



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.
NEWSletter

From the Arrangements Committee

SEPTEMBER DRAWS NEARER, the Agricultural Fielddays are about to begin as I write, and that almost always seems to mean rain and fog. By September that weather will be well gone but we will be into the spring equinox which brings highly variable weather patterns. However, as I said in the previous Newsletter, St Peter's is very well adapted for either wet or fine weather.

Regardless of the weather, the Conference programme has come together extremely well. You will see from the Registration Form that is enclosed with this Newsletter, that there is an excellent and varied array of elective lectures and workshops to go with the previously announced Keynote Speakers. Already, many who have seen the draft programme have expressed regret that they can attend only one of the elective lectures. Unfortunately, we have neither space nor time to permit the repetition of these lectures but we are endeavouring to get the texts printed for distribution to those interested and hope to have these available at the Conference.

A word about Maungatautari for the benefit of those beyond the Waikato. Maungatautari is a 1000m high forested volcanic cone south of Cambridge. A local farmer, David Wallace, has a dream of restoring that forested area to its original state by removing all of the exotic predators. He has developed a pest-proof fence which is proof against both burrowing and climbing predators and he has established the **Maungatautari Ecological Island Trust**, which is in the process of fencing the whole mountain so that the original indigenous flora and fauna can be re-established. The aim is to restore to the forest the native trees, birds, insects, reptiles, frogs and other wildlife and to share it with all New Zealanders. Among the species to be reintroduced are kiwi, kokako, giant weta and tuatara.

David, a long-time SoFN member has kindly agreed to share his dream in a morning presentation (a film will be shown) and then in the afternoon to host a visit to the mountain sanctuary. The two are designed to be independent — you can enrol for either or for both.

Peter Timmins

Chair of the 2004 Arrangements Committee



FILLING IN REGISTRATION FORMS ISSUE

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Karen Armstrong and the Recovery from Radical Atheism

PART 5 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, John Dominic Crossan and Robert Funk. Some material is omitted for reasons of space. The full paper is available on the website.

Karen Armstrong, "The God of all Faiths". In Marcus Borg & Ross Mackenzie (2000), Eds: *God at 2000*. Harrisburg, PA, Morehouse Publishing.

As will be recognised, the titles I have given to these reviews are my attempt to characterise in each case what the author is about. So my words "The recovery from radical theism" try to recapture Armstrong's personal struggle – a struggle which appears to have had a resonance for many today. It will be recognised that she did not know until well into adulthood just what to make of her unhappiness. Perhaps most poignant is her self-disclosure about the difficulty — if not impossibility even at this stage — of prayer as defined by Catholic practice. That kind of prayer discipline pushed her into a practical atheism from which a tentative solution was found which is really the theme of this chapter of hers. The key to it, I suggest, is that the credal formula for prayer had, for her, failed to bring her to any authentic knowledge of God beyond the occasional awareness of having most honestly carried through an admirable spiritual exercise. A recovery from the radical theism of tradition demanded an equally radical, even if temporary, solution.

The writer, lecturer, television broadcaster, columnist, former nun and author of many books, including the famous *A History of God*, states in her answer to the question "How do I see God?"

"I am not at the moment able to pray. I have such bad memories of all those years when I tried and failed. I feel exhausted and tired at the thought of speaking to God".

Armstrong found a path that she calls "The God of all faiths" and writes of "Ways of approaching the sacred," including theology as a necessity for thought, (but remembering that theologians in all three great monotheisms deny that God is a separate being), and above all, compassion. Like Holloway, and indeed in one way or another, all of the theologians discussed here, she sees the 'solution' as "The Divine enshrined in every human being". This appears to mean not elevating our ego within a "ghetto of righteousness" but recognizing that the very strangeness of the stranger is the pointer to the way of God. Because only by "dethroning the ego and placing the the other in the centre of our lives" do

we shake of our complacency and begin to experience how we are with the sacred.

In her "slough of despond", Armstrong has lost community and liturgy, yet "is always seeking, always changing, always moving on". She asks, concerning prayer, if God "really needs reminding "that we are miserable sinners and that he created the world." She laments that "we have got into the habit of telling God things all the time".

In this Chautauqua Institute lecture, Karen Armstrong gifts us with her story, her reflection on God. God has been a problem to her from her school days. The God of supernatural theism, the term used by Borg, Spang, and others, as we have seen, was first cause, perfect, supreme and powerful but for this child of the church, remote and abstract. Her entry to a religious order of nuns was an honest and thorough attempt to get to know this awful being and to give her whole life to him.

Her problems at that young age were the forerunner of her many years of search. She asked whether science had dismissed the possibility of God, how a God all-powerful and all-loving could allow atrocities like the Holocaust, and why a God of love should reveal himself to a tiny people, leaving the millions outside his plan. She suspected that "there might after all be nothing out there".

When in desperation she tried Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises as a method for prayer, she found only "a vacuum, an emptiness, a stultifying boredom" and that in such efforts she "couldn't keep my mind on God for five minutes."

When she did "experience some devotion", she realised that she had usually "engineered it" for herself.

She didn't blame anybody. She writes "I was simply engaged in a spirituality that was wrong for me".

But it was a much deeper issue than simply finding spirituality a struggle. Her further reflection suggests that throughout, she almost fiercely demanded to know what it was that she had failed to know. She had to re-think God for herself. What or who was this being if indeed being is what it is?

She discovered that her approach was wrong., ie to discover God in a new way, she first had to approach

"... she sees the 'solution' as The Divine enshrined in every human being".

She discovered that her approach was wrong, i.e. to discover God in a new way, she first had to approach the quest differently. The "logical, discursive reflection" by which she tackled secular studies had to give way to a "more intuitive, imaginative process, similar to that which opens up the truths of art" (p100). Rational analysis, she continues, though "indispensable for science, mathematics, or medicine" is of no help in appreciating a Beethoven last quartet.

Armstrong argues that this reliance upon reason alone has been a mainstay of both the theology and the spirituality of the West since the 16th and 17th century revolution in science. The resulting domination of truth by empirical reason was accompanied by a denigration of mythology and mysticism. This objectivism, as I have termed it in my vision statement, has been the source of current religious problems. She had to try to love this God. (The "God of propositional Christianity", as I came to call it when I came back under conservative, evangelical expository preaching after my American sojourn. AW). This relationship to God was so unsatisfactory to Armstrong that she left the religious life and in the low period that followed, found she "didn't know how to live". She gradually recovered, learned to make friends and as this happened, found her belief in God slip quietly away.

Taking up the writing of religious programmes for television, she found herself grappling with the more mystical approach to the divine found in Judaism, Islam, and Greek and Russian Orthodox Christianity.

This was a compelling challenge to the rationality that underlay the supernatural theism of the West.

Her main discovery, as already mentioned, was of the "eminent theologians and contemplatives" of all three monotheisms dismissing any talk of God as another being and indeed denying the language that says "God exists". God, she found, is not accessible by logical thought alone. God is discernable, if at all, by the intuitive disciplines of prayer, liturgy, contemplation and ethical practice".(p102)

The similarity of approach of the great religions to the Ultimate drove Armstrong to the concept of "the God of all faiths". From the different religious traditions, she says she has learned certain things:

1. Religion is natural to human beings. We seek ecstasy.
2. Religion is an art form. We are meaning-seeking animals.
3. There is a sacred dimension in human experience. When people apply themselves to the practice of religion, they experience "a sacred dimension of existence". This dimension is indescribable, ineffable, knowable ultimately through the "development of capacity for an experience of God". She goes further, saying that "the practices by which we obtain these aesthetic capacities demand

creativity, ingenuity, discipline, skill, trial and sometimes error" (p105).

4. True religious experiences require abandonment of egotism and selfishness. This she finds in all the major traditions. So religion offers us a way of being human.
5. Theology becomes listening and attention. The old certainties of classical Western theism are no longer credible. Just as atheism historically has marked a new stage of transition, so today's 'unbelief' marks a reaching for a new religious solution. She likens this 'listening', this 'cloud of unknowing', or 'Dark night of the Soul' that we experience while waiting for a new theology to emerge, to the experience of a poet who "may have to 'listen' for years while a poem rises gradually from the unconscious, line by line, phrase by phrase, image by image". (p107).

Compassion

Armstrong addresses a final, trembling question: Is there anything we can do while we are waiting?

She answers that along with theology as listening and attentiveness, her second way of approaching the reality of God is by the exercise of practical compassion.

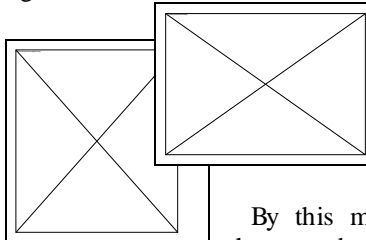
For her, the practice of compassion is actually creative of a sense of God. She reminds us that the Buddha used to urge monks and layfolk

"to sit quietly and radiate feelings of benevolence, sympathy, and compassion to all four corners of the world"

By this means, the hard shell of selfishness that obstructs both our best selves and the experience of the Sacred is broken down. Others can then take the place of our ego on the throne.

She also finds that trying to live by the Golden Rule brings some of the release of the mind that the Buddha insisted upon. We are "in the place where God is" when we "learn to honour the Sacred in others and to give ourselves away".

In this sense, and as has been suggested in my initial vision statement, there is all that in the world which is not yet holy but which waits to become holy. It is already holy as part of the whole, but its Sacredness is realised by both our mindful reflection and by our action. We create the sense and the reality of the Sacred through the practice of compassion. This is particularly so when it is in the stranger that we respect and create the Sacred. Our religious tradition should, if Armstrong's search has truth, lead us to honour the stranger and love her/him as ourselves. That is where God is experienced. Finally then, God is real insofar as "we place the other in the centre of our lives".





Bo o k R E V I E W S

IN WHICH BOTH OUR MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY AND OUR ACE REVIEWER TAKE ON DON CUPITT'S 'LIFE, LIFE'

Hugh Gilman, Treasurer and Membership Secretary extends his skills to reviewing:

- *Odyssey on the Sea of Faith: The Life & Writings of Don Cupitt* by Nigel Leaves
- *Life, Life* by Don Cupitt

JUNG MIGHT REFER TO THIS AS synchronicity but these two volumes arrived to me in an over-lapping time frame. One was purchased through the author. The other was received unannounced from its author with a suggestion that its arrival "may be noticed in the Newsletter." Both will be in the Resource Centre awaiting you by the time you read this.

I am not terribly at ease with these reviews as (a) from being your Membership Secretary I am aware that both authors will be receiving this Newsletter and (b) I've not been called upon to write a book report for lo these many years now.

I found both volumes both comprehensible and enlightening. They can be read separately or in either sequence. I recommend that *Odyssey* might be a more suitable lead-in when navigating both. Indeed I found it comforting somehow to learn that both Don Cupitt and I have managed similar peripatetic spiritual journeys, crossing paths at several points. I am sure that many, if not most, SoFN (NZ) members will similarly find themselves nodding, "Been there, done that, want to see my scars?" as they read through these two books.

"There go my people. I must hurry and catch up, for I am their leader," Lao Tse (ancient Chinese general).

Nigel has written his PhD dissertation on Don Cupitt and *Odyssey* summarizes his findings. I must confess that I have not read many of Don's books but I did find it most interesting to discover the various way stations he has encountered on his faith journey – and how far he has fared from the ruts of his contemporaries. The writings are separated into seven stages which are each treated in turn with several books selected and examined in each stage. Having a

background of an experimental physicist I never studied philosophy and have always found the writings of the various schools too daunting to really "get into." Nigel with Don's help, provides a guide to the differing points of view in a comprehensible manner. Concomitant is the development and recognition of Kingdom theology and its relation to secular society as opposed to Ecclesiastical theology as expressed by professional churchmen. I/we need not agree at every point with Don nor do we need to have visited each of Don's positions over the years. It is sufficient that we are all still exploring in our own fashion.

"Life is what happens while you're waiting for something else," said George Harrison.

Life, Life is Don's latest tide mark on the beach. When I last heard him speak at a Conference here in New Zealand he mentioned that he was 'collecting' vernacular references to 'life.' (Sorry to say, I never got these two 'Life' comments back to him – or perhaps I assumed he already had them from other sources.) These have now been summarized and categorized and placed into context in a most agreeable fashion. I have long wondered at the Church's disparagement of 'secular society' and its manifold inherent 'evils' – and so I gather has Don. Perhaps it's a question of management or control by our 'betters'. Regardless, it seems that we're quite well off without management and left to our own devices to develop workable solutions in a Kingdom theology of the here and now. Indeed, most of the philosophical and theological positions that have been approached, examined and passed through seem to have little of practical value. After all, it's what to do when passing through the front door in the morning and meeting society on the street, the shops and the office and what to resolve when wide awake at 3am that is important to most people most of the time. I fully agree that this life and what I do with it is paramount. If, in the end, the Ecclesiastical bods are correct then I will then be in a position to say that I did my best as I saw it at the time.

"This life is a test. It is only a test. When the real version of your life is released it will include a complete and detailed user manual,"

Hugh Gilman

Alan Goss of Napier, also discusses Don's latest:

Life, Life by Don Cupitt,
Polebridge Press
2003

Many will be familiar with the TV ad which features a frenetic reverend inviting his flock to come alive by drinking a certain brand of tea. *Life, coming alive*, is the theme of Don Cupitt's latest book and is also captured in some lines from the musical "Sweet Charity".

For the rhythm of life is a powerful beat,

Puts a tingle in your fingers and a tingle in your feet!

Rhythm on the inside, rhythm on the street

And the rhythm of life is a powerful beat.

Life, Cupitt contends, is everything, life is all we have and will ever have and that we must bring it back into the centre of religion. Indeed 'God' is already being replaced by 'Life' as our single religious focus. Cupitt uses the word 'life' mainly in its social context, it is our ordinary conversations with one another, our communicating, the buzz we generate around ourselves, the human traffic of our comings and goings which is concentrated especially in the city.

Some important distinctions are made between God and life, e.g. whereas God (in traditional terms) is pure holiness, life is profane as well as holy; whereas God is pure goodness, life is a mixture of good and evil; whereas God is sovereign and transcendent, life is finite and temporal. Life is a package deal to which we are called to respond. (cf Jesus) It is too big to wrap up and classify -- it is "baggy, shapeless and chaotic" and it is up to us to give it some order.

continued ..

Life is also bigger than all our religious ideologies, so big that no one religion can be true for everyone, everywhere. Indeed life laughs at all of our theologies and at the absurdity of some of their claims and pretensions.

Cupitt argues that since the 18th century there has been a marked shift in our way of looking at the world. Whereas we once relied upon external support from a supernatural realm on high — religious laws, God's will and so on — now we have re-arranged everything around human beings. We therefore re-interpret life from a human point of view. Since traditional Christianity started to fold in the 1960's the word 'life' has undergone remarkable changes, with the old god-language being displaced by the new life-language. People are now heard to say "life is sacred" that we should "love life", "have faith in life", "trust life", "commit ourselves to life", and so on. In our funeral services we "celebrate the life of . . ." In the same way, whereas until recently all life, including yours and mine, belonged to God, now we claim the right to decide "what I want to do with my own life", or to "control my life". We humans are now much more autonomous, we plan our futures, set our goals and arrange our agendas, even if the outcomes end up wide of the mark. People are re-thinking their religion, we are witnessing a monumental changing-over from a God-centred to a life-centred religious outlook, a radically new way of looking at ourselves, our religions, and our moralities, and the world.

That is the substance of this small book of only 142 pages. Some modern people are expressing their love of God through their love of life — in nature, in their relationships, in children, in the arts, in the ordinary ups and downs of everyday experience. The book is a disciplined yet exuberant romp through the rhythms of life and it induced that 'Sweet Charity' tingle in your fingers and in your feet. The author has been accused of adopting a rather cavalier approach to life, inviting us to accept it as a package deal — the good as well as the bad. "Take life as it comes", as we say. Is this, for the holocaust survivor or any victim of tragedy or misfortune, too blase and fatalistic? Read these 32 short and lively chapters and judge for yourself. But let the 1930s film star, Mae West have the last word (as quoted by Cupitt): "Its not the man in your life that counts, it's the life in your man." Surely no-one will disagree with that!?

Alan Goss, May 2004

In Brief

Immortality?

"It is a world of people who long for immortality, but who don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy day."

attributed to Imogen Stubbs, an actress

SoFiA's First Conference

City: Perth W.A.

Theme: Where to now with religion?

Date: 17th–19th September, 2004.

Need Registration details? Contact your Editor, see p10

Alice in Wonderland

'I can't tell you just now what the moral of that is, but I shall remember it in a bit.'

'Perhaps it hasn't one,' Alice ventured to remark.

'Tut, tut, child!' said the Duchess. 'Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it.'

For those who like satire ...

The Dover Bitch

A Criticism of Life

by Anthony Hecht

So there stood Matthew Arnold and this girl
With the cliffs of England crumbling away behind them,
And he said to her, "Try to be true to me,
And I'll do the same for you, for things are bad
All over, etc., etc."

Well now, I knew this girl. It's true she had read
Sophocles in a fairly good translation
And caught that bitter allusion to the sea,
But all the time he was talking she had in mind
The notion of what his whiskers would feel like
On the back of her neck. She told me later on
That after a while she got to looking out
At the lights across the channel, and really felt sad,
Thinking of all the wine and enormous beds
And blandishments in French and the perfumes.
And then she got really angry. To have been brought
All the way down from London, and then be addressed
As a sort of mournful cosmic last resort
Is really tough on a girl, and she was pretty.
Anyway, she watched him pace the room
And finger his watch-chain and seem to sweat a bit,
And then she said one or two unprintable things.
But you mustn't judge her by that. What I mean to say is,
She's really all right. I still see her once in a while
And she always treats me right.

We have a drink

And I give her a good time, and perhaps it's a year
Before I see her again, but there she is,
Running to fat, but dependable as they come,
And sometimes I bring her a bottle of Nuit d'Amour.

For those who are confused ...

The name of our Network, "The Sea of Faith", comes from a line in Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach". And we are not above poking fun at ourselves!

A Decade Ago

from Newsletter Number 7 May, 1994

Plans are now well advanced for the Conference at Bryant Hall, Hamilton, September 2-4. Please note that due to limited space registrations will be limited to 250. Since 211 came last year, and, since the membership of the SOFN has now risen to 400, [about 550 in 2004 - ed] all who intend to come to the Conference are urged to register without delay.

Visit of Carol Christ to NZ February/March 2005

Carol P. Christ, renowned feminist theologian and pioneer in the study of Women and Religion and Goddess spirituality, will be visiting New Zealand, hosted by Massey University. Dr Christ will be the keynote presenter at two research symposia to be held at Massey's Turitea and Auckland campuses, and will give public lectures in Palmerston North and Auckland. It is intended that a public lecture will also be organized in Wellington.

Carol Christ is author of many inspiring books and articles that have changed women's lives and become classics in the study of women and religion.

The anthologies *Womanspirit Rising* and *Weaving the Visions*, co-edited with Judith Plaskow, transformed the way religion is understood and taught in North America and elsewhere. Her other books include *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, *Odyssey with the Goddess*, and *Rebirth of the Goddess*. Her latest book, *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World*, was published in 2003.

Dr Christ (PhD, Yale) has taught at Harvard Divinity School, Columbia University, Pomona College and San Jose State University and has been active in feminist, peace and environmental movements for decades. She currently lives in Greece most of the year, directs the Ariadne Institute for the Study of Myth and Ritual and leads Goddess pilgrimages within Greece.

Events planned around Dr Christ's visit (so far) are set out below.

This information came from k.e.routree@massey.ac.nz

Carol Christ's Public Lectures: "Re-imagining the Divine in the World"

Free admission. Everyone is welcome.

Auckland Monday 21 February 2005 8pm Venue: Staff Lounge, Study Centre, Massey University, Albany campus. Take Greville Rd exit from motorway. Entry via Gate 1, opposite Mega Centre.

Palmerston North Wednesday 23 Feb 2005 8pm Venue: Russell Room, Wharerata, Massey University. Includes a guest appearance by the singing group 'Brazen Hussies'.

Wellington Friday 25 Feb 2005 6.30pm Venue: St Andrew's Church, 30 The Terrace

Research Forums "A meeting with Carol Christ"

For those interested in research areas related to women and spirituality, eco-spirituality, women's studies, feminism, ecofeminism, theology, theology. Please contact Kathryn Rountree to register: k.e.routree@massey.ac.nz

Registration is free, but we need to know who is coming for organizational purposes.

Keynote address by Carol Christ: "She Who Changes: Restoring the Body and the World"

Auckland Monday 21 Feb 2005 10am-4pm Venue: Staff Lounge, Study Centre, Massey University, Albany campus. Take Greville Rd exit from motorway. Entry via Gate 1, opposite Mega Centre.

Palmerston North Wednesday 23 Feb 2005 10am-4pm Venue: Russell Room, Wharerata, Massey University

The above information was supplied by futurechurch Massey Rd, RD2 Waipu 0254
rosemary@futurechurch.org

The True Faith?

"Once there was an old man who had a marvelous ring which could make its wearer beloved by God and by men. He left it to his son and so it passed down in the family for several generations.

Eventually it came to a man who had three sons. Not wishing to show favoritism, he had two replicas made and gave each son a ring; but then he died without telling them which of the three rings was the genuine one. The sons began to quarrel sharply, each claiming to possess the true ring. A judge was called in to arbitrate, and he ruled that there was no way of telling which ring was genuine, or indeed whether any of the rings was genuine. For all that anyone could tell, the original had been lost, and the father had caused three replicas to be made.

All that any of the brothers could do was to try to show by his conduct that his own ring was the true one."

From "Nathan The Wise" (1779) by G.E. Lessing Paraphrased by Don Cupitt in his book "Sea of Faith" p163.

Conference 2004 — Timetable

Friday September 24	
12 noon	Meeting of Leaders over lunch
12:00-2:00	Registration
2:00	Conference Opening
2:15	Keynote: David Boulton
3:15	Afternoon Tea
3:30	Book Launch in the Book Room
3:45	Core Groups
4:45	Happy Hour
6:00	Dinner
7:00	Elective Lectures
Saturday September 25	
9:00	Workshops and Presentations
10:30	Morning Tea
11:00	Keynote: Lloyd Geering
12:00	Core Groups
1:00	Lunch
2:00	Workshops, Presentations
4:30	AGM
5:30	Happy Hour & Steering Comm. meets
6:30	Dinner
8:00	Entertainment
Sunday September 26	
9:00	Keynote: Ghazala Anwar
10:00	Core Groups
10:45	Morning Tea
11:15	Panel Discussion
12:45	Conference Close
1:00	Lunch

.... then to Christchurch in 2005!



The Republic of Heaven?

Did man make gods or gods make man? Language and culture surely made both

A review by Anne Ashworth, of David Boulton's *The Trouble With God*. Anne is a member of the North West Group of SoF (UK). Originally published in "Sof 59" May 2003 and re-printed with permission. David will be a Keynote Speaker at this year's SoF (NZ) Conference.

THREE FOR THE PRICE OF ONE? That is what you get for that very modest £7.99, for this volume is really three short books in one. In good Sea of Faith mode, it is three stories — the author's story, God's story and finally the tale of the Republic of Heaven. Also in good Sea of Faith mode, it is full of scholarship; but if you know anything about David Boulton you will know how lightly he wears his erudition, and with what wit. Whether the three parts cohere into one whole may be debatable, but all are in their different ways decidedly reader-friendly.

Part one, My Story, will grab you at once, by the immediacy of its opening on 11th September 2001, and the way that event is related to the fundamentalism in which David Boulton was brought up. His story of life in a Plymouth Brethren household is wonderfully funny. David uses his skill with words to recreate the whole atmosphere of Gospel Hall where God lived. It smelt of "damp wood, damp coconut matting, stacks of damp 'Golden Bells' hymn books."

"The gospel was preached in obedience to Christ's command to go into all the world, but the saints expected the world to come to Gospel Hall, and it showed some reluctance to make the trip."

All expectations were centred upon the Second Coming, not to mention the Tribulation, the Third Coming, and the Rapture.

The Boulton story traces David's emergence from this hothouse atmosphere, where at every year's evangelical summer camp he

"returned home re-renewed and re-redeemed, and sometimes it lasted a whole week",

to a gradual loosening of his Christian ideas. As he grew up, the boy's commitment changed to the political sphere. He became a Christian Socialist then a left-wing political journalist. It was when his editor asked him to review John Robinson's *Honest to God* that David Boulton finally 'came out', to himself, as a nonsense humanist.

But it was not so simple. This is the book of a self-confessed God-haunted man. So much of our culture and history is infused with God that he remains a background presence. In the Quaker history of the Dales where the Boultons live, God was inescapable.

So the project of part two, God's Story, is to trace how that God has changed and evolved over the centuries, and what the notion of God might mean today. Here is your chance to bypass Karen Armstrong's wonderful but lengthy 500 page *A History of God* and let David Boulton's masterly summary do the work for you in 80 pages. He examines some of the theories about how the idea of gods arose, asking what he calls

"the big question, perhaps the biggest theological question that can be asked"

does the sense of the numinous have a real referent? Moving on to the ever-changing biblical God, David even makes biblical scholarship fascinating and occasionally funny. We are taken through God's "laddish youth" as he lies to Adam and Eve or encourages the Israelites to ethnic cleansing, to a maturing deity who repents of some of this, learns mercy and develops a social conscience. (Epigraph to the chapter on 'God as Trinity': an oil advert: "Three in one! Eases, lubricates, protects working parts!") Then comes the more modern part of God's biography, and here David Boulton makes good use of his particular researches in 17th century history; as well as tracing the familiar 19th and 20th century path through Strauss and Feuerbach to Robinson and Cupitt.

So, David asks, "Did man make gods or gods make man? Language and culture surely made both." It's a Cupittian, postmodern answer. Is it a fudge or a freedom? For this God-haunted man, it has been enough to confirm him in his chosen third way between religion and atheistic humanism. So part three is the story of humanism. Non-religious humanism has, he claims, cut itself off from a vital and main stream of human consciousness, the religious content of so much art, music and literature.

Don Cupitt claimed that we no longer have a Grand Narrative. David Boulton would substitute a Grand Fiction. We no longer need to do all that careful, liberal demythologising. "Reclaim it all," he argues; re-interpret the religious stories and use them to promote the subversive Republic of Heaven, where human beings are equal and heaven is in this world.



Local Groups

WHAT THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT

Dunedin

Richard Holloway's book: *Godless Morality* was recently outlined for them by Margaret Feist. Holloway says: 'Ethics that arise from a system of belief have power and integrity only so long as the beliefs are believed'. Because, in the Western world, the traditional Christian belief system no longer carries conviction with everyone, traditional Christian ethics cannot hold our communities together. His aim in this book is to unite those who believe with those who do not in the discovery of a workable ethic for our time. In our pluralistic world, 'to devise a single system of moral values is impossible. We can claim that various moral imperatives come from God, but no one is in a position to decide between conflicting claims. Better to find good human reasons for supporting the approach we advocate'

They plan to also study chapter 2 of Lloyd Geering's small book: *Fundamentalism: the Challenge to the Secular World*. This chapter deals with the origins or causes of fundamentalism, the features it has in common, and ways in which it differs, in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Lloyd describes it as 'a modern religious disease' and gives his reasons. There will be plenty of time for discussion. [The book is available from SATRS — see page bottom-left of p10 in this Newsletter]

Don Feist also commented on "SoF" — the UK Sea of Faith Magazine:

"The most recent issue devotes six pages to a discussion of films about Jesus, from *King of Kings* in 1927 to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* [see page 9 below - ed]

There is also a two-page report on the Westar Institute's conference in New York in March at which Robert Funk, John Spong, Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering, Marcus Borg, Richard Holloway and Karen Armstrong [and others] all spoke.

In the previous issue [March 2004] there were two contrasting reviews of Don Cupitt's 2003 book *Life, Life*.

One said the book is: '... daring, radical and witty ... an exuberant book ... dazzling in its playfulness ... [it] will attune you to the way our worldview, our religion and our morality are being organised around the idea of life.'

The other reviewer considered that: 'Cupitt has ... demonstrated the failure of this unreflective genre to meet the real challenges of life. This religion of everyday speech is the religion of fatalism held by a politically disengaged generation'."

In June, Ian Fleming will introduce them to 'The many gospels of Jesus ruthlessly excluded from the New Testament canon and their developing effect upon the belief of Christians today'.

Contact: Don Feist (03) 476-3268

Hawke's Bay

Jocelyn Kirkwood wrote:

"The Hawkes Bay group began the year in March with a workshop on Spirituality under the very able leadership of Keith Fuller. Members used the resource "Back to Spirituality" first presented at the U.K. Sea of Faith conference in 1998, as background reading.

Last month (April) we continued with the theme by taking a look at Buddhist spirituality. We hired (from the Resource Centre) the video V21 "Batchelor: Interview with Stephen

Batchelor" 23/9/02. This was made in Christchurch following the Timaru SOF Conference and features Noel Cheer as the interviewer. There are three spaces during the 50min. tape which make it ideal for discussion. We invited one of our members, a Buddhist, Ian Allan, to field the questions we posed in the breaks and at the end. He did a magnificent job and we would recommend this as a programme for other groups.

Next month we have Rev. Kevin Ward from the School of Ministry, University of Otago, presenting a repeat of his inaugural address to students as given in February this year. It is entitled "Is New Zealand's Future Churchless?" We anticipate another good attendance and lively discussion

Contact: Jocelyn Kirkwood 06-877-8184

or Keith Fuller 06-842-0254

Auckland

They hosted your editor on April 18 when I "tried out" on them a paper which I subsequently gave in Brisbane called "On Accounting for Religious Experience". They reproduced part of that paper in their Newsletter: here are the concluding remarks:

"Whatever the case may turn out to be, it is most likely to support the notion that we are physical creatures before we are mental creatures and we are mental creatures before we are spiritual creatures. Our conscious selves crouch on top of a causal pyramid. We are contingent creatures built of atoms, defined by genes, bullied by hormones, buoyed by endorphins, tortured by nightmares and inspired by good music, good poetry and good preaching. Some are fortunate in having religious visions. We do well to acknowledge that we are in some way their author, and so claim them as part of that bundle of aspirations to transcendence that we reify into 'God'. Shakespeare had Prospero say that "we are such stuff as dreams are made on". Maybe. But we are, in one way or another, the authors of the dreams and the visions."

On Saturday 12 June, they held their annual one-day Conference with Lloyd Geering lecturing of *The Future of Christianity*. His two lectures were a condensed version of the four-part series recently delivered at St Andrews on the Terrace in Wellington and which will be available in book form for \$12 + p&p in July. (Refer to page 10 for contact details.)

The day ended with a 90 minute panel discussion (chaired by Noel Cheer) involving an Anglican cleric (Glynn Cardy), a Methodist cleric (Norman West) and an academic (Chris Marshall) and Lloyd Geering.

In his paper Lloyd was optimistic for Christianity:

"The secular world is not anti-Christian, though it may legitimately be judged post-Christian, relative to the former Christendom. The secular world is a product of the Christian West, and is motivated by the values, aspirations and visions of its matrix. The modern secular world is all part of a continuing evolving cultural process. Just as the original Christians claimed the Christian Way, or path of faith, was the legitimate continuation and fulfilment of the Jewish path, so it may be claimed that the modern, secular and humanistic world is the legitimate continuation of the Judeo-Christian path of faith."

Contact: Derek Pringle (09) 489-3589

Faith in Cyberspace

A STEP TOWARDS GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS?

Looking For a Book?

Search for that rare, out of print, antique or used book on religion, the church or theology at www.rarebook.webcentral.com.au/Theology/theology01.htm

The "Jeffrey John Affair"

It caused many ruffled feathers in the Church of England in the UK. One outcome was a new network called Inclusive Church. Their website is at www.inclusivechurch.net

Where Do You Invest?

Would you, the organisation you work for, or your church, invest funds in unethical companies? Check out www.csri.org.nz

The Appeal of Religion

Ohio State University Research News tells of a new comprehensive psychological theory to account for our attraction (or otherwise) to religion. The author is Steven Reiss, professor of psychology and psychiatry at Ohio State University.

Reiss identifies 16 basic human psychological needs that motivate people to seek meaning through religion: power, independence, curiosity, acceptance, order, saving, honor, idealism, social contact, family, status, vengeance, romance, eating, physical exercise, and tranquility.

The theory was published in the June issue of Zygon, a journal devoted to issues of science and religion. The following is an abstract of Reiss's paper from the Zygon website.

"A psychological theory of religious experiences, sensitivity theory, is proposed. Whereas other theories maintain that religious motivation is about a few overarching desires, sensitivity theory provides a multifaceted analysis consistent with the diversity, richness, and individuality of religious experiences. Sixteen basic desires show the psychological foundations of meaningful experience. Each basic desire is embraced by every person, but to different extents. How we prioritize the basic desires expresses our individuality and influences our attraction to various religious images and activities. Each basic desire is associated with a basic goal and a unique joy, such as love, self-worth, relaxation, or strength. We do not seek to experience joys infinitely: we regulate joys, in accordance with our core values, to sixteen balance points (sensitivities) that vary based on individuality. Religions help persons of faith regulate the sixteen basic joys by providing some images that strengthen joyful experiences and others that weaken them. We can strengthen our experience of self-worth, for example, by contemplating God in the image of savior; we can weaken our experience of self-worth by contemplating original sin. The theory of sixteen basic desires is testable scientifically and suggests such philosophical concepts as value-based happiness."

Source: SoFiA "Bulletin" June 2004

The Rules and the AGM

With your May Newsletter you should have received a copy of the Rules document as it was originally formatted.

The current Steering Committee have suggested it may be time for these rules to be reviewed to reflect our current needs and status.

We would like to invite members to consider this document carefully, and if you have any suggestions as to how these might be improved, please would you post a remit to this effect to the Secretary:

Marion Dodd, 64 Wairiki Rd, Mt Eden, Auckland.
or by email: g.dodd@auckland.ac.nz

Please note if you have mislaid your copy that it is available on the SOFN website.

Remits will be collated and presented to the AGM at this year's conference in September at Cambridge for discussion and formal vote.

Marion Dodd, Secretary

Copy Deadlines

These are the dates by which I will need copy for the Newsletter for the remainder of this year:

Issue	Deadline
September	15 August
December	15 November

It is easiest for me if you can send the copy either as part of an email or as a Word document attached to an email. The next easiest is the copy is typed so that I can scan it. But, even if you need to handwrite it I can still use it — provided that I can read it!

Noel Cheer, Editor

Celluloid Christologies

The May edition of the UK "SoF" magazine (see page 10 for subscription details) carries an article about movies that have portrayed Jesus/Christ. This is no place to summarise the article but here is its useful list of movies:

- ✘ The King of Kings (1927)
- ✘ The Gospel According To Matthew (1966)
- ✘ Son of Man (1969)
- ✘ Jesus of Nazareth (1977)
- ✘ Jesus (1979)
- ✘ Jesus of Montreal (1989)
- ✘ The Garden (1990)
- ✘ The Passion of The Christ (2004)

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

New Bed-Fellows

THE UK WEEKLY MAGAZINE "The Economist" is not usually a source of information about religious attitudes. But, in keeping with its basically pragmatic editorial view in asking questions such as "does this policy actually work as intended" and "what might be the effect of this course of action", it has turned its attention on page 34 of the June 5 edition to the effect of religious attitudes on the political scene in the United States. Given that the U.S. is something of a world leader — for good and for ill — it might be useful to take a closer look.

They dismiss as simplistic the notion of a coercive "religious right" and see, instead, a polarization between "aggressive Republican evangelicals ... and an equally aggressive Democratic group of secularists."

Just as in New Zealand the political labels 'Left' and 'Right' are of less use than they once were — giving way instead to "Interventionist" and 'Non-interventionist' — so too are the labels of religious denomination that were once even stronger than they are today in their capacity to divide people.

A recent survey by the University of Akron in the US drew political conclusions from reported attitudes to doctrine and belief. Reminiscent of Kirsopp Lake's spectrum of 'Fundamentalists, Institutionalists, Experimentalists' (or as we would now say, 'Fundamentalists, Liberals, Radicals'), their survey found that the religio-political dynamic was better reflected as 'Traditionalist, Centrist, Modernist' than as protestant evangelical, mainline protestant and Catholic. "Traditionalists of *different* denominations", they write, "have more in common with one another than with [other] members of the *same* denomination. And the same holds true for centrists and modernists."

Could it be that, in a more general sense, religious expression is becoming less centered on historical allegiances? Not, we might suggest, that the 'church union' as such will return but rather that 'church' will be relegated in favour of a higher agenda — the bringing together of people of faith?

But faith in what? The Akron study surely gives us a clue. The traditionalists, whether Catholic, Presbyterian, Pentecostalist or whatever, invest their faith in the accumulated experience of earlier generations and especially as it came to be formalised and canonised in (for protestants) scripture or (for Catholics) the church magisterium. The tradition is what provides authority, stability and a standardised prescription.

In the middle, the liberal is having the hardest time — trying to reconcile the extremes. Reluctant to let go of the tradition but not brave (or 'foolhardy', according to taste!) to embrace uncertainty, the liberal bestrides two ice-floes that are steadily moving apart.

Down the other end of the spectrum of faith positions, where most SoF people can be found, is where the formalisation, canonisation, authority and stability are dismissed as inertia. "Life", as Cupitt has written (see page 4) is just too "baggy, shapeless and chaotic". But SoF's more radical constituency, though different in *orientation* from the traditionalists', is similarly made up of people of many historically competitive denominations and, in many cases, none at all.

And so we greet as brothers and sisters those whose religious imperative is to "promote the quest for meaning and fulfillment as a human activity" and the denominational flag is a secondary consideration — if one at all.



Noel Cheer, Steering Committee Chairperson

Oh, and 41% of U.S. voters say that they would not vote for a candidate who professed