



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.
NEWSletter

From the Arrangements Committee:

**National Conference September 24-26
St Peter's School, Cambridge**

MEMBERS PLANNING TO ATTEND THIS conference can look forward to three days in a beautiful, peaceful, rural setting in the heart of the Waikato. St Peter's is a co-educational boarding school sited in extensive tree-studded grounds close to the town of Cambridge and only 15 mins drive from Hamilton Airport.

The buildings are well-suited to the structure of our conference as there is a large centrally-located lecture theatre (seats 700+) and nearby are very well equipped classroom blocks and a student centre which has several large comfortable lounge areas. The dining hall and chapel are a short walk from this central complex and the accommodation halls are further away again on the perimeter of the campus.

The accommodation is of a very good standard of its type. All rooms are single cubicles and each accommodation block has well-equipped kitchen/lounge areas. It is a pleasant stroll across the grounds to the conference area, and if it is wet, there are sealed roads and ample parking.

If you think that becoming a boarder again is not for you, then there is the usual variety of accommodation (homestays, bed and breakfasts, hostels, camping grounds, motels and hotels) in Cambridge (2km) or Hamilton (10km) for you to make your own arrangements with.

*Peter Timmins
Chair of the 2004 Arrangements Committee*

Newsletter 56

May 2004

TIME TO START PLANNING YOUR WORKSHOP
ISSUE

- 1. The Arrangements Committee**
Peter Timmins talks about Conference accommodation.
- 2. Robert Funk & The Naked Jesus**
From Nazereth to Nicea is the path from iconoclast to icon.
- 4. Phantoms of the Brain**
Ian Fleming liked V.S. Ramachandran's book.
- 4. In Brief**
Ripples on the Sea of Faith
- 5. The Passion of The Christ**
What reviewers are saying about it.
- 6. Our "Rules"**
Are any changes needed?
- 6. Philip Pullman's Trilogy ...**
His Dark Materials gets short shrift.
- 7. Mary, Mary, Extraordinary**
The rehabilitation of Mary Magdalene.
- 7. Has Christianity a Future ...**
... or is it doomed to be "embalmed in fundamentalism"?
- 8. Local Groups**
What they are talking about.
- 9. The Sea of Faith — 2010**
Donald Feist's thoughts of where we should go.
- 10. All About Us**
Who and where and what and so on.
- 10. The Last Word From The Chairperson ...**
... who did not like Gibson's "knavish piece of work". Either.

Robert Funk and The Naked Jesus

PART 4 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?" Earlier excerpts dealt with Don Cupitt, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Some material is omitted for reasons of space. The full paper is available on the website.

Robert W. Funk (1996), *Honest to Jesus*, Hodder and Stoughton.

Strip Jesus of the polite, middle-class get-up the church has played him in and what do you have?

Robert Funk, Founder of the Jesus Seminar sets out in this unapologetic book to do some stripping. Or more properly, to help reveal a Jesus who has been hidden by the New Testament and by the whole credal domination of his story.

To describe Funk as a historical Jesus buff would be to do him an injustice. His chief concern is to examine how Jesus the social rebel and iconoclast, an eminently exciting person, became the sleep-inducing, non-human god-figure of the creeds, a cult figure and a super-nature.

This summary does not deal in detail with all of the chapters. It sketches the road Funk took and spells out his 21 theses from the epilogue, entitled "Jesus for a New Age". It is the epilogue of a breathtaking ride along the road from Nazareth to Nicea, with heritage notices all along the route.

It might be useful to note Funk's list of six classes of readers for *Honest to Jesus*. They are, as he sees it:

1. Those who are bitter from an initial deception by parent, clergy, or the church. They are the "church alumni association" as John Spong terms them. "They once thought they were instructed in the truth, only to discover that their parents and the church misled them" (pp11-12). They are the "walking wounded" of the church who, if they are not too "embittered" may become "truth seekers, questers".

2. Those who have faithfully remained with the community of faith. Funk sees them as dissatisfied, looking for crumbs, aware that the church is fading out, but hoping for food.

3. Those who are innocent of the Christian tradition altogether. They have "often wondered what the Bible and religion were all about" but either did not have or did not take opportunity to find out.

4. Those who read only to confirm their own prior convictions. Victims of many sorts of tyranny, they have a trained reaction to any new thinking about the Bible or religion. They 'know'.

5. Clergy and lay leaders. Funk sees a few of these to have been awaiting honesty about Jesus and faith. These have

read with delight some of the people included in the present list. He speaks with sadness of those clergy and laypersons who have quit the church because honest truth was never made available or they were too slow to grasp it. He laments the 'theological dry-rot, the institutional fungi' that have accumulated. These are those whose attention span has shortened, whose reading time has withered, whose libraries are outdated, who do not read, who have no energy for expanding their intellectual horizons.

6. Other professional scholars, especially other biblical scholars. His experience with them is a very mixed bag of pleasant surprises and lack of openness to a new point of view.

A field of possible questers for a radical theology may be suggested by Funk's list of six classes of reader. A kind of evangelistic mission is implied, in which radical theology is simply a new package for an old need: truth about God and wholeness.

Now we turn to the road. The chief concern has been to examine how Jesus the social rebel and sage, driven by the imperative of the Kingdom of God, became the Divine Saviour and Sin-bearer, eternal King and Judge of all the earth. And how that has led to an unbearable bind for the Christian faith. In this respect, Funk's fundamental assumption is like that of Borg and Crossan, namely that to get free of the smothering miasma wrapped around Jesus by centuries of church politics there must be a new honesty about what Jesus said, did and thought. Can it be assumed any longer that Jesus came as divine Son of God from the glory of eternity, that he was sent by God to fulfill an eternal plan to have him die in our place to pay the price for sin demanded by God and to defeat death by rising from the dead and returning to his place at God's right hand? And that, being eternal from the beginning, he knew all that was to take place so that his death which would not in the long run be a real death, would nevertheless effect the required redemption? God looks the other way and pretends he's not his son, yet accepts the sacrifice and lets us all get home free. In place of this incomprehensible metaphysics, the historical Jesus must be recovered.

Funk then, like the others, is on a no-holds-barred quest for truth. In his quest, he resolved to observe strictly a set of rules for the quest for the historical Jesus. So he spells out a straightforward set of rules for an honest search, then sets to work.

“...From Nazareth to Nicea is the path from iconoclast to icon ...”

From Nazareth to Nicea is the path from iconoclast to icon. Funk sketches that movement in familiar terms of Peter's ascendancy, Peter and Paul arguing about apostleship, and the gospel of Jesus as being a celebration of man's equality under God.

Funk concludes that Jesus made none of the claims for himself that are inserted into the story, did not practice baptism, and did not initiate what we know as the Eucharist.

He observes that the Nicene Creed itself makes the astonishing omission of everything between the virgin birth and the passion and resurrection. Jesus, in other words, has been lifted out of history.

And Jesus played a passive role. Imagine that! The Lord of all creation was scripted into a wooden passivity under a predestined plan.

He could only do this because he was not really human. He only seemed to be human.

The outcome of this fairy tale is a childish passivity parading as mature belief. Funk illustrates this by what he calls the childhood package of popular piety in America today. It runs:

- ✓ There is a God in heaven
- ✓ God loves me
- ✓ Jesus is God's son
- ✓ Jesus died for my sins
- ✓ God speaks to us through the Bible
- ✓ I must believe these teachings; if I don't believe them, I won't go to heaven.

From this childishness, the way back to the real Jesus cannot be easy. Funk lists seven barriers blocking the way back to Nazareth:

1. Ignorance
2. Popular images of Jesus
3. The gospels as inerrant and infallible
4. Monolithic literalism
5. Spirituality as self-indulgence
6. A self-serving church and clergy
7. The foibles of biblical scholarship (isolation, elitism, patronage-seeking, etc)

He lists the factors that have precipitated the renewed quest for the historical Jesus. They include:

- ✓ The influence of the historical method
- ✓ The collapse of credal and traditional theological formulations
- ✓ The new ecumenism of scholarship
- ✓ The end of the Christianised age
- ✓ The rediscovery of the parables
- ✓ The rediscovery of the Wisdom literature
- ✓ The discovery of new sources
- ✓ The collapse of the old symbolic universe
- ✓ The arrival of new or revised methodologies. These methodologies include not only languages but linguistics, and social sciences.

These factors and many others lead to a much greater ability than 100 years ago to recover reliable information about Jesus.

Further into the book, Funk delves into translation and text, the gospels and their sources, the rhetorical Jesus, humour and the contours of God's domain, the parable, the

kingdom, the death of Jesus, domesticating and marketing the Messiah, resurrection and return, and the divine child.

Out of all this, Funk derives an epilogue, "Jesus for a New Age," culminating in his 21 theses;

1. The aim of the quest is to set Jesus free
2. The renewed quest prompts us to revamp our understanding of the origins of the Christian life itself
3. The renewed quest also has serious ramifications for how we understand the Christian life
4. The renewed quest points to (Jesus as) a secular sage who may have more relevance to the spiritual dimensions of society at large than to institutionalized religion
5. We can no longer rest our faith on the faith of Peter or the faith of Paul. Such dependency and authoritarianism is no longer adequate
6. Jesus himself is not the proper object of faith
7. In articulating the vision of Jesus, we should take care to express our interpretations in the same register as he employed in his parables and aphorisms
8. Give Jesus a demotion
9. We need to cast Jesus in a new drama, assign him a role in a story with a different plot
10. We need to re-conceive the vocation of Jesus as the Christ
11. Jesus kept an open table
12. Jesus made forgiveness reciprocal
13. Jesus condemned the public practice of piety
14. Jesus advocated an unbrokered relationship with God
15. Jesus robs his followers of Christian privilege
16. Jesus makes it clear that all rewards and punishments are intrinsic
17. We will have to abandon the doctrine of the blood atonement
18. We will need to interpret the reports of the resurrection for what they are: our glimpse of what Jesus glimpsed
19. Redeem sex and Mary, Jesus' mother by restoring to Jesus a biological father, if not actual father.
20. Exorcise the apocalyptic elements from Christianity
21. Declare the New Testament a highly uneven and biased record of various attempts to invent Christianity.

Each of these 21 conclusions is fully explained in the text and the reader is pointed to that. Our interest for purposes of this essay is to signal the congruity of the selected theologians' writings by looking across them

Funk's contribution is unique, as they all are. He combines scholarly knowledge, courage and imagination. The book is also an expose of the plots and barriers by which religious people block honest inquiry.

Funk models the kind of identification of key points needed in the quest to recover what credal religion has smothered and distorted in its interest in privilege.



"Animated stardust"

IAN FLEMING RECOMMENDS THIS BOOK

Ian Fleming from Dunedin was very impressed with *Phantoms in the Brain — Human Nature and the Architecture of the Mind* by V.S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee. It was first published in Great Britain in 1998 by Fourth Estate.

Ian sent two quotations from the book. The first is from chapter 7, "The Sound of One Hand Clapping":

"Unlike other animals, humans are acutely aware of their own mortality and are terrified of death. But the study of cosmology gives us a sense of timelessness, of being part of something much larger. The fact that your own personal life is finite is less frightening when you know you are part of an evolving universe — an ever-unfolding drama. This is probably the closest a scientist can come to having a religious experience.

"The same goes for the study of evolution, for it gives you a sense of time and place, allowing you to see yourself as part of a great journey. And likewise for the brain sciences. In this revolution we have given up the idea that there is a soul separate from our minds and bodies. Far from being terrifying, this idea is very liberating. If you think you're something special in this world, engaging in a lofty inspection of the cosmos from a unique vantage point, your annihilation becomes unacceptable. But if you're really part of the great cosmic dance of Shiva, rather than a mere spectator, then your inevitable death should be seen as a joyous reunion with nature rather than as a tragedy."

This is the book's concluding paragraphs:

"During the last three decades, neuroscientists throughout the world have probed the nervous system in fascinating detail and have learned a great deal about the laws of mental life and about how these laws emerge from the brain. The pace of progress has been exhilarating, but — at the same time — the findings make many people uncomfortable. It seems somehow disconcerting to be told that your life, all your hopes, triumphs and aspirations simply arise from the activity of neurons in your brain. But far from being humiliating, this idea is ennobling, I think. Science — cosmology, evolution and especially the brain sciences — is telling us that we have no privileged position in the universe and that our sense of having a private non-material soul "watching the world" is

really an illusion (as has been emphasised by Eastern mystical traditions like Hinduism and Zen Buddhism). Once you realise that far from being a spectator, you are in fact part of the eternal ebb and flow of events in the cosmos, this realisation is very liberating. Ultimately this idea also allows you to cultivate a certain humility — the essence of all authentic religious experience. It is not an idea that's easy to translate into words but comes very close to that of the cosmologist Paul Davies, who said:

"Through science, we human beings are able to grasp at least some of nature's secrets. We have cracked part of the cosmic code. Why this should be, just why homo sapiens should carry the spark of rationality that provides the key to the universe, is a deep enigma. We, who are children of the universe — animated stardust — can nevertheless reflect on the nature of that same universe, even to the extent of glimpsing the rules on which it runs. How we have become linked into this cosmic dimension is a mystery. Yet the linkage cannot be denied.

"What does it mean? What is Man that we might be party to such privilege? I cannot believe that our existence in this universe is a mere quirk of fate, an accident of history, an incidental blip in the great cosmic drama. Our involvement is too intimate. The physical species homo may count for nothing, but the existence of mind in some organism on some planet in the universe is surely a fact of fundamental significance. Through conscious beings the universe has generated self-awareness. This can be no trivial detail, no minor by-product of mindless, purposeless forces. We are truly meant to be here."

Ian concludes: Are we? I don't think brain science alone, despite all its triumphs, will ever answer that question. But that we can ask the question at all is, to me, the most puzzling aspect of our existence.

[V.S. Ramachandran was the author and presenter of the 2003 Reith Lecture series, *The Emerging Mind* — ed]

Why

Why Not

.... present a Workshop at this year's Conference? Tell Marjorie Cox (phone 09-445-1240 or email her at marjorie.cox@whl.co.nz

You know you can do it!

Leap of Faith?

Geoff Bonallack is a member of the Mana Sea of Faith Group, just north of Wellington. In February he did his first bungee jump, at Taupo. He reckons that it won't be the last now that he has developed a taste for it. Oh, and Geoff is 87!

oops ... !

The review title on page 7 of Newsletter 55 implies that Don Cupitt wrote a book called *New Religion* for a New Age. As far as we know, he hasn't — at least not yet! Alan Goss' article was making the point that this is an umbrella theme found in many of Don's books.

New Book Resources

Bona-fide members can borrow these by sending \$3.50 for P&P (stamps preferred) to Suzi Thirlwall (details on p10)

B148 Furlong, Andrew: *Tried for Heresy*

B149 Vermes, Geza: *Jesus in his Jewish Context*

B150 Moyers, Bill: *Genesis, A Living Conversation* (book+video tapes)

B151 Boulton, David: *The Trouble with God*

B152 Keck, L. Robert: *Sacred Quest*

B153 Leaves, Nigel: *Odyssey on the Sea of Faith*

B154 Burklo, Jim: *Open Christianity*

B155 Rubenstein, Richard E. *When Jesus Became God*

B156 Kelley, James I: *Skeptic in The House of God*

B157 Holloway, Richard: *Doubts and Loves*

B158 Armstrong, Karen: *The Battle for God*

B159 Skolimowski, Henryk: *A Sacred Place to Dwell*

Michael King

We note with sadness the untimely death of New Zealand's most acclaimed current historian, Dr. Michael King. His contribution to understanding between indigenous Maori and indigenous Pakeha is of inestimable value, especially at this time of heightened controversy.

Michael was a Keynote Speaker at our Conference in 2000. You can read his paper on our website or order it from the Resource Centre citing its number "P33".



What reviewers say is good — and bad, about the movie.

As a Movie

"Let's get one thing straight, The Passion of the Christ is a well crafted film. There's nothing wrong with the directing, the acting is good and the sets are wonderfully put together to create an atmosphere of ye olde Jerusalem."

Leslie Bunder
www.somethingjewish.co.uk

The film is devoid of poetry, imagination and nuanced interpretation.

An obsolete understanding of the atonement activity of Jesus suffuses the film.

By focusing unremittingly on the brutal scenes of the crucifixion, the film-maker expresses a sacrificial understanding of the atonement."

Catholic New Times, Toronto

Anti-Jewish?

"It is unflattering to Jews. Caiaphas, the high priest, follows Jesus right to Calvary to make sure this renegade Jew is dead. This is not in the gospels."

Catholic New Times, Toronto

Fanaticism

David Denby in The New Yorker said "Gibson's timing couldn't have been more unfortunate: another dose of death-haunted religious fanaticism is the last thing we need."

Paradigms Lost and Found

Marcus Borg suggests that three features are important in the old paradigm [which this movie promotes]: faith as believing is central; the afterlife is promise and motive; and the Christian life is about rewards and punishments.

To be a good Christian in this view, one must believe literally that Jesus was son of God, born of a virgin, that he died miserably for our sins and that God raised him physically from the dead.

However, in the emerging paradigm, the Bible is a human response to God, not a divine product; biblical interpretation is metaphorical and historical, rather than literal and factual; and the Bible mediates the sacred rather than reveals doctrines and morals.

Borg writes that the "earlier paradigm is anti-intellectual and rigidly but selectively moralistic."

Atonement

"Thankfully, many Christian churches have moved away from an emphasis on the blood of Christ's sacrifice, popularized by Anselm in the 12th century. This "satisfaction" theory has had a long run within Christianity and it surely served its purpose in another age when Christians were struggling to understand the unmerited suffering of Jesus and their own sufferings in an often short and brutish life. In this interpretation, Jesus was the sacrificial lamb offered up to God as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of unworthy humanity."

**'This
"satisfaction" theory
has ...
outlived
its usefulness'**

"This metaphor, probably borrowed from the sacrifice on the Jewish Day of Atonement, has had a long grip on our imagination. It must be stressed, however, that it has outlived its usefulness, as have most of the metaphors used over the course of time in the Church — the necessary justification, the holy ransom, etc."

Catholic New Times, Toronto

Why Did Jesus Die?

"I don't think Jesus saw his death as the purpose of life," said Marcus Borg. "It takes the whole political edge out of the story to say 'our sins' led to his death. Jesus was executed because he was a radical critic — like Martin Luther King Jr. — of the political and economic system of his day."

John Dominic Crossan offers a simpler explanation: Jesus' message threatened Roman and Jewish authorities. That message was the arrival of the "kingdom of God."

Pious Revisionism

John Spong: "This film also introduces a fictitious character named St. Veronica who is said, at Station Number Six^[1], to have wiped Jesus' bloodied face with her handkerchief. Veronica, a creation of later piety, never appears in any biblical narrative."

Notes: [1] The Stations of the Cross are a Catholic devotion meant to evoke a contemplative experience of Jesus' last hours. The faithful follow a series of 14 pictorial images representing scenes of Jesus' condemnation, his road to Calvary, and his crucifixion.

Spong: "Mary, the mother of Jesus, hardly appears in the gospel tradition outside the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. She is never referred to or mentioned in the writings of Paul. She makes only two appearances in Mark, the first Gospel to be written (70-75 CE) and both of them are pejorative."

"Mel Gibson ... has read the later development of pious tradition about the Virgin Mary back into the gospel narratives."

Mind Your Language!

"Jesus talking to (Pontius) Pilate and Pilate to Jesus in Latin!" exclaimed John Dominic Crossan, ... "I mean in your dreams. It would have been Greek..."

Latin was reserved for official decrees or used by the elite. Most Roman centurions in the Holy Land spoke Greek rather than Latin, historians and archaeologists told Reuters.

The mistakes, experts say, didn't stop with the wrong language, which Crossan said was so badly pronounced in the film that it was almost incomprehensible.

Theology

"In the end, she [Elaine Pagels] said, "Gibson's movie is no more subtle than 'The Lord of the Rings.' There is the side of good and the side of evil."

What Does it say about Jesus?

"All these critics regret Gibson's portrayal of Jesus ... as a virtual puppet in a cruel divine atonement plan, and of the crucifixion as a once-and-for-all event devoid of any sense of redemption as ongoing in our lives."

Catholic New Times, Toronto.

What Does it say about God?

"If you face the theology squarely, you're dealing with a God who would not forgive people but would take it out on his own son," said John Dominic Crossan, "While you might love Jesus, it would not make you love God. You're dealing with someone who is close to a monster."

"Would you like to meet this God in a dark alley?"

More ...

... on the next page. Your editor, too, puts in the boot — see page 10.

Read This, Mel!

'It is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans. There one sees in Pontius Pilate a Roman racially and intellectually so superior, that he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of Jewry.'

Adolf Hitler (July 5, 1942)

Say This, Mel!

The Guardian in the UK has come up with a handy glossary of Aramaic phrases for those who intend to subject themselves to Mel Gibson's movie, 'The Passion of the Christ' (which has its dialogue in Aramaic). These include:

- Baseem, ellaa saabar naa d-etstebeeth yateer b-Lebeh d-Gabaaraa! (Not bad, but I think I preferred Braveheart);
- Puuee men Preeshey, puuee! (Boo, Pharisees! Boo!);
- Shbuuq shuukhaaraa deel. Man ethnaggad udamshaa? (Sorry I'm late. Have I missed any scourging?) and
- Ayleyn enuun Oorqey? (Which ones are the Orcs?).

Source: SoFiA "Bulletin" April 2004

**"Dance like no one is watching,
Love like you've never been hurt,
Sing like no-one is listening,
Live like it's heaven on earth."**

William Purkey

"The Rules"

We're looking at our Constitution ("Rules") and asking whether any change is needed. They were originally drawn up in 1996.

While we want to keep the constitutional burden to a minimum, we do need a basic set of rules to satisfy the Companies Office in order to maintain our status as an Incorporated Society. We don't want to make a big deal about it because we are a network that exists to serve the members, and the Steering Committee is not a hierarchical structure with ambitions to entrench or institutionalise its own position. But we value some response from any member willing to give it some thought.

You will have received a copy of the Rules with this Newsletter and, should you want to propose any changes which would be discussed at the AGM, then you will need to forward them to the Secretary (Marion Dodd, 64 Wairiki Road, Mt. Eden, Auckland) by August 15th so that your remit can be included in the mailed-out notice of the AGM.

The Rules may be changed only at an AGM. Proposing changes and voting may be done only by members.

Are His Materials Too Dark?

Leonie Caldecott wrote an article with the title "Paradise Denied" for the Roman Catholic website Touchstone www.touchstonemag.com. She is a columnist for The Catholic Herald and works for the European branch of the Chesterton Institute for Faith and Culture (www.secondspring.co.uk).

Readers who are familiar with Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* will recognise why a Roman Catholic would take issue with parts (perhaps most) of it, and so too does this reviewer. But she goes beyond partisanship into a more general disapproval:

"In fact, the most notable thing about the last volume of *His Dark Materials* is the way in which the author, judged from a purely literary perspective, woefully overreaches himself, losing coherence and continuity and lapsing into the worst excesses of didactic writing. This is the cardinal sin of fiction, whereby an author, instead of embedding the moral of his story in the text as a whole, contents himself with putting it on the lips of a protagonist. And yet it is for this most flawed volume that the literary establishment decided to decorate Philip Pullman."

She contrasts this kind of sermonising with the more subtle approach of Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*: "... consider the spiritual combat affecting Gollum in the second book in which the unfortunate creature conducts a fascinating dialogue between the angelically and the demonically influenced sides of his soul. ... Tolkien presents — embeds — truths about the moral life and struggles of the soul, in a way that is not a sermon stuck into the story but an event that makes sense within the story. By showing through the story the choices Gollum faces, the reasons for choosing either, and the fruits of his final choice, Tolkien subtly implies the advantages of moral behavior."

Pullman doesn't so much as wrestle with Christianity but rather bulldozes it aside and instates another metaphysic:

"Philip Pullman appears to be basing himself on an age-old piece of metaphysics called dualism. Whether under its ancient Manichean form, among the medieval sects, or indeed in its modern, New-Age guise, this heresy stems from the incapacity to hold spirit and matter in the right balance. ... While for most dualists of the ancient and medieval world, only the spiritual world is worth inhabiting, for a twentieth-century sentimental rationalist like Pullman, the material world is superior, and anyone who emphasizes the spiritual is a dangerous, life-denying death-worshiper."

Caldecott sees the whole atmosphere of Pullman's work as detrimental to adolescent growth: "Does it really serve the cause of realism and truth to condemn young people to spend the rest of their lives thinking that the life-giving God is no better than the Dark Lord Sauron or the evil wizard Volde-mort? Young people, of all faiths and none, who contemplated the fragility of life after September 11th, require all possible spiritual resources to face the future."

**"Instead of being Born Again
why not just Grow Up?"**

found in futuresnewz 8, a publication of futurechurch.org.nz

Mary, Mary, Extraordinary

The Rehabilitation of Mary Magdalene

Setting The Scene

If you read and enjoyed *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Henry Lincoln and Richard Leigh and, more recently, *The da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown you would be aware that, in one way or another the several authors are proposing a spectrum of speculations with varying degrees of offered proof. It is not the purpose of this article to assess the claims, but merely to draw them to your attention, the better to perhaps fuel a discussion group. In ascending order of "difficulty" the implicit and explicit claims are:

- that Mary Magdalene was one of Jesus' disciples
- that Mary Magdalene was the chief disciple
- that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus
- that the growing Christian church suppressed any or all of the foregoing
- that Mary Magdalene was pregnant to Jesus at the time that he was crucified (and that he, perhaps, survived).
- that she/they escaped under conditions that led to their descendants living anonymously in the south of France
- that the knowledge of the foregoing has been retained by secret societies in defiance of the Catholic Church and by other custodians who were in danger from that Church

Who Was She?

There is very little about Mary Magdalene in the canonical biblical account. The following references were found at: www.beliefnet.com/story/135/story_13527_1.html

- During Jesus' Ministry .. Luke 8:1-3
- During the Crucifixion .. Mark 15:40, Matthew 27:56, John 19:25
- After the Crucifixion .. Mark 15:47, Matthew 27:61, Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1
- At the Resurrection .. John 20:1, Mark 16:9, John 20:18, Luke 24

Mary, a woman from Magdala (present-day Migdal) appears first in Luke 8 as a woman from whom seven evil spirits have been evicted.

Tradition has confused her with the "woman taken in adultery" and who showed tearful regret — from which we get the word 'maudlin'. This is how David van Biema, writing in *Time Magazine* on Aug. 11, 2003 put it:

"The mix-up was made official by Pope Gregory the Great in 591 [when he conflated the two Marys]. That position became church teaching, although it was not adopted by Orthodoxy or Protestantism ...

"In 1969, in the liturgical equivalent of fine print, the Catholic Church officially separated Luke's sinful woman, Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene as part of a general revision of its missal."

'Suppose Jesus Were Married?'

This is the title of the 13th chapter of John Spong's *Born of a Woman*. He concedes that the biblical record and 20 centuries of tradition argue against that possibility. But, he says, the Bible and the tradition are literally "man"-made. And, marriage, in traditional Christian terms has always been valued less than was celibacy.

The appearances of women in the biblical narrative could easily support the notion that they were wives and might include Jesus' wife among them. As Spong points out, the mores of the day would allow only for three possibilities: wives, mothers and prostitutes.

Mary Magdalene figures strongly in the resurrection narratives. Not a mere bit-player, she is in the foreground of the story.

Why was Jesus' mother fretting about the wine running out at the wedding at Cana? Because, suggests Spong, it was her son's wedding.

In the following chapter Spong shows how the growing church suppressed the memory of Mary Magdalene and replaced her with the virginal, obedient, Mary, mother of Jesus, who became part of the ecclesiastical legend celebrated so ineptly in Mel Gibson's tawdry movie epic.

More Information

One of the most comprehensive websites dealing with many aspects of this subject can be viewed at www.beliefnet.com/index/index_10126.html

Quite understandably, Roman Catholics are unimpressed with both *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and *The da Vinci Code*, and they say so. There's an articulate response to the ABC documentary "Jesus, Mary and da Vinci" at this website: www.carl-olson.com/articles/tdvc_abc_ncreg1.html

The Gospel Truth?

Recently published is Karen King's *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala, Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*. (Polebridge Press 2003) This is from the promotional material:

"Lost for more than fifteen hundred years, the Gospel of Mary is the only existing early Christian gospel written in the name of a woman. Karen L. King [Winn Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard University in the Divinity School and a scholar of women and heresy in early Christianity, including Gnosticism] tells the story of the recovery of this remarkable text and offers a new translation.

This brief gospel rejects Jesus' suffering and death as a path to eternal life and exposes the view that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute for what it is — a piece of theological fiction. The Gospel of Mary of Magdala offers a fascinating glimpse into the conflicts and controversies that shaped earliest Christianity. Includes complete photos of the Berlin Codex, Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3525, and the Rylands Papyrus.

Reported by Noel Cheer

Has Christianity a Future?

Will Christianity die and become embalmed in fundamentalism? Or will it rise out of its ecclesiastical tomb to live a new kind of life in the modern secular world? You are invited to SoF Auckland's One Day Conference on Saturday 12 June from 10.00am to 4.30pm at Somervell Church, Remuera

Details: Lecturer: Lloyd Geering, Discussion Groups & Panel Discussion chaired by Noel Cheer, Cost: \$15 Register at the door, Enquiries: (09) 630-2933

Local Groups

WHAT THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT

Auckland Central

Derek Pringle provided the following report on a recent lecturer. Their Newsletter offers the comment that 'it was not so much a critique of the content of Lloyd Geering's books, but rather [comments on] the philosophical assumptions [which] Lloyd makes with respect to language'. It has been abbreviated for reasons of space:

David Legg, Head of Religious Studies at St Peter's College and university lecturer, spoke on 'A Philosophical Critique of Lloyd Geering's 'Tomorrow's God' and 'Christianity Without God'.

David focussed on Tomorrow's God.

[He said that] Geering explores a theory of language, based on it expressing our unconscious mind, as derived from Kant and Nietzsche. Kant asserted that we can never truly know a 'thing in itself', only how it appears to us, but David Legg argues that we cannot tell that there is a difference unless we know both aspects. Ludwig Wittgenstein has argued that languages are games that we play, and that we play them around anything we like, so that there is no solidity in language. Wittgenstein is one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, and Geering bases his writing on his philosophy, but David argues that it contains a philosophical mistake. We create language to express meaning, but what is the meaning of meaning? David considers that language, meaning and questioning are all separate entities, and that the central activity of philosophy is questioning.

David then claimed that using a humanly created language does not prevent us from appreciating "truths" outside the limits of that language. This he demonstrated by means of two measuring jugs graduated in litres — i.e. a humanly-created measuring system. His conclusion was that however we may have chosen to construct the measurement system it would not alter the fact that two measures of 250mls equals 500ml. This is objective fact, i.e. a type of knowledge independent of the metric system. So, he argues, we can have objective truth and invented language, and he observed that some subjective realities (e.g. dreams) cannot be expressed in language because it is not strong enough to do so.

Further points emerged during the lively discussion that followed David's presentation:

- the standards of 'truth' for poetry are different for those of carpentry, as are those for religion and science
- human constructs do not preclude true statements
- the importance of being wrong as a means of learning, and finding out where we truly are (cf Popper's theory)
- there are degrees of knowledge and of precision.
- humans are 'caught in a bubble' as philosophers have claimed, but have the ability to stand back and question the bubble, noting similarities and differences within the bubble.
- Aristotle gave us two questions: What is it? - this question is prescriptive and descriptive, and is addressed from within the bubble. Is it? - this question gets us out of the bubble.

There will be further opportunity for SOFN members to explore these issues through the series that David Legg will present at St Luke's Community Centre on the same topic. There will be 6 sessions on Sundays July 25 to August 29, from 11.30am to 2.30pm.

Your editor addressed this Group on the subject "On Accounting for Religious Experience" on April 18th.

Derek draws our attention to a seminar to be presented by the Friends of the Scientific and Medical Network on the subject "The Stephen Experience" ("a participatory enquiry into the nature of mind and being"). That will be on May 15th.

The Group also plans its own One-Day Conference: see page 7 of this Newsletter.

Contact: Derek Pringle (09) 489-3589

Christchurch

A recent newsletter from them sets out their meeting plans until June. Items include: Project Acqua (plans to divert Waitaki River water through a canal with six power stations raises the question 'does a river have spiritual value?'); a discussion of Tariq Ali's book, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Jihads, Crusades, and Holy Wars.*; Guests from the local Bahai group will introduce the faith, its history and beliefs; *The da Vinci Code* — a discussion of the detective work behind the best-selling book of this title.

Their meetings are held at St. Ninian's Presbyterian Church lounge, Puriri St, on the first and third Sundays of the month at 4pm, unless otherwise indicated.

Contact: Ian Crumpton phone (03) 342-5375

Dunedin

At their February meeting, Albert Moore, Bruce Spittle and Don Feist reported on a lecture they had all attended on religion in China today.

Albert spoke of the five religions that are officially recognised by the Chinese State. Although the numbers in these state approved religions sound large [about 40 million are Christians], they are, in fact, a tiny proportion [about 3%] of the population of China. The beliefs and rituals of the great majority are practised in families and local communities.

Bruce was interested in three features of the folk religion: Enduring in that it was ancient and had survived hundreds of years of state control and, recently, proscription by the cultural revolution; Earthy in that it was concerned with the practical matters of daily life: birth, rain, harvest, death; Eclectic in that in its local variations it might include elements from local history and experience or other religions.

Don responded to the lecture by wondering what there is in New Zealand society and culture, outside the activities of recognised religious denominations, which would qualify as the 'rituals and beliefs' of the majority of New Zealanders. What is it for Kiwis that provides 'identity and cohesion' the sense of belonging and participation, connection not only to 'extra human power' but to the rest of the human race.

At their April meeting Margaret Feist will introduce the book *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out Of Ethics* by Richard Holloway, and lead a discussion on it.

In March they took Bishop John Spong's 'Twelve Theses' as a starting point for talking about how our own thinking has developed in recent years. There was general agreement with all of Spong's points. Some people felt they are now rather old hat. [These are available in the 'Workshop Resources' section of the website - ed]

One of the points that emerged in the subsequent discussion was:

'not only must the idea [of the cross] go, [and] that the Bible contains objective, divinely revealed and unchanging standards of behaviour, but also the double talk must go, that acknowledges the presence of myth or metaphor but still wants to treat those stories as historical. 'A church that can't be honest about myth and interpretation, can't be honest about sexual, racial, discrimination either''.

Contact: Don Feist (03) 476-3268

more ...

Tauranga

Their April meeting dealt with “non-religious ceremonies” that can meet the needs and expectations of those who do not find the traditional Church services appropriate. They are fortunate to have two members who are very competent in these areas.

Stewart Anderson who dealt with Wedding Ceremonies and Celebration of Birth Ceremonies, and Val Watkins on Funeral Ceremonies.

Contact: Hugh Aiken (07) 544-4116

Manukau / South Auckland

Their founder, Elsie Montgomery, has packed her tent and moved to Hamilton. The contact is now Marie Clark, 10a Rimu Road, Mangere Bridge. Phone 09-636-8719

Waikato

Fred Marshall reports:

There have been two meetings this year. The first on March 5 had three items on the agenda: first the setting up of structures to organise the coming Conference — an Arrangements Committee composed of volunteers was set up in 2003; it is in good heart, it meets regularly and is growing as the need for collaborators grows. Secondly the perennial problem of leadership. Like his predecessor Rae Brooker, Peter Timmins, the convenor during 2003 threw down the gauntlet: Two meetings provided with a topic and then the termination of the group if offers of topics were not forthcoming from the membership. It was resolved that after the topics for the first two meetings — Dr Pratt on Pluralism in March and Dr Kingsbury on the Welfare State in April, we would prepare for the Conference theme ‘20 years on: Faith Evolving’. Where to now?’ by reviewing over 4 sessions the videos of Don Cupitt’s initial series to give perspective to our discussions. That would keep the wolf from the door for a while. The third item was Doug Pratt’s talk on Pluralism and the strategies adopted by dogmatists across the spectrum from Fundamentalists to Liberals for dealing with it by exclusion of non-conformists or by inclusion of all in a normative group. Doug pointed out the danger that a group adopting the principle of pluralism risks becoming normative in its turn.

Norman Kingsbury, who belongs among the Founding Fathers of the Waikato group, addressed the topic “Expectations of the State: Responsibilities to Each Other: Welfare in NZ”. What proportion of our tax dollar can we expect the state to put towards the growing cost of health and welfare support and why? He described the topic and then set us in small groups to discuss the following questions:

1. Is there a post-Christian ethic for expecting the State to provide: * access to education - early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary? * access to good public health system (what provision and what limits)? * social and financial support for those who cannot support themselves?
2. If there is such a post-Christian ethic for expecting the State to provide these things, what are the characteristics and the source of this ethic?
3. Do we have a vision of New Zealand? What are its characteristics?
4. What are our expectations of the State to create and support this vision?
5. Other issues and comments

The diversity of the opinions reported back was surprising!

Fred Marshall

The Sea of Faith — 2010

Donald Feist, from Dunedin, looks ahead.

I HAVE A NIGGLING FEAR THAT THE SEA OF FAITH Network [NZ] is starting to settle into a comfortable rut, in which we encourage and affirm one another in a range of opinions about faith and God which we had each arrived at some time ago, but which are no longer evolving. But I don’t believe that I, or anyone else I’ve heard from or talked to — within SOFN or beyond — has reached such a level of insight and understanding, or such ability to communicate that understanding to others, that no further progress in our thinking is necessary or desirable. Looking 20 years ahead during this anniversary year, is too ambitious for me, — but maybe six years is possible. So here are three things I would like to see by the year 2010 — or sooner.

1. **Authority:** At the Reformation, the Protestant Churches claimed that they exchanged the supreme authority of the Church for the supreme authority of the Bible. But for people who live thoroughly within the world of the 21st Century I believe neither of these authoritarian approaches to faith and the Church will serve.

I would like to see SOFN doing more thinking, discussing, and speaking to the churches, about how both personal faith and communities of people based on faith, can be truly and thoroughly non-authoritarian.

2. **Epistemology:** Some of the things being written by physicists which I think are important, are to do with the complex relationship between how-things-are [physics, metaphysics, ontology] and our human knowledge-of-how-things-are [epistemology]. The talk within SOFN about realism and non-realism has been one part of trying to make this vitally important distinction when we are talking about God. But I believe there is still vast confusion about this.

We need a lot more clear and careful thinking about where epistemology begins and ends. And - it would be a valuable contribution to the human race if SOFN could nudge the churches into becoming more honest and less blinkered on this matter.

3. **‘God’:** Human ideas about the divine — in other religions just as much as Christianity, so far as I am aware — all developed in an age when humans perceived themselves as existing in an environment that was in large measure arbitrary and fickle, and therefore mysterious and often frightening. All the developments of science since the time of Copernicus and Galileo have pushed our understanding towards seeing that there is order in the universe, such that we can formulate laws about how things have operated in the past, are operating now, and can confidently be expected to continue to operate. This transformation of the nature of our knowledge of the world, I believe, is at the heart of the crisis in how we conceive of the divine, and how we are to understand the relationship, and the interactions [if any] of what is immediately accessible to our senses, with whatever else more there might be.

Personally, but with some reluctance, I still hang on to naming this ‘whatever else more’ as ‘God’, but I can see that so much change is needed in what this word represents, that it may be necessary to replace the word. I very much hope that SOFN can help me towards more clarity on this.

Donald Feist

[Correspondence on this, and any other topic, is invited - ed]

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 Poison of The Christ*

THESE ARE MY OBSERVATIONS about Mel Gibson's controversial movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. But you should form your own opinions.

In its favour I thought that there was a good characterisation of Pilate: he was bored, confused and scared for his job. Building up the character of his wife as a conversational foil was also a good use of artistic licence.

Judas and Caiaphas were well cast and well acted. The sets and the costumes looked authentic. At the end of the movie there were two visually-pleasing tableaux: lowering Jesus from the cross and him draped across Mary's lap as in Michelangelo's "Pieta".

But (and its a huge and damning "but"), all that gore! It was unnecessary even while it was done well. Do we applaud, for example, brilliant camera work in a porno movie? Samuel Johnson said it well in a different context: "we do not marvel that it is done well, we marvel that it is done at all."

The Cecil B. de Mille soundtrack was over-the-top. Angels repeatedly belting out heavenly AH, ah, AH, ah!

There was some corny symbolism with, for example, Jesus stamping on a snake. And the excuses for flashbacks were just too cute.

Peter sliced off the soldier's ear and Jesus restored it, right there on camera. No mucking round with metaphors here. Can a person who is capable of doing this sort of thing really be human like you and me? So maybe the flogging and the death didn't bother him too much either?

During the very stagy flogging event that should have been, but wasn't, limited to 39 lashes (40, less one for mercy) the Roman soldiers were stage-nasty. They had really bad teeth, too, like Gollum. Understandably, the movie accepts the biblical record as historical, even though departing from it as with St Veronica mopping Jesus' blood and then burying her face in the bloodied napkin. (See the footnote on page 5) Is this devotion ... or is it yuck?

My serious complaint is that the attention to detail of the flogging and the injuries seemed obsessive. I think Mel should see a good psychiatrist.

Why was Jesus' mother Mary so composed during the repeated floggings? Would (could?) any normal mother do that? In the context of Catholic devotionalism, maybe. But human fellow-feeling argues against its credibility and requires us to ask what was going on inside her head. She wouldn't survive a CYFS review. Surely any real mother would be beside herself with grief?.

Caiaphas harangues Jesus from the foot of the cross. This event is extra-biblical and provides further encouragement for anti-semitism in those so disposed. Let's not go overboard on this: as much as we can understand, Jesus was delivered into a judicial murder by people who, like himself, were Jews. But to say only that he was killed "by the Jews" is to make an error, and to encourage anti-semitism by failing to say that it was a case only of a pragmatic murder. A race tag is not justified..

More yuck: a raven pecks out the eyes of the co-crucified thief who did not repent. That will teach him! So there!

It is interesting to read the Catholic New Times of Toronto (see page 5) saying that the notion that Jesus died as a satisfaction for our sins is no longer credible. If you agree, then the central thesis of the movie — that Jesus was flogged so that his skin was in shreds, that Jesus was nailed to a cross and left to die of exposure etc etc ... to pay for the sins of the world ... is an offense against God and Man. That his mother was depicted as acquiescing in it, is obscene. If this is God's will, I suggest that we cancel our subscription and sign up with a better God.

I would have serious reservations about people who came away from this movie without being revolted — both by what allegedly happened at the time and at the sadistic focus on the cruelty provided by the movie. Hamlet may have had Gibson in mind: "'tis a knavish piece of work ... and we that have free souls, it touches us not" ... except that we find it revolting!

Noel Cheer, Steering Committee Chairperson 2003-2004

* I wish that I had thought of this first!