



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

After Religion – What?

Is Nothing Sacred Anymore?

There is still time to register for the Conference at Nga Tawa starting 29th September, and plenty of single room accommodation

Consider whether friends might wish to attend some or all of the sessions and to engage with us over ideas and experiences. If you have not yet registered, the organisers of the Conference urge you to consider attending yourself. You might like to find out more from someone you know who attended a previous Conference or who is attending this year.

Our speakers appear eager to present and participate. The redoubtable Bruce McKenzie will run the bookstall. Wine for happy hours and the banquet has been chosen. Entertainment has been arranged for Saturday evening. Buses have been laid on for the trips on Saturday afternoon and shuttling to and from the airport in Palmerston North. Workshop arrangements are waiting for you. Now if the weather will co-operate for the trips....

Actually, almost all sessions take place (and some of the accommodation is) under the connected roofs of a complex of buildings, and the rooms are modern and heated, so we should be cosy during the early spring in the Rangitikei. (Nga Tawa is just outside Marton, the “Hub of the Rangitikei” – just off Highway 1). Marlene Smith, our registrar, has worked hard to ensure that the

maximum number of people get their first choices of electives, workshops, and trips.

Having attended a number of our previous Conferences, I realize that I enjoyed the conversation, presentations, and facilities without thinking too much about what went on behind the scenes. Now I know. Thanks are due to all members of the Steering Committee, especially the chairs for keynote speakers, electives, and workshops, and our hard-working Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer. The people on the Arrangements Committee, a group of 17 from Palmerston North, look forward to welcoming you to a comfortable and suitable venue.

Please see previous Newsletters and the Conference registration material available on the net at www.sof.org.nz for information and copies of the registration form. If you wish to ask anything of me about conference arrangements or the Marton area, I am at dlhaist@xtra.co.nz and 06 354 2626.

Larry Haist
Arrangements
Committee
Chairperson
2006



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In Their Own Write

Keynote Speaker Previews

Don Cupitt: “When humans have become completely demythologized, and have lost all their old guiderails and landmarks, what will they live by?”

David Tacey: “The literal understanding of God has been destroyed by science and philosophy, but intuition, the arts, and postmodern philosophy are groping toward God in a new way.”

Bill Cooke: “This idea will be examined by looking at the ideas of God and faith prominent in Sea of Faith literature. The implications of the fatal flaw in these areas for liberal religion are outlined, and some solutions are offered”.

In The Beginning – Sin

*This is a synopsis of a paper by Fred Marshall of Hamilton.
The full paper appears on the website at www.sof.org.nz*

What was this apple which our *tūpuna ake* (ancestors) ate with such disastrous consequences?

For the Middle Ages it was sex, which explains why women have had such a bad press in the traditional church beliefs, although how our prototypical ancestors were meant to do without it, one wonders. The myth of the garden tends to be discounted these days and the notion of original sin is rejected out of hand; but if we look again, this ancient myth contains useful insights which we are just beginning to grasp. Sin is associated with humanity from



the very beginning

AXIOMS

1. That the **biblical myths of human unworthiness are wrong** — both as far as humans are concerned and also in the way they portray the nature of the divine. What we are, is what we are meant to be.
2. That **the divine purpose of Jesus's life was to liberate us from the destructive beliefs** of the past. But under the inevitable influence of those beliefs the early Church distorted the lessons of the master's life, to make doctrines which were the antithesis of what he taught — notably in the importance of doctrine itself, and in the doctrines of sin, propitiation, redemption and salvation.
3. That God IS, over and above anything that the human mind is capable of conceiving; that while different images of the divine help us to envisage God's existence, **all our notions of God are of no consequence in defining divinity and in particular the distinction between a subjective and an objective divinity is meaningless.**

THE PATTERN OF EVOLUTION

Mankind is evolving from an animal state, characterised by:

- a survival instinct which justifies any and every action necessary for individuals to save themselves from death;
- the pack instinct which drives some individuals to dominate their fellows, which draws others to follow unquestioningly the dominant individual and which maintains the discipline of the pack by social or physical sanctions;
- the securing and defence of territories to guarantee the resources needed by the pack;
- the unbridled exercise of the reproductive urge justified by thin rationalisations and without regard to the consequences.

We are evolving into a spiritual state characterised by:

- a concern for others and a willingness to die for them if necessary;
- a refusal of dominance — the leader is to be a servant; the rejection of the pack dynamic — the future rests on individual choice;
- collaboration in the husbanding of the earth's resources so that there is enough for all;
- a rational bridle on reproduction to compensate for the loss of the natural balancing mechanisms which, until this century, kept populations in check — disease, famine and war.

This process will be completed not by dominance and the use of the mob but by the action of individuals and groups of individuals who are willing to "listen"— to their conscience, to an inner vision, to a conjunction of circumstances, or to whatever other medium the "voice of God" may be heard by, and who of their own free will do what this "voice" prompts them. This is the model which we take from Christ.

THREE TURNING POINTS

- **"Who told you that you were naked?" (The Garden of Eden)**
- **Jesus**
- **The "post-modern, post-Christian, post-everything" — now**

Book Noted: *The Future of Religion*

by Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo (Santiago Zabala ed.); Columbia U.P., NY, 2005.

This is the result of a dialogue between the well-known Rorty, a neo-pragmatist, non-Christian but Jesus sympathizer, Prof. of Comparative Literature and Philosophy at Stanford U., and Vattimo, who teaches theoretical and hermeneutical philosophy at U. of Turin, and declares himself to be a

post-metaphysical Christian. Zabala, who writes an introductory essay and chairs the discussion is researcher in philosophy at the Pontifical Lateran U. of Rome.

- The essay by Zabala is "A Religion without Theists or Atheists".
- Rorty contributes, "Anticlericalism and Atheism", and Vattimo, "The Age of Interpretation".
- Then there is an excellent dialogue on "What is Religion's Future after Metaphysics".
I found the philosophical/ theological context pretty demanding; references to

(the usual suspects): Hegel, Kant, Nietzsche, Schleiermacher, Heidegger, Derrida, Croce, Dewey, Gadamer, and much talk of 'onto-theology'. The focus is rather on the Roman Church, and for Rorty, the state of authoritarian religion in the USA, but nevertheless the cap fits fairly generally. I found new and arresting ideas, as well as the familiar arguments, but this dialogue I found fascinating -- and with a wonderfully simple and direct conclusion.



The Annual General Meeting

of the Sea of Faith Network (NZ)

will take place at 4:30pm on Saturday September 30, 2006
at the site of the Annual Conference, Nga Tawa College, Marton

Agenda

- Welcome
- Apologies
- Minutes of 2005 AGM
- Report of the Chair
- Report of the Treasurer
- Membership Report
- Resource Centre Report
- Archivist Report
- Editor/Webmaster Report
- Introduction to 2007 Conference
- Remits for Proposed Rule Changes
- Election of Officers
- General Business
- Closure

Remit

In the name of Mary Boekman

1. That Rule 2 of the Sea of Faith Rules be amended as follows:

In place of:

“The Registered Office of the Society shall be at 82 Kingshorne Street, Strathmore Park, Wellington or such place as the Steering Committee shall from time to time appoint.”

The Rule should state:

“The Registered Office of the Society shall be the mailing address of the current Secretary, or such place as the Steering Committee shall from time to time appoint.”

End of Remits

Some Background

Subscription

After many years of the \$15 annual subscription, we need to raise it to \$20. The Treasurer, Ron Wilson will propose a motion to that effect.

Remit

The Remit tidies up an anachronism

Auditor

When we come the Election of Officers we propose to not elect an Auditor for the following reasons.

For years we have struggled to get an auditor who conforms with the requirement in our Rules that s/he is a member of the NZ Society of Accounts.

The whole business of auditing the accounts of organisations like our's has become very difficult and potentially very costly. Increasingly, small organisations like our's do not have their books audited.

Furthermore, all audits have a hedge statement along the lines ‘as far as I can tell from the information that I have been given, these records are a true statement’ — which gives little in the way of solid assurance.

So ... in looking at Rule 10 we can see that for SoF to have an auditor at all is an **option** (but if we did have one s/he needs the aforementioned qualification) and in consulting with the Registrar of Incorporated Societies we find that they do not require our financial statements to be audited. Therefore we propose to disband the office of auditor and to seek ongoing guidance from some competent person, or persons, on keeping our books.

As part of easing the Treasure's load and making procedures easier for members, we have recently made progress of three important fronts:

1. We separated the subscriptions renewal process from the payment of Conference Registration.

2. We are in the process of bringing the Conference Account and the Main Account under our elected Treasurer who has oversight of both accounts at all times. Over the years the relationship between the two accounts became somewhat estranged.

3. We will provide a simpler method for NZ subscribers to the UK “Sofia” publication to enrol and renew. (see page 10 of this Newsletter for details).

Noel Cheer
Chairperson

Learning to live without 'Identity'

The first section of Don Cupitt's Keynote Address at this year's UK Conference

In our tradition we have for many centuries tended to alternate between two styles of thinking that I shall call *globalism* and *localism*. The globalist outlook wants to see a single set of universal laws of reason, laws of nature, and moral principles prevailing throughout the whole world. But in reaction against it, localist thinking emphasises local differences, and tells us to identify with our own cultural tradition — our own distinctive vision of the world, our faith and customs. Above all, we should seek out and cling to everything that *differentiates* us from the rest of humanity, and binds us together. *Difference* is more important and valuable than *sameness*.

The contrast I am describing is familiar in the Hebrew Bible. The globalist or universalist strain, found in some of the Latter Prophets and the Writings, presents a religious vision that reaches out to the whole of humanity, whereas the localist strain concentrates exclusively upon the election by God of the people of Israel, their special task and destiny. At its most globalist, the Hebrew Bible speaks of Adam, and is a book for all humanity. At its most localist the Hebrew Bible is extremely ethnocentric, laying down all the ritual observances by which the Jews insist upon their difference from all other peoples, and saying to them that your own people's special relation to your God is the fundamental fact about you which must rule your whole life. For you, Jewishness comes first in every way, and humanity in general comes a rather poor second.

In the more recent Western tradition, the great triumph of Isaac Newton's physics made globalism prevail across the Western world for over a century. Newton had proved that a universal mathematical physics was

possible. He had shown that all local motion everywhere in the Universe is governed by a small set of simple and clear mathematical rules. Nature was an elegant and predictable machine, the same everywhere, and it seemed that the whole scheme of things within which we human beings live was well designed and good. There were universal laws of Reason and of Nature, and it seemed obvious that our human codes of law and morals should follow the same pattern and be the same everywhere. People began to speak about international law, and to draw up declarations of universal 'Rights of Man'.

Globalism peaked, one might say, in the language of the American and French Revolutions, and in the work of the Jewish scholar Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1788), in whose day some leading Jews even contemplated giving up their separate Jewish identity and becoming completely assimilated into liberal Protestant Christianity. That is something we could hardly imagine today, for of course during the nineteenth century there was a sharp localist reaction in the rise of messianic nationalism, not only amongst the Jews themselves, but in many countries. Your nation had its own distinctive language, history, culture and art-tradition, and you must be prepared to sacrifice your life for the sake of its honour, its independence and its sovereignty. In fact, nationalism and the cult of the national spirit became an immensely powerful secular religion. Ethnocentrism was a sacred duty.

Extreme nationalism divides the whole world up into competing nations, each of which thinks only of its own interest. In time, it provokes a reaction, as internationally-minded people try to check national egoism and develop international laws, conventions and institutions. And

that is roughly where we are today. This political history has been reflected in the history of religions. The scholars of the Enlightenment were the first to construct a list of major world religions, each with its own great territory, its language, its culture, its history, its doctrines and rituals. Thus, as the modern nation-state was being invented, so the modern conception of a religion as a kind of spiritual nation was also being invented. People found themselves committed by birth to sacred territories: to Christendom, or Islam, or Hindustan, or the Buddhist world, or to what was usually called 'fetishism' or 'animism'. Language, culture, religion, homeland — these things were all part of your birthright.

This was a fateful development, because in due course it made people around the world aware of their own distinctive religion as their own *heritage*. One had a duty to know about it, and take a pride in it, so that as in politics the concept of 'my nation' was the seedbed of militant nationalism, so people began to get militant and assertive about their own distinctive religious heritage. It's not something you question or criticize: it is something you fight for. So Judaism begat 'Sionism', Islam begat 'Islamism', Hinduism begat militant BJP-Hindu nationalism, and even Buddhist monks took to the streets. It was the West that had invented the concept of a religion as a great cultural bloc that was your heritage, and through which you *identified* yourself, and it was the West that invented the transformation of objectified religion into aggressively militant ethnonationalist ideology.

So the early-twentieth-century world of warring nation-states gave way in due course to the late-twentieth-century world of warring religions, often fighting for sovereignty over territory.

It's worse than that. As during the twentieth century there was an enormous expansion of world population from one to six billions, technological advances, political upheavals and cheap mass travel all combined to encourage very large-scale population movements. These movements are transforming every large country — and especially every large Western country — from a nation into an empire. A nation is a more-or-less ethnically and religiously homogeneous group of people, who feel they are all of one blood, and are indeed all interconnected by descent. By contrast, an empire embraces under a single political authority many peoples of very diverse ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Thus the British used to be, and to feel they were, a nation; but now they feel the country becoming more like an empire. More than that, we realise that our modern conception of what a religion *is* commits the people of each major faith to try to build around themselves the entire social and cultural world of their own tradition. And it is indeed entirely natural that, just as Christians have long wanted to Christianize the whole of British social and cultural life, so today Muslims should want to make Britain into an Islamic country. Even the Jews, tiny though their numbers now are, can still seek planning permission to create purely-Jewish districts by running overhead wires around them to create an 'eruv'.

A practical contradiction thus arises. Britain has become like an empire, and I for one rather like living in an empire, with all its cultural richness and variety. It's as if, nowadays, 'everything is everywhere': almost all the peoples, all the cultures and religions of the world are represented today in modern London, a city of 200 languages, just as all the varied voices and activities of humankind can quickly be accessed in one's own study. But it

is not going to be possible for any one religious group to dominate completely, and to remake the whole human world in its own image. All of us now have to learn to live as members of one minority group amongst others. All of us now have to acknowledge others, and must also acknowledge the (limited) sovereignty of the state to which we owe allegiance.

When in the past many competing religious and ethnic groups had to coexist within one empire, the standard method of reducing friction was segregation. The capital city was divided into 'Quarters', and different ethnic groups lived in different villages — an arrangement that survives in many places today. But in dynamic, rapidly developing societies segregation soon leads to inequality, and inequality leads to sharp political unrest; and my own belief is that our modern experience is showing us that we need to change our understanding of religion. We need to give up the idea that in our own tradition we already have, readymade, a complete civilization in miniature, founded on an exclusive and final revelation of Truth, and demanding our absolute and exclusive allegiance. Still more do we need to give up the idea that our very identity as persons is given us by and through our commitment to such an idea of religion? And that is what I mean by 'learning to live without identity'. We need to become *inwardly* globalized. Nowadays, when 'everything is everywhere', I'd rather lose my identity and be everyone and anyone.

Ten years ago I was asked to write a contribution to a symposium of essays on the dialogue between Judaism and Christianity. In response to that challenge, I wrote a deliberately-subversive piece saying that I was unhappy with the whole idea of there being two big things, one called *Judaism* and the other called *Christianity*, and each being a kind of finished block that is not going to change. Sorry, but no: that whole way of dividing up the religious world and talking about religious differences is now

inappropriate. In our society we don't live in one or another of a whole series of walled-off ghettos. Everything is everywhere, and everything now mingles. None of us can claim privileged access to his own tradition: on the contrary, all your tradition is just as accessible to me as mine is to you. The whole idea of *any* privileged access to Truth is dead.

Everything is in the melting-pot, everything mingles, and I'd like to talk about what will emerge from this mingling. Where is it taking us, and what kind of future will there be for religion?

* * * * *

Faith in Cyberspace

 Still confused by Intelligent Design? You can read an analysis of the claims that its supporters make at

http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~thegroundoffaith/issues/2006-02/bonting_intel_design.htm

The author writes: "Its theological nature ... makes the ID hypothesis a form of 'God in the gap' theology, in which a specific act of God is proposed for a natural phenomenon that cannot (yet) be explained scientifically."

 From the international SoF Internet discussion group: "We don't need to indulge in the hubris of arguing that human experience is 'all there is' to take seriously the sobering (and liberating) realization that it is all we have to work with." *Bill Wilson, Waiuku, NZ*

To become a subscriber to this discussion group, go to the website

<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?LIST=SOF>

and follow the instructions.

There is no charge.



Book Reviews

A Mission in Time

Islam — A Short History

Karen Armstrong
Chronicles Books

For numbers of people the words 'Islam' and 'Muslim' are associated with a brand of religion that promotes acts of terrorism, oppresses women, and stirs up civil war.

In this little book Karen Armstrong takes on the Herculean task of writing a history of Islam in 187 pages and correcting some of the distorted images of that religion which have grown up in the West.

In 610 CE an Arab businessman, Muhammad ibn Abdallah, received a revelation in a cave near Mecca. From that time on till the present day Islam has had a mission. Their sacred scripture, the Quran (Koran), told them that God is active in history and that they are "to create a just community in which the weak as well as the strong are to be treated with respect." Armstrong guides the reader through a series of complex events - assassinations, civil wars, invasions, the rise and fall of dynasties - which, along with the interior religious quest, constitute Islam's vision for the world. That vision is political as well as religious. While Christians are more concerned with beliefs and doctrines Muslims see politics as the arena in which God works.

The book includes a brief and lucid section on fundamentalism. Fundamentalism exists in other religions and not just Islam, it is highly critical of Western secularism which it sees as the enemy, trying to "wipe religion out". Fundamentalists feel they are fighting for survival and some resort to terror. Armstrong shows that Islam is not a violent militaristic faith as commonly assumed in the West. Some Muslims, in their fight against what they see as the evils of secularism, go to extremes and abandon those core values of peace and compassion which are at the heart of all the major world faiths.

Armstrong refers to the veiling of women, (the burkah). Many

Westerners regard this custom as a form of male domination (as it was under the Taliban). Veiling links the wearer with the past and is a mild protest against our Western compulsion to "bare all", to idolize youth and to sideline age. The uniformity of dress also stresses the importance of community over Western individualism.

Armstrong shows Islam at its most triumphant between 1500 - 1700 CE. Three large empires were established and by the end of the 15th century Islamdom was the greatest power bloc in the world. "The whole world seemed to be becoming Islamic". But the arrival and rise of the West from 1750 onwards, founded on technology and capital investment and organized on secular, democratic lines, was a major turning point, not only for Islam but for all the major world religions. None of them, including Christianity, will ever be the same.

Armstrong contends that "it has never been more important for Western people to acquire a just appreciation and understanding of Islam". Today many Western people are expressing concern about the absence of spirituality in their lives, a diet of dry secularism is not enough. Muslims share this concern yet they welcome the more positive aspects of modernity without it being imposed upon them. They are anxious to retain their own religious traditions and some show some willingness to debate and reform them.

Armstrong's book is a necessary tool for getting a fair and balanced handle on Islam, a distorted image would be disastrous. Westerners share this world with 1.2 billion Muslims, at their best both societies have a common concern to promote justice, mercy and peace amongst all peoples.

Highly recommended.

Alan Goss

Navigating Through Time

A Short History of Myth

Karen Armstrong
Canongate

This modest-sized book traces the history of myth down through the ages from the Palaeolithic period (20000-8000 BCE) to the modern era. It argues persuasively that because mythology has fallen into disrepute - a myth is now commonly understood as a falsehood - our sense of the sacred has become blunted and our very humanity threatened. In the final chapter Armstrong suggests, perhaps somewhat tentatively, how this situation might be remedied.

Myths, according to another writer, "are maps by which cultures navigate through time". They tell us, says Armstrong, how to behave. They are true, not because they are factual, but because they give us insight into the deeper meanings of life. They demand action. In the ancient world myths were indispensable, they were therapeutic and still speak to our inmost fears and desires.

Mythology also reflects the way we think about God and humanity. Armstrong shows how people change their ideas about God and the human condition whenever they move into a new historical era. For example, in today's global world, where the technological geniuses have replaced the spiritual ones, the Creator God worshipped by Christians, Jews and Muslims has largely disappeared, especially in the West.

In a chapter on the Christian myth Armstrong shows how Jesus and the first disciples were rooted in Jewish spirituality, as was St. Paul. Paul, who was not much interested in Jesus' teachings, transformed Jesus into the timeless mythical hero who dies and is raised to life. The early Christians knew that this myth was true, not factually and historically, but because they had experienced transformation. Unless, says Armstrong, an historical event is mythologised it cannot become a source of inspiration.

In the final chapter Armstrong refers to the dramatic ways in which life has changed with the advent of modernity. As the scientific spirit took hold with its quest for efficiency (logos) the death of mythology has proved potentially disastrous. Human beings lost their sense of the sacred, World War I, Auschwitz, the Gulag and Bosnia spelled out what could happen when the sacred goes. Unless our technological genius is matched by some kind of spiritual revolution the future for our planet is bleak.

Armstrong discusses some secular novelists who have turned to mythology and who have tried to restore the balance. She concludes with a sobering note: "If professional religious leaders cannot instruct us in mythical lore, our artists and creative writers can perhaps step into this priestly role and bring fresh insight to our lost and damaged world."

This is a book that had to be written, it deserves a wide readership.

Alan Goss

**Bringing God Back to Earth —
Confessions of a Christian
Publisher**
John Hunt
O Books 2004

For me the book was like a doughy Christmas pudding with a lot of silver threepences embedded in it. But the threepences were so good, I happily kept on going through all the doughy bits. Here are some of the bits I liked:

'Religion began as a response to the dilemmas that self-awareness created. For instance, rather than act in the interests of the species, individuals could override their biological programming and act in the interests of the self. But to act solely in the interests of the self is self-destructive for everyone in the longer term. Religions grew to connect us again with the larger whole, replacing our lost instinct ... So in the first meaning of the word, religion helps us provide the framework for relating to each other, rituals for the key moments of life, for building societies'.

'Religion is nothing special. It's not something you do on Sundays, or in quiet times. It's not something you can separate from loving, or living. It's not different from washing the dishes, or dreaming at night. It's not either "real" or

'Religion is not for children, or for grown-ups who want to believe like children, it's for grown-ups who want to be responsible, and [who] are prepared to be responsible for others'.

John Hunt

"imaginary". Both God as reality and imagination are just different ways of coming to terms with the polarization of the world into "me" and "it" that came with self-awareness'.

'Over time we encounter the deity we've been taught to expect. In every spiritual experience, vision, dream, near-death-experience, the God we see takes the forms we're familiar with. All beliefs are learned. They're not written in our DNA.'

'The problem with theism is that it tends to push God out to the heavens as a remote, separate figure it can be hard to believe in. The problem with monism is that it makes Her or ourselves indistinguishable from the world around us. The extraordinary appeal of Christianity over two millennia has been to combine the best of both worlds by having a transcendent God who incarnates Himself into matter. Its weakness is that it muddles the two different approaches to God, reducing spirit to flesh. Its major internal disputes have accordingly centered on how far Jesus is one or the other'.

'So has Christianity been a good thing? Does it make a difference for the better? The most Christian nations on earth today, those with the highest proportion of churchgoers, have had some of the worst records, being amongst the most racist (South Africa and apartheid), the most genocidal (Rwanda), the most tribal and murderous (Northern

Ireland), the most nationalistic (Serbia), etc. And the evil-doers are often part of their communities, sincere Christians, certain of their salvation. Those who are not, as with Germany in the 1930s, commit acts with the support of the wider Christian community and the church, or they couldn't flourish ... But Christianity should have made a difference that is beyond argument. It makes more explicit claims than any other religion to be both one of love and of equal relevance for everyone. ... Logically history should show a steadily increasing gap between the morality of Christian countries and their pagan neighbours. It hasn't happened.'

'So why aren't Christians better than other people? Partly because the effects of good religion on practice are also true for Buddhists and Muslims, for all believers in all religions. It's the kind of God you believe in that matters rather than the doctrines that churches shape around Her. Sadly, simply believing in God doesn't make you a better or happier person than your neighbour. At most it can make you a better or happier person than you would otherwise have been.'

'The divide in the world is not between religions, or between believers and atheists. If there's a divide anywhere it's between those who have faith that the universe is meaningful and act accordingly, and those who don't, and act for their own benefit. Between those who will fight to make the world a better place, and those who can't see the point. Between those who are happy helping others along the way of life, and those who see it as a race to win. Between those who will sacrifice their selves in favour of others, and those who want to impose their cultures or creeds. Between those who see us as chimps occasionally granted glimpses of the divine mystery, and those who think they're saved and everyone else is going to hell.'

Reported by Don Feist, Dunedin

SoF (UK) Conference

Here are some recollections of this year's UK Conference.

The Issues

They are agonising over an apparently declining and aging membership. Attendance at this Conference was about 120. We expect about 150 at our's.

The feeling was expressed that affairs of SoF (UK) have been drifting somewhat in recent years and the incoming committee expressed a resolve to be a bit more business-like. The change of name of the magazine from 'sof' to 'sofia' caught a few people off-guard.

David Boulton, a founding member, argued persuasively for SoF(UK) being more visible in the press. He said that after being in existence for nearly 20 years, SoF (UK) was still not in a position to state (even internally) a view on the Iraq war, the environment or fundamentalism. Since the 2004 AGM the Steering Committee has been empowered to make public pronouncements on such matters, but has not yet done so. **There is something in this issue that we in New Zealand ought to debate.**

Those, in NZ and elsewhere, who oppose a media presence seem to do so from a position of not wanting SoF to take on the necessary institutional complexity.

For the UK to be able to this, they would need to be able to reconcile such activities with their status as a trust which has a self-imposed mission to educate the public in matters of religion.

The Speakers

The overall theme was **'Taking Each Other Seriously — Exploring the Otherness of The Other'**.

Don Cupitt asked us to 'live without identity' — to adopt a 'globalist' rather than a localist viewpoint.

Dr Ataulh Siddiqui (Senior Research Fellow at the Islamic Foundation, Leicester) pleaded for tolerance and understanding of Muslims.

I spoke of 'The Religion of the Willful Disbelievers' and attempted to show that spirituality is as inherent to humans as is language and, like language, the contrasts occur in the kind of implementation.

The AGM

The new chairperson is Penny Mawdsley, the secretary is John Pearson and the treasurer is Patti Whaley.

The Story

This was told by Hilary Campbell.

In the beginning Truth went about among the world naked. It was not a pretty sight. In fact, it was quite scary, and people were frightened by his nakedness, and ran away, and kept their children indoors so that Truth was forced to go about the world only under the cover of darkness. One day, a beautiful woman appeared, a stranger, dressed in the most beautiful clothes. Her clothes were of a material no one had even seen before, iridescent, rainbow-like. At first people were cautious of her and shied away, but soon discovered that when they talked with her or even just touched her clothes, they dreamt the most amazing dreams. These dreams changed them. They became more open to learning and grew in love for themselves and for others. One night, Truth crept up to the stranger who was creating such change. He asked her, "Who are you?" The stranger smiled and said, "Do you not know me? We have been companions for many years, though you

have not recognised me. My name is Story." She gave Truth a gift. She gave him her cloak to wear. And from that time on people were not afraid to encounter Truth, for Truth always went about the world clothed in Story.

The End

They have as much difficulty as we do in finding a satisfactory 'ritual' ending. This year we all sang a modern hymn called 'The Larger View' by John Andrew Storey to the tune of 'The Carnival is Over'.

In their ancient isolation
Races framed their moral codes,
And the peoples of each nation
Trode their solitary roads.
Now the distances are shrinking;
Travel, and the printed page.
All earth's many lands are linking,
Spreading knowledge of each sage.

Now new times demand new measures,
And new ways we must explore;
Let each faith bring its own treasures
To enrich the common store.
Then no more will creeds divide us —
Though we love our own the best —
For the larger view will guide us
As we join in common quest.

Reported by Noel Cheer

P.S. see page 10 for the new method of subscribing to "sofia"

Revelations

Revelations — Personal Responses to the Books of the Bible. Introduced by Richard Holloway. Canongate.

Thirty-four people were invited by the Publishers to give their individual responses to selected books from the Bible, this volume is the result. The names of the contributors will be familiar to many, authors like A.S. Byatt, Ruth Rendell, Joanna Trollope, Louis de Bernieres and P.D. James, musicians Bono and Nick Cave, theologian Karen Armstrong and the Dalai Lama

Some of the pieces will appeal more than others, the majority affirm (in the words of Nick Cave on Mark) that their selected book gives "our imaginations the freedom to rise and to fly". Others like the author Will Self (on Revelation) are much less enthusiastic. Self says that "he read the Book of Revelation only once - I never wanted to read it again". Mordecai Richler, the Jewish novelist (now dec'd), in his reflections on Job, asks why God should choose "my bunch" Israel as his holy people? For captivity in Babylon?; for the Inquisition?; for Pogroms?; for the Holocaust? "According to the Jewish calendar", he writes, "more than 5000 years have passed since God declared us a holy people, chosen to be special. Enough is enough. ... possibly he might consider favouring others with his love."

The contributions are all largely personal with no institutional axe to grind, no special cause to plead. All are written with feeling and will encourage discussion and debate. A thoughtful introduction by Richard Holloway emphasises the importance of myth and poetry in the biblical writings and the perils of packing the scriptures with science and fact.

This book confirms what we all know - a second-hand, imposed faith is useless. The only faith that really matters is one that we can truly call our own.

Alan M Goss August 2006

JIHAD

Islâm is the religion founded by the Prophet Muh.ammad. The word is sometimes said to mean "peace," but it is salâm that is the word for peace. Islâm means "submission, resignation," i.e. to the will of God. Both are from the same root, slm, "to be safe and sound, unharmed," and many other meanings. This is related to Hebrew shalôm, "peace," and the Ancient Egyptian root snb, "health."

The Dâru-l-Islâm, the "House of Islâm," means the predominantly Islâmîc part of the world, especially the part covered by Islâmîc states.

Outside the Dâru-l-Islâm is the Dâru-l-H.arb, the "House of War"; and it was the traditional duty of Islâmîc rulers to extend the House of Islâm into the House of War. **This was the Jihâd, the Holy War.**

Jihâd is now often said not to mean Holy War but merely a moral and spiritual "struggle" for perfection.

[But i]t is no distortion of Jihad to say that it means "Holy War."

Indeed, in the Middle Ages it was an important question whether Islâm could be properly practiced in a state that was not an Islâmîc state.

The terrorist attacks against the United States on 9/11/2001 [11 September] put conservative Islâm in a somewhat different light. Sa'ûdî subsidies to Islamic schools in countries like Pakistan have helped breed a generation of fanatics with a great hatred of modernity and the West. The mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, Osama ben Ladin, was himself a Sa'ûdî millionaire, stripped of his citizenship, who had created a state-within-a-state in T.âlibân, Afghanistan. T.âlibân itself ominously means "students," i.e. students from the Pakistani Islâmîc schools. The Sa'ûdîs are (officially) mortified by all this; but many Americans, particularly but not exclusively those sympathetic to Israel, are suddenly suspicious of a presumably friendly regime whose consistent actions have tended, not surprisingly, to promote anti-Americanism. There is undoubtedly an inner inconsistency in Sa'ûdî policy, which is overtly friendly, indeed dependent (with American troops stationed in the country), with the country whose culture represents the whole threat of freedom and modernity to Wahnâbî conservatism and the theocratic aspect of the Sa'ûdî state. Where previously the threat to the Sa'ûdî state had been from the Left, things like Nasser's "Arab Socialism,"

now the threat may be from the Right, from people who view any remnant of secular pragmatism and Realpolitik in Sa'ûdî policy as irreligious — the people who have created the present ideology of Islamic Fascism. This is an unusual position for the House of Su'ûd, and it may force some unpleasant choices upon them.

Kelley L. Ross www.friesian.com

Terrorists often start out as "true believers" who are seduced and sometimes victimized by a bad idea. The images coming out of [the Israeli bombing of] Qana are a gift to the terrorists who aim to spread the false idea that the West is deliberately aiming to destroy the Islamic world, deliberately striving to harm and humiliate Muslims.

The only way to understand how this phenomenon works is to hang out with Muslim youths and talk to them. I have done quite a bit of that in various parts of the world in Western cities, in Palestinian slums, and in Pakistani madrasas. And what I've learned is this: **Jihad has become a global fad, rather like gangsta rap. It is a fad that feeds on images of dead children.**

Most of the youth attracted to the jihadi idea would never become terrorists, just as few of the youths who listen to gangstaa rap would commit the kinds of lurid crimes the lyrics would seem to promote. But among many Muslim youths, especially in Europe, **jihad is a cool way of expressing dissatisfaction with a power elite whether that elite is real or imagined; whether power is held by totalitarian monarchs or by liberal parliamentarians.** And we should not assume jihad is a Middle Eastern or European problem. The idea is spreading here in America as well.

Jihad has become a millenarian movement with mass appeal, similar, in many ways, to earlier global movements such as the anarchists of the

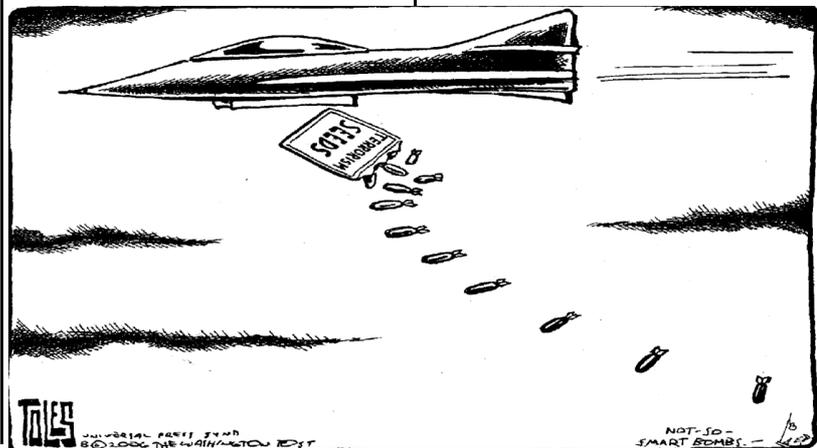
19th century or even the peace movement of the 1960s and '70s. But today's radical youth are expressing their dissatisfaction with the status quo by making war, not love. They are seduced by Thanatos rather than Eros. Newly-wed pro-jihadi youths spend their wedding nights watching today's ghoulish pornography: the beheadings of foreigners held hostage in Iraq. Children film themselves reenacting these beheadings, seduced by a familiar drama of the good guys killing the bad guys in order to save the world.

There is an appeal to an identity of victimhood: If I am a victim of someone else's bad actions, I have an excuse for not meeting expectations — my own or others'. There is an appeal to righteous indignation.

There is an appeal to avenging wrongs visited on the weak by the strong. The narrative will be more seductive if moral questions seem to have easy answers, if good and evil can be easily distinguished, if perpetrators and victims stand out in stark relief, and if they never trade places, as they often do in the real world.

And the West sometimes plays right into the hands of terrorist ideologues, whose success depends not only on the appeal of the narrative they weave, but also their ability to illustrate it with facts, or at least pictures that appear to be facts.

Jessica Stern is a lecturer on terrorism at Harvard University, and author of "Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill." This appeared in International Herald Tribune August 2, 2006



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 **Chairperson** is Noel Cheer,
26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay, (04) 236-7533

The **Secretary** is Mary Boekman, 138 Rata St,
Inglewood, (06) 756-7644

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. It is maintained by
Suzi Thirlwall (07) 578-2775

Further details 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**:

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noel@cheer.org.nz

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.

Optional Extras ...

"sofia" is 28 page A4, 6-times-a-year magazine produced by the UK SoF Network. To subscribe follow these instructions. Note that where "Donation" is spoken of, you should think of it as "Payment".

- Go to www.charitychoice.co.uk
- Select "charity search" and search for Sea of Faith
- Select "Donate now"
- Select the "Other" box and enter the amount: the subscription is £15 per year plus £6 postage. = £21
- Click on "Donate Now"
- You will see a page with "Gift Aid" at the top. Scroll to the bottom and click on "Donate Now".
- You will come to the Payment Form which you must fill in with your credit card details.
- When you are confident that the details are correct, click on "Confirm".
- In addition, send an email to the UK Treasurer, Patti Whaley (pinkoleaf@triscali.co.uk) telling her

Last Word

FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

THIS IS NOT ONLY THE LAST WORD FOR THIS NEWSLETTER but also the swansong for my time as Steering Committee Chairperson. I have enjoyed the experience and worked with some wonderful people. If invited I will continue off-committee as Newsletter Editor and Webmaster.

The original SoF Network started in 1986 in the UK as a response to Don Cupitt's TV series — asking what were the implications (mostly, I suspect for the dear old CofE) of a world which was turning its back on both the richness and the rigidity of formal expressions of Christianity. But a reading of the constitutional documents of all three Networks — UK, NZ and Australia — show that we are not a specifically Christian organisation. We are not trying to reform Christianity nor defend it as an entity nor systematically reject it.

When we meet, not only do we check-in our titles at the door — Prof, Dr and Sir and Dame just muck-in with the rest of us — we also hang up robes of office and symbols of allegiance and join that one all-embracing spiritual congregation — the entire human race.

Dogma — as dogma — is swept aside, although the ideas that go into the dogma may meet our enthusiastic approval. It is this dissolving and re-synthesis that qualifies us to be seen in the post-Modernist camp. The suspicion towards meta-narratives dissuades us from buying into a package deal. We want to see the constituent parts and we want to be aware of what larger story they are being made to contribute to.

So, for many of us, Christianity is a story among stories. Understood as an invitation to live "in the Kingdom" it is one of the best stories on offer. Rendered, as Mel Gibson did, as a dark battle against sinister forces ending in the sacrificial death of an already-divine figure it is just plain sick.

This year we celebrate the centenary of Albert Schweitzer's seminal work, "Quest of The Historical Jesus". While most SoFriendly scholars disagree with Schweitzer's findings, we can see a thread from Reimarus, through Strauss, Schweitzer and John A.T. Robinson up to the late Bob Funk and to today's Cupitt, Spong, Geering and Borg which asks, "who was he?" and "what can he mean for us today?"

Happily the Sea of Faith Network can provide an intellectually-honest, dogma-free environment in which we can ask those questions and the thousand others by which we anchor and centre our lives.

In the end, isn't it really about being human? Maximally human. Lovers of each other and of this glorious earth on which we live and the cosmos out of which we grew.

The one story that each of us must tell is that of the one life that each of us has and which started at around the time of our birth and it will eventually flicker out.

Make it a good one, eh?

Noel Cheer
Outgoing Steering
Committee Chairperson

