an organization founded by Edwin H. Wilson, Lester Mondale, and others in 1962 as the "Fellowship of Religious Humanists" to advance humanism within the Unitarian-Universalist denomination and to promote religious humanism in general. Their website is at <http://www.humanist.net/frh/>

Some people regard "religious humanism" as an oxymoron or a contradiction in terms. You can find these views represented at:

<http://fire.benton.wa.us/philosophy/insidius.html>

The Council for Secular Humanism is found at <http://www.secularhumanism.org/>

## 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.

Its WWW home page is at  
<http://sofn.wellington.net.nz>

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

Members may obtain tapes, books etc from the SoF Resource Centre at 34 Briarley St, Tauranga.

For membership details and for the address of your nearest local group, contact the Membership Secretary, 133 Orangi Kaupapa Road, Northland, Wellington.

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.chear@attglobal.net](mailto:noel.chear@attglobal.net)

*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.*

"SoF" is 28 page A4, six-times-a-year magazine produced by the UK Sea of Faith Network. They offer it to New Zealand Sea Faith members currently at \$NZ59 for a year's subscription.

To subscribe for a year, send \$59 to "The Membership Secretary, SoF, 133 Orangi Kaupapa Road, Wellington". Write your cheque to "SoF (NZ)".

*Many of the study booklets referred to throughout this Newsletter are available from The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society:*  
<http://satsr.wellington.net.nz>

## Talking It Over

*This is the first of Don Cupitt's columns which we re-publish, with permission, from the UK SoF "Portholes" newsheet. The intention of "Talking it Over" is to introduce possible discussion themes for local groups.*

### Talking It Over -- 1

In this column ... I'm planning to propose some current issues that local groups may wish to discuss.

The first topic has to do with secularisation and the current rapid decline of the mainstream Western churches, both Catholic and Protestant. Callum G. Brown (*The Decline of Christian Britain*, Routledge 12 pounds 99) thinks it began in 1963, and associates it with the rise of modern feminism.

After the Second World War came the task of reconstruction. Politicians laboured to build family houses and praised family values. There was great emphasis on the role of Woman as wife, mother and emotional provider within the home. I see that in 1972 I wrote that: 'The height of the antifeminist reaction in the 1950s was of course a period of religious boom. Churchmen criticised working mothers, put on family communion, urged family prayers and family grace before meals, and opposed divorce and abortion. Religion flourished in the neo-Victorian climate, and male supremacy in marriage was as fashionable as large families.'

It was characteristic of the period that religion was assumed to be Mother's business. If a householder on one of the new housing developments opened his door to find a young curate like me on the doorstep, he would invariably say: 'Oh. You'll be wanting to see the missus' - and he would turn away to call her. The church approached the family via the mother, and she bore in effect the whole responsibility for transmitting religion and personal values. Baby-books barely mentioned father - do you remember?

It hardly needs saying that since the Sixties women have rebelled sharply against this conception of themselves, their vocation in society and their destiny. Today, the number of working women is about the same as the number of working men, and a startlingly small proportion of the 'family houses' down your street are actually occupied by traditional families. The churches have suffered accordingly. They made a very bad strategic mistake: but why?

Why, after 1800, did the impression grow up that religion is chiefly a matter for wives and the domestic sphere of life - something that must be kept up for the sake of the children? In view of the very negative sayings of Jesus on the subject, why did Christianity after the Reformation come to commit itself so heavily to 'family values' and a strict sexual orthodoxy?

Even today, when I go to church I have the impression that everything is being explained as if to very young children. We are all talked down to.

Does it still have to be like this? How can we work our way towards a more grown-up conception of the place of religion in our lives?

*Don Cupitt*