



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

FROM THE ARRANGEMENTS COMMITTEE

THERE IS A FEELING OF SPRING IN THE AIR IN Taranaki. Although there is still a good coating of snow on the mountain, the camellias and magnolias are looking splendid, and I'm sure I heard a tui the other day – they come down from the mountain when the kowhai blooms.

Conference is now only a few weeks away, and we are gearing up to receive you. Forecasts are for a damp spring in the west, so let's hope for the best, but bring a brolly anyway! The school has covered ways between classroom blocks, and we have made sure that there will be heating if needed, so you should stay pretty warm and dry.

Those of you who aren't familiar with the route down from Auckland would do best to have a comfort stop at Te Kuiti, there isn't much after that apart from at Mokau. There are plenty of places to stop on the way up from Wellington, Ashley Park Antiques being a good place for a cuppa after Wanganui.

Please remember we're not providing lunch on the Friday, except to those who are required to attend the Leaders' Meeting at noon. There are several cafés and takeaway/sandwich shops in Inglewood, and many more in New Plymouth. Inglewood's favourite eating-place is Macfarlane's Caffe, but you will need to book during the week ahead to have a sit-down lunch there (ring 06 756 6665).

We are starting registrations at 10am on Friday – you may like to register first and then move on to your hotels/motels, or go sightseeing, returning for either the Leader's meeting at noon or the conference opening at 2 o'clock.

Inglewood High School is on SH3 at the New Plymouth end of Inglewood, and there is plenty of parking on hard standing, both on and off school property – by the Kelly St entrance (which will be open only for pedestrians during the conference to prevent locals from using the school as a short cut!). This second entrance can be approached off SH3 (Rata St) via Pukatea St and right into Kelly St.

We would like to invite you to bring your favourite book(s) for display at the Conference. People can browse this selection and then order a copy for themselves. (Please make sure that your name is in them.)

Another B&B has contacted us: it's immediately opposite the school gates and has two double rooms. If you need accommodation ring John Fawcner 06 751 1668.

We're still taking registrations for Conference, so if you make a late decision to join us you'll be most welcome. The programme is intriguing and stimulating, and the company is bound to be likewise!

See you in September.

Mary Boekman, Chair of Arrangements Committee, Phone 06-756-7644

Newsletter 53

September 2003

"SUBSCRIPTION REMINDER"

ISSUE — SEE PAGE 9

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Mary Boekman sings the praises of Taranaki — where its all on.

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We start a new series in which Alan Webster introduces us to seven radical theologians.

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Discussed at Niagara, again.

4. Review: *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*

Even so, the author concedes that its not a good idea.

5. Review: *God's Funeral*

But don't buy the wreath just yet!

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Oh what a tangled Web we read.

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He's back in November for his fourth tour of NZ.

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Frank Gaze asks whether we are as "cool" as we could be in the way that we interact with others.

DON CUPITT & THE SECULAR KINGDOM

PART 1 OF ALAN WEBSTER'S TAXONOMY OF RADICALS

In this issue we begin the serialization of a paper by The Rev Dr Alan Webster who 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. This paper was foreshadowed in Newsletter 52 under the heading "Can You Tell Your Borgs from your Crossans?" The full paper is available on the website.

In his introduction Alan notes: "There is a gathering of reforming minds at every level within and without the Church. Untold numbers of 'lay' people are way ahead of the average clergy-person and of the most fervent conservatives. Like all reformations, it leaves many walking wounded in its wake. That is a cost that we might seek to share in our common humanity with Jesus. It is his radicalism, reflecting his being, that started it all."

In respect of the comments on the authors, he writes: "In the main, I have just summarised and freely commented on the most recent book, or chapter of a book, which represents each theologian's view of the state and prospects of Christianity and/or the church."

Don Cupitt (2001) *Reforming Christianity* Polebridge Press

Selection of representative revolutionary theological writers has to be based on a blend of objective assessment and subjective rapport. In the list of which Cupitt is first simply because he appeared on my theological horizon before the other six, the objective criterion is contemporary currency, i.e. major impact on the future-oriented thinking of the Christian church. The subjective criterion is that of personal impact, i.e. recent books that have significantly moved my thinking forward. Consequently, I find Don Cupitt, Marcus Borg, Robert Funk, John Dominic Crossan, Karen Armstrong, Richard Holloway and John Spong integrative for me and visionary for Christianity, especially in the West.

Don Cupitt, Cambridge Don, has for many years been the epitome of integrative theological thought, especially for his masterful treatment of the science, philosophy, religion conversation. I place him first in my list as a kind of milestone but select his recent book, *Reforming Christianity*, for its pertinence to the theme of radical theology. I think it's radical, perhaps not in style, but in its conclusions. He's a cool writer.

Not alone in radical re-assessment of the state of Christianity (see Spong at the end of this list), Cupitt reads history as displaying the end of Christendom in its ecclesiastical, credal form.

Cupitt sounds the revival of the kingdom of God theology as do the other theologians discussed and most new thinkers about the mission of Jesus. His eye is on the strategy whereby the early church forged a disciplinary structure by which to ensure permanence for itself when the uncertain institution began to waver as it became apparent that the promised new world

order of Jesus was not going to sweep all secular authorities before it. This power grab was done by an apparatus of creeds, confessions and priestly control, all based upon an increasingly complex theology of salvation and damnation. This system became necessary for churchly discipline whilst it awaited the new Kingdom. Not willing to let that promise of terrestrial power slip away, the church extended its powers into the secular structures so that by the Middle Ages, the church was mightier than the state and barely distinguishable from it.

This structure reigned supreme until the Enlightenment. In Cupitt's view, Christendom no longer exists and the ecclesiastical structure is now in its dying phase. In his view, the structure as such serves little useful purpose. Its claim to represent eternal truth is now superseded by an action-oriented religion whose concern is no longer primarily the guarantees of salvation, but increasingly a churchless religion trying to work out a kingdom religion.

The conceptual leap that Cupitt and others – perhaps most of us engaged in systems thinking – offers is that of a reform of Christianity by rediscovery of its roots in kingdom theology. Far from being any more an exclusive claimant to spiritual and otherworldly power, the visible presence of the church is fast becoming a this-worldly, secular change-agent. As Jesus put it, this kingdom is both around you and within you – and certainly not confined to ecclesiastical controls or subject to the authority of a priesthood. It is a secular kingdom that Cupitt announces. It is immediate; its mission is the fulfilment of the dreams of a good life for all. It is the humanitarian expression of the love

of God. It tackles the demons of the secular society: justice issues, equality, prejudice, and the like.

Cupitt claims that this secular realisation of the kingdom is now the preferred expression of Christian discipleship. This means, Cupitt would argue, that Christianity is now more alive outside than within the church. The kingdom is coming but it is appearing more outside than within the church. This means that it bypasses traditional church controls.

These major expressions of God's presence are now free of church ownership – but of course, they always have been. Humanity's progress in its entirety is to be recognised as the secular expression of the kingdom. This means that the kingdom is everywhere, all-pervasive, realised in human society – and far from being confined to the church, is largely outside of it. Hopefully at times collaborating with it, but not subservient to it. Indeed Cupitt sees little antagonism between the church and this kingdom growth. The church will help nurture its coming and its early growth.

There will be obstruction by some who despise the world and all secular action, but this is unlikely to succeed against a loosely structured movement.

In this sense, then, as Cupitt makes clear, Christianity has burst the barriers, just as Jesus began to do with the old wineskins of a tradition-dominated Judaism. Christianity is now more evident in the world than in the church. Whereas people saw religion as attending church, being preached to and prayed over by those supposed to have privileged access to God and being urged along a moral pathway, Christians can now see themselves as groups that celebrate a life-changing spirit. That spirit energises them to work for the fulfilment of the vision of the creation.

So the conceptual leap requires a conscious move from the old to the new. This means that a respect for the ecclesiastical base is necessary as the new initiatives take root. The new is not a ready-made system but a realm or domain of possibilities. It is this, despite the barriers thrown up by traditionalists, that allows the unformed but evolving new religious presence to take shape. Importantly, the emerging secular spirituality seen in the 'Baby Boomers' and 'Generation X' offers a possible new platform, not for another institutional religion but perhaps for a generalised modern identity as spiritual beings. It can be assumed that the original human impulse to find a power or protection against fearful forces is still to be found in altered form. The inequalities of today's world will not easily yield to the DIY attitude which wants not

only church-free Christianity but as far as possible, Government-free exercise of social responsibility. If Cupitt is right, there will still need to be organizational structures for social cooperation, but presumably these will also be less hierarchical and more responsive to the independent spirit of the people. ■

FUNDAMENTALISM

LLOYD GEERING REPORTS FROM NIAGARA FALLS

At Niagara Falls, and with a foot of snow on the ground, the Canadian Snowstar Institute held its second Conference in late March this year at the Fallsview Hotel.

The Snowstar Institute was founded by a few liberal churchmen (mainly from the United Church of Canada) to promote more liberal religious thought and counter the growing influence of conservative and fundamentalist thinking in Canada. For this purpose the Conferences are known as Niagara II, since fundamentalism first emerged after conferences at Niagara Falls about a century before.

The Snowstar Institute has a strong affinity with the Sea of Faith Network, on the one hand and with the Westar Institute of USA, on the other. Bob Funk, founder of Westar, and I had been invited to address the conference but owing to Bob's illness, he was replaced by Brandon Scott, another Westar Fellow. He and I both spoke about the nature and dangers of fundamentalism. (It was this experience which led me to choose the theme of fundamentalism for the recent series of lunch-hour lectures at St. Andrew's, Wellington.) [the book is now available, address on page 10 - ed]

Islamic fundamentalism was vividly described by Sally Armstrong, a Canadian journalist who has been visiting Afghanistan since 1997. She has just published her account of the struggle of Afghan women in *Veiled Threat*, and she described to us her experiences in tracking down and interviewing a remarkable Afghani woman doctor, Sima Samar, now deputy prime minister.

One evening was devoted to a public meeting, held in an Anglican church at Niagara-on-the-Lake. This was an opportunity for Snowstar (through Brandon Scott and me) to explain its purpose to a wider audience. It may be an idea we could take up at a future SoF Conference.

Lloyd Geering

At this year's Snowstar Conference, Lloyd was presented with the **Don Cupitt Award** — an annual award by the Snowstar Institute, which honours individuals for their outstanding courage, creativity and contributions to progressive religious thought.



REVIEW: WAR IS A FORCE THAT GIVES US MEANING

IT MIGHT BE EXCITING, BUT IT CAN KILL PEOPLE

This review appeared on the website of The Center for Progressive Christianity at <http://www.tpc.org>

For fifteen years, most of his adult life, Chris Hedges has been a foreign correspondent for The New York Times. [a detailed listing of his postings then follow - ed].

Out of the crucible of his experience, he wrote his book "not to dissuade us from war, but to understand it." For he writes, "It is especially important that we, who wield such massive force across the globe, see within ourselves the seeds of our own obliteration."

Each of the seven chapters of the book is composed not only of his message, which draws on the literature of war, from Homer and Shakespeare to Peter Caputo and Anthony Lloyd, but also of harrowing and haunting stories from his life on battlefields.

In this statement Hedges gives us the heart of his book. "The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives becomes apparent. Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our airwaves. And war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble."

Pursuing this statement, Hedges uses a distinction made by Lawrence LeShan in *The Psychology of War*, between "sensory reality" and "mythic reality" in the time of war. Sensory reality describes "seeing events for what they are." Mythic reality refers to imbuing "events with meanings they do not have."

When we allow the myth of war, promoted by the state and media, to rule, we view our nation and ourselves [as] the embodiment of goodness and [we] demonize our

enemies [as] the source of all evil. Then, he writes, "Our enemies invert our view of the world to justify their own cruelty. In most mythic wars this is the case. Each side reduces the other to objects — eventually in the form of corpses."

Hedges calls one dimension of the myth of war, the "plague of nationalism." A nationalist regards his/her own nation as the supreme value and even the source of life's meaning. He writes, "Lurking beneath the surface of every soci-

allure of heroism," it leaves out "the one essential element of war — fear." He writes, "The prospect of war is exciting. Many young men, schooled in the notion that war is the ultimate definition of manhood, that only in war will they be tested and proven, that they can discover their worth as human beings in battle, willingly join the great enterprise." But he finds it "startling that such a fantasy is believed, given the impersonal slaughter of modern industrial warfare."

Sigmund Freud said that human history was a struggle between the instinct of life, he called Eros, "which propels us to become close to others, to preserve and conserve" and the instinct for death, he called Thantos, "the impulse that works toward the annihilation of all living things, including ourselves." Hedges believes that "Love alone can fight the impulse that lures us toward self-destruction." Concluding his book, he writes, "To survive as a human being is possible only through love. And, when Thantos is ascendant, the instinct must be to reach out to those we love, to see in them all the divinity, pity, and pathos of the human. And to recognize love in the lives of others — even those with whom we are in conflict — love that is like our own. It does not mean that we will avoid war or death. It does not mean that we as distinct individuals will survive. But love, in its mystery, has its own power. It alone gives us meaning that endures. It alone allows us to embrace and cherish life. Love has power both to resist in our nature what we know we must resist, and to affirm what we know we must affirm. And love, as the poets remind us, is eternal."

This timely, brilliant, heart wrenching, heart warming book is a gift of love to everyone with the courage to read it.

War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning
by Chris Hedges
Public Affairs, New York, 2002, 211pp., \$23.00
Reviewed by G. Richard Wheatcroft

ety, including ours, is the passionate yearning for a nationalist cause that exalts us, the kind that war alone is able to deliver. It reduces, and at times erases, the anxiety of individual consciousness. We abandon individual responsibility for a shared, unquestioned communal enterprise, however morally dubious." Nationalism, which often begins and always fuels war, is expressed as patriotism, which is commonly understood as an appreciation and love of one's country, but can also be seen as a sign pointing to the idolization of the nation.

One of the results of war is that the culture of the nation involved is destroyed and replaced by a "warped version of reality." Hedges reminds us that a nation at war "seeks to destroy its own culture." It does this by silencing its own "authentic and humane culture" which "allows us to question and examine ourselves and our society." Moreover, the enemy state is "dehumanized" by starkly dividing the universe between the forces of good and evil. He describes how this has occurred in many countries, including our own today.

Hedges reminds us that while the "myth of war entices us with the



REVIEW: GOD'S FUNERAL

BUT DON'T BUY A WREATH UNTIL YOU HAVE READ THIS

Nigel Leaves is Chair of the SoF in Perth and will be presenting a workshop at this year's NZ Conference. In the review below he admits to feeling a bit cheated.

God's Funeral: The Decline of Faith in Western Civilization.

A.N. Wilson, Abacus 2000

A few years ago I read A. N. Wilson's biography of C.S. Lewis and had been impressed by the way that he had demythologised and demystified this patron saint of the conservative evangelical wing of the Church. Instead of being the defender of right-wing morality and Christianity in a godless age, Wilson's Lewis was, to adopt Nietzsche's phrase, "all too human" with religious doubts and creaturely inconsistencies. So, when I saw the title of this, his latest book, I settled back to enjoy a good read that would, in the tradition of Sea of Faith, recount the death of God and the demise of traditional religion.

However, like many books with arresting titles, the argument of the author is not the same as what one might be led to assume. Whilst for the majority of the book Wilson gives comprehensive (and often humorous) sketches of those who in the 18th and 19th Century called into question the existence of God — from Thomas Hardy (the title is taken from his famous poem) to Samuel Butler — his real agenda is to be found in the last four chapters. Having set out in extraordinary detail and using the great breadth of his journalistic background to show those who have attempted (Sea of Faith-like) to "promote religion (and God) as a human creation" and create new ways of being religious without any metaphysical underpinning, his closing chapters become an apologia for theistic belief despite those who have announced "God's funeral." Freely admitting that he is a devotee of the American pragmatist William James, who in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [see Newsletter 52] argued for the legitimacy of religious belief and the validity of religious experience, Wilson adopts a position close to that of the theologian John Hick, namely that the religious experience of humans means that the rumour of God will be kept alive. Far from attending God's funeral, people have refused to believe that God is dead and have resisted those that have declared Him/Her so, I felt somewhat duped by the end of the book and a little annoyed that I had spent a birthday book token on such a thesis. Wilson, whilst

obviously interested in the story of the death of God does not take its protagonists too seriously and his 397 pages to get to William James is a long introduction to get to what he believes to be the Truth of the matter. In the manner of many evangelical theologians who spend nine-tenths of a book setting out the case for the opposition the last tenth is a rallying-call to forget what you have just read and find the real answer in what they are about to tell you.

A final word. For all his years spent in journalism and his writing for the general public this book has many stylistic flaws. The language is at times cumbersome and pretentious — keep a large dictionary near to hand! It falls somewhat between an academic thesis and a popular novel. Whilst the character sketches are fascinating they often end abruptly and you find yourself being led into someone else's life without any connecting paragraph. Overall it is an interesting insight into some Victorians who could throw off the last vestiges of belief in God, but beyond that it needs to be rewritten or, at the very least, retitled! ■

BOOK PREVIEW

In his Foreword to *God, Or Godswallop* by Marian Barnes, Lloyd Geering writes: "I am often asked to read manuscripts and sometimes inwardly groan when another turns up. This one I read without stopping, not only because it is relatively brief and concise, but also because its honesty and freshness make it so alive. Many of its readers are likely to find that it resonates with their own spiritual problems and dilemmas. ..."

"At a time when some clergy are being painfully forced to acknowledge (at least to themselves) that they are atheists, here is an atheist of some fifty years' standing who has found that atheism was not enough."

The book will retail at \$24.95 and will be available at the Conference

"We are not angels, we are merely sophisticated apes. Yet we feel like angels trapped inside the bodies of beasts, craving transcendence and all the time trying to spread our wings and fly off, and it's really a very odd predicament to be in, if you think about it."

BBC Reith Lectures 2003

WHAT IF?

GEOFF BONALLACK SPECULATES ON ETERNAL LIFE ON EARTH

What if you were given the choice of living forever or dying tomorrow? Which would you choose? Well, obviously, you say: live for ever.

So here we go down the path of eternal life on earth. It is ten years later and I am 98. I have been attending quite a few funerals recently of old friends but yesterday I attended the funeral of my eldest son who was only 71. This really upset me. As I look ahead I realise that all my friends will soon be dead and, one by one, my children will depart and then it will be the turn of my seventeen grandchildren. The oldest of those is thirty something already. And what of my 25 great grandchildren? They are scattered all over the world and I certainly won't be chasing up their funerals: I hardly know them anyway. As for their children: I have no idea how many of them there may one day be, nor, I have to admit, do I really care.

Meanwhile my flat, built on my second son's land, is no longer new and is beginning to need some maintenance. John is now 60 and I find myself wondering where I will live when he has gone. I guess I will just rent a place but where? Hopefully I won't have to worry about that for a while yet; but you never can tell; people are dying all the time. One day in the not too distant future, all my present friends will have gone on their way and my relatives will be people I have never met nor really want to.

Meanwhile the National Super department is getting increasingly tetchy about doling out my fortnightly allowance as is the Government Super department from whom I have collected my monthly allowance since way back in 1977 when I retired. However, neither of these bodies will act yet I am hoping as I shall be 100 in a couple of years and, after that, I shall become increasingly famous as the years go by. Maybe I shall be able to charge for interviews and give talks world wide. I could become really rich. One thing worries me. There was no mention in my eternal life contract about my health. To date it is fine: I can get around and even drive my car and still do my own shopping. Hopefully it will stay this way. Not much joy in living eternally in a wheel chair or old folks home.

The world is in a mess. I've stopped reading the newspapers in this year 2013. There are wars everywhere and the once powerful USA is fast becoming a collection of run down states plagued with riots and political upheavals. Great Britain is no longer great but seems to be struggling along better than most. As for New Zealand: we are still the safest place to live I guess but for how much longer?

One thing gives me hope: the astronomers are saying that a great asteroid is headed our way; it will arrive on a collision course with us in 2043 and that will be the end of everything and everyone. Even me. I find that is the best news since I was given the chance to live forever.

So supposing instead, I had bravely chosen to die tomorrow. What then?

At last I would find out who has been right between those who think there is life after death and those who say there is nothing. Well, of course, if there is nothing I would never know but if there is the long tunnel with the great light at the end and all my friends and relations waiting to welcome me into the new life, then, oh joy! What reunions; what great celebrations! Well yes but will all my uncles and aunts and hosts of cousins now almost forgotten be really interested in me and, if so, would this be such a good thing? It would be great to be reunited with my wife and immediate family and to be able to spend some time with my Mum and Dad but sooner or later, probably sooner, I would want to settle down into some sort of meaningful life.

Or would I? Who knows? I might end up wishing I had chosen to live for ever back on earth away from the madding crowd. And let's face it, there must be a bewildering mob up there, even starting from William the Conqueror. I wonder what he has been doing all this time.

So do you know what? I'm glad I'm only 87. Most of all, I'm glad I don't have to choose between these two alternatives and that it will all be decided without my having to even sign an agreement.

Geoff Bonallack, Mana SoF Group

A Decade Ago

The first Newsletter for The Sea of Faith Network in New Zealand went out just over a decade ago, but it wasn't until issue 5 (in December 1993) that the Editor came out from anonymity and revealed himself to be Lloyd Geering.

In the July 1993 issue it was revealed that there were 132 subscribers to SoF in NZ, "from Kaitia to Invercargill". (The most recent statistic is 583 members in 406 households.)

Planning was then underway for the first national Conference, which was subsequently held at Waikato University in September of 1993.

With the 30th anniversary of "Honest To God" in 1993 there was heightened interest in audio tapes which dealt with it. The tapes are still available from the Resource Centre under the collective name "Thirty Years of Honesty".

Discussion groups had been set up in Auckland, Napier, Hutt Valley, Wellington and Dunedin. There are now (in 2003) more than 20 groups.

Lloyd wrote a review of A.N. Wilson's *Jesus* and gave it a better rating than Nigel Leaves gave another of Wilson's books in the current Newsletter.

Lloyd also pointed to the scholarly divide that put N.T. Wright on one side (the conservative) with a colourful sprinkling of others (Wilson, Spong and Barbara ('bizarre')) Theiring on the other.

Karen Armstrong's *A History of God* was just coming into view.

Reported by Noel Cheer

FAITH IN CYBERSPACE

"What's your religion?"

It used to be such a simple question to answer. But now you might be "spiritual but not religious" — or raised in one faith but practicing another. Maybe you're a Methodist but think of yourself more as an evangelical, or a seeker who is anti-religion — or born again. The old categories don't seem to work because the religious landscape has changed so much. To confuse yourself even more have a look at the Quizzes on Beliefnet at

www.beliefnet.com/features/quiz/index.html

Progressive Christianity

The Centre for Progressive Christianity describe themselves in the following (abridged) terms:

"By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who:

1. Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus;
2. Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us;
3. Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples;
4. Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable ...
5. Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe;
6. Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty — more value in questioning than in absolutes;
7. Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers; and
8. Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

Check them out at www.tpcp.org

The Ground of Faith

The say of themselves that they are "Exploring: Science-Mysticism-Experience together" ... The network exists to explore Consciousness in any aspect, in the light of personal experience, mysticism, and the realities suggested by Quantum Mechanics theorists.

Our own Leo Hobbs is a consultant. Their website is at

<http://thegroundoffaith.orcon.net.nz>

Outlets for Social Activism

While the Sea of Faith Network in New Zealand is not an activist group — we wave no banners, lobby no politicians and have no official presence in demonstrations and marches — many of our member do and are. Sometimes they are acting on their own behalf, sometimes as part of an organisation with a mission to reform some aspect of society.

One such organisation is CASI — the **Churches' Agency on Social Issues**. The churches represented are: Methodist, Presbyterian, Churches of Christ and Quakers.

The current issue of their publication "Broadsheet" (at A5 its a bit tiny for "broadsheet") they give opinions on: the Treaty; the GE moratorium which is soon to be lifted; Government social policy; housing; and bioethics.

You can find them at

P.O. Box 9049 Wellington or www.casi.org.nz

Spirit and Spice

Its a NZ Methodist ginger group and its at

www.spiritandspice.org.nz

Harry Potter v. The Bible

See www.bettybowers.com/godvspotter.html

IN BRIEF

Next Year in Oz

The first national **Sea of Faith in Australia Conference** will be held from September 17-19, 2004. It will be held at Wollaston College in Perth. We'll keep you informed.

Render Unto Ego ...

"The idea of many schools of spirituality that we must kill Narcissus [the ego] in order to be free of personal obstructions, just results in more constipated yogis and schizophrenic priests." from *Embracing The Beloved, Relationship as a Path of Awakening* by Stephen and Ondrea Levine, Doubleday 1995 page 106

Conference Correction

If you plan to attend Ivan Pickens' presentation on Saturday afternoon you can skip the "Background Reading List" as this belongs to Derek Pringle's morning session and somehow got attached to Ivan's in the dark recesses of our planning system.

Joanna Margaret Paul

We note with sadness the recent tragic death of Joanna Margaret Paul of Wanganui. We published Joanna's "Letter to the Editor" in Newsletter 50, in February of this year.

JOHN SPONG

NEW ZEALAND VISIT NOVEMBER 2003

Auckland

Sunday 2 November 2003

- 10am: St Matthews in the City "Beyond Theism"
- Afternoon event (time tba): St Matthews in the City, "A Christian Perspective on Assisted Suicide"

Monday 3 November 2003

- 7.30pm: Holy Trinity Cathedral, Parnell, "A New Christianity for a New World"

Takapuna

Tuesday 18 November 2003

- 7.30pm: Takapuna Methodist Church, "Evil: Medieval Concept or Present-day Reality?"

Hamilton

Monday 17 November 2003

- 7.30pm: St. Paul's College Chapel, "A New Christianity for a New World".

Gisborne

Tuesday 4 November 2003

- 7.30pm Book signing and speaking event, details tba

Wellington

Wednesday 5 November 2003

- 7pm: Wesley Church, Taranaki Street, "Evil: Medieval Concept or Present Day Reality"

Thursday 6 November 2003

- 12 - 1:15pm: Old St Paul's Wellington Voluntary Euthanasia Society "A Christian Perspective on Assisted Suicide"
- 7pm: VUW McLaurin Lecture Theatre 102, with Lloyd Geering, "The Human Jesus Before His Divinisation" book via Continuing Education phone 463-6560

Christchurch

Friday 7 November 2003

- 7.30pm: University Lecture Theatre, "A New Christianity for a New World" book via Continuing Education phone 364-2470

Sunday 9 November 2003

- 5pm: Christchurch Cathedral. John Spong preaches and dialogues.

Enquiries

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To purchase Spong's *A New Christianity for a New World*, please contact Whirlwind Distribution at any of the addresses above.

LOCAL GROUPS

WHAT THEY DO & WHAT THEY SAY

Auckland

Margaret Maurant recently gave a presentation on "Exploring spiritual challenges of the later years of our lives."

The three aspects that the group discussed were:

1. Coming to terms with our own **mortality** — not to be morbid but to make each day matter. Taking time to notice beauty, courage and love; breaking down any unfinished business and thus being at peace with others and ourselves. Being open to finding any new talents we can explore.

2. Handling the grief of **losses** of all kinds. We looked at how sometimes we can replace what we've lost by finding new path and thus go on growing.

3. The importance of **attitude** in later years. Do we focus more on what we are losing while closing our eyes to what we still have?

Contact: Derek Pringle (09)489-3589

Nelson

Twelve members enjoyed the warm hospitality of Bruce and Winsome Hamilton at their fourth solstice celebration over a grand selection of dishes. Winsome read a delightful poem called **The Mean Mother**.

A similar number enjoyed an evening with Shmuel Bar-Even. Shmuel's background provided a sound foundation for speaking on being a Jew.

The evening was centred on questions informally provided by members. Shmuel's thoughtful responses to the questions enabled members to further pursue matters.

Their speaker for their August meeting will be Peter Donovan, Associate Professor of Religious Studies (retired), Massey University speaking on "Judaism and Christianity through Moslem eyes."

Contact Lindsay Vaughan (03)548-5375

Hawke's Bay

Keith Fuller reports:

"In July we further explored the topic of ritual with Bev Smith, who travelled down from her new home in Gisborne especially to address our group. Bev spoke of her experiences of ritual in England and of the insights she had gained from these experiences.

We transferred our August meeting from our usual (and historically significant) venue, the old Custom House at Port Ahuriri, to the more utilitarian, and larger, Memorial Rooms in Clive Square, the one time hub of the emerging city of Napier. The anticipated larger numbers of people enjoyed listening to, and discussing with, Barrie Allom. Barrie talked about his journey in the period between the end of his book and now, where his thinking had taken him now and what he thinks may be the future of the spiritual endeavour. A lively and probing discussion followed, rounding off a thoroughly enjoyable and stimulating meeting. The highlight of our August meeting had to be, though, our Co-Chair Jocelyn (aka Mother Superior) asking for someone to sleep with her! Apparently there are now some spare beds in the motel that Jocelyn et al have booked for the conference.

Such a benign explanation of such an innocent request could not prevent us all enjoying some hearty good humour!

Contact: Keith Fuller (06)842-0254 or e-mail jeanluc@xtra.co.nz

Gisborne

The following is adapted from a report by Norman Maclean. Recently they have: had a visit from Alan Goss of Napier; group discussions on a variety of topics; Bob and Janet Scott (local founders and convenors) giving full accounts of Conferences they have attended (supported by Alan and Pamela Hall); and Norman Maclean reporting on his visit at Easter to the Hawkes Bay Group to lead a discussion on dispensing (or not) with God.

On July 26th, Bev Smith gave an interesting and informative talk about her recent attendance at the Somerville Church in Auckland to hear Lloyd Geering and John Salmon discussing Lloyd's *Christianity Without God*. As always a lively discussion followed: the Gisborne Sea of Faith Group particularly enjoys these exchanges of view which are facilitated by dividing our evening into two sequences — with "half time" featuring Janet's superb soup and everyone else's edible offerings.

And, as always, the Scotts will attend the New Plymouth Conference and report back.

This Group welcomes visiting speakers. If you are likely to be in the district, then contact one of the following:

Contacts: Bev Smith (06)868-8208; Norman Maclean (06)867-3423; Bob & Janet Scott (06)867-7617

In The Wairarapa

Jim Veitch provided this information about radical Christian activity just over the hill from Wellington. He notes that this group, while similar to style to Sea of Faith, has a specifically Christian focus while the Sea of Faith does not.

In the Wairarapa we are going well with a group that has been meeting on Sunday evenings since June of 2002. We don't publicize our meetings at all — it is all word of mouth.

We do not have a service but we meet as a group for discussion and a talk. We are working our way through Borg's book on the Bible having worked our way through his book on Jesus.

We have around 40 each evening. We have had sometimes over 50 attending. Members come from throughout the Wairarapa — some are connected with church some not. We meet under St Luke's but we are not bound by the church connection.

Members are keen on putting the origins of Christianity together. After Borg on the Bible we shall take up Brandon Scott's book on the parables.

The group organised a lecture from Jim Veitch on Iraq before the war began. We had 294 attending, including a good representation from the colleges.

Rohan Gunaratna gave a lecture on terrorism on a Saturday evening and we got 98 adults without young people.

In 2002 we worked our way through the lectionary readings for the Sunday.

I have found people are keen to know more about Christianity and to work their way through questions about faith. The local Sea of Faith group, which is smaller

but overlaps with some in this group, caters for those who are looking for something wider. It is good to have alternatives. It is essential these days with the demise of the liberal strand in the church — and in the wider community, squeezed out by the neo-conservatives — that we fight back and show people how a liberal understanding of the Bible and of the origins of Christianity can work. I guess this is what The Jesus Seminar is all about.

Contact for this group is Adam Floyd (06)304-9560.

Contact for Sea of Faith Wairarapa is Barry Allom (06)377-5777

National Membership Subscription

Membership Secretary, Hugh Gilman tells us how it works:

"Our membership year matches our financial year — 1st July to the subsequent 30th June. [In practice this means you get Newsletters issued after 30 April 2003 through to mid-September 2004.]

Therefore, this is the "Reminder Notice Issue" for those whose subscriptions are expiring. This is indicated by an extra slip of paper included in the envelope reminding you that your subs are due. Please be careful not to over-pay. **Send no money if:**

(a) you do **not** see a reminder in this envelope OR

(b) you have **already** paid your subs through your SoFN Conference registration form.

All payments are receipted (usually in the next Newsletter envelope) and you should examine your receipt to see the year you are paid through. Current accounts are receipted as "2003/04 Subs".

advertising in the

new zealand
Listener

As our first, rather tentative, excursion into nationally advertising SoF in New Zealand, we have placed small advertisements which have been appearing in the Listener at monthly intervals since April. The last is scheduled for September. Membership Secretary, Hugh Gilman, reports on how it has gone so far.

"From the inception of our public information programme utilising the Listener's "Notice Board" we have had a steady stream of requests for the free copy of the Newsletter and accompanying "blue" information sheet. I have received 50 requests from the start of the exercise through to the end of July 2003. Several of these have since become members and some of them are expected to attend our Conference in Inglewood in September.

The notice clearly states "write for a free Newsletter". However, some respondents insist on including pre-stamped envelopes, stamps, and/or cheques for varying amounts. (Books and other letters are passed on to Noel as Newsletter editor.) These are returned in the Newsletter envelope and mention is made in the letter included that the additional effort — although recognized and appreciated — is declined in the interests of fair treatment towards all. Some of the subsequent enrollments also include cheques for more than the \$15 annual subscription. These result in a dual receipt — one for the \$15 annual sub and a second for the charitable donation to be claimed back from the IRD in the next income tax cycle."

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.

We have two **Life Members**: Lloyd Geering (since 2001) and Don Cupitt (since 2002).

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 — Suzi Thirlwall (07)578-2775

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, 6-times-a-year magazine produced by the UK SoF Network. To subscribe for a year, send \$65 to the Membership Secretary (address above). Note that this is 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 COOL

ALMOST SIXTY YEARS AGO I LISTENED TO a sermon on the Old Testament text: **"A bruised reed will he not break and a smoking flax will he not quench."** Ever since, I have been interested in the quality of "serenity", or that referred to in the beatitude: "Blessed are the meek", or in the French version "debonair". What the later 20th century would call "cool".

The "cool" person is one who has come to terms with themselves, does not try to shift their own load on to others, has no need to control others, needs no attention-seeking behaviour, nor any supernatural rescue from the results of their own anxieties, while being sensitive to the different patterns of those around them.

We have seen some particularly "un-cool" actions in recent months: the world's two most powerful governments riding rough-shod over the wishes of most people on the planet, including many of their own people; the Church of England fumbling and missing the opportunity to appoint a gay bishop; autocratic top-down patterns of religious thought contributing to the New Zealand Parliament stifling formal national debate on the "Death with Dignity" Bill.

There are options to this fraught behaviour: consensus decision-making through forums like the UN Security Council, reasoned discussion by the normal democratic processes, and many more.

Some sessions at our Conference this month pursue some of these practical alternatives to open conflict or the naked exercise of control. And several of our speakers are among the most experienced available on their chosen subject — most experienced not only in New Zealand, but in world terms. The Conference also gives us the chance to ask ourselves whether we are as "cool" as we could be in the way we interact with others.

Next year we return to the more philosophical, theoretical side of our thinking. A team in the Waikato has issued an invitation to us to hold the 2004 Conference at St Peter's School, Cambridge. We will consider this proposal at our AGM at Conference.

And **David Boulton**, former editor of the UK Sea of Faith magazine, has agreed to be one of our keynote speakers at Cambridge. I am looking forward to meeting and hearing David, as many of you will be.

Meantime, this year's Conference programme awaits us.

Frank Gaze, Chairperson 2002-2003