



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

**NEWS**letter



This is your Steering Committee which met on February 12th in Wellington to further the business of SoF(NZ)

Back Row: George Dodd, Lyle Millar, Marion Dodd, Ralph Pannett, Don Feist, Peter Timmins

Front Row: Ian Crumpton, Mary Boekman, Derek Pringle, Ron Wilson, Noel Cheer

These are some decisions that we made:

- We will separate the process by which annual subscriptions are renewed from the process of collecting Conference fees. At first glance it might seem to be time- and effort-saving to do them together, but our experience has been that its confusion all round. So, you'll get a reminder in the next Newsletter about renewing your membership. The 'year' starts on July 1st. We've put on the back-burner the idea of offering Direct Debit or other electronic methods of payment. We'll stay with cheques.
- In recognition of their busyness and state of distraction at Conference we voted for whole- or part-rebate of Registration Fees for Arrangements Committee members.
- Conference planning is well underway. More details in the next Newsletter. The timetable is on the website. We have moved the Elective lectures from Friday evening, when we're all jet-lagged, into late Friday afternoon. The first meeting of the Core Groups will then be after dinner on Friday when we're nicely relaxed.
- We've created a new Committee position, that of 'Local Groups Co-ordinator'. Peter Timmins is the first holder.
- On top of all that, we've got a 'domain name' for SoF(NZ). That means that you enter [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz) to get to the website. That's easy to remember and easy to quote.

Noel Cheer

## Newsletter 60

March 2005

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## Did God Make The Tsunami?

These are extracts from an article in The Washington Post by Jose Antonio Vargas

Let's turn to history. The date: Nov. 1, 1755. The time: past 9 a.m. on All Saints' Day, a Catholic holiday. The scene: Lisbon, the devoutly Catholic capital of the devoutly Catholic Portuguese empire, shook -- first a big earthquake, then a big tsunami, then a big fire.

More than 100,000 people died.

The pious ones of the 18th century, clinging to their merciful and omniscient and just God, asked in awe: Was He angry? Was this His will? Was this His reaction to an ill, sinful world?

Three centuries pass and here we are. In a world of Muslims and Christians and Jews and Hindus and Buddhists, with the disaster in South Asia so far claiming more than 110,000 [250,000 - ed] lives -- many of them children -- folks all over the world, in all places of worship, are pondering similar questions.

On the Web site IslamOnline.net, someone from Belgium asked the geologist Zaghoul el Naggat: "Is there any religious meaning that we can take from a country being affected by tidal waves? Is this a punishment from Allah to these people? Or is it a test? How do we know when a form of natural disaster or phenomenon is a test or a form of punishment from Allah to the people?"

Shlomo Amar, Israel's Sephardi chief rabbi, has said, "This is an expression of God's great ire with the world. The world is being punished for wrongdoing -- be it people's needless hatred of each other, lack of charity, moral turpitude."

Some organizations in India say the tsunami is "divine retribution" for the arrest of Jayendra Saraswati, a Hindu religious leader.

Since Sunday [the day of the tsunami], those of different faiths have sought their own meaning, and some kind of explanation, for such a massive loss of life.

On his Web site Watch.org, Bill Koenig writes: "The Biblical proportions of this disaster become clearly apparent upon reports of miraculous Christian survival. Christian persecution in these countries is some of the worst in the world." Eight of the 12 countries hit -- Malaysia, Burma, Bangladesh, Somalia, Maldives, Sri Lanka, India and Indonesia, he says -- "are among the top 50 nations who persecute Christians."

Koenig, who lives in Alexandria and started the site in 1996, sees the South Asian disaster as an example of Christian exceptionalism. "what happened, and we see this happen over and over again, was that Christians, supernaturally, have been able to escape from harm's way," says the self-described Christian fundamentalist. "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, not ever shall be," he says, quoting from Matthew 24:21.

Mahdi Bray, a Muslim cleric, is the executive director of the Freedom Foundation, a public affairs arm of the Muslim American Society, a national grass-roots religious, social and educational organization based in Washington. He quotes the Bible, too, a psalm which says, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." There is a similar passage in the Koran, he adds, "Verily with every difficulty there is relief."

"This is a test" of people's faith, he says again and again.

Sutadhara Tapovanaye, a Buddhist monk for 38 of his 48 years, tries to explain it differently. This, he says, is a part of life, the dynamics of nature, an always-changing world.

[I'm with the Buddhist, how about you? - ed]

## In Church

by R S Thomas (1913-2000)

Often I try  
To analyse the quality  
Of its silence. Is this where God hides  
From my searching? I have stopped to listen,  
After the few people have gone,  
To the air recomposing itself  
For vigil. It has waited like this  
Since the stones grouped themselves about it.

These are the hard ribs  
Of a body that our prayers have failed  
To animate. Shadows advance  
From their corners to take possession  
Of places the light held  
For an hour. The bats resume  
Their business. The uneasiness of the pews  
Ceases. There is no other sound  
In the darkness but the sound of a man  
Breathing, testing his faith  
On emptiness, nailing his questions  
One by one to an untenanted cross.

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## On Re-Electing G .W . Bush

"The election results of 2 November 2004 make it clear that Westar and Snowstar have not fulfilled their promise to raise the literacy level in American society. Whatever your politics, you will have to admit that the fundamentalists and moralists carried the day. .... The tenor of the political campaign reveals another troubling aspect of the current climate: the loss of civility. .... We [Americans] embrace the comfort of plenty and endorse the false self-esteem that comes with self-assigned moral superiority.

The political campaign was a clarion call for us at Westar and Snowstar [and SoF! - ed] to reclaim the Bible, the Christian legacies, and the moral high ground. We can do so by salvaging the liberal legacy, practicing civility, becoming uncompromising advocates of economic and social justice, re-establishing an exchange with the sciences, re-uniting the churches with their own creative scholarship, and expanding the parameters of our community as radically inclusive.

*Robert Funk, Director,  
Westar Institute (home of The Jesus Seminar)*

## Local Groups

Look on the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz) for the complete list

### Central Otago

Due to the efforts of Bruce McMillan and the working party comprising his wife Leslie, Cliff Tapper, Don Morrison, and Jill Smith, a new Local Group has got underway in Central Otago. Jolyon Manning wrote this about a recent meeting:

"A well represented Central Otago audience were mightily impressed as expected from the words of our 87-year old Lloyd sharing in his lifetime reflection and learning. A sort of 'History of Religion' on Planet Earth."

**Contact: Bruce McMillan, Phone 03-445-4124.**

### Dunedin

They plan to start the year with a discussion of Don Cupitt's *Life, Life* led by Bruce Spittle. (See also Newsletter 57 page 4). In his preliminary notes, Bruce draws our attention to two contrasting views of 'the human being and human life': the 'old' model in which 'life should be spent in purifying the soul in preparation for death' and the 'new' model in which 'joy in life has become the chief end in life ...?'

**Contact: Don Feist, phone 03-476-3268**

### Tauranga

*They have published their 2005 programme:*

**9 Feb:** 'Show and Tell', book, item or whatever

**9 March:** 'Life' after Death Without Religion.

**13 April:** 'Is Christianity Going Anywhere': study of parts 1 and 2 of the Lloyd Geering lecture series at St Andrews Trust (see [www.standrews.org.nz/satrs](http://www.standrews.org.nz/satrs))

**11 May:** 'Is Christianity Going Anywhere', 3 and 4

### Belief and Knowledge

"Belief, which we have come to associate with religion, belongs really to science; myths are not believed in, they are conceived and understood.

To demand belief for an idea is already to contrast interpretation with knowledge; it is to assert that that idea has scientific truth."

George Santayana  
Reason in Religion

**8 June:** "Quakerism & Meditation", Guest Speaker

**13 July:** Midwinter Social, 2 Minute talks

**10 Aug:** visit by Lloyd Geering

**14 Sept:** Problem Solving, Ethics

**12 Oct:** Conference Reports

**9 Nov:** Planning & End of Year Supper

**Contact: Hugh Aiken, phone 07-544-4116**

### Manakau

They meet monthly on the second Sunday in Friendship House. They recently started the year with discussion groups, considering chapter 10 of *The Jesus Mysteries* by Freke and Gandy and posing the question "What was special about Jesus that some saw [him] as the Christ". The contrast between the Jesus of history and the Christ of the early church (i.e. before Constantine.)

They tried to tease out the threads of the Hebrew Messiah, the Greek Dionysus (god/man) and the early Christian Christ and discussed the quote: 'an enormous Greek hero cult devoted to a Jewish Messiah.'

**Contact Marie Clark, phone 09-636-8719**

### The End of Faith

*Excerpts from a promotional interview on the Amazon.com website of the author Sam Harris who wrote **The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason.***

"The President of the United States has claimed, on more than one occasion, to be in dialogue with God. Now, if he said that he was talking to God through his hairdryer, this would precipitate a national emergency. I fail to see how the addition of a hairdryer makes the claim more ludicrous or more offensive."

"The biblical God is jealous, angry — deplorably neurotic, in fact. And the Greek gods were like teenagers left alone in their parents' house for the weekend."

"Spirituality' or 'mysticism' ... refers to any process of introspection by which a person can come to realize that the feeling he calls 'I' is a cognitive illusion. The core truth of mysticism is this: It is possible to experience the world without feeling like a separate "self" in the usual sense. Such a change in the character of one's experience need not become the basis for making unsupportable claims about the nature of the universe, however."

# Where Does SoF Fit In?

The discussion that must never cease is that which concerns our purpose and our relevance. Here are two contributions.

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## Community?

*John D. Wessel of the Gold Coast SoF group ponders the question of creating community for 'spiritual' people outside the churches.*

One of the great difficulties of building a spiritual life outside the walls of traditional religion is that there seems to be no established community for this enterprise. Those following alternative spiritual paths often walk alone. They have no ready-made community for encouragement and support.

Community is extremely important. While there are many things one can do alone to nurture the soul, few things are as important for spiritual life as having companions who understand and support one's journey. My sense is that those who follow alternative paths do find informal ways to find community, through friendships, workshops, organisations and by simply sharing books, articles and other materials with one another. But I sometimes wonder if a more formal community might be useful.

One of the most attractive features of many alternative paths is that they are free of heavy institutional obligations. Those interested might want to meet in small, flexible, informal community, perhaps in someone's home and thus give each other mutual support.

Can a community exist in the absence of a common belief system? It seems as if this is what such a community would call for, given the diversity and pluralism of alternative spirituality. Most of us would find this difficult: we feel more comfortable with those who are like us. However, a more mature spirituality, one that honours the spiritual views of others, calls for a more mature form of community. Could it be the search itself that is what's held in common?

True community, says Martin Buber, must be based on 'confirmation of otherness' as well as similarity. Perhaps it is time for us to transcend old tribal models based on divisions of 'us' and 'them' and construct communities which incorporate diversity. We will experience friction at times but I suspect such communities will also be exciting, creative and growth-promoting. Such a community would support each person in his or her own spiritual journey. This would not mean that people could not question or raise concerns about the path of another, just that such discussion should be done with respect for that path.

Such a community would support individual journeys rather than requiring everyone to fit into a standard belief system. I am convinced that traditional religion kills the soul by forcing it into a small, suffocating box. A

community which promotes freedom for the soul and creative searching for answers to life's spiritual questions would indeed be a godsend and a fresh path to the sacred.

Relationships are essential to the life of the soul. We are tribal people and need one another, not only for physical survival but also for spiritual sustenance as we journey together on the road to the sacred. As Jung said, "The unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a 'you'.

**Could SoFiA ["Sea if Faith in Australia" ... and others] be such a community?**

*SoFiA "Bulletin" September 2004*

## At a Crossroads?

*Nigel Leaves was interviewed on the ABC Radio programme, "The Spirit of Things" on Sunday 12 December 2004*

I think this is where Sea of Faith is really at the crossroads, because it began as a sort of reforming influence within Christianity. Whether Christianity wants to be reformed in that way is debatable, but there are certainly lots of spiritual paths that people are following, and we find a lot of people coming to Sea of Faith to explore with us what exactly their religion of the future will be.

... I think you'd find a division within Sea of Faith as to whether it should stand for anything, or whether it's simply this milieu in which people can explore in an open way ideas which they find difficult to express and to articulate anywhere else. So the Sea of Faith has been a network, and I think rather than an association. And so as a network of people all exploring what it means to be religions in the third millennium.

... I think one interesting thing is that you'll actually find more men than women in the Sea of Faith, and perhaps there's something about intellectual debate which arouses passions in men that perhaps women are more into their emotions and feelings, and again, it's probably something that we do have to address within Sea of Faith.

... I think where Sea of Faith has tried to promote itself is to say that very often the churches have said 'leave your intellect once you come through the doors', and perhaps we've tried to emphasise the fact that intellectual debate is part and parcel of being a Christian and trying to work out what it means to believe in a divine being, or Jesus or all the questions of faith.

*Nigel Leaves of Wollaston College, Perth organised the first national conference of SoFiA, the Sea of Faith in Australia and was a speaker at the 2004 SoF (UK) Conference*

## Faith in Cyberspace

### Religion Online

A vast reservoir can be found at [www.religion-online.org/](http://www.religion-online.org/)

### Cranks

Crank Dot Net is devoted to presenting Web sites by and about cranks, crankism, crankishness, and crankosity. All cranks, all the time. [It may be a matter of dispute as to what counts as crankiness - ed]. Its at [www.crank.net/index.html](http://www.crank.net/index.html)

## Is All This ... Inevitable?

*Religious people have no need to fear science, says theologian Keith Ward. Modern physics makes belief in God more plausible than ever. This appeared in New Scientist on 27 November 2004, page 19*

[He introduced the conclusion of his article by referring to] the "possible worlds" theory postulated by Hugh Everett in 1957, in which every possible world exists. Many cosmologists take this as the most plausible explanation for the immensely improbable way our universe is fine-tuned for intelligent life.

"We seem to have three choices" in accounting for this fine-tuning, says Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal of England, in *Our Cosmic Habitat*. "We can dismiss it as happenstance, we can acclaim it as the workings of providence, or (my preference) we can conjecture that our universe is a specially favoured domain in a still vaster multiverse."

If this multiverse contained every possible set of laws and conditions, then the existence of our own world with its particular characteristics would be inevitable. A theory of everything resonates strongly with the idea of God as a cosmic mind. It does not take any great leap of faith to go from there to the religious notion of a cosmic consciousness.

If we suppose that mathematical realities exist only when conceived by some consciousness, we can frame the idea of a consciousness in which all mathematical structures, all possible states, and all moral and aesthetic values exist. We can speak of this ultimate consciousness as omniscient, since it conceives of all possible states. We can speak of it as omnipotent since it has the power to bring into reality all possible states.

We can speak of it as a Supreme Good, since it contains an indefinite number of forms of beauty, intelligibility and bliss. Here we find ourselves very close to the classical Christian, Jewish or Muslim idea of God.

*Keith Ward is Gresham Professor of Divinity at Gresham College, London and was a speaker at the 2004 SoF (UK) Conference.*

## A Word to Local Group Leaders

Your address is posted on our Website and it is one way for prospective members to find your Group. You should look it up sometime to confirm that it is adequate.

If you did not receive an email from me on February 15th — the monthly bulletin of bits and pieces — it will be because I don't have your email address. To fix that send me an email at [noel@cheer.org.nz](mailto:noel@cheer.org.nz)



## A Decade Ago

from Newsletter 10, March 1995

"Ralph Pannett saw [the Internet] as a way of developing our Sea of Faith network to be more responsive and participatory (at least for those with computing resources). Following a letter published in a recent issue of the UK SoF magazine a small group of SoF members in the UK and New Zealand exchanged email addresses. Now messages are sent to a common mail list so everyone sees and may comment on any one contribution to a 'discussion'. The advantage of this mode is that it is non-hierarchical, everyone has equal access, and is part of the group, no matter their geographic isolation. So 'SoFnet' was born.

"Suzi Thirlwall ... has kindly offered to manage a resource centre of books, tapes (audio and visual) and any other material of interest to SOFN members and groups."

(Ed: Both are still in operation a decade later: if you are a member and want to participate in 'SoFnet' then send an email to [noel@cheer.org.nz](mailto:noel@cheer.org.nz)

Suzi still maintains the Resource Centre, her address is on page 10 and a full catalogue of Resource Centre contents accompanies this Newsletter and appears on the website.



# Books

## The New Believers

Rachael Kohn, *The New Believers, Re-imagining God*, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2003 (Available at Unity Books, Wellington) reviewed by Lloyd Geering.

A few years ago, on my way to USA via Sydney, I was interviewed by an ABC journalist who greatly impressed me with her ability to ask intelligent questions on religious issues. Last year in Sydney she interviewed me again for her regular programme, "The Spirit of Things". Her name, Rachael Kohn, betrays her Jewish background but before entering broadcasting some fifteen years ago she pursued an academic career. In her native Canada she gained degrees up to doctoral level in sociology, New Testament and Rabbinics. Then she lectured in Religious Studies in Canada, Britain and Australia. All this has made her the most qualified and intelligent interviewer on religious topics in Australasia and she now presents two regular radio programmes. It is a pity we have nothing like them in New Zealand.

On this last occasion she introduced me to her own book, *The New Believers*, written partly on the basis of her interviews with some leading religious figures and partly out of her experience in visiting new centres of religious interest. Here she takes us on a religious safari where she finds what she calls 'the free-flowing exploration of spirituality and the charting of new frontiers'.

The burgeoning of new age spirituality can be a minefield for the uninformed but with skill and insight Rachel distinguishes clearly between the fraudsters and self-styled messiahs on the one hand and, on what she calls 'the fine and deep-thinking' individuals who are pioneering spiritual paths they believe to be more relevant to the world they live in.

I learned quite a lot from this book. I had not realised, for example, that lurking beneath the surface of the fanciful tale *The Wizard of Oz*, its theosophist author, L. Frank Baum, was 'consciously reflecting the scientific rationalism which had seriously questioned the received beliefs in a personal God'?

Rachel introduces us to a great variety of people within the Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist and even secular worlds, who are re-imagining God or inventing new forms of spirituality. I was particularly interested in the various new movements emerging in the Jewish world

The feminist revival of the goddess, Joseph Campbell's emphasis on the role of myth, the Gaia movement's concern with the saving of the planet, the renewed interest in the Jewish Kabbalah, the influence of Freud, Jung and Rudolf Steiner, the Dalai Lama, Don Cupitt, and Hans Küng's Global Ethic are only a few of the topics discussed.

Members of the SoF will find this book both interesting and informative. Because of her knowledge and experience Rachel has been able to present her material with the empathy of a neutral scholar and to offer a clear and balanced appraisal.

Lloyd Geering.

[Readers with web access should go to the ABC website at <http://abc.net.au/rn/relig/spirit/> and listen to recorded broadcasts of "The Spirit of Things" or read transcripts. They may also marvel at how much better the listening public of Australia are served than are we - ed]

## Devout Sceptics

*Devout Sceptics, Conversations on Faith and Doubt with Bel Mooney*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2004, 192 pp., \$28. Revieweb by Lloyd Geering.

I had not heard of this book until someone gave it to me at Christmas. Bel Mooney is a journalist who presented an award-wining series on BBC in which she discussed questions of faith and doubt with a wide-ranging group of well-known people that included writers, scholars and politicians. Of the 34 original presentations she has selected 20 and slightly edited them for publication.

Here we learn interesting insights into the personal beliefs of people we mostly know about in other connections, such as Denis Healey, Isabel Allende, Joanna Trollope, Clare Short, and Amy Tan.

Collections of this kind are difficult to summarise, so I mention only one. I was particularly interested to learn that James Lovelock, author of *The Gaia Theory* was reared as a Quaker. Today he describes himself as an agnostic, partly because he wants to keep his mind open. He rejects humanism as 'a self-limiting and self-destructive philosophy', because it focuses too much attention on the human species and does not do full justice to the complex community of organisms that constitute planetary life.

SoF members will find themselves identifying with much that is said here and yet there is freshness about the material because of the great variety of backgrounds from which it has come.

Lloyd Geering

## Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life

Ian Fleming drew our attention to the last page of Richard Dawkin's *The Ancestor's Tale - A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life* (UK Publisher Weidenfeld Nicolson Illustrated.) Richard is an articulate scourge of all things religious, but some of his targets might appear to SoFolk as "straw men". The following passages show Dawkins leaning in a somewhat spiritual direction brought about by his contemplation of the wonders of the natural world:

"The universe could so easily have remained lifeless and simple - just physics and chemistry, just the scattered dust of the cosmic explosion that gave birth to time and space. The fact that it did not - the fact that life evolved out of nearly nothing, some 10 billion years after the universe evolved out of literally nothing - is a fact so staggering that I would be mad to attempt words to do it justice." ... "Not only did evolution happen: it eventually led to beings capable of comprehending the process, and even of comprehending the process by which they comprehend it." ... "Not only is life on this planet amazing, and deeply satisfying, to all whose senses have not become dulled by familiarity; the very fact that we have evolved the brain power to understand our evolutionary genesis redoubles the amazement and compounds the satisfaction."

"Pilgrimage' implies piety and reverence. I have not had occasion here to mention my impatience with traditional piety, and my disdain for reverence where the object is anything supernatural. But I make no secret of them. It is not because I wish to limit or circumscribe reverence; not because I want to reduce or downgrade the true reverence with which we are moved to celebrate the universe. Once we understand it properly. 'On the contrary' would be an understatement. My objection to supernatural beliefs is precisely that they miserably fail to do justice to the sublime grandeur of the real world. They represent a narrowing down from reality, an impoverishment of what the real world has to offer.

I suspect that many who call themselves religious would find themselves agreeing with me. To them I would only quote a favourite remark that I overheard at a scientific conference. A distinguished elder statesman of my subject was having a long argument with a colleague. As the altercation came to an end, he twinkled and said, 'You know, we really do agree. It's just that you say it wrong!' I feel I have returned from a true pilgrimage.

*edited by Noel Cheer*

## Books Noted

Living With The Devil, A Meditation on Good and Evil. Stephen Batchelor, Riverhead Books (Penguin) 2004.

Stephen Batchelor, a former monk in the Tibetan and Zen traditions, is a contributing editor for Tricycle magazine, and the author of the national bestseller Buddhism Without Beliefs. He was a Keynote Speaker at our Timaru Conference in 2002.

The dusk-jacket says "The devil need not appear with horns and a forked tail: he stands for everything that paralyzes our innate wisdom, freedom and empathy, thus blocking our paths in life." The word 'diabolos', Stephen told us at the book launch in Wellington, last December, invokes the image of an obstacle thrown across one's path.

The point is picked up on page 53: "Existential flight is driven by fear ... [which] ... penetrates deep into the roots of human existence. It originates in that very feeling of being contingent: that deep intuitive fear that one need not have been born and will inevitably die."

In an interview Stephen said: "I find supernaturalism to be an enormous obstacle in communicating Buddhist ideas. Not only does it take us away from our direct experience

of the world, but it also dehumanizes the Buddha. In being represented as perfect, the Buddha loses something of his humanity."

This is a hopeful book about living with life's contradictions. Stephen Batchelor argues that freedom from the demonic is not achieved by suppressing it or projecting it onto others, but by calmly and clearly recognising and understanding those inhibiting and destructive powers as they well up from within us and assail us from without.

*Noel Cheer*

The soul of early modern man[kind] found itself split in two: detached Cartesian reason at odds with exuberant Wordsworthian emotion. Since the rationalists believed in systematic human progress and the establishment of an ordered world, they demonized chaotic outbursts of unbridled emotion that threatened their goals. The romantics, however, asserted the primacy of feeling and regarded any attempts to impose abstract rules, controls, or measurements as a form of demonic inhibition.

Stephen Batchelor, Living With The Devil p42

Spirit Abroad, A Second Selection of New Zealand Spiritual Verse. Edited by Paul Morris, Harry Ricketts and Mike Grimshaw. Random House 2004

In the concluding essay, Paul Morris wrote: "Artists and writers articulate our spirituality. By their very nature poetry and spirituality are closely related. Like poetry, spiritual experience is often fragmentary and incomplete, a transforming moment profound and partial, driven by momentary rather than linear logic. ... Our poets have become our 'theologians' as they write our identity and spirituality."

This book is now in the SoF Resource Centre

*Noel Cheer*

## On Turning Seventy

C.K. Stead

I think it came to me in sleep  
that when at Anzac dawn parades  
old soldiers weep  
it's not as they will say for fallen comrades

but for the young self full of sap and fire  
as distant now and caught in coils of time  
as one the bullets of some half-forgotten war  
stopped in his prime.

From Spirit Abroad

## A Kiwi in Sheffield

Beverly Smith of Gisborne went to the UK Conference in Sheffield. Here are some of her impressions.

I WAS VERY IMPRESSED WITH MY FIRST MEAL -- starter of watermelon filled with crab meat, mayonnaise and a julienne of fruit, followed by beef stroganoff and a choice of two desserts. We were permitted to bring our wine from the very upmarket bar where there was a gathering for pre-dinner drinks. The Halls have to compete for live-in students with those who opt to live out.

The SPCK bookshop had an impressive range of radical theological books, not only encompassing Western thought but inclusive of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist. There was a second hand bookstall where I purchased for £1 Jean Holm's *The Study of Religions*, published 1977. When I got back to Auckland I phoned Jean to tell her I'd bought her book and had met her former colleague from Cambridge University, Alison McRobb. Jean told me of her embarrassment when the publishers printed Hebrew letters upside down in a chapter titled "getting it right".

The Conference was run on the very same lines as our wonderful NZ events, except that our Core groups became Base groups. Tony Windross, an Anglican vicar from Norfolk, looked after the group I was in. He told us he was absolutely up-front with his congregation as to where he stood regarding supernatural events, more fortunate than Anthony Freeman (who attended Conference) author of *God in Us* [who] was dismissed from his Parish. Anthony felt delivered from an oppressive Christianity. He believes God is not out there aloof and silent but inside us, alive and present.

\* \* \*

Professor Keith Ward [see p5 - ed] ... [spoke] ... with a friendly counter-blast to Don Cupitt, particularly in reference to Don's book *Life, Life*. Although believing in a Deity 'out there', Keith acknowledged that the church has to change to accommodate people in this century. ... It can be appropriate to stay in the tradition and change it. Leaders are needed who are liberal and radical. We don't [always] have to agree with people we honour and respect. Jean Holm informs me that Keith Ward and Don Cupitt are great friends -- each having written a number of books at different ends of the spectrum.

\* \* \*

I had listed for Anthony Freeman's [workshop] "Grassroots Spirituality" -- based on Robert Forman's book of same name. [But] as the American author was present, Anthony handed the session over to him, a jovial exponent of Transcendental Meditation and spirituality in our times. [He spoke of] a profound shift in the nature of spirituality in America. He expanded on two opposites: Spirituality vs Tradition. The first is something we can experience and it gives a sense of being connected with silence and a listening spirituality [in contrast with] the dogma of tradition in the past where there is too much music, praising etc. People who are exploring their spiritual lives in a range of ways have no natural ways to meet or support each other's quest. All this makes a huge difference. Think of the difference between the person who reads Deepak Chopra in the privacy of her home, and her friend down the road who goes to a church. The church-goer "knows" that she is part of a huge community, the so-called "body of Christ". She has a huge community that reinforces her beliefs. She sees people around her who think roughly as she does. She knows where or how to find other like-minded souls, even when she moves to a new town. Down the street, her spiritual friend reads Deepak's books alone. If she feels that she has learned something enormous from Chopra, she may tell one or two friends with whom she shares her interest, but she has no larger community with whom she can share her excitement. If she feels that she wants to correct a social wrong, hers will be

a largely lonely voice, for she is without a support system. [However], The Sea of Faith is a place to connect.

Australian Nigel Leaves who replaced Huston Smith as a keynote speaker suggested we read his biography of Don Cupitt which enables us to understand Don's earlier books and the impact of Don's broadcast.

\* \* \*

Don Cupitt's awaited lecture was entitled "The Return of the Great Questions". He looked back on the 20th century at the great advances in medicine, the average life becoming longer and more prosperous and culturally richer. Yet at the same time this was also much the most destructive century, ravaged by the decline of religion and the clash of violent secular-political ideologies and severely threatened by overpopulation and degradation of the environment. Young people came to draw their world-view and their values from the media and pop music. With the ring of communications satellites around the world, money, ideas and entertainment began to be traded continuously -- in a single world-wide conversation of humanity. Some groups feel they haven't been invited to the party with resultant religious backlash.

\* \* \*

At the closing of Conference a small group [led us in singing] this German folk song.

### Die Gedanken Sind frei Thoughts are Free

Die Gedanken sint frei, my thoughts freely flower  
Die gedanken sint frei, my thoughts give me power.  
No scholar can map them, no hunter can trap them;  
No one can deny; Die Gedanken sind frei!

So I think as I please, and this gives me pleasure,  
My conscience decrees this right I must treasure,  
My thoughts will not cater to duke or dictator,  
No one can deny: Die Gedanken sind frei!

And if tyrants take me and throw me in prison,  
My thoughts will burst free, like blossoms in season  
Foundations will crumble, the structure will tumble.  
And people will cry: Die Gedanken sind frei.

### Israel, The Torah and God

RABBI MICHAEL WEISSER addressed the Auckland Group a few months ago. He left them with this analysis of the way in which different Jewish emphases see the following inter-relationships:

#### Orthodox: God → Torah → Israel

God created the Torah and created Israel to receive it.

#### Conservative: Israel → God → Torah

From Israel's relationship with God, came the Torah.

#### Liberal: Torah → Israel → God

Israel created the Torah and from this came to understand God.



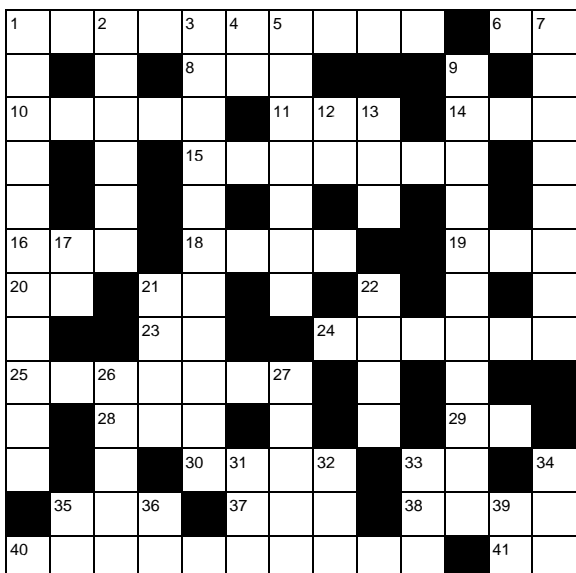
# SofWord N° 1

## Across

1. It just happens that way.
6. SoFman takes the current steadily forward.
8. Born a woman.
10. Recipient of Paul's pastoral tips.
11. Small numbers?
14. A curious drink?
15. The rocky road to the Papacy.
16. If you do this you might have to do it again.
18. Theology, in a four-letter sort of way.
19. Way to go, out East.
20. To be — for now.
21. You'll get there if you go West, young man.
- 23 All our clocks tick in step.
- 24 We'll let it be, then.
- 25 What a really big fan might do.
28. Next page required.
29. Let me make it clearer.
30. Half a bum.
33. Skeletal stuff.
35. A musical second coming?.
37. It rules the red states of the USA.
38. Soulful endorsement.
40. Earthly objecter to divine objects.
41. Brutus didn't deserve this intimate greeting.

## Down

1. The claim of universal applicability.
2. Yes, I was born here.
3. Knowledge breathed in to you.
4. What there is 'plus ultra'
5. One whose path had been lightened, according to Simeon.
7. A punctuation mark lost a letter and lost consciousness.
9. Rebranded as Intelligent Design.
12. Logical Operator.
13. Don't fall in to it.
17. The third person exists.
21. They don't let just anyone in.
22. A story, right or wrong.
26. Choose to commit (3-2).
27. To glory, laud and honour.
31. Warm in the kitchen, important in Turkey.
32. Prefixed just about anywhere.
33. Wild or otherwise its a good grain.
34. African beast of Flanders' singing.
35. She rated "Ten"
36. Suffixed to Dad's name if he had mine..
39. Ugly movie star invited to 'phone home'.



## Feedback

from the 2004 Conference at Cambridge

About one half of the attendees at the last Conference provided the Arrangements Committee Chair, Peter Timmins with completed Survey forms. These items have been selected from a larger document that will be considered in detail by the Steering Committee and next year's (2005) Arrangements Committee:

### The Good Bits

- one in five wrote something like "thoroughly enjoyed the whole weekend."
- three quarters nominated the Keynote Speakers for special mention.
- a third singled out the Saturday dinner for positive special mention and one in five singled out the concert.
- Some said that the Arrangements Committee was "cheerful"

### The Not So Good Bits

- The weather and long walks in the rain between buildings.
- Some of the signage didn't meet expectations.
- A cool auditorium was noted by 20% of respondees.

### In Between

- The success of the Core groups are strongly dependent on the skill of the leader.
- Suggestions to move Elective lectures from Friday evening to help those who are travel-weary.
- Some sort of celebratory ending.
- The suggestion that Keynote Speakers might circulate around the Core Groups.

*Data by Peter Timmins, summarised by Noel Cheer*

## C hanges in S oF (U K)

At a recent Steering Committee meeting they elected the following:

Chair: David Paterson  
 Treasurer: Patti Whaley  
 Editor of "Portholes": Ken Smith

## Copy Deadlines

These are the dates by which I will need copy for the Newsletter for this year.

Issue	Deadline
May	15 April
July	15 June
September	16 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 (addresses on Page 10)*

## 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**, P.O. Box 35651, Browns Bay, Auckland. (Phone 09-478-2490).

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

**www.sof.org.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

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*The only copy appearing in this Newsletter that may be construed as reflecting SoF policy is that which is accompanied by a by-line of a member of the Steering Committee.*

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### Optional Extras ...

"SoF" is 28 page A4, 6-times-a-year magazine produced by the UK SoF Network. To start your subscription, send \$53 to the SoF(NZ) Membership Secretary (address above). Renewal rates will be advised from the UK. *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/](http://www.standrews.org.nz/satrs/)

## Last Word

From The Chairperson

### Who Made The Tsunami?

**STEPHEN BATCHELOR'S LATEST BOOK**, *Living With The Devil* (Riverhead Books, New York, 2004) is noted on page 7 of this Newsletter. On page 6 of the book he tells us:

**"At the heart of the Buddha's awakening lies a counterintuitive recognition of human experience as radically transient, unreliable and contingent. ... no essential self either underpinned or stood back and viewed the integrated display of colours, shapes, sounds, sensations, thoughts, and feelings that arise and vanish in each moment of consciousness."**

In a parallel way, the Indonesian tsunami brings into relief the relationship that the universe has with us, its biological products. We are not important — except to our selves and to each other. But some assume (or 'have faith that' or 'trust that') the universe 'cares about' each one of us — that there is built-in compassion. But, like the mysterious and ineffable 'love of God' with which it is sometimes conflated or equated, its actions may occasionally leave us out-of-pocket and sometimes even dead. Believers in this cosmic/divine care shrug their shoulders and murmur about a wisdom far greater than our's which launches a Black Death, a Lisbon Earthquake or an Indonesian tsunami.

Others don't think like that. For them there is no agent with moral accountability which is higher than the human. It is not that the universe is 'callous', because that would require it to have the *capacity* for compassion which it evidently lacks. It simply rolls on, sometimes elevating and sometimes crushing its creatures. These processes occur according to what we call 'laws' but which may be little more than the 'regularities' which arise when one set of contingencies collide with another.

Most importantly, in this point of view, love and justice and compassion all exist in the universe *because we humans have made them*. Even in the face of natural disasters, this view does not blame God or capital-N "Nature" — because if a moral agent were to exist it would not do such things.

Foolishly, and in a fit of excessive humility, theistically-inclined humankind at some time in the past disowned our own capacity for transcendence and invented a super-human entity who takes all the credit for the good things but is allowed all sorts of lame excuses for the bad.

*Noel Cheer, Steering Committee Chairperson, 2004-2005*