



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z. **NEWSletter**

Conference Registration Issue

Greetings from Taranaki

where the Maori versus England rugby match is going on as I write. These are the sort of events that can fill the accommodation in Inglewood and New Plymouth, so once again I say: book now, just in case. There are still some vacancies at the two Inglewood Hotels and at Forrestal Lodge. The latter is a converted convent set in its own very pleasant grounds — the hostess is very friendly. All hotel and lodge rooms are comfortable, though not luxurious, very reasonably priced (see the Registration Form for details), and only a couple of minutes walk from the Club where we are having dinner on Saturday night.

There are still also vacancies in New Plymouth, and we are arranging transport to get people who need it from both Inglewood and New Plymouth to the High School and back — if you can't arrange car-pooling. Incidentally, Aaron Court Motel will also have a caravan park by Conference time.

We're looking forward to receiving your Registration Forms!

About the Conference Programme

Several of the people involved in presenting the programme have been involved in practical peace-making processes: **Derek Evans**, our first keynote speaker, is a former Amnesty International chief who has worked on healing the breaches of war recently in Sri Lanka. He says:

"For almost 20 years of my life, I was a kind of emergency worker in many — too many — situations of war, terrorism, and massive abuse. I have worked in Cambodia and Sri Lanka, in Colombia and Guatemala, in Sudan and South Africa, in Palestine and the Philippines, the former Yugoslavia, Russia, and many other places. I have seen enough of war to know that I hate war."

As people of faith, we know that evil is real and powerful. As people of faith, we also know that it can only be overcome by something equally real and even stronger — the transforming power of love. We know that revenge and retribution serves neither the cause of justice nor the call of compassion. We who are people of faith must speak and act on this truth."

Te Miringa Hohaia believes that the war for his people of Taranaki has never ended. And **David Williams** has taken part in several negotiations to bring finality to those same wars of the Nineteenth Century. **Trish Stewart** works

at peace-making through the Restorative Justice process, **Neil and Sandra Chesterton** worked for five years in war-torn Afghanistan, **John Craighead** works as a District Councillor, **Sue Pickering** as a Spiritual Director.

Others of our speakers have visions of peace: **Rex Hendry** sees Antarctica as a model of international co-operation, **Lloyd Geering** sees Israel as the key to Mid-East peace, **Ivan Pickens**, **Derek Pringle** and **Graham Shearer** each have a methodology for peace.

Still others see a way to peace through the arts: **Ralph Pannett** through graphic art, **Harry Brown** through choral music, **Keith Fuller** through ritual, **Lyle Millar** by way of language, **Jacquie Lambert** through writing poetry and **Jill Harris** through reading what New Zealand poets have written.

Several Sea of Faith Network stalwarts are tossing more ideas into the mix: **Joy and Owen Lewis** on forgiveness, **Hugh Gilman** on Jihad v Crusade, **Paul Moreau** on a modern spiritual journey, **Noel Cheer** on Human Consciousness, and **Nigel Leaves** on life after Spong.

Finally, we have **Roger Hanson** exploring a subject which has long been of interest to Sea of Faithers: the origins of the universe: the latest from the world of Physics.

We think the Steering Committee has come up with a very stimulating programme, and we, the Arrangements Committee, look forward to seeing you here to enjoy it.

Mary Boekman

Chair of Arrangements Committee, Phone 06-756-7644

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Making War, Making Peace

FRED MARSHALL TAKES A WIDER VIEW

We have been preoccupied with Iraq and Palestine and politics and principles and suffering and oil.

Perhaps it is time to take a wider view.

In the recent 100-year Australian drought a million kangaroos died of thirst, starvation and a bullet here-and-there when they poached on human terrain. Now that the rains have come, Ma kangaroo has a baby in the pouch and another in the womb and the population is reestablishing itself. Lemmings, rats, elephants are subject to the same natural law: dearth and death; abundance and proliferation.

Are humans exempt? We are clever at breaking the cycle. We meet dearth at one location with aid from elsewhere, keeping famine-stricken people just alive so they can starve again when gross mismanagement of the natural heritage provokes another crisis. When one resource fails we are very clever at replacing it with another. Fish catches in Northern seas are dwindling from ferocious over-fishing. But in the deep waters off New Zealand fish have been found that were never caught before, fish that live up to a hundred years – orange roughy and hoki. Powerful boats with clever fish-finding gear and huge nets gather over the spawning beds in season and haul in thousands of tons to feed fish-deprived European and Asian nations. How long will it be before the breeding stock, caught at spawning time, is destroyed and the hoki beds are as barren as the cod and halibut fisheries in Europe? The Australian plains both East and West are very suitable for wheat provided they are watered. But human irrigation has brought to the surface the salt of ancient seas and now hundreds of acres of former wheat bearing lands are sterile salt pans. These examples of short-term solutions to fundamental problems are all products of our human nature and thus of the natural order; they demonstrate precisely the innate human ability to survive that has brought us through ice-age and world-threatening disaster. However human proliferation and abuse of our natural resources are now putting the world environment under increasingly unsustainable pressure. Will we, sooner or later, join the kangaroos as victims of inexorable natural law?

Nature is already at work to redress the human population/environment balance, targeting specifically

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the human reproductive system. HIV is pandemic; other STDs are ensuring growing rates of female sterility, male sperm counts are dropping. On the food-supply side our rapid international transport systems guarantee the globalisation of plant pests capable of massive economic destruction and a reduction in food sources. Aeroplanes are the vehicles to disperse new and virulent diseases like SARS. Around the corner lie deadly hemorrhagic viruses like the Spanish flu or the Black Death. Clever humans will, with quasi god-like means, meet each of these threats as they occur, finding vaccines and biological agents to keep plagues and pests at bay, and like the kangaroo, as each threat passes, the human population will make up any deficit.

But there is a very natural and very ancient population control inherent in human nature – the urge towards domination and its consequence – war. The Maoris in NZ kept the population in balance by tribal wars until civilisation skewed the process by supplying muskets to some and measles to others. George Bush and his running dogs Blair and Howard, and Sharon in Israel, are, like Stalin and Pol Pot, Hitler and Napoleon, a natural phenomenon going back to the destruction of the Neanderthals. Cato's "*Delenda est Carthago*", – Carthage must be destroyed – is analogous to Bush's war on terrorism – similar motivation (economic dominance), similar ruthlessness in execution. What we are seeing in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine, in Chechnya and Kashmir is a natural phenomenon on a par with drought, flood and earthquake. But there is one enormous difference between Cato's Roman world and our own. Roman might dominated the world with sword, spear and catapult whose capacity for destruction and death was puny compared to our weapons of mass destruction. In our time the US, not content with killing thousands of Vietnamese and Iraqis in combat and provoking thousands more deaths by the destruction of social infrastructure and the on-going damage wrought by landmines and cluster bombs, have ensured that future generations will abort their babies or give birth to deformities by the genetic effects of dioxin in Vietnam and depleted uranium in Iraq. But worse than this legacy of testosterone-driven belligerence, the "might is right" philosophy on which the current US policy of world dominance, and Sharon's boutique take-over of Palestine are based, breeds hatreds which will last for millennia. Hatred will sooner or later get its hands on those weapons of mass destruction over which America and its allies currently hold a precarious monopoly.

The world is cocked to fire. We don't know who will pull the trigger – India and Pakistan perhaps, Israel in retaliation for a successful terrorist attack or to defend the Golan heights, some "rogue nation" who will explode a dirty atom bomb in New York which will provoke retaliatory attacks on Syria, Saudi Arabia and

ultimately on any nation that will not subscribe to the right of the US to control all the water, all the oil and all the food sources for its own advantage. Can anyone say that this scenario is impossible or even unlikely? But whenever and however the apocalypse occurs, it will be the inevitable outcome of the primitive and perfectly "natural" ethic of 'might is right'. The best hope for the world in this scenario is that there would be, like Noah, enough of us to survive and wise enough to rebuild a different society which takes care of its future. But Humankind has already shown itself capable of overcoming fire, flood and pestilence. Can we change the path of evolution in the matter of war too? Professor Poole from Waikato University and other demographers have demonstrated that poverty breeds population. In prosperous countries the birthrate falls below replacement levels. The alternative world path would be for the US and its Western Allies to use the billions and billions of dollars which making and using weapons of mass destruction cost, to make the whole world prosperous and to put in place the stringent conservation measures which we know are necessary to prevent the depletion of water, energy and food resources, against the clamour of self-interest which looks only to the profit balance at the end of the year. Cancelling third world debt would be a good place to start.

Let Zion put aside its tanks and bombs and set an example for a troubled world, as its founders intended, realising Buber's vision of Isaac and Ephraim in federation working together to make Palestine a prosperous, blessed and peaceful heart to the Middle East and the world. Perhaps an Iraqi, Kurd and Turkish common market would follow and as the decaying kingdoms of the old East collapse other nations would rally to the cause. The federal model would fit the Basques in Spain and France, the peoples of Kashmir, India and Pakistan. If the wealthy nations have the will to put the vast sums they spend on war into the conservation of the world's resources and the prosperity of the world's peoples we have an alternative path to the road to ruin we are currently following in the tracks of Bush, Sharon, Hussein, Stalin and the other bullies of history. We stand in our age at a fulcrum. The powers of domination, the old natural path, are unprecedented and the consequences of using them unthinkable. But the quotient of good will in the world is great enough to change the path of evolution.

Fred Marshall

In his professional life, Fred was Professor of French in the University of Waikato while now, in retirement, he supports his City Councillor and hymnwriter wife Jocelyn, enjoys the sofnets and has been active in the local SoF branch, edits the Royal School of Church Music (Waikato) newsletter *NOTES*, is the dogsbody of St Peter's Cathedral Choir and writes the odd article for learned publications.

CAN YOU TELL YOUR BORGS FROM YOUR CROSSANS?

ALAN WEBSTER'S TAXONOMY OF RADICALS
AND HIS SURVEY OF CHRISTIANS WHO ARE SCARED OF HELL

The Rev Dr Alan Webster is a Methodist Presbyterian and is a former Associate Professor of Human Development and Education at Massey University, Palmerston North, and founding Director of the New Zealand Study of Values. He is now retired and lives in Hawera.

He recently offered the SoF two papers, one of which (*An Alternative Vision*) he authored and the other (*Gender, Fear-Inspiring Beliefs and Church Attendance*) he co-authored with Paul Perry, using data from the 1998 NZ Values Study.

Both papers are too large to be reprinted in our Newsletter or even to be adequately summarised, and so the reader, or a web-literate accomplice (perhaps a grandchild?), can retrieve them from the "Archive of Documents" section of our website (see p10).

Alan explains that the *Alternative Vision* paper "was inspired by an attempt on the part of New Zealand Methodist leadership to craft a vision strategy for future development. Having seen, in 25 years in the *Methodist Connexion*, much earnest seeking but little evidence of any strategy that might stem its backward slide, I felt an urge to spell out the way I see it. Being a thorough maverick, a Presbyterian, and originally a Baptist with more than a little radicalism in me to boot, and having studied religion's progress in New Zealand for 20 years through the NZ Study of Values, I felt I might have a useful view."

He had at his disposal resources familiar to SoF readers: "A device I have used is to assume that there are 'vision implications' in the theologians I have summarised, including my own paper, and so I have tried to spell out the vision implications. This is, if you like, a vision of a radical church, fitting for a radical gospel. In my current *Alternatives* paper, I've tried to develop a theology of spirituality beyond theism." This paper contains insightful and readable comments on the works of Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Don Cupitt, Robert Funk, Richard Holloway and John Spong.

The Values Study is co-authored by Alan Webster and Dr Paul Perry, a Senior Lecturer in Massey University's School of Sociology and Women's Studies. It surveyed over 1200 adult New Zealanders in 1998 asking a range of questions about family, community, work, politics, the government, religion and national identity.

The second paper gifted to us is based on the NZ Study of Values data. The authors analyze the influence of gender and fear-inspiring beliefs (e.g. "hell") on religiosity. The results are presented as eight patterns of NZ religiosity and would provide a useful focus for a group workshop. The findings are presented on a grid whose two axes are: "Individualist/Communalistic" and "Secular/Religious".

Both papers are worth the time to download and read.

If you have a serious need for a paper and you have no more immediate means of access, then contact your Editor



REVIEW: Christianity Without God

THE CASE FOR

A review by Janet Trisk, an Anglican priest and a lecturer of systematic theology at an Anglican seminary in South Africa. This review first appeared in "Sof", the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK) in January 2003

What an extraordinary

writer and theologian Lloyd Geering is! Nearly thirty-five years after his first book *God In The New World*, his newest publication is as fresh, challenging and interesting as ever. My first reading of *Christianity Without God* was in a single day, as one might read a novel. It is that engaging and it reads as easily, for Geering writes in simple and compelling language, conveying a complicated set of ideas in the most accessible way. He does so with a passion that is exciting and inspiring in the best tradition of the liberation theologians, who claim that good theology is engaged reflection.

Christianity Without God examines whether it is possible to conceive of Christianity without the traditional theistic belief in God. Geering contends that this is not only possible but that Christianity, since its very origins, was moving towards the rejection of theism, and that in our time not only it is possible to conceive of non-theistic Christianity, but that Christianity should become so. If debates in the SOF Network are anything to go by, this question will be keenly followed by a number of Seafarers.

Geering argues that the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation form the basis for the Christian departure from theism. These inter-related doctrines contradict traditional Jewish monotheism, which sets God against humanity. Geering's argument of how the doctrines of the Incarnation and the

Trinity spelled the beginning of the end of theism is systematic, scholarly and extremely wide-ranging. For example, in examining the history of the concept of god, he moves in one chapter of just under 15 pages from the pre-Axial period, through Jewish, Greek and early Christian thought to modernity. Yet one never feels breathless in taking in this vast sweep. His synthesis of the main thoughts is clearly the result of many years of reflection and scholarship.

At the same time as scanning these broad vistas, Geering manages to take in details and to draw attention to non-dominant, even forgotten traditions. Two examples will illustrate this. In 'reading' Jesus, Geering presents him as exemplar of a sage of the Wisdom tradition, rather than a messianic king come to institute a kingdom. He draws some wonderful parallels between Jesus' teaching and that of Ecclesiastes and Ben Sirach.

Such a reading of Jesus, of course, has profound implications for the church which has modelled itself on imperial hierarchies, claiming the Lord Jesus and his Father God as the source of power and authority for Christian leaders. Geering notes that for "Christianity without God" there is no place for the traditional institutional church, which owes more to the Roman Empire than to Jesus. What does still have a place, he suggests, is the simple gathering of people for a meal, sharing of stories and support, and ritual and festivals celebrating all we have come to value in human existence.

Geering also draws attention to the neglected Epistle of James as a close relative of the Wisdom tradition. James, he suggests, has been ignored because writers such as Augustine and Luther, who favoured a reading of Jesus as the lord and saviour rather than a

human sage, gave emphasis to the Pauline corpus. Yet the emphasis in James on the worlds of faith are highly relevant to the way Christians might choose to live without God, taking responsibility for their world and especially for the "little ones".

The book has some extremely useful introductions on theological topics. For example he offers a precise set of definitions of theism, atheism, deism, pantheism, panentheism and mysticism that is every theology teacher's dream. So too is his chapter on "Why did Christians invent the Holy Trinity?" It is one of the neatest introductions to an understanding of Trinitarianism I have come across, and will certainly become part of suggested reading for students commencing a study of the doctrine. However, this book is not only for scholars and trained theologians.

Because of Geering's clear and simple writing, drawing on everyday examples, it will appeal to interested readers with very little formal training.

Christianity Without God is above all, a hopeful book. It recognises and celebrates humanity and our potential for freedom, and the positive changes we have seen in the end of slavery, challenges to patriarchy, racism and heterosexism and a growing concern for the earth and all its creatures. Geering suggests that we still have far to go though, in taking responsibility for our world and our lives, and part of that human movement to freedom and maturity is Christianity without God.

Christianity Without God

Lloyd Geering

Bridget Williams Books, NZ,
2002, \$34.95, ISBN 1877242241
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\$18.00, ISBN 09443449252

REVIEW Christianity Without God



THE CASE AGAINST

Dr. Michael Grimshaw lectures in Christianity in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Canterbury. Currently researching issues of culture, location and identity he also co-edits the journal "push" (details on page 9). This is an edited version of the original which can be seen on the website.

I am currently researching the 'Death of God' movement in the 1960s. Reading an article by Fred M. Hudson entitled 'Four meanings of the Death of God' in Ice and Carey's 1967 anthology *The Death of God Debate*, I suddenly thought the central themes and conclusions were very familiar. Then I realized that these were what sit under Lloyd's book. Now I am not saying that plagiarism has occurred — either consciously or unconsciously. Rather that Lloyd's book fits a type of thought that existed in America in the 1960s [briefly] and which soon disappeared. It is a de-mystified, secularized version of Thomas Altizer, William Hamilton etc — *without the theology*. In many ways the long delayed, populist, anti-academic exposition of secular culture against the 'death of Godders'. I say *against* because Altizer, Hamilton, Vahanian and van Buren by no means sought such liberal triumphalist resolution as Lloyd posits. So what seems to be happening here is a form of secularizing the 'death of Godders' of the 1960s whose understanding of the end of religious Christianity and of theism did not mean such a reduction into a humanised humanism — that is a humanism that appears to worship another human being as in Christianity without theism.

Yet while the moderns who look to the nineteenth century afterdraft of the Enlightenment might have dismissed talk of God, Continental influenced theory, theology and philosophy is full of talk of God especially [and this is my main point] of talking of the possibility of articulating the god *after* the death of God.

The real focus of the book is played out in Chapter 10: 'Why Christianity must become non-theistic'. It is interesting to re-read the central thesis expressed here through a Barthian hermeneutic in which 'God' is the God of religion, not the self-revelation of Christianity.

...why Christianity must [his italics] henceforth take final leave of

God. It must do so first, to continue along the path to freedom on which it set forth; second, to be true to its own early development as expressed in the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation; and third, for the ultimate salvation [my italics] of humankind and of all life on this planet.

We need to read this through such a hermeneutic so we can be reminded of the basis of much 1960s Death of God theology. The extreme transcendence of Barthian theology was a formative influence that many of the 'death of Godders' reacted against. Having been Barthians [or at least very Barthian influenced] they now sought to secularize that transcendence — but did so often through Bonhoeffer's only partially articulated call for a 'religionless Christianity'. Influenced also by Tillich's call for 'the depths' as the location of God, the Barthian transcendence often merely got inverted. What I'm attempting to say here is that this call to take leave of God is nothing at all new, rather still stuck in forms of 1960s death of God theology. Yet like many exponents of this theology, there is the conceptual leap that the God of religion may go — but Christ (or in this case Jesus) takes the place of the revelatory God. In other words, we get rid of religion's God and now have a Christ or a Jesus who subsumes all of the transcendent God's grace and truth into himself — and this new post-God Christ or Jesus just happens to express and support our liberal western, twenty-first century ethics.

The problem that this book faces is not so much that it is seeking to have 'Christianity without God or theism' but rather that it is claiming that it is possible, nay preferable, nay demands a Christianity without Christ. The claim is a detextualized, demythologized Jesus. A Jesus who suddenly exists not only free of the theology of the text in which he is written and encountered but also free of the theology and culture in which he existed but can, somehow, now manifest a non-theological kingdom in the twenty-first century.

So what's the alternative? To engage with those who have sought to grapple with the issues of God on the other side of the death of God. Yes I realise that this could be seen as perilously close to goobledygook but let

me try to explain. If we take Bonhoeffer seriously then the call to a religionless Christianity seeks to ask what is there that we create that obstructs and limits our hearing Christ, or experiencing God? The death of God theologians began to venture down this path and articulated the killing off of the religious God but really often indulged in a form of patricide — God is dead long live the son. They also took God and Christ [the Holy Spirit often conspicuously missing] out of the transcendent realm and located experience [of them/of it?] in the secular. For Modernity ends, or rather reaches its flat-line, with the death of God. God is dethroned, humanity is enthroned, we live a secular, rational existence. The postmodern, however, is not so celebratory in the triumph of a western rationalist ethos, noting that progress and liberal values often become enthroned in the place of the now departed God — religion reappears with a secular, liberal face. Does Jesus lead so inexorably to a western liberal position? How can western liberals be so sure that they know that 2000 years of Christianity was misguided and that the truth is now abundantly [and finally] clear? Furthermore, are the secular modernists the most evolved? Have they arrived in the kingdom before everyone else?

Lloyd has consistently shown that he has a rare gift to take other's thoughts and insights and refract them in an accessible way. To a degree he has done this with this book — but in doing so he has merely written the book he should [by this logic] have written back in the 1960s [or early 1970s at a pinch]. Geering on Vattimo, Virilio, Nancy, Derrida, Baudrillard, Mark C. Taylor, Caupito, Kristeva, on Bauman, Milbank and Ward to name but a few would be interesting. For in philosophy God has come back — not the God the modernists sought to dethrone but a God on the other side of the dethroned God, a god that challenges the claims of secular modernity as yet another form of religion.

In conclusion, the irony is that while for many people Geering will be seen to have now, finally, 'gone too far', the reality is in fact that he has not gone 'far enough', being stalled in a version of 1960s triumphant modernity while the world is attempting to move on from (and in) a desecularizing post-modernism. ■



REVIEW

EMPTINESS AND BRIGHTNESS

DON CUPITT ARGUES THAT THERE IS NO SUPERNATURAL GLUE THAT HOLDS THINGS TOGETHER

This review by Alan Goss has been abridged to fit the page. The web version is complete.

Anyone who is brave enough to suggest that a new way of religious thinking is urgently needed ... is destined for a long, hard ride. But this is what the Cambridge theologian Don Cupitt sets out to do in his little book *Emptiness and Brightness*. We need a second Axial Period largely because the great religious traditions have run out of steam, their vocabularies, their ways of thinking and their view of the world are plainly out of date.

Central to Cupitt's position is that there is no ready-made Real world "out there" and there is no ready-made self. There is no objective reality "out there" (God), there is only this world which, like ourselves, is passing, transient, flowing, fleeting, existing in time. This transient life is itself our spiritual life. Religious truth is not to be found in some cosmic supernatural realm separate from this world but is right under our noses. It is easy and obvious and simply involves saying "yes" to life as it passes by. To say "yes" to life is bliss.

"Yes" to Life: Life is the ongoing process of the world ... the ceaseless drama or soap opera of human existence. Life is formed and filled out by language which is the medium of human communication. It is through language that our life in the world is built up and held steady. What is necessary ... is that we give up the quest for "something out there" (objectivity) and the idea of truth out there and say "yes" to life and our life in this world. Most people ... feel that there is something "out there" that gives them the anchor they seek. They need the anchor to hold them, keep them steady, to ensure a measure of control. The majority of Christians are realists, that is they believe there is a supernatural real world out there independent of ourselves. Better to let the anchor go, to let be, and to float freely on the ever-changing ocean of life.

There is an appealing ordinariness about life. The tragic and the comic, the serious and the trivial, are all mixed up together. Those who agonize about and bewail the lack of young people in our churches should heed Cupitt's life-focussed approach. Such people congregate in places where there is the flow of life — the pubs, the malls, the resorts, the rock band arena, where meeting matters.

Cupitt is therefore inviting his audience to respond to a religion of life, just as it is. There is no longer any need for the old supernatural distinctions between spiritual and material, heaven and hell, God and Satan, sacred and secular and so on. These outdated dualisms are largely to blame for Christianity's long-term decline. We need a new religion, a fresh start, and show people how to recognize and respond to the truth of our life as it now is. As we enter the second Axial Period we can dispense with the complex apparatus of mediated religion with its doctrines, priesthood, big hats, religious laws, which enable us "to do business with God". Cupitt is asking us to learn and practice a new world view. This may be summarized as follows:

World: The world we make for ourselves ... is our world and the only world we know ... and is subject to ceaseless change. Nothing that happens in the world is fated to happen, it just happens — our ideas and practices and values emerge in the flow and in time pass away. There is no "other" supernatural world out there, nor are there any imposed absolutes from on high. This new view of the world — and we see only **our** world — represents an enormous change. It means leaving behind the old God-endorsed, God-backed programmes of knowledge, ethics etc. and the end of a divinely established reality of things. Cupitt employs the Buddhist term "Empty" to describe this view of the world, namely that everything is passing, transient, empty of substance and objective reality. There is no supernatural glue that holds things together. There is an in-built spontaneous and creative play of forces at work in the world and within ourselves. Our best ideas seem to come without a giver. Cupitt offers three modes or aspects of life in the world:

(i) **Be-ing** cannot be described, pinned down, in language. It ... is like a fountain, it emerges from the ground and recycles itself in a steady and ceaseless flow. It is all there is, and it is not mysterious or deep in any way, it is simply the flow of things in time, ourselves included.

(ii) **Language** is the symbolic currency by which we humans communicate with others and build our world.

(iii) **Brightness.** As we become consciously aware of the world so do we become consciously aware of its

brighter, vividness and beauty. Cupitt calls this world view "Empty Radical Humanism". It also means a humanism of love and pity for the human in its very transience and weakness, not in its strength and pride. *Socially* our only concern is attempting to free our fellow humans from need and other forms of deprivation; we leave the work of *governing* to the law and to the processes of liberal democracy; *morally* we will favour toleration, limiting the freedom of others only when it is necessary to do so for the good of others.

Our chief religious task is to love this world, love this life, to throw ourselves into the business of living. This means becoming poor in spirit, losing ones-self, losing everything.

Conclusion: For Cupitt life really has no depth, no hiddenness, no mystery, a view which makes some of his critics rather testy. What he means is that what you see is what you get, there is no Big Question about life and no Big Answer to it somewhere to be found. We are not going anywhere special and our lives are not a preparation. **We're home already, the world is our oyster.** God and the sacred, together with our religious feelings, are now scattered and dispersed throughout the world in personal relationships, love, morality and babies.

In the light of all this, a revised mission statement for today's Christian church might be as follows:

The mission of the church is to help all people, everywhere, to reach their full human potential. The church will do this by exploring life in all its brightness, darkness and complexity, drawing upon the resources of the Christian and other great religious traditions as well as from other appropriate sources. The preservation of the environment and the fostering of human spiritual values like love, caring for others, a passion for justice, an appreciation of beauty and a concern for truth will be central to the church's mission.

Alan M Goss, May 2003

[Note: a review by Lloyd Geering appeared in Newsletter 46]

Emptiness and Brightness
Don Cupitt
Polebridge Press, USA



REVIEW

FUNDAMENTALISM

THE BATTLE FOR GOD

"We can't be religious in the same way our ancestors were."

So writes **Karen Armstrong**, (author of *A History of God*) in this superb book which, although written before September 11, 2001, is a masterly commentary on one of the driving forces of our age.

This is how Alan Goss of Napier, one of our most prolific reviewers, opens his review of this important book. He continues

Fundamentalism is a defensive religious faith which is fighting for survival in a hostile world. In essence it is a 20th century movement, originally western but now spread to other parts of the world. Its needs an ideology and it needs an enemy. Its chief enemy is the modern secular world, or secular humanism, along with an in-built fear of science, experts, sex and feminism, and western foreign influences like globalism. Fundamentalists are pro-God, pro-life, pro-morals, and are therefore strongly opposed to the granting of rights to homosexuals, to abortion, to euthanasia, and to the allegedly "anything goes" morality of liberals and radicals. The theory of evolution is constantly discredited and, in all three religions, (Christianity, Islam and Judaism), a strict adherence to a literal interpretation of the scriptural traditions — Bible, Koran and Torah — is demanded. A similar conformity to basic religious doctrines

and standards is required. Certainty is needed in an uncertain world.

Armstrong draws an important distinction between two ways of thinking and speaking which reveals one of Fundamentalism's chief weaknesses. **Mythos** (myth) is story-based and is not to be taken literally. We moderns are much more familiar with **Logos** which is forward-looking and which relates to rational, practical, scientific thoughts which enable people to function in the world. [A full treatment of **Mythos** and **Logos** appeared in Newsletter 51 - ed].

Fundamentalists confuse the issue when they try to turn the *mythical* element in their faith into

like Jerry Falwell's moral majority in the U.S., is a powerful lobby group for political change.

Armstrong is wise when she suggests that secularists and others should try to understand what drives Fundamentalists and what kindles their anger and hostility. When you stand to lose everything that you feel is sacred, you feel powerless and alienated and in spiritual despair, [and so] there is nothing to lose. Is there any way out of this impasse?

To go beyond Armstrong, there are signs that people are beginning to look at religion in a new way — to make a new spiritual beginning. As institutional Christianity and the old religious landmarks gradually fade away, people seem to be moving away from a church-based spirituality — services, rituals, doctrines — and discovering a spirituality of their own. Rather than seeing themselves as spiritual citizens of a particular church or denomination, people are beginning to regard themselves as spiritual citizens of the world.

Armstrong's book is a major work, thoroughly researched and written in style — a sane and balanced commentary on the phenomenon of Fundamentalism. To try to understand its motives is a first and better step than resorting to force.

Alan Goss, Napier

Fundamentalism is a defensive religious faith which is fighting for survival in a hostile world.

"logos", that is, when they try to prove myth as being scientifically true. The result is not only bad religion, but also bad science. Both "Mythos" and "Logos" are needed, but to use myth as a vehicle for scientific, practical or political purposes has courted disaster for Fundamentalists, as Armstrong clearly shows. The other main weakness of Fundamentalism is the hatred and hostility directed against its enemies. Fundamentalists also express hostility towards those whom they suspect are either diluting or destroying the foundations of their faith.

Whatever are our views about Fundamentalism, it will not soon go away. It is a muscular, militant and at times, subversive faith which has got rid of a corrupt Shah in Iran, assassinated Prime Ministers in Israel and Egypt and,

The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam
Karen Armstrong
Harper Collins 2000

And ... In Wellington

Lloyd Geering will present a four-part series under the title **"Fundamentalism: the challenge to the secular world"**

at lunchtimes on July 1, 8, 15 and 22 at St. Andrews on the Terrace. A book and/or tapes is likely to result.

THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

"ONE OF THE GREATEST WORKS ON RELIGION TO EMANATE FROM THE USA"

This is an outline of an address given by SoFiA member Geoff Forster to the August 2002 meeting of the Melbourne SoFiA group. It is reprinted with permission from SoFiA Bulletin March 2003

William James was a pioneer in the emerging discipline of psychology, a proponent of the philosophy of pragmatism, an investigator in psychical research and author of an oft-quoted essay, 'The Moral Equivalent of War'.

The Varieties of Religious Experience was originally given in the famous Gifford lecture series in Scotland and published in book form in 1902. Arguably it is one of the greatest works on religion to emanate from the USA. It is concerned with personal experiences, not with sociology or theology. James is writing primarily as a psychologist.

He asserts that humans are subject not only to physical and social influences, but to what he calls "the reality of the unseen".

One chapter is devoted to "the religion of healthy-mindedness", characterized by an optimistic, sunny view of life. The poet Walt Whitman is cited as an example. Half a century later, Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* would exemplify this genre.

James then explores "the sick soul" (where a sense of deficiency and incompleteness predominate) and "the divided self" (where the gap between how one actually is and how one might be is recognised). The story of Leo Tolstoy provides an illuminating example, and James includes material of how Tolstoy resolved his dilemma.

There are two chapters on various types of conversion, where "religious ideas, peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy." Here James is speaking as the psychologist, but he quaintly adds: "Our psychological account does not exclude the direct presence of the Deity."

Several chapters are devoted to "saintliness", where various qualities are approvingly delineated, though James is well aware of the eccentricities and distortions of various 'saints'. He favorably contrasts the values of the saint with those of the successful worldly achiever.

His chapter on mysticism is of great importance and influence, especially the four characteristics of mystical experience that he defined: ineffable, noetic, transient and passive.

In a chapter on the philosophy of religion, he is not enthusiastic (too many differences, lack of transformative effects in character and conduct). However, he expresses the hope that one day a "science of religions" would emerge.

His famous five conclusions are very affirmative, both ontologically and in terms of the effect on human life. For instance, conclusion 3:

That prayer or inner communion with the spirit (of the higher unseen universe) - be that spirit 'God' or 'law' - is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological and material, with the phenomenal world.

He later adds:

We have in the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self, through which saving

experiences come, a positive content of religious experience, which is literally and objectively true as far as it goes.

Ramifications: Psychology & Religion

After James' viewpoint of harmony, Freud soon appeared with a very different view ("the future of an illusion"). Freud's pupil and later collaborator, Carl Jung, no doubt influenced by some personal numinous experiences, disagreed with his former mentor. Then behavioristic psychology became stronger so that, as one psychologist remarked, "psychology first lost its soul and then its mind". However, with humanistic and transpersonal psychology, the pendulum tended to swing back towards James' position, especially with Maslow (emphasizing "peak experiences") and Stanislav Grof.

Ramifications: Religious Experience Research Unit, Oxford

This institution, beginning under the naturalist Alister Hardy, has made a significant contribution towards James' hope for a "science of religions".

Ramifications: Altered States of Consciousness

Foreshadowed in a famous passage in *The Varieties*, this topic has made significant strides that would have delighted James.

Ramifications: Psychology & Theology

The 'argument from experience' is limited by the fact that just because a person has a religious experience does not guarantee the validity of his or her interpretation.

Can an atheist have a religious experience? Ian Robinson, editor of *The Australian Rationalist*, wrote an article in the Winter 2000 issue on this topic, which was very supportive of the value of religious or rather mystical experience, but offered an explanation alternative to theism.

Ramifications: Interpretation of Religious Experience

Peter Donovan, a New Zealand philosopher of religion, has written a helpful book, *Interpreting Religious Experience*. He explores several analogies related to those who have such experience and those who don't. His key point is that a series of experiences can find a framework in a religious world view, where on a purely secular understanding the experiences would simply be regarded as isolated and unconnected.

Concluding Considerations

Near the end of *The Varieties*, James reiterates his conviction of the great value of religious experience. Is this a matter of tapping into Frederick Myers' "schliminal"? (James often refers approvingly to Myers.) Or, after Jung, tapping into the unconscious?

James refrains from endorsing the "overbelief" of traditional theology of theism. On opposite pages one finds these two statements: "The unseen region... produces effects in the real world" and, perhaps in deference to his Gifford lectures audience, "God is real since He produces real effects". Many in SoF may identify with the first statement. I personally adopt the latter.

In any case, James offers abundant evidence to support his statement: "We can experience union with something larger than ourselves and in that union we can find our greatest peace."

How we interpret this may involve a 'leap of faith' and certainly is a challenge to our authenticity. ■

LOCAL GROUPS



Christchurch

On June 13 they intend to look at the first half of Ian Harris' *Creating God, Recreating Christ*. They'll discuss the second half on June 27th.

On July 11th Hugh Thorpe will discuss why this year has been designated by the UN as International Year for Clean Water.

Eric Park, on July 25, will show the defects in "GNP" and why the "Genuine Progress Indicator" (GPI) is better.

For billions of years, genes have enabled the replication and evolution of life. Since the recent arrival of human culture, "memes" have come into play. On the 8th of August, George Ridley leads a discussion of their role.

August 22 sees "The Madness of God". Discussion of some of the points raised in Brian Lilburn's monograph of this title, and Walsch's 'The New Revelations' (Conversations with God).

Contact: Ian Crumpton phone (03)342-5375

Dunedin

For their May meeting they planned to discuss:

"God is made in the image of man"

They ask: "Is it simply outright blasphemy to say this, or does it contain some element of truth? Is our understanding of our human nature shaped by what we understand God to be; or is it rather that our understanding of God is shaped by how we understand ourselves?" Later plans:

- June: "The last enemy ..." attitudes to death.
- July: "Spirituality, is there more to be said?"

Contact Don Feist Phone (03)476-3268

Nelson

In their May meeting they planned a discussion on Lloyd Geering's latest book, *Christianity without God*. In June, Schmuel Bar-Evan will speak on Jewish faith in a modern world.

Contact Lindsay Vaughan (03)548-5375

Hawkes Bay

"Our April meeting saw Norman Mclean of Gisborne lead a lively discussion around the theme of whether there can be limits to our religious experience. Norman posed the question **"Is our religious experience all that there is to experience?"** and like all good facilitators then sat back and enjoyed the ensuing discussion.

May saw the first of our tea meetings for this year. Lloyd Geering spoke to a gathering of around fifty-five people on the theme of the resurgence of the Wisdom tradition of Jesus. We all enjoyed a

simple meal of soup enhanced by the traditional pot-luck menu of 'finger food' before Lloyd took questions for around forty-five minutes. Lloyd remarked on the high standard of questions coming from the floor — while we who live in Hawkes Bay were not at all surprised at the quality of the local intelligentsia! We put it down to the local Chardon-nay!

That same weekend we held our first Sea of Faith meeting in Central Hawkes Bay. Around twenty-five people from as far afield as Napier and Palmerston North met at the Dannevirke Services and Citizens Club on Sunday for **"An Afternoon With Lloyd Geering."** Lloyd spoke about the origins and philosophy of the Sea of Faith and once more took questions from the floor. A small core of local people indicated a commitment to the establishment of a local group with help from the Hawkes Bay SOF Group. A further meeting in Dannevirke is planned for September.

For our June meeting we will watch the ABC Compass doco based on the Timaru Conference. This is an easy one to organise, thereby giving our seriously dedicated and slightly off-beat team of chair people a rest!

Contact: Keith Fuller (06) 842-0254

IN BRIEF

"push"

... is a journal devoted to the eclectic discussion of issues and ideas in theology and religion. For subscription (\$15 for 4 issues) and contribution enquiries contact: The Editors, "Push", Dept. of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 6800 Christchurch or michael.grimshaw@canterbury.ac.nz

Interfaith Forum

On 21-22 September 2003 an Aotearoa New Zealand National Interfaith Forum will bring together in Wellington people from different faith groups, to explore common issues and to celebrate and honour both the values held in common and the differences that create the unique character of each faith. The aim is improve community harmony and strengthen New Zealand society. If you are a young person with a keen interest in interfaith issues, or a representative of a faith group with experience of involvement in interfaith activities, then you will benefit from and be able to contribute to the forum and its outcomes.

For an Expression of Interest form, please contact Dr Pushpa Wood, 20 Rolleston Street, Mount Cook, Wellington; email jack.wood@paradise.net.nz

The forum is being organised by the Wellington Interfaith Committee, which has representatives from the Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Baha'i faiths.

**"LAUGHTER IS THE SHORTEST
DISTANCE BETWEEN TWO
PEOPLE"**

Victor Borge

ALL ABOUT US

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. We draw our members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions.

Our national Steering Committee publishes a regular Newsletter, maintains a website, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

The current **Chairperson** is Frank Gaze, 2 Telford Tce, Oakura (New Plymouth) 4650, Phone 06-752-7447

Membership of the national organisation costs \$15 per household per year (\$22 if outside NZ). Write your cheque to "SoF (NZ)" and mail to **The Membership Secretary**, 133 Orangi Kaupapa Road, Wellington. (Phone 04-934-8054).

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

Further details on all of the above can be found on our website at <http://sof.wellington.net.nz>

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.org.nz

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.

Optional Extras ...

"SoF" is 28 page A4, six-times-a-year magazine produced by the UK Sea of Faith Network. To subscribe to this magazine for a year, send \$65 to the Membership Secretary (address above). *Note that this is separate from and additional to membership of Sea of Faith (NZ).*

Many of the study booklets referred to in this Newsletter are available from The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society:

www.standrews.org.nz/satrs/

LAST WORD FROM THE (CHAIRPERSON

Toeing the party line

Some of us have been pleased to see the ABC-TV Compass programme made of last year's Conference in Timaru. It has extensive interviews with Don Cupitt, Stephen Batchelor and Lloyd Geering. If you haven't seen it there are copies with many of the Local Groups – there is sure to be one near you.

When it was shown on the ABC a few weeks ago, it resulted in an outburst of interest in Sea of Faith in Australia, the growth of existing groups and the formation of new ones in New Zealand's offshore island.

But the programme was not perfect. In particular, it tended to give the impression, from one or two statements by Cupitt, from a hint by Batchelor, and from the introduction by the presenter, that Sea of Faith is an explicitly Christian group with a clearly defined "Sea of Faith theology".

One of the things our New Zealand Network has been at pains to point out repeatedly is that while we are interested in any and every serious statement of a religious philosophy, and while we are keen to debate them all and listen seriously and carefully to them all, we do not endorse any, because our interest is in the finding out, the thinking, the trying, the struggling, rather than in the discovery or any final answers.

Most of us have some background in a version of Christian faith: three of our Steering committee are ordained clergy. Some of us find Geering's books to our liking; some of us agree most of the time with Cupitt; many of us like what Spong has to say. See: qna@johnshelbyspong.com. I personally find the Ten Theses suggested by David Boulton worth looking at. International statements of ethical principles such as the Belmont Report on bioethics are helpful. A statement of values being discussed at present by members of the Restorative Justice Network in New Zealand is hard to fault.

But the value of many of these formulations is that they are the result of lifetimes of experience hammered into shape on the anvil of trained thought.

None of them have been handed down on plates of gold, none are infallible, yet all are inspirational.

Sea of Faith Network New Zealand has no theology, no dogma, no creed and no thought police. The point of its life is the journey, not the destination. We welcome any who wish to travel with us.

Frank Gaze, Chairperson 2002-2003