



1967

Heresy?



2007

On the 3rd of November 2007 about 150 people gathered at St Andrews on The Terrace, Wellington to celebrate to 40th Anniversary of the trial of the Rev. Dr. Lloyd Geering for “doctrinal error” in Christchurch exactly 40 years before.

The 2007 event was chaired by the minister of St. Andrews, Rev. Dr. Margaret Mayman (who is also the chair of The St. Andrew’s Trust for the Study of Religion and Society — the sponsoring organisation). The first speaker was Radio New Zealand’s Geoff Robinson who praised Lloyd’s skill as a communicator. And, just as they had done 40 years ago, The Student Christian Movement gave a bouquet of flowers to Lloyd.

There followed a 20 minute television news item made at the time of the trial.

In the first of two addresses, the Rev. Dr. Allan Davidson from St John’s College in Auckland spoke on “Heresy Yesterday”.

A pre-recorded greeting and appreciation of Lloyd’s work by Bishop John Shelby Spong followed.

Chris Nichol of TVNZ’s programmes “My God” and “Praise Be” then interviewed Lloyd about his recollections of the 1967 trial.

Tom Hall, who has edited Lloyd’s recent books for Polebridge Press in California, had travelled from his home in Rhode Island to be at this event and was invited to launch Lloyd’s most recent book *In Praise of the Secular* for The St. Andrews Trust.

After lunch a preview of the TVNZ “Documentary NZ” programme *The Last Western Heretic*, which features Lloyd’s theological views, was shown. It will play on TV1 some time in the near future.

Allan Davidson delivered his second address, “Heresy Today” and the Rev. Dr. Geoff King from Christchurch rounded out the proceedings with an address on “Heresy and the Future of the Church”.

Also announced was the “Lloyd Geering Prize for Communication on Religion and Society” — a biennial prize of \$US5000 which “will recognise ... contributions to the debate on the role of religion in society”.

See www.standrews.org.nz/satrs for more details of the above.

From a 1967 news report:

“Finally, by a large majority, the Assembly judged [that] no doctrinal error had been established, and dismissed the charges, and declared the case closed’.

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Conference CDs

Once again we are offering CD recordings of the recent Conference. The people contracted to record them failed to deliver a full suite, but what we have to offer is shown on the attached order which is available on the website also.

Cold Shower

“All at Sea in The Sea of Faith”

Lloyd Geering on Raymond Bradley

On the Sunday morning of the recent Sea of Faith Conference Raymond Bradley (a retired Professor of Philosophy) subjected those present to something like an unexpected cold shower. Since the theme of the Conference was story-telling, he entitled his lecture *The Semantics of Story-telling for those ‘All at Sea’ in the Sea of Faith*. Although Bradley applauded all attempts to demythologise the Christian stories (as John Spong had done so well the day before) he judged much of the new theology to be just a ‘playing with words’ that ended up as philosophical gobbledygook.

He then proceeded to take examples from Paul Tillich, John Robinson, John Spong and Don Cupitt (to my relief he omitted me though I am not sure that I deserved it) and showed why some of their statements, when philosophically examined, do not make much sense. He drew attention to a variety of philosophical traps we can all easily fall into, such as treating abstract nouns as if they were the names of things and confusing the three different ways in which we commonly use the word ‘is’.

Of course, to those present who were not used to the philosophical analysis of language, Bradley ran the risk of being himself incomprehensible. Nevertheless, his lecture was a very good introduction to Stage I philosophy and it is to be hoped that we in the SoF all took his warnings on board. Indeed, those who have read my *Christianity without God* [page 15] will know that I said something similar there.

‘Theology can be highly deceptive. It can give the appearance of being very profound; yet, on closer examination, it may turn out to be gobbledygook, saying nothing very sensible or meaningful at all. It may even deceive the theologian who wrote it. It is wise to take some theology with a grain of salt’.

But does this mean that we in the SoF have been led astray by Tillich, Robinson, Spong and Cupitt? Some may have felt that Bradley’s criticism of these examples he took was unduly harsh and, in the Panel Discussion that followed, he did seem to mellow somewhat, fully acknowledging that poetry was exempt from the canons he applied to philosophical or theological discourse.

Let me now put in a word on behalf of Tillich and Co. I have always felt that Tillich’s famous phrases, such as ‘ultimate concern’, ‘ground of being’, ‘being itself’ were far from clear in their meaning; yet I found them very suggestive and useful. Indeed when I first read Tillich’s three-volumed *Systematic Theology* I felt I was swimming through a sea of words looking for islands of meaning where I could rest for a while. There are a few of Cupitt’s books also that are not very clear to me.

In spite of that I have been inspired by Tillich (as also by Robinson and Cupitt later). We need to remember that theology (or ‘God-talk’) is highly symbolic. It is more allied to poetry than to science. This becomes quite obvious when we express our theology in hymns. Theology is the attempt to express the inexpressible in words and will always be subject to error and justifiable criticism. Tillich and the others like him were working at the outer limits of language, creating new and suggestive phrases (just as the poet does). They have been at the leading edge of religious thought at a time of great cultural change.

We can learn a lot from them.

But where theology tries to be philosophical (as it did for many centuries) and claims to be expressing theological ‘truth’ in meaningful propositions, then it opens itself up to the harsh criticism of linguistic analysis and it must accept that challenge.

Lloyd Geering

Tillich on “Depth”

“The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life; of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. ... For if you know that God means depth, you know much about Him. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or unbeliever. For you cannot think or say: Life has no depth! Life itself is shallow. Being itself is surface only. If you could say this in complete seriousness, you would be an atheist; but otherwise you are not. He who knows about depth knows about God.”

From The Shaking of The Foundations

The Uses of ‘is’

1. Existence: ‘John is.’
2. Predication: ‘John is fat.’
3. Identity: ‘John is my husband.’

Book Notes and Reviews

The Lloyd Geering Reader: *Prophet of Modernity*

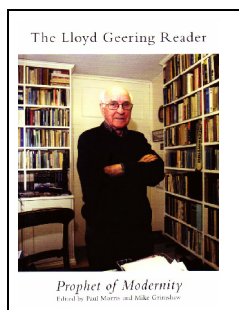
Edited by Paul Morris and Mike Grimshaw
Victoria University Press 2007

A Note from the book cover:

“This is the first collection of the writings of Lloyd Geering, covering a period of nearly fifty years. Over the past decade Geering has become an international figure, sought out by readers and audiences in America, Britain and Australia. New Zealanders have, of course, been aware of him and his writings for much longer. Yet this collection includes material that will also be new to many of his New Zealand readers. Based on detailed archival research, the selections demonstrate the remarkable consistency and development in the thought of this increasingly influential thinker. This collection draws on his books, articles, occasional writings, published lectures, and unpublished materials which appear here for the first time. Its importance is that it provides another form of autobiography — the development of New Zealand’s leading public intellectual and his fascinating coverage of the place and role of religion in the modern world, both nationally and internationally.

Lloyd Geering has kept religion, theology and the discussion of their impact and role in modernity in the public debate in a manner that is rational, clearly expressed, and open to the questioning of the public and the media. He has broken down much of the traditional mistrust of the discussion of religion in the contemporary world. His success can be gauged in that very few are indifferent to what he has to say, because his concerns are indicative of a wider, secular society attempting to come to terms with the legacy of the twentieth century, with globalisation, with modernity itself. This book enables us to better understand Lloyd Geering and what it is he has been saying to us as our very own prophet of modernity”.

Paul Morris is Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. Mike Grimshaw is Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies, University of Canterbury. I bought my copy for \$40. The Newsletter welcomes reviews of this or any other appropriate publication - ed.



My Name Was Judas

C. K. Stead.

This is an original and controversial version of the Gospel story. Stead has gathered the Biblical accounts of Jesus’ life, and set them out almost in diary form. Judas was presumed to have taken his own life after the crucifixion, but he survived, and forty years later he relates his memoirs, starting with their lives together as children, their intellect, their admiration for each other, the rivalry between them. Later, as a disciple, Judas finds it difficult to believe in all the myths that begin to surround Jesus as he gains fame, popularity, and notoriety. Jesus’ oratory and charisma were leading to claims that he was the Messiah, and Judas thus became rather the odd man out among the disciples because of his unbelief. It was easy then, to name him as the betrayer of Jesus at the final showdown with the Romans and Temple authorities in Jerusalem.

With his richly-painted backdrops of ancient Palestine, Stead goes beyond the boundaries of the story known to us all, and convincingly enters the mind of one of its key players. It’s a bold novel, with its wonderfully clear narrative prose, is fresh, provocative, and compelling.

Bruce Hamilton, Nelson

* * * * *

Before I Die

Jenny Downham

First time author, 43 year old Jenny Downham has caused quite a stir with “Before I Die”, a novel targeted at teens with crossover appeal for adults in general. Jenny, a single Mum, left a touring improvised-theatre company in 1999 when her second son was born. She describes starting writing as a means of using up some of the “playful energy” she had expended as an actor. During the writing of the book, the July 2005 London bombings occurred and she was very aware of the effect this had on many people. She read memoirs written by adults with cancer, researched cancer and shared her manuscripts with nurses from London’s Great Ormond Street Hospital, which specializes in treating children’s cancer.

Her book, “Before I Die”, is the story of Tessa, a very normal 16 year old, who is dying of leukemia. She has spent the past four years having treatment, going in and out of hospital for test after test, dealing with hope and hope being dashed now that they can’t do any more. In order to cope with this she makes a list of 10 things she wants to do before she dies. The first one is sex.

continued

Her dealings with members of the medical profession are sometimes difficult. During one encounter, while the doctor is explaining the very poor prognosis, Tessa shuts herself off from them and thinks of what she is going to miss out on. She decides that she has two choices – to curl up in a rug and wait to die or to get on with her list. She chooses the latter.

The author tells what it is like to be seriously ill from the patient's perspective. Tessa is a normal teenager, with normal desires and needs and the longing to be independent. Her relationships with her parents and sibling are true to life and totally believable. She is not an easy person to care for and gives her father some real anguish while she carries out the items on her list. Her relationship with her best friend is extremely incisive, however the boy friend seemed a little convenient and unlikely at first. Later, the relationship develops rather beautifully.

Tessa is hard on the people closest to her and to those who want to care for her. She rejects the rules which others feel are important in society. In carrying out her list, she has disappointments, fun, excitement, and even a small sense of power. She has a great sense of the beauty which surrounds her and wanting to hold on to it for the after life. We learn how she and her family and friends think of her illness and what they all have to deal with as she gets closer to death. She thinks about what her family will experience when she dies and whether or not she'll be able to haunt them! In her mind, or perhaps in reality she writes letters to them about what she wants them to do after her death.

When I first heard this book reviewed on National Radio, it was described as possibly the most important book to be published this year. Though, I'm not sure I could say that, the book is a very moving and uplifting story and has something to say to all of us about the way we regard and cope with our own death.

The strength of this book, for me was in the development of the relationships, which were very honest. Though the subject matter is very distressing, the book is life affirming. We all must die. It might be tomorrow or not for years. Like Tessa, make a list, make plans, live life to the fullest, enjoy what you do, even if it turns out to be a mistake and there is

nothing more important than the love which we have for our family and friends.

Liz Duncan, Nelson

Bitter Sweet

Just as this Newsletter was ready for publication, I received a copy of Don Cupitt's *Impossible Loves*. There was time to review it here, but I hope to have a review for the next Newsletter.

The book is published by Polebridge Press and it examines the role that may be played in our lives by various 'impossible loves' — whether for non-existent objects, unavailable persons, or unattainable ideals. Don sees the task of religion today as being to help us say "amen" to our contingent lives — just as they happen to turn out. From page 5: "We are like the man in the film who drives a lorry laden with explosives that may blow up at any moment, and will certainly blow up eventually. Or we are like rowers, unable to see where we are going, but compelled to row as fast as we can, despite the possibility that we may topple over a fall or hit a rock at any moment."

Don strongly recommends that we *spend* life — well, you can't take it with you, can you? — and uses the image of the sun which lives by dying in his term 'solar living' by which we "find our own voice", "appropriate our own life" and "so act as to enhance and increase the overall value of life".

From page 86: "There is no transcendent or supernatural order. We *are* our own lives in all their temporality, contingency and finitude" Or, as he writes elsewhere, we are subject to Time, Chance and Death and "we reject religion's painted screen."

Noel Cheer



God-Poisoning

A Critique of Toxic Religion

Recent times have seen a number of books, from Richard Dawkins and others, that frontally attack religion. This prompted me to go back and have another look at a book that caused a stir in Germany in 1976: *God-Poisoning* (Gottesvergiftung) by Tilman Moser. Moser is a psychoanalyst who has lectured in Psychoanalysis and Criminology and has written a number of other books, including one on his training analysis (*Years of Apprenticeship on the Couch: Fragments of My Psychoanalysis*). *God-Poisoning* is all about Moser's own negative experience of God, or, alternatively, of the manipulation of feelings in the name of religion.

Moser tells us that he has been to several therapists for help with his problems, but they were hardly aware of the phenomenon of God-poisoning. They expect to find internalised mother and father figures in the psyche of their clients, but not a God-figure. Moser finds it embarrassing to admit that he is still troubled by God and has not managed to outgrow the faith of his childhood. **He thought that God was dead or at least forgotten, but has had to acknowledge that God lives on in the structure of his psyche.**

So Moser sets about freeing himself from the lingering influence of this God. In the first part of the book, entitled 'Prayers before Dawn', he addresses his complaints, vents his anger, and declares his independence from this God. This reminds me of the 'empty chair' procedure in which the therapist asks the client to address their mother, father, or other important person directly, as if they were in the chair opposite.

My God-poisoning is of a very early, almost oral nature. Not only have I scarcely taken food without it having been prayed over, but my psychological nourishment too was soaked in poison. You were the permanent extra offer in the smiles of my parents, and in their worries, and they were huge. If I wanted the humanness, the affection, and the hopefulness of my parents, I had to eat and drink you along with them...All closeness and intimacy was God-infected...

Moser expresses his feelings of absolute rejection, of being deeply bad, and of being dependent on a judgemental divine other for any hope of acceptance:

Since I secretly hated you because of the humiliations that I took upon myself, in order to please you or just to avoid your displeasure, I had to revere you more and more, plead with you more fervently, just to find a little approval. And so you became more and more real, simply because, for many reasons, you didn't like me. I have suffered in my life under no-one as much as under you, whose existence was forced upon me. By showing you how you moved into me as a sickness... I hope to heal myself somewhat of you. I know that you will dwell in the scars until my death, even if I manage to drive you out of me... The scars will bite me and you will torture me with phantom pains, long after you have been amputated.

Paradoxically, this feeling of being totally rejected went together with hopes of being specially chosen by God, of being entrusted with a special mission, and Moser interpreted his suffering as a sign of this election. His parents misused a strict God, who sees everything and can even read secret thoughts, for their own

pedagogical purposes. Moser had to repress natural feelings of hatred or rebellion against this domineering divine figure. As he was surrounded by believing relatives and friends, any doubting or questioning of this indoctrinated God would have met with absolute rejection and exclusion.

Moser gives us insight into the family dynamics that led to his intense preoccupation with God in childhood. You became large in me, because the voice of my mother, in the few seconds of the day in which she prayed with me, took on a sound, that, in the jargon of your servants, was not of this world, inward, warmly resonating, as if something precious, which remained inaccessible without your presence, was suddenly there, and which disappeared out of my life again with the quietly spoken Amen. You had a relationship to my mother that brought her otherwise so controlled voice into a light tremor. That moved me deeply like nothing else in life; and it was the first and only proof of God that I trusted, without knowing where it would lead me.

Moser is not criticising religion from outside, not engaging in a polemic against the religion of other people. Rather, **he is engaging in a therapeutic process of freeing himself from the toxic religion of his childhood.** Just occasionally, he extends his own experience to a critique, for example of divine sadism in the theology of the cross as the sacrifice of God's son, and of hymns as examples of how God exploits our deepest longings, but is unable to fulfil them.

Moser is also surprisingly tolerant. The book is prefaced by the motto 'Rejoice, if your God was friendlier' and explicitly acknowledges the possibility that others may have experienced God more positively than he has done.

In 2002, he spoke at a psychotherapy conference in Basel, Switzerland that had the theme "Couch or Church?" and began by acknowledging that 'all more recent studies indicate that a friendly God, a trusting faith, belong to the best medications for psychological hygiene.' He also acknowledges that toxic religion has or can have its origin in prior negative experiences, which a simplistic moralising theology of sin exploits and builds on, and that there is a positive childhood feeling of reverence or rapt interest (Andacht) that underlies religion. Although for him nothing was left after he freed himself from his God-poisoning, he is not opposed to religion per se, just to toxic religion. Psychotherapy, properly understood, is neutral with respect to world-views. Moser even sometimes wonders whether a widespread ignorance about God cannot also be neurotic, even if it is a mass social phenomenon.

I think that Moser's approach will be more effective in reducing abuse in the name of religion than the kind of frontal attack we have been seeing. This will no more stamp out religion than Communist oppression can stamp out the longing for freedom.

I paid attention to the responses of churchmen at the time to Moser's book, but was generally disappointed. While Moser bared his soul, they were content to present generalisations and abstractions. Logical argument and intellectual analysis just didn't seem to engage with Moser's passionate and personal prose. I was even left wondering if there isn't more constructive insight to be gained into God-talk from this opponent than from many of its defenders.

Laurie Chisholm, Christchurch

Letters to The Editor

Dear Sir

I'd like to congratulate the SOFNZ on the 2007 annual conference, and express my appreciation for the opportunity to present a paper.

I do, however, feel some concern about the format of the session at which I and two other women spoke. Unlike the keynote speakers (all men, as has been the case for some years), we were given a minimal introduction so that the audience had almost no idea of our relevant qualifications and experience for speaking and could not take this into account when responding to the papers. A small amount of time at the end of the two-hour session became unexpectedly available for questions because the three of us kept strictly to the time allowed us (unlike the keynote speaker in the session preceding us).

Questions usually provide the opportunity to explore and enlarge on papers. We women speakers had been restricted to 30 minutes each, so our papers were of necessity highly condensed and would have benefited from such exploration. Presented end-on-end without a chance for questions while each paper was fresh to the audience, 15 minutes at the conclusion of the session were therefore of limited value.

The opportunity to give the three papers a second hearing through the CD made of all the conference speakers will not be available because a technical problem prevented our three papers from being recorded. The hand of (a male) God perhaps?

Jill Harris, Days Bay

[It is worse even that that: King's managed to lose the recording of the Plenary as well - ed]

Dear Sir,

In the latest issue of the SOF Newsletter our Chairman asks what we, as individuals or as a network, should be doing about ethical or moral issues we see as important. As an individual, I see many important issues or needs already being tackled by well informed groups who offer opportunities for support or action: Amnesty, Women's Refuge, Poverty Action, Council for Civil Liberties, Green organizations, mentoring schemes, ESOL, Adult Literacy. In other words, I don't think we are as helpless as Norm seems to feel.

My inclination is to support, either with money or membership or voluntary work, or my vote, as many as I feel I can — the opportunities far exceed my resources of time and money. Beyond that, it is possible for me to attend (or initiate) public meetings, write to the press, contribute to public discussion, including writing to members of Parliament about policy or about legislation under consideration by Select Committees.

It is very difficult for a network like Sea of Faith to take action or make well-informed public statements, which could be in any way effective, without research and much consultation. But Sea of Faith as a network, does have a constructive role in challenging or clarifying our understanding of some of the deep issues facing society; for example, contributions in the September Newsletter from Shirley Dixon, Ian Crumpton and Lloyd Geering. Perhaps its most valuable contribution could be in helping us (next conference maybe) to face honestly the question

of how much, in what ways, and at what levels, we can contribute to a healthier society.

Margaret Feist, Dunedin

Dear Editor

I do not pray either. I do not see any sense in telling "whatever-it-is" what it already knows, and begging and pleading for my will to be done.

I do believe there is a "whatever-it-is" deep inside me, and I listen to it. It is like a memory reminding me of things I didn't know I knew. Sometimes somebody says something that triggers that memory, or it can emerge as I am drowsily waking in the morning, or when scanning library shelves for information I require, or when having a break from writing.

To me, it is not a question of *to* "whatever-it-is" but *from* "whatever-it-is".

Julie Hunter

Do You Like Us? Tell Us!

The questionnaire handed out at this year's Conference was our most extensive attempt to find out what our membership likes and dislikes. If you took one home from the Conference then be sure that you fill it in and return it. If you haven't got one, then go to the website and get one.

www.sof.org.nz

Signing Up For Sofia

"Sofia" is the name of a magazine produced by the UK Network four times a year. Over the years it has developed a reputation for thoughtful articles. You can subscribe by following these instructions which depend upon using an organisation called Charity Choice whose main function is to collect donations. When we use them to 'donate' £21 (currently about \$60) to SoF (UK) they agree that we are **subscribing** to Sofia.

Here's how:

- Go to www.charitychoice.co.uk
- Select "charity search" and search for Sea of Faith
- Select "Donate now" (you're not sending a donation, but that doesn't matter)
- Select the "Other" box and enter £21 (for overseas subscription). Your credit card (see below) will be debited with the \$NZ equivalent — about \$60)
- Click on "Donate Now"
- You may then see a page with "Gift Aid" at the top — that doesn't apply to you as a non-UK resident, so 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".
- email the new SoF(NZ) Treasurer and Membership Secretary, Peter Cowley at pcowley@paradise.net.nz to notify him that you have paid by Charity Choice. This will allow him to remind you when your sub is in danger of running out.

Bits and Pieces Bits and Pieces Bits and Pieces Bits and Pieces Bits and Pieces

The Myth: Always and Repeatedly

This excerpt comes from an article called 'The sacred and the human' by Roger Scruton in "Prospect Magazine" August 2007

"However, Enlightenment thinkers, having shown the claims of faith to be without rational foundation, did not then dismiss religion, as one might dismiss a refuted theory. Many went on to conclude that religion must have some other origin than the pursuit of scientific knowledge, and some other psychic [viz. psychological - ed] function than consolation.

"The ease with which the common doctrines of religion could be refuted alerted men like Jacobi, Schiller and Schelling to the idea that religion is not, in essence, a matter of doctrine, but of something else. And they set out to discover what that might be.

"For thinkers in the immediate aftermath of the Enlightenment, it was not faith, but faiths in the plural, that composed the primary subject matter of theology. ... For post-Enlightenment thinkers, the monotheistic belief systems were not related to ancient myths and rituals as science to superstition, or logic to magic. Rather, they were crystallisations of the emotional need which found expression both in the myths and rituals of antiquity and in the Vedas and Upanishads of the Hindus. This thought led Georg Creuzer ... to represent myth as a distinctive operation of the human psyche. A myth does not describe what happened in some obscure period before human reckoning, but what happens always and repeatedly. **It does not explain the causal origins of our world, but rehearses its permanent spiritual significance.**

www.prospect-magazine.co.uk

Lambeth 2008

Each decade the worldwide communion of the Anglican Church holds the Lambeth Conference. At the 1998 Conference the issue of gay clergy was so divisive that the Conference agreed to hold-over the matter until 2008. It appears that no real progress had been made. John Spong wrote an open letter to Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams in which he asked him to show courageous leadership in the face of homophobic reactionaries. Here is part of that letter:

"The Bible was quoted to support the Divine Right of Kings in 1215, to oppose Galileo in the 17th century, to oppose Darwin in the 19th century, to support slavery and apartheid in the 19th and 20th centuries, to keep women from being educated, voting and being ordained in the 20th and 21st century.

"Today it is quoted to continue the oppression and rejection of homosexual people. The Bible has lost each of those battles. It will lose the present battle and you, my friend, will end up on the wrong side of history, the wrong side of morality and the wrong side of truth. It is a genuine tragedy that you, the most intellectually-gifted Archbishop of Canterbury in almost a century, have become so miserable a failure in so short a period of time.

"You were appointed to lead, Rowan, not to capitulate to the hysterical anger of those who are locked in the past. For the sake of God and this Church, the time has come for you to do so. I hope you still have that capability."

You can read the full letter at
www.somareview.com/openlettertorowan.cfm

Lost a Pendant?

Our Secretary, Mary Boekmann, wrote:

"At the end of Conference, someone handed me a greenstone pendant which she had found on the floor in her hostel at Kings. I had hoped by now someone would have enquired, but no. Enquiries to me, please. Phone 06-756-7644"

An Aid To Higher Thought?



Auckland October 2007

Bits and Pieces Bits and Pieces Bits and Pieces Bits and Pieces Bits and Pieces

What They're Doing In Warkworth

Ann Todd of Warkworth wrote:

The Warkworth Sea of Faith Group thoroughly enjoys our third-Sunday-of-the-month 'get togethers'. We take it in turns to lead each meeting which starts at 3pm and ends at 5pm. The sessions are varied and are unfailingly good value.

Last year, for instance, we were given a fascinating talk by a practising Buddhist, and on another occasion Bill Cooke came up from Auckland to give a dissertation on 'Can You Speak of an Atheist Spirituality?' We also had a valuable two hours on "Homosexuality and The Church".

This year Lloyd Geering's book *Wrestling With God* was discussed, and at a later meeting his CD from the 14th Annual Conference on "After Religion — What? Is Nothing Sacred Any More?" gave rise to interesting shared thoughts.

At our June 'get together' we watched two DVDs entitled 'Living The Questions'. The first — 'Kingdom Without Walls' — brought up the subject of religious tolerance, and the second — 'Will The Real Jesus Please Stand Up' — gave us divergent views of Jesus.

We have since watched a Spong DVD; listened to an audio-tape of Maureen Garing interviewing an Indian scientist on 'Science and Spirituality'; and David Bellamy (also on audio tape), speaking on looking after our environment, and on global warming.

Every one of these sessions has inspired thorough discussion and our Sea of Faith group thrives as a result.

Was Jesus Special? If So, Why?

Ian Stubbs is a UK SoF Member who frequents the SoF Internet chat list. He recently wrote this summary:

In his day (pre-Enlightenment) I think there .. [was] nothing special about Jesus' powers of healing — no one would have had problems about the supernatural in all kinds of forms invading our human space. The Caesar was, after all, 'Son of God', the Caesar was divine.

What is special about Jesus, as Dominic Crossan has argued so well [see especially his *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, HarperSanfrancisco 1994 - ed], is that his followers claimed divine status for this Galilean nobody [and this was] high treason.

Jesus and his followers described a new world which was at hand, a brokerless kingdom, a kingdom of nobodies based on justice and peace rather than on violence and a direct challenge to the power of Rome.

Of course they described this in all kinds of language available to them in their day — sacrifice etc. — and it's true that this radical message has been subverted, in the New Testament and down the ages. But it's there, unique and far more radical a vision than merely leading a good moral life!

Can a Humanist Frolic In The Sea of Faith?

In response to an invitation in 2006, I wrote an article for *The Open Society*, the Journal of the NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists. A Newsletter reader has asked for it to be published in this Newsletter — but alas, it is far too large. What follows is an outline of the thesis and an invitation for you to read the two-part article on our website.

In Part 1, I argued that there exists a universal human capacity to establish meaning in life by assigning value to people, places, objects and events. If such valuations become life-directing then the term 'religion' is as good a name as any for the exercise of this capacity, provided that we agree that conventional religious expressions are historically- and culturally-coloured examples.

In Part 2, I argued that, although we should be grateful for the clarity of thought and for the social activism of secular humanists, rationalists, skeptics and atheists, they understate some important human requirements of the kind that are celebrated by organisations such as The Sea of Faith Network.

The full two-part article is available in the appropriate section of the website.

Noel Cheer

Steering Committee

Members of the 2007-2008 NZ Sea of Faith Steering Committee are:

- Norm Ely (Chair)
- Mary Boekman (Secretary)
- Peter Cowley (Treasurer)
- Bill Cooke
- Bob Geddes
- Betty Manning
- Geoff Neilson
- Derek Pringle
- John Craighead

On Being Goaded

"The chief threat to world security at present lies in the capacity of tiny groups of political Islamists to goad the West into a rolling military retaliation. Extremists on each side feed off the others' frenzied scenarios so as to garner money and political support for their respective armies of the night. Each sees the other as a cosmic menace and abandons communal tolerance and peaceful diplomacy to counter it."

Simon Jenkins, Sunday Times (UK), October 14, 2007

**Have a good Christmas,
Hanukah, Diwali, Eid-Ul-Adha
.... or whatever helps you
to live a fulfilled life.**

Faith In Cyberspace

The Odour of Sanctimony

An article, written by Sara Robinson, appears at <http://www.alternet.org/bloggers/robinson/64873/>

It takes the view that, at least in the US, young people are becoming revolted at evangelical Christians who are "all self-righteous and judgmental, blaming homosexuals and feminists for everything from 9/11 to the price of gas [petrol], ignoring the interests of the poor in favor of those of big business, and dismissing any kind of environmental stewardship as nothing more than a way to waste time until the Rapture comes."

"A study ... by ... a reputable Evangelical research and polling firm, found that under-30s — both Christian and non-Christian — are strikingly more critical of Christianity than their peers were just a decade ago. ... Ten years ago, 'the vast majority' of non-Christians had generally favorable views of Christianity. Now, that number stands at just 16%. When asked specifically about Evangelicals, the number are even worse: only 3% of non-Christian Millennials have positive associations with Evangelicals. Among the [older Baby-] Boomers, it's eight times higher.

"Roughly a quarter of both the Christians and non-Christians in the under-30 group also mentioned — without being prompted — that 'Christianity has changed from what it used to be,' and that it 'no longer looks like Jesus'."

The NZ Interfaith Group ...

... has evolved from a variety of interfaith groups that have been active in Wellington over the past 15 years, such as the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and Faith and Community Week. It is in the process of becoming an umbrella group for interfaith groups in other centres around Aotearoa New Zealand. www.interfaith.org.nz

New In The Resource Centre

B178: Jesus for the Non-Religious by John Spong

B179: The Geering Reader ed Morris & Grimshaw

See "All About Us" on this page for access to the Resource Centre (you need to be a member of SoF(NZ))

Editorial

If we look on churches as organisations which, like all others, are staffed by humans with human foibles, then we don't need to look further as to why they are mostly socially and theologically conservative.

Job promotion and consequent leadership and direction-setting privileges comes with age and so too do the accumulated benefits of pensions.

To rock the very boat that sustains one at an age when one is becoming less employable on the general labour market would be a brave thing to do.

Is this analysis fair — or is it just too glib? Letters to the Editor please.

Noel Cheer

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 three **Life Members**: Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt and Noel Cheer.

The **Chairperson** is Norm Ely, 7 Bay Drive, Titahi Bay, (04) 236-5749

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

Membership of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$27 if outside NZ). Write your cheque to "SoF (NZ)" and mail to:

The Membership Secretary, PO Box 15-324, Miramar, Wellington 6243.

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.

There is a catalogue on the website,

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**: Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay, Phone (04) 236-7533 email: noel@cheer.org.nz

NZ Members may subscribe to '*sofia*' a quarterly magazine produced by SoF (UK). For further details see page 6 in this issue.

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.

In My View

Norm Ely, Chairperson 2007-2008

During discussions with family, friends and contacts about your interests or hobbies how often are you in the situation of explaining your interest or membership of Sea of Faith NZ?

Moreover, how often do you need or want to describe Sea of Faith to other people?

It seems to me that many of our group find it difficult to explain what Sea of Faith is all about or their own situation in respect of their Faith position. I would envisage that many of our group are in fact not sure of where they are at in relation to their own situation let alone explaining it to others.

Unfortunately we cannot help you directly in the explanation of your position but we can help you in other ways. One way is to go to our website at www.sof.org.nz where you can get a lot of information directly, including back-number Newsletters; a catalogue of the Resource Centre and archived papers. The website is up to date and is maintained by our Webmaster – Noel Cheer. This site can improve if it is used more — you might provide information to us for possible addition to the site and we get positive and negative comments in respect of the site provided.

Examples of what is on the site are:

1. About The Sea of Faith Network, Why "Sea of Faith"?
2. What Does The Sea of Faith Believe?
3. Frequently Asked Questions
4. The Sea of Faith Network In New Zealand;
 - a) Local Groups
 - b) Conferences
 - c) Newsletter
 - d) Local Groups Bulletin
 - e) Resource Centre
 - f) Our Brochure, Ready To Print
 - g) Sea of Faith, Worldwide

This information is an invaluable resource for you to provide to others for their reading and consideration to help them evaluate their position and where they would like to move to in respect of their "Faith Expedition".

I would not expect many of our members to be able to say "Here is my Faith Position" and that position not change over future years. In most cases I would expect us to be at different points at different times. I would also expect that our members cover a broad spectrum of thought about Sea of Faith and the issue of Faith in general. Therefore it is very important that we provide a wide spectrum of resources and are tolerant of other members' positions on Faith. We may not want to accept others' arguments but unless we are open to and aware of the ideas of others then we will not move forward individually.

Amongst other things, I see Sea of Faith as an organisation or body of ideas and information that sets out those ideas and information for others to do with as they wish.

Please do not hesitate to use our resources and provide us with feedback/articles/points of view for us to provide to others for their consideration.

Norm

By way of postscript ...

I would like to pass on my personal thanks to John Irwin and ALL of his helpers who made Conference 2007 such a success.

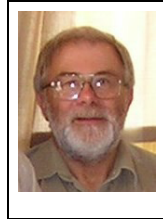
It was a Conference of somewhat diverse views from speakers who gave everybody a lot to think about. Not everybody felt comfortable with all speakers and in my opinion that is not a bad thing as it provides us with commentary that allows us to take up what we as individuals think is appropriate and put everything else on the back burner until such time as they are appropriate.

I would very much like to thank ALL speakers who gave us a very good series of presentations from a variety of positions. I also thought that the panel discussion that closed the Conference was very well hosted by Noel Cheer. Since John Spong was not available for the panel, we were able to invite the three speakers from Saturday to join it. All speakers on the panel gave their own take on discussions, were tolerant of other presenter's views and handled questions very openly and professionally.

To all attendees — my thanks for your attending, taking part, not being afraid to ask questions (and challenges) and being very tolerant of other attendees and their views.

Thank you all for making Conference 2007 such a success.

Norm



URGENT!

The Steering Committee of Sea of Faith is looking for help with the next Conference in Blenheim in late September 2008. We require a coordinator and volunteers on the ground. As coordinator you don't have to live in the area (though that would be ideal) because with modern technology the coordinator can be in any location. If you are interested then please email

**The Steering Committee Chair – Norm Ely
nely@clear.net.nz**