



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

AFTER THE CONFERENCE

THE 2003 Conference, our 11th, has come and gone. What was it like? Stimulating Keynote addresses — read them in summary in the accompanying Supplement and in full on the website — excellent elective lectures, a wide range of Workshops and splendid food. You can read about our *first* Conference on page 8.

Our heartfelt thanks to Mary Boekman and her team on the Arrangements Committee for making it all work. But they dropped the ball on the weather! As a Taranakian (born in Stratford) I feel a bit apologetic for the relentless rain. But we smiled and scurried through it. And the Inglewood Club will have been shaken to its core with the invasion of Softies looking for Happy Hour!

The new Steering Committee is as follows. The date after the name is the year in which a member's right to serve on the Steering Committee runs out. Naturally, its their "use-by" date!

Chairperson: Noel Cheer [2006]

Secretary: Marion Dodd [2005]

Treasurer & Membership Secretary: Hugh Gilman [2004]

Arrangements Committee Chairperson (co-opted to the Steering Committee): Peter Timmins [2007]

Members in general: Marjorie Cox [2004], George Dodd [2005], Ron Wilson [2007], Frank Gaze [2005], Lyle Miller [2005], Keith Fuller [2004], Yvonne Curtis [2004], Ian Crumpton [2006], Donald Feist [2006].

We should also salute two valuable non-SC members: Suzi Thirlwall who looks after the Resource Centre and Alison Eng, our Archivist.

One function of this Newsletter is to provide a platform from which our members can launch their thoughts. Three such appear in this issue: the incomparable Alan Goss gives us not one, but two book reviews; Helen Frances addresses a poem to Iraqi poets in New Zealand; and Ken Mills reflects on the search for spiritual truth.

*Noel Cheer,
SC Chair 2003-2004 and Editor*

Newsletter 54

December 2003

POST-CONFERENCE ISSUE

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In defence of SoF's hands-off approach to religious humanism — at least in NZ.

MARCUS BORG AND THE GOD-PRESENCE OF JESUS

PART 2 OF ALAN WEBSTER'S TAXONOMY OF RADICALS

In this issue we continue the serialization of a paper by The Rev Dr Alan Webster who is a Methodist Presbyterian and a former Associate Professor of Human Development and Education at Massey University, Palmerston North, as well as 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.

Marcus J. Borg (1995), *Meeting Jesus again for the First Time*. New York: Harper/Collins

Marcus Borg, "Seeing God Again: What's at Stake?" In Marcus Borg and Ross Mackenzie, Eds, (2000) *God at 2000*, Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse.

Borg (1995), the 'gentle radical', presents one of the most appealing portraits of Jesus in modern literature. The soft style disguises the rigorous scholarship. He does his portrait without divinising Jesus. Indeed he plainly was impeded in early life by the divinity of the Christ of orthodoxy. But once he began to ask "How is it that when people were with Jesus they felt themselves to be in the transforming presence of God?" his scholarly imagination came to life. Jesus was not God but the God-presence became real in a relationship with Jesus.

Marcus Borg the Professor of New Testament distinguishes two images of Jesus: the *fideistic* image of the divine saviour and the *moralistic* image of the teacher. He rejects both these as sufficient bases for a modern picture of Jesus, on grounds that they are inaccurate as images of the historical Jesus and that they lead to incomplete images of the Christian life. His major claim is that the Christian life is "about a relationship with God that involves us in a journey of transformation." (1995, p3)

Borg's interpretative leap is captured by an heuristic: the *pre-Easter Jesus*, the one the disciples knew, ie Jesus before his death; and the *post-Easter Jesus*, ie the Jesus of Christian experience and tradition. Jesus from Easter onward was experienced as still present. Thus he became the 'Risen Lord', a living Christ. Borg's contribution to this familiar position is to say that Jesus moved 'beyond belief' to relationship. This continuity of presence they understood as 'a relationship to the Spirit of God'. In it the follower found transformation.

In making the pre-Easter: post-Easter distinction Borg opens up the possibility of life-changing appreciation of the historical Jesus. He was able to see Jesus as spirit-person, teacher of wisdom, social prophet, and movement founder. Jesus as spirit-person moved the focus from *believing in* Jesus to "*being in relationship* with the same spirit that Jesus knew." This relationship

is above all an experience of God as compassionate. Borg goes straight to the point, saying this defines politics as seen in Jesus. It placed Jesus in the midst of the world of everyday. He enacted the politics of compassion. The Christian life is therefore an embodiment of compassion.

The pre-Easter/post-Easter concept sheds brilliant light on the manner by which Jesus communicated. He subverted conventional wisdom, presenting for those able to hear, a new Kingdom, the rules of which are those of the compassionate spirit. The kingdom was declared as real and present and known by the nobodies of the world.

Jesus is, in Borg's view, a thorough monotheist who knows the life of the Spirit and inspires transformation. But he denies that the use of expressions like "Son of God" and "Wisdom of God" denotes divinity, seeing these as metaphors by which people referred to the transformative effect of meeting Jesus in the post-Easter testimony. (It is one thing to say Jesus reflected the way of God; it is quite another to say this makes him God. If that were so, there would be a million Christian Gods. AW)

Jesus and his followers were rooted in Judaism. Similarly, post-Easter people are supported by the story character of Scripture. That story is of Exodus from slavery; exile and return; and being restored to righteousness – the priestly story. To the traditional credal mind, the meaning of the priestly story is that of being accepted because God's conditions were met by sacrifice. To Borg, the priestly story is an invitation to passivity and to a preoccupation with the afterlife. Yet used metaphorically the stories can restore the images of humanity and of God and thus provide hope for a new beginning.

Finally, Borg sees the gospel as an invitation to post-Easter people to be in the same relationship to Jesus as his pre-Easter followers were. Borg thus ends with what he calls a "transformative understanding of the Christian life" (p136). This means the life of companionship with God. To believe in Jesus ought not to mean literally to make him the object of worship – a feat reserved for God. To believe in Jesus must mean to "give one's heart to him". In short, the outcome is the

transformed Christian life. The story is not that of believing in certain credal propositions about Jesus but facing one's deepest self toward the God-presence Jesus knew.

Seeing God Again: What's at Stake? Essay in the book of which he is co-editor, *God at 2000*.

We look to another publication for what Borg thinks his thesis says about God. In the above title, he paints what Jesus saw as God. The acclaimed lectures from the Chautauqua (NY) Institute featured seven well-known religious thinkers of whom Borg was one. Although the lead question for each lecturer was the same: "How I see God", I suggest that for Borg this might translate as "How did Jesus see God?" or "Who is the Christian God now?"

The essential prologue to Borg's essay on God is that of the post-modern era in which the modernist/Enlightenment ideal of certainty has been replaced by a recognition of uncertainty in which metaphor and a language of unknowing is more comfortable. Borg sums up what he has learned about God under six statements in which he compares "How I saw God the first time" with "Seeing God again – how I see God now". He first states that *God is known in all of the enduring religious traditions of the world*.

He cannot believe that the God of the universe should make only one religion the vehicle of knowledge of 'him'. Religious pluralism is good for every tradition. For Christian exclusivists, this is a stark challenge. He agrees with Sally McFague's image of the universe as God's body.

Next, like most post-modern theologians, Borg sees God or the *sacred as ineffable*.

This refers to the sacred as ultimate mystery, beyond all language. It contrasts with the detailed 'knowledge' of God assumed by concretists as the essence of the Bible, taken as the very Word of God. A hidden or incomprehensible God is worshipped as mystery or that for which no sufficient language exists. God is that which cannot be contained by language or any tangible medium.

Thirdly, *our concept of God matters*. Borg contrasts two forms of theism: *supernatural theism* – the most common form of Christian theism; and *interventionism* – the idea that God breaks into the universe to do what he wills. The corresponding idea of prayer is that it comprises ways of getting God to want what you ask for. People who claim to be atheists usually, in Borg's view, mean they don't believe in the God of supernatural theism.

Borg puts forward an alternative to these theisms: a theism, if the term must be used, that he calls the *encompassing spirit*. It is known also as *panentheism*

which means everything is in God and God in everything. (It does not mean pantheism, which means everything is God, or God is just 'all that is'). It does mean that God is not conceived as having an existence apart from the universe itself. Such a concept conveys both *transcendence* or the "beyondness", the utter "otherness", of God; but also *immanence*, God's near presence, God right here.

Borg finds the panentheistic concept intellectually much more satisfying; more truly biblical; and experientially valid, for the self and across religions.

The fourth statement is that *how we image God matters*. Images are more concrete than concepts.

In this context, he refers to the metaphors of God, as king, judge, shepherd, father, mother, lover, potter warrior. They paint a picture in words.

Images or metaphors create mental pictures of the character of God. Borg mainly contrasts the traditional *monarchical* model who makes requirements and sets up in-group and outgroup distinctions, demands vengeance and ultimately forces us to focus upon our own safety and salvation; and the alternative model, that of the *divine lover* – an image he sees as deeply biblical. This image makes it essential to interpret God, whether in the biblical account or in wider life, as being lover, liberator and compassionate life-giver.

A brief but important statement: God is real.

Whilst the God of supernatural theism is unreal, i.e. it provokes doubt, simply because such a God is unnecessary, this cannot be argued if the realness of God is that of total Being. God is all Being. If God is part of all that is, this is not a proposition that can be argued against, since if the term God were not employed, some other term would be needed to express that integral totality: Being itself. If the concept is capable of being argued against, it is not God. To say *God is* is not a logical conclusion that invites argument. To say God is real is not to propose another being out there. It is rather an amazed realisation. In Borg's view, to say "God is real" is to contemplate all that is as one totality that evokes awe, thanksgiving and praise. To know God, in Borg's sense, would be no different from knowing the amazing, nourishing whirl of matter, time and energy and feeling in its entirety as 'parent'.

He has learned that *life with God, whether in its Christian form or some other form, is not very much about believing in God but about living in relationship with God*.

Far from believing specific teachings despite their doubtful probability, the criterion of being Christian lies in "our relationship with the mystery". So adherence to a Christian tradition is not the point, but a relationship with God is, by definition, the ultimate state of personal spirituality.



REVIEW: THE TROUBLE WITH GOD

A REVIEW BY GREG SPEARRITT

The Trouble with God: Religious Humanism and the Republic of Heaven by David Boulton

If God is dead, very few in my local community have heard the news. But then, Toowoomba is one of the studs on the Bible Belt of Queensland's Darling Downs. A robust anti-intellectualism protects us from everything bar football, Sunday-paper prose and a taken-for-granted Sunday-School faith. Both Paul and Pauline have quite a following here.

What might it do if David Boulton's latest book got a serious airing in our parts? I suspect the positive, life-affirming thrust of his book would be entirely lost in anger at an attempt to remove one of life's few basic certainties.

There would, however, be plenty of folk who could identify with Boulton's early life as one of the 'saved' hanging out for the Lord's return. The first section of *Trouble with God* is autobiography, warm and entertaining. Spending Sundays with a bunch of exclusivist Brethrens in Middlesex, south of London, Boulton imbibed scripture and the certainty of the second coming, but through his family he retained a penchant for dissent as well as a deep-seated sense of humour. His sense of intimacy with God and Jesus meant they featured in play as well as in worship:

[My brother] Brian and I sometimes played God and Jesus, I, by virtue of seniority, taking the role of God, and Brian playing second fiddle as my Son. We squatted on the high back of our sitting-room sofa, imagined as our heavenly home, and looked down with fixed seraphic smiles on our humble creation below. Once, when God proposed sending Jesus down to earth to save poor sinners, Jesus refused to go and had to be pushed, falling with an undignified bump. Jesus wept, and God was given a smacked bottom. (21)

Good Queensland (former) Anglican, meek and mild, that I am, I find it hard to identify with the fervour and fundamentalism of Boulton's childhood religion. Evangelical Protestantism is all the rage around here, though, and the choruses wafting out of the

houses of God in my area still have much in common with the old Brethren hymns: "There was more blood in our hymnal", says Boulton, "than in the local abattoir."

Having given his heart to Jesus for the umpteenth time, and having lost a chance at University through the lack of scholarly application that waiting for the Rapture engendered, Boulton moved on to national service in the RAF and to writing and editing for groups as varied as the Liberal Party, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and a socialist weekly. Involvement in the CND in particular challenged many of his assumptions about Christianity and led him to the wish and wash of theological liberalism.

Being charged with writing a review for Bishop Robinson's new book, *Honest to God*, was the next seminal moment: he began the review as "a sort of liberal Christian", and by the

"To get God out of human culture is like getting metre and rhyme out of poetry: you can do it, but at the cost of losing what you are trying to save."

final paragraphs had become "more of a humanist".

Here I find myself on more familiar ground. Reading Don Cupitt gradually had much the same effect on me. Why bother with God-talk when God is all our own work? Why not acknowledge that the two great commandments are really just one? (What can "love the Lord your God" mean, after all, except "love your neighbour...")

Before Boulton addresses the question of whether and how religion and humanism should be related, he tells, in the second major section of *The Trouble with God*, the fascinating life-story of the Ancient of Days who is reputedly 'the same yesterday, today and forever'.

Relying on respectable recent scholarship, but in very plain terms, Boulton traces the ancestry and subsequent development of the god we call 'God'.

In his infancy and reckless youth he was a warrior/monster-god, responsible, for example, for sparing only the 32000 virgins among the Midianites, and these for the pleasure of his male followers (see Numbers 31). In late adolescence, God discovered compassion for the lowly and the outcast and grew in his prime to be not only fatherly and self-sacrificial, but royally Triune. The slow decline into his autumn years was spurred by the Reformation and the Enlightenment as the likes of Strauss, Feuerbach and Darwin put in their 2 cents' worth and radical Christian groups like the Ranters, Seekers, Quakers and Unitarians arose.

The once-Almighty Yahweh-Elohim was finally reduced, with the work of JAT Robinson and radicals such as Don Cupitt, to a toothless Cheshire-cat-like smile.

Yet, that's not the end of the story. Even if God is just our human ideas of him/her/it,

[t]o get God out of human culture is like getting metre and rhyme out of poetry: you can do it, but at the cost of losing what you are trying to save. (72)

The final section of *The Trouble with God* makes the case for keeping the humanism we have arrived at 'religious'. Boulton deals with issues of religious practice, morality and 'spirituality'. With the help of Phillip Pullman, author of the *His Dark Materials* fantasy trilogy, he argues persuasively for a 'republic of heaven' in which imagination, community, good will and human self-sufficiency are essential elements.

It won't be enough for most Christians, nominal and otherwise, at least in my local area. Just (in the words of Pullman) "play together in the bright moonlight till we all fall asleep"? Too scary by half, and what of the heavenly treasures we've been laying up all these years? I suspect, given a choice between Boulton's book and hard-earned cosmic superannuation, I know which would get the boot.

Rest assured, though: *The Trouble with God* will have a prominent place on the bookshelves in this no-longer-redeemed household. ♦

David Boulton is to be a Keynote speaker at our 2004 Conference. Gregg Spearritt is Editor of the Sea of Faith in Australia "Bulletin". This review came from the September 2003 issue.

TWO REVIEWS BY ALAN GOSS

SO PROLIFIC A REVIEWER THAT HE DESERVES HIS OWN MASTHEAD



Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism: The Challenge to the Secular World

Lloyd Geering 2003, St Andrew's Trust (see panel page 10) \$10 + \$3 p&p

In 1925 the famous New Testament scholar Kirsopp Lake, in a book *The Religion of Yesterday and Tomorrow*, expressed the view that the real divisions in the church cut across denominational lines and consisted of three groups. They were the Fundamentalists, the Experimentalists (or Radicals) and thirdly the Institutionalists (or Liheals). Lake then made a striking prophecy: "The Fundamentalists will eventually triumph. They will drive the Experimentalists (Radicals) out of the Church and then reabsorb the Institutionalists (Liberals) who, under pressure, will become more orthodox... The church will shrink from left to right." This is a quote from Lloyd Geering's booklet on Fundamentalism based on his St. Andrew's Trust lectures 2003. As the author says, "This is a remarkable prediction, for it generally describes the state of affairs in the mainline churches today."

Geering sketches the rise, nature and extent of the modern phenomenon of fundamentalism, he shows how it is not confined to any one religion or movement but to a number of them — Christian, Jewish, Muslim and so on. It is noticeably militant and battling for unquestioned obedience to a monarchical deity as revealed in the scriptures (Bible or Koran) and also for a Jewish or Christian or Islamic State, i.e. a theocracy.

At the same time fundamentalism locks itself in combat with secular humanism and those aspects of the modern world which threaten the flowering and growth of the spiritual life. It distorts religion to the extent that Christianity, as well as Islam, are given a negative image — the label "Christian" is often regarded as a synonym for "fundamentalist". As it infiltrates and even captures the mainline churches, who are reluctant to criticize it, fundamentalism hinders and prevents the church from making a creative contribution to the emerging modern global world.

The author points out how the term 'fundamentalist', which came into use in America in the 1920's, was not then regarded as at all dangerous, the liberals considered it a passing phase. The events of September 11, 2001, the Bali massacre and similar acts of terrorism elsewhere changed all that. Geering devotes a chapter to how this change came about, including the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians which is being fueled on both sides by Christian and Muslim fundamentalism. "The western world encounters the face of Islamic fundamentalism in the terrorist acts of suicide bombers The Islamic world encounters the face of Christian fundamentalism in the trigger-happy fundamentalist cowboy from Texas", President George Bush.

Geering acknowledges that some of the criticisms leveled by the fundamentalists against the modern secular world cannot be ignored. Drugs and alcohol, the junk culture, the cult of the celebrity, the mass media, a lowering of moral standards ... are all signs that our spiritual capital is wasting away. The fears and protests of fundamentalists therefore need to be listened to, there is no place for war or coercion. This presents a challenge to the mainline churches which are now threatened by what may be called "the fundamentalist captivity of Christianity". The effects of a fundamentalist coup pose a danger not only to the churches but to society at large. A stronger, more vocal liberal voice is needed in the Christian, Muslim and Jewish worlds to counter the fundamentalist threat. This booklet, which is a mine of information, the fruit of wise reflection, and a model of precision, is a step along the way.

Alan M Goss 15.9.2003

Galileo's Daughter

Galileo's Daughter, Dava Sobel, Fourth Estate Ltd.

This book, skilfully researched and written in clear elegant prose leaves one lasting impression on the reader: through all the passions and turmoils of those times both Galileo and his daughter were people who, in any age, nourish the human spirit.

Most chapters include a letter (or extracts), from Galileo's eldest daughter Virginia, to her father, both sharing a deep and abiding affection for each other until the latter's early death at age 34. Virginia, together with her sister Livia, both became nuns after entering the frugal Convent at San Matteo near Florence. Virginia's letters — she later became Sr. Marie Celeste — have a rather formal old-world style, always addressing her father as Sire and are a welcome respite from the flaccid, chatty email of the "info" age.

What is especially appealing about this book is the fine balance it achieves in describing the nuts and bolts of seventeenth century life — the domestic scene, the political and religious intrigues, the fearful bubonic plague, the rigours of life behind Convent walls — against the drama and complexities of Galileo's research, notably in astronomy, which led him to adopt the Copernican theory of the solar system. The centre of this system was the sun, not the earth, a theory which of course conflicted with that of holy scripture.

In 1633 Galileo was tried for heresy by the Holy office of the Inquisition, forced to recant under threat of torture and placed under house arrest. (His famous words, "nevertheless it — the earth — does move" are probably legendary). As the author says, "the suppression of science by religion ... the challenge of radical new discoveries to ancient beliefs, the struggle against intolerance for freedom of thought and speech ... on other process (in law) has ricocheted through history with more meanings, more consequences, more conjectures, more regrets." A few in high places in the Catholic Church did, however, give Galileo both physical and moral support, along with the faithful nuns at San Matteo. His forbidden books thereafter flourished on the Black Market, his name and fame spread over national frontiers to all parts of Europe.

This book and its gripping account of the Galileo affair leave lessons still to be heeded. Our concern for doctrinal correctness — some would say our obsession with it — is a blind alley, there are no doctrinal absolutes as the Catholic Church virtually admitted some centuries later when in 1992 Pope Paul II publically endorsed Galileo's philosophy. A creedless church, a healthy diversity of views, the right to challenge in vigorous debate, are prerequisites for that peace and unity we so often talk about and which paradoxically, always needs to be tried and tested. Galileo did that in 1633 and lost, but only for a while. His beloved daughter Virginia now lies next to him in their much visited tomb in a nameless coffin. The book's last sentence reads, "But still she is still there."

Alan M Goss 11.9.2003

IN BRIEF

WAVES ON THE SEA OF FAITH

Retreating With Joy

The Bethlehem of our Hearts: an advent retreat with Joy Cowley, 5-7 December 2003 Wallis House, Lower Hutt. "In this weekend journey through the Gospel Advent readings, we explore what the incarnation of the Divine means to us in 21st Century Aotearoa/New Zealand."

<http://www.fredericwallishouse.co.nz/retreats.html>

The Singing Universe: A Retreat with Joy Cowley 30th January to 2nd Feb 2004. "This will be a retreat that celebrates our mystical journey, recognising the links between the discoveries of contemplative prayer and quantum science. Above all it will be about our own place in the love song of the universe."

\$145.00 Residential/\$90 non-residential

Contact Houchen Retreat House in Hamilton
houchen.house@xtra.co.nz

Epworth Bookshop changes hands

Epworth Bookshop Trust has sold its Epworth Bookshop operation to a new company formed by staff members Philip Garside and Sarah Laurenson and their spouses Heather Garside and Alan Dine. The new company is called Epworth Books Ltd. Their address is: 157B Karori Road, Marsden Village, Karori, Wellington P.O Box 17 255, Karori, Wellington, phone 04 385 0352, fax 04 385 6114, NZ freephone 0800 755 355 email: sales@epworthbooks.org.nz website <http://www.epworthbooks.org.nz>

SoF in China?

Don Cupitt sends word that a Chinese Sea of Faith Network may not be out of the question in the short-to-middle term. Don's works are apparently being translated and published in China, and he's booked for a lecture tour there in 2004.

Source: *SoFIA Bulletin* October 2003

Parliament of the World's Religions

The first was held in Chicago in 1893 and marked the beginning of a formal dialogue between the religious and spiritual traditions of East and West. The second, in 1993 was also in Chicago, the third in Capetown was held in 1999 called attention to the interreligious movement's contribution to overcoming apartheid. The fourth Parliament will be held in Barcelona from July 7 to 13, 2004. It will provide a forum to help us:

- Deepen our spirituality
- Live in harmony
- Recognize the humanity of the other
- Actively work for a better world

One could hardly disagree! Source: www.cpwr.org

How Many SoFathers ...

... does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

Once a light bulb goes out, we can no longer believe in it, but we can talk endlessly about *why* it went out

Honest Doubt

Ted Abraham drew to our attention this quote from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*: "**There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds**"

[see also *Radical Theology* p7 - ed]

Irresistible Happiness

"I can only suggest," he says kindly, "you do your best to banish anxiety, preferably with a glass of champagne, and lay yourself open to the moment when happiness becomes irresistible."

John Mortimer

Anglicans on the Brink of Schism?

"There can never be any compromise between a world that is fixed by the scriptures and understandings of first-century Israel and the much more developed and sophisticated plural world we inhabit today ... We cannot really expect such an institution to leave the ninety-nine heterosexuals in search of the one lost gay ..."

David Hart, *UK Steering Committee & Anglican priest.*

Although the issue of homosexual clergy is comparatively quiet in New Zealand at present, it is likely to gain heat soon because of the recent acceptance by that church of an application by lesbian lay-preacher Deborah Gordon to train for the Presbyterian ministry.

Its already a lively issue in the Anglican communion in both the US and the UK.

It is a matter of significance for the SoF Network in the UK. In part this is because of the "established" status of the CoFE there and in part because of the large number of Anglicans, including clergy, in the UK Network.

Their recent AGM passed two resolutions. The first, in the context of homosexual clergy, "voices its indignation" at the pressure put on Jeffrey John to withdraw his nomination as Bishop of Reading.

The second, in the context of wider expressions of faith, states that the SoF in the UK "does not believe that formal discipline is an appropriate way of handling doctrinal diversity."

A similar initiative, though not specifically SoF sponsored can be found at

www.PetitionOnline.com/ManCath/

FAITH IN CYBERSPACE

A STEP TOWARDS GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS?

Westar

Westar Institute (host to The Jesus Seminar) publishes "The 4th R". Some articles are available at:
http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R_Articles/4r_articles.html

The UK Network

maintains a pretty full website too — lots of interesting items: www.sofn.org.uk

In The US

Organisations of a SoF "style" are springing up in the US. One such is SPAFER (South Points Associations for Exploring Religion). It was formed in 2000 by several people who, following informal conversations at a Jesus Seminar, felt the need to have a forum in the Mid-South to discuss and explore religious questions and issues that orthodoxy does not seem to address. www.spafer.org

Radical Faith:

Exploring the fundamentals of faith in a changed world. A Durham based site with good articles and links, good connections to the writings of Richard Holloway. Part of the Progressive Christianity Network.
<http://www.radicalfaith.org/>

Sick of Political Correctness and Fashionable Nonsense?

Butterflies and Wheels has been established to oppose a number of related phenomena. These include:

1. Pseudoscience that is ideologically and politically motivated.
2. Epistemic relativism in the humanities (for example, the idea that statements are only true or false relative to particular cultures, discourses or language-games) In passing I ask "Is SoF ever/never guilty of epistemic relativism — correspondence invited — ed.
3. Those disciplines or schools of thought whose truth claims are prompted by the political, ideological and moral commitments of their adherents, and the general tendency to judge the veracity of claims about the world in terms of such commitments.

<http://butterfliesandwheels.com>

WHY ARE WE HERE?

"As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being."

Carl Jung: *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p.326

CONTRIBUTION

Helen Frances of Wellington writes "I attach a poem I wrote after hearing Iraqi poets here perform their poetry. They speak from experiences I have not had, and I felt very moved."

To Iraqi poets in New Zealand

Your words fly over my head
dropping images
like a shower of sun
from Ra or Allah
or the womb of a woman
burst wide

I stand on the balcony
of your poem and see
trees and white houses
sprayed with blood
A school bus
spewing entrails
from two eyes that didn't see
the suicide bomber

I cry "Allah, god almighty, what can a woman do?"

And I feel the warm flesh
of this woman's body
her white house
built to shelter life,
and in the blood
of her womb
the seed of olive groves

Helen Frances 2003

RADICAL THEOLOGY

*Don Cupitt's address at the recent SoF (UK) Conference carried the title **Radical Theology, Radical Politics**. Here is an excerpt:*

"Christianity, it seems, includes also its own moment of self-cancellation: faith's day includes its own midnight. Why? — because, paradoxically, the very considerations that caused the loss of faith then go on to recreate faith in a new and powerful form. ...

On my view then, radical theology is a personal struggle for a new and better kind of religion on the far side of the loss of the older sort of popular, traditional, ecclesiastical faith. It is, inevitably, highly autobiographical."

LOCAL GROUPS

WHAT THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT

Marlborough aka Blenheim

John Craighead reports: "This year we have undertaken a 12 part video series study called "Canticles of the Cosmos" told by the cosmologist Brian Swimme as his response to Thomas Berry's twelve principles of a functional cosmology.

We've undertaken this jointly with the local Unitarian group. It's not an easy study as it strips away the traditional creation stories and invites us to take the story of the Universe as the basis of our understanding our role on the planet. This highlights our very recent emergence as a species amongst many others and our inability to live and think of ourselves as separate from the 'natural world'. As traditional beliefs in the last 300 years have encouraged us to do the opposite with the environmental consequences are wrestling with today it is a timely and inspiring challenge to our intellectual and spiritual foundations. Brian Swimme features on the internet."

Contact: John Craighead Phone 03-578-7359

Dunedin

Their November meeting will feature a viewing of the video filmed at the Timaru Conference 2002 followed by these questions for discussion:

1. Does the word "life" better capture the essence of spirituality than the word "god"?
2. Where is the tide in your "sea of faith"?
3. Does the Buddhist tradition aid spiritual growth for you?
4. Does christianity without theism seem a contradiction in terms?

Contact: Marjorie Spittle phone 03-476-4322

Auckland

They recently thanked departing committee members Christine Jones, Joy Lewis and Owen Lewis.

They are buying the UK "SoF" magazine (see panel, page 10) for their library.

Their end-of-year dinner (November 16) will feature ABC video filmed at the Timaru Conference.

Jill and Ian Harris will be leading a workshop on "Creating Liturgies" on November 29 — more information on this at phone 09-377-4985

Contact Derek Pringle, phone 09-489-3589

South Auckland

This group has enjoyed an informative and interesting year of eclectic talks and discussions, ranging in content from 'Forgiveness', 'The History of Humanism' and 'Easter Island' to 'The Origins of Middle East Conflict' and 'The Anatomy of Terrorism'. They plan to finish the year with a social hour and a viewing of

the ABC video, hosted by the Auckland Central group — see above.

Their group meets each second Sunday of the month at 2:30pm in Friendship House Manukau and a warm welcome is given to all comers,

Contact Elsie Montgomery, Phone 09-278-5517

A Decade Ago

from Newsletter Number 5,
December 1993:

The Conference anticipated in our last Newsletter was so successful that it far exceeded all our expectations, being attended by 211 people. All the feedback has been very positive.

During the Conference the Sea of Faith Network (SOFN) was officially formed by a general meeting chaired by Ian Harris.

It was agreed that organization should be kept as simple as possible, that only individual, and not corporate, membership should be envisaged, and that membership fee should stand at \$10 per annum.

The Wellington SOFN ad hoc committee was asked to set up the Continuing Committee for 1993-4 from Wellington SOFN members, and this was to be responsible for the Programme for the 1994 Conference.

John Denny, Warden of Bryant Hall where the Conference was held, and local organizer of the Conference reported that there was likely to be a financial surplus. It was agreed that any surplus should form a Conference Fund for future Conference expenses. John and Gillian Denny were warmly thanked for the work they had put into the Conference. John's invitation to hold the 1994 Conference at the same place, September 2-4, was gratefully accepted and local arrangements were left in the hands of the Hamilton Committee.

The new Wellington Committee was asked to look at the possibility of a South Island Conference for 1995 or, alternatively, a biennial conference, interspersed with Regional Conferences.

The SOFN Steering Committee is now: Ian Harris (chairperson), Jill Harris (secretary, Jane Griffith (membership secretary and treasurer), Lloyd Geering (newsletter editor), Marion Blackburn, David Simmers and Ian Crabbtree. (Newsletter Distribution).

The Quest for Spiritual Truth?

This article, which has been shortened for space considerations, was submitted by Ken Mills of Whakatane. The full version is on the website.

Spiritual Truth appears to each person differently according to their upbringing, world position and future involvement in the further study of nature religion and its wider aspect and search into the spiritual nature of man.

There seems to be an inbuilt essence of the Divine in each of us that we at some stage in our life seek to explore, the Journey depends it would seem on a certain amount of luck.

The book you are drawn to in the bookshop, the book you find in the waiting room of the Dentist or Doctor. The book you find at your friends house you are staying with for a few days. The open meeting you go to on the spur of the moment. All seem to be accidental? Are we all searching for this indwelling-ness that we find hard to explain?

We have all been overshadowed by Religious Doctrine since birth in one way or another and we may be forced into one or other of these religious orders by birth, family demands and local customs. Many of course will change their denomination due to their reading or study as time goes on. Some will for various reasons dispense with all types of religion.

There are other avenues that can open up before us and lead us into what seem strange and silent forms of religion, the Mystical, the Black and White Witchcraft, and many variations some of which are completely harmless and fun, others lead to more sinister ends.

Myself I prefer the Mystical wherein there is also a wide range of choice, but I feel one tends to quickly choose the right Path and are able to come to terms with ones own ecstasy as you follow the path. There are dangers in any of the paths one takes be it any major religious denomination or any of the many other methods of finding the Truth of this inner fire.

That there is a connection between all that is composed in the Universe I have no doubt. The mysteries of creation and the hidden connection between all things existing in the universe are among the riddles whose solution is of deep interest to us all.

There is an abundance of words, which do not in the least assist the process of thought but merely reflect the emotional struggle in this search for truth. The fact is there are several avenues that open up the truth of spiritual knowledge that the organised religious orders do their best to deny even fight against as I have learnt to my horror.

Why is it that we can find divine revelations in one or other of these avenues, yet when we try to extend or share our divinity with the human kind we are so often disappointed.

What is it that divides man in his quest to find unity and brotherly love?

Our Consciousness is I feel the one common link through which we can achieve this goal. If we Think love and if we practice love in its wider terms then we must see the gradual culmination of its passage throughout this lonely planet.

Ken Mills. 24/6/2003.

How Do We Nurture Our Spirituality?

This item is taken from the September/October issue of the Newsletter of the Auckland Group. It is a summary of a "Conversation" between Rosemary Neave and Ceridwyn Parr (and others) on the subject of "FutureChurch", at their meeting on 17 August, 2003. You might like to read the Chairperson's "Last Word" on page 10 at about the same time.

Rosemary opened by asking how do we nurture our spirituality in a world beyond theism? Rosemary feels that we need "God" -- meaning a framework for talking about what it is we value, and where we get a sense of hope and meaning and participation in something greater than ourselves. What is meant by "God" can be as varied as the people present.

As we have moved away from the idea of just one way, people have become more individualistic in their experience of "God". Rosemary felt that spirituality is more about making connections with the earth, with God and with others. Her idea of a FutureChurch is a place where people gather to try to discover ultimate meaning and value, to share stories, to discuss, to create rituals, to strategize for political change.

She was impressed with the energy of the Sea of Faith in NZ, but felt that it is an intellectualizing group, rather than a spiritual group engaging together in life. FutureChurch would ground people's ideas in calling forth a response, a passion, a commitment, a hope! This is what spirituality provides. A key part is creating rituals to help ground these ideas, to give a sense of community, and to motivate us to work together to bring about the world we hope for.

Ceridwyn spoke of her time at various spiritual communities in Britain last year — especially Iona — and of the Taizé Community [in France] — where people attending live and work and worship together as a way of expressing their spirituality. People gathered together can make changes happen in the world.

Spirituality enables us to encounter ourselves full and to feel more content with who we are.

Rosemary summed up her "passion for FutureChurch" by saying that she wants to help create a place where a Christianity can be found that is contemporary, thinking, connected, passionate, relational and responsive.

For more information on FutureChurch, visit their website at www.futurechurch.org.nz or email Rosemary Neave at rosemary@futurechurch.org.nz

Got a Book Review?

Or a film review, or a well-thought-out piece for publication — send it to me. This Newsletter should primarily be a vehicle for New Zealand copy, but its got to come from you!

Your ever-searching editor

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 Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay, phone 04-236-7533

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

The article about FutureChurch on page 9 should be read against the background of what our own Sea of Faith Network seeks to provide.

We are not a Christian ginger-group nor one that even seeks to reform Christianity. Indeed many members have given up on the hope that they once held that Christianity can be reformed.

As an organisation, we are indifferent as to the path of faith that our members individually or collectively adopt to nurture their own spiritually and to celebrate key spiritual values. That's their choice and we respect it.

We are not a "church" in any sense. That exposes us, with some justification, to charges of "only doing head stuff". That we lack a liturgical or even a ritual core is lamented by some. Others are bothered that we don't make the SoF "voice" heard in politics — whether church, peace or environmental. In both instances, we feel that we can provide more value to our members by providing a non-dogmatic, non-creedal forum in which members can find their own "positions" on such matters. Then they go on to join whatever existing group (church, Amnesty International, Greenpeace ...) best expresses their yearnings.

Most of our members would position themselves in a box labelled by sociologists as "religious humanist". We would agree with *secular* humanists that all forms of religious expression — buildings, vestments, scriptures, creeds, hymns and liturgies — are human cultural constructs, as are music, political parties, great poetry and urban myths.

We radically differ from secular humanists as to the importance of religious expression.

Secular humanists tend to disparage all manifestations of religious faith as part of the immaturity of the human race and they say that we should speed up rationalist education in a bid to eliminate it.

Religious humanists affirm "the continuing importance of religious thought and practice as a vehicle for awe and wonder and for the celebration of key social and spiritual values" and we promote "the quest for meaning and fulfillment as a human activity". And of course we provide "encouragement, stimulation and support in fellowship with others engaged in the quest."

Its all in our brochure — and you can print your own copy from our website at <http://sof.wellington.net.nz>.

Noel Cheer, Steering Committee Chairperson 2003-2004