



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter



Conference 2009, September 25–27

Venue: Hamilton or nearby
details to be advised

Contents

- 2: Editorial: All Those 'Jesuses'
- 3: Eternal Life *and* Goss v. Chisholm
- 4: Ideas Displaced by Darwin
- 6: Who on Earth is David Boulton?
- 8: Obama and Non-Believers
- 9: View from the Chair
- 10: Agnostic Faith
- 10: This Year of Anniversaries
- 10: The Steering Committee
- 11: Your 'Final Vocabulary'
- 12: Jesus and Christ

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 Newsletter six times per year, maintains a website, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference. We have three Life Members: Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK) and Noel Cheer. The Chairperson is Norm Ely, 16b Mawhare Street, Titahi Bay, (04)236-6026. The Secretary is Alan Jackson, 55 Evans St, Opoho, Dunedin (03) 473 6947.

Membership of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both charges drop to \$15 if your Newsletter is emailed). Send remittance and details to The Membership Secretary, PO Box 15-324, Miramar, Wellington 6243 or Internet bank to 389000 0807809 00 and tell pcowley@paradise.net.nz. Members may borrow books, tapes etc from the Resource Centre (Suzi Thirlwall phone (07)578-2775.) See the website at www.sof.org.nz for a catalogue and other details about us.

To offer a comment on material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact the Editor: Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay, (04)236-7533 email: noel@cheer.org.nz

Editorial

All Those 'Jesuses'

For an organisation that prides itself in "drawing freely upon our religious heritage without being bound by it", the Sea of Faith Network might attract questions for setting a Conference theme around the person of Jesus. Yet that decision can be defended on a number of grounds.

The first defence is that, for better or for worse, Christianity is traditionally taken to be the propagation of the teachings of Jesus. Under this debateable assumption, it continues to inform many aspects of the West — from art and music, to law and morality, to a general religious background, though for a declining percentage of the population.

The second is that, in the last two decades, vigorous academic work has been going on in a renewed Quest of the Historical Jesus. Much of this work has taken place outside church organisations and outside of the tenured halls of academia. Notable in this area is the work of The Jesus Seminar which assigns degrees of probability to the reported words of Jesus. Today, Schweitzer's gloomy conclusions of a century ago — to the effect that Jesus was a failed apocalyptic prophet inaccessible to our times — need no longer dishearten us.

The third is harder to describe. Think of the settled physical cosmos and the well-defined moral cosmos before science and the Reformation and Darwin upset it all. (More of this on page 4). Ideas, and whole categories of ideas, which formerly provided certainty and hope and stability have gone, and we are left with a world-view that is no more certain than the American banking system, no more safe than the current state of 'the war on terror', and no more mutually supportive than 'nature, red in tooth and claw'. While we concede that all of the foregoing dis-illusionments are 'true', we note that they are not comfortable — not adequate for building a life on.

Something is broken in the West. Wordsworth, in referring to Nature, said "For this, for everything, we are out of tune; It moves us not .." George Steiner in *Nostalgia for the Absolute* (1974) wrote that "For the very great majority of thinking men and women ... the life-springs of theology, of a transcendent and systematic doctrinal conviction, has dried up".

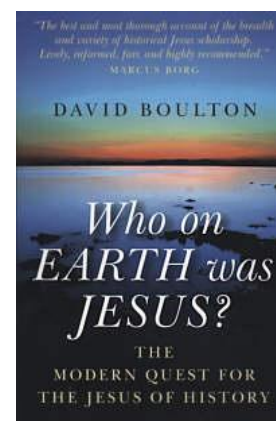
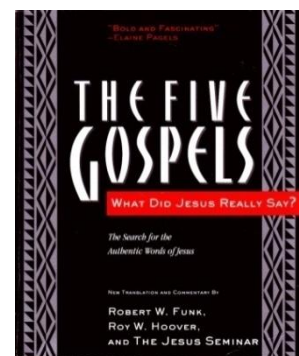
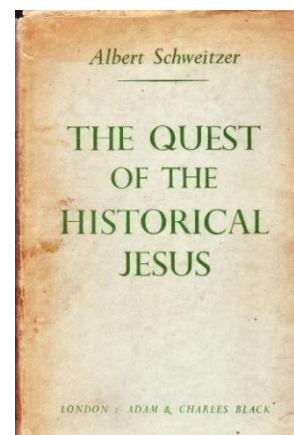
Of course it is possible to lay the blame at the feet of the crumbling edifices of the several formerly huge Christian church organisations that, until half-a-century ago, called so many shots in so many areas of our lives. It is probable that many people belong to the Sea of Faith Network as part of their way of coping with their disappointment or fury or just plain sense of loss at the state of affairs that brings more than a third of our citizens to declare 'No Religion' in the national census. All this 'slow, withdrawing roar' is by attrition rather than by educated and informed re-evaluation. Something more than merely the promotion of 'Intelligent Design' is dysfunctional about public religion.

And Jesus?

Many members of The Jesus Seminar are cited in David Boulton's *Who On EARTH was JESUS?*. If their assessment is sustainable, then the shadowy Jesus upon whose sayings and reputation the largely fictional 'Jesuses' of the New Testament, including the magisterial Christ of Paul's and John's writings are built — is best thought of as an anti-establishment sage with a utopian vision which brought him into tragic conflict with authorities. Jesus is more appropriate as a proclaimer, rather than as the one proclaimed.

If we broadly agree that 'religion' is not likely to go away — some of us would insist that it *should* not — then we really need to look for a thematic foundation that does not depend upon the story of a son slaughtered by a heavenly father (even Abraham drew back at the last moment) then propagated through space and time by immense bureaucracies of dogma, earthly power and life-denying guilt. Doug Sellman's "religious delusional system" (page 12) speaks to this.

Jesus, the reductionist sage, with his sandalled feet in the dusty roads of the Middle East of twentysome centuries ago still invites us to make peace, to forgive even when our grievances are legitimate, and to support those who most need support. We could, in the words of Marcus Borg, "meet him again for the first time". This year's Conference is a sort of invitation to do that.



Noel Cheer

Bits and Pieces

Eternal Life?

An advance report from one of John Spong's Q & A letters about his forthcoming book on life after death.

The book ... was submitted to Harper-Collins in late October of 2008 [and] will be published in the summer of 2009 [southern hemisphere mid-year].

I do think the focus can never be on death in such a study. It has to be on life. What does it mean to be alive? What does it mean to be human? What path have we journeyed in our billions of years of evolutionary unfolding to get to this point? What is the barrier between consciousness and self-consciousness, and what does it do to human beings who alone have been forced to cross that boundary?

I will argue in the book that it is only by exploring life that we can make any sense out of death. When life is driven to its very depths, I believe it then opens into transcendence. I will try to make that case. Life beyond death has nothing to do with endless time, but with perceiving new meaning. I admire Charles Hartshorne, but I will not make my case in his categories.

The hardest thing I had to do was to transcend the dimensions of time and space, to go beyond all religious systems including my own, and to seek a new way to speak about God other than in the language of theism, which long ago lost its power for me.

I am confident that this book, whose title will be *Eternal Life: Pious Dream or Realistic Hope?* will confound my critics and confuse my friends.

John Shelby Spong

Alan Goss Responds To Laurie Chisholm*

In his abbreviated reflection on Lloyd Geering's "God, Gaia and Us", [Newsletter 80 page 2], Laurie Chisholm expresses mixed feelings about some of Lloyd's views. He often finds himself "tearing (Lloyd's views) down" in the same way that he (Lloyd) "tears down traditional Christianity." And he is disappointed "that Lloyd Geering didn't have a good word to say about God." It is on these two points that I wish to comment.

Perversely one could say that over the years Lloyd Geering has been "tearing down" traditional Christianity following earlier thinkers like Reimarus, Strauss, Renan and Wrede and later scholars such as Bultmann, Cupitt and Funk. Over the years this "tearing down" process has slowly but steadily been gathering momentum. The traditional picture of God as an all powerful, all knowing supernatural personal being is no longer credible for many people, nor are the divinity and physical resurrection of Jesus and the Bible as a divinely inspired book. These beliefs, together with doctrines like predestination and a literal Last Judgment, are going ... going ... gone. While there are those who still rigorously defend such beliefs, for many of us their loss has been a welcome liberation. This does not mean a rubbishing of the Christian tradition; rather, in a secular culture, the tradition has to be re-thought and re-imagined — which is what, over the years, Lloyd Geering has devoted his gifts and energies to doing. What is at stake here for all of us is our own personal integrity, a willingness to be honest and to speak one's mind, which is why in Funk's words "the exploration of the future of faith is inevitable" — for all of us.

Laurie also has concerns about Lloyd Geering's position on God. I am reading a small but lively booklet issued by Polebridge Press, *When Faith Meets Reason* in which thirteen American scholars speak openly and candidly about their doubts and struggles with issues of faith. In his introductory chapter the editor, Charles W. Hedrick, makes this comment: "There never has been a 'right' way of viewing Jesus — or God for that matter. The Bible does not attest a single view of God. Rather one finds in its pages multiple views — for example, the capricious God of Job, the unconscionable God of 1 Samuel 15 who ordered the annihilation of the Amelikes, and the ethical God of the Hebrew prophets. The same is true of Jesus."

As Hedrick points out, the views represented by these thirteen scholars are scarcely uniform, one way or another we must all work out for ourselves our own religious meaning. So it is with God. For example Paul Laughlin, in his contribution "A Mystical Christian Credo", conceives God as "a Principle, Power or Force that is thoroughly within the universe rather than in a supernatural realm" that defies analysis or investigation. A review of Michael Benedikt's book [*God is the Good We Do*] by the editor in the same Newsletter describes God as "goodness-in-action personified-and sanctified". And so it goes on.

There is no silver bullet definition of God, and Lloyd Geering's thoughts about connectedness tying in with his notion of a new form of mysticism helped me personally in my own religious quest. As Lloyd concedes, his offering probably has limitations but nevertheless it is a timely pointer along the way. God is not a fixed and primary dish on the menu, we are being offered a wide variety of choices — and that is our problem. To quote Funk again, "God is a derivative of the human imagination. We do not know God directly; no-one has seen God, or heard and smelled God. Those who claim to know God can only give us an account of their experiences. It seems we have invented God in our image."

Over time our experiences in life will change, the religious imagination will continue to flourish and new understandings of God will emerge. Our hope is that these will help us to make religion and spirituality a saving, life-giving force in our precarious and increasingly threatened world.

Alan Goss, February 2009

**As an Editor looking for good material, I applaud these debates. Please, let's have some more!*

Ideas Displaced By Darwin

Directly or Indirectly Darwin's Theories Destroyed Some Really Big Ideas

Data from Wikipedia assembled by Noel Cheer

Teleology

A teleological school of thought is one that holds all things to be designed for, or directed toward, a final result; that there is an **inherent purpose or final cause** for all that exists.

As a school of thought it can be contrasted with metaphysical naturalism, which views nature as having no design or purpose. Teleology would say that a person has eyes because he has the need of eyesight (form following function), while naturalism would say that a person has sight because he has eyes (function following form).

In European philosophy, teleology may be identified with Aristotelianism and the scholastic tradition. (See Cupitt in the sidebox).

Most theology presupposes a teleology: design in nature can be used as a teleological argument for the existence of God. Aristotle's analysis of four causes speaks of a material cause, efficient cause, and formal cause, but all these serve a final cause.

Later teleology was fundamental to the speculative philosophy of Hegel and was explored in detail by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*.

In general it may be said that there are two types of final cause:

Extrinsic finality consists of a being realizing a purpose outside itself for the utility and welfare of other beings. For instance, minerals are 'designed' to be used by plants which are in turn 'designed' to be used by animals — and similarly humanity serves some ultimate good beyond itself.

Intrinsic finality consists of a being realizing a purpose directed toward the perfection of its own nature. In essence, it is what is 'good for' a being. Just as physical masses obey universal gravitational tendencies, which did not evolve, but are simply a cosmic 'given,' so life is intended to behave in certain ways so as to preserve itself from death, disease, and pain.

The impact of Darwin's theories of evolution, which hold that species develop by natural selection, was to greatly reduce the influence of traditional teleological arguments.

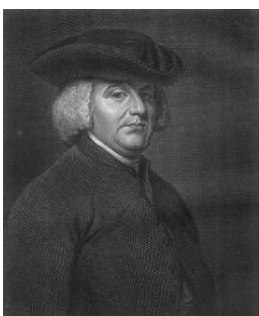
God, The Watchmaker

William Paley (d.1805) is famous for the 'watchmaker' analogy commonly known as the Teleological argument.

In 1802 he published his last book: *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*. As he states in the preface, he saw the book as a preamble to his other philosophical and theological books; in fact, he suggests that *Natural Theology* should be first and so that his readers could then peruse his other books

according to their tastes. His main goal was to suggest that the world was designed and sustained by God. Such a book fell within the long tradition of natural theological works written during the Enlightenment.

Although Paley devotes a chapter of *Natural Theology* to astronomy, the bulk of his examples were taken from medicine and natural history. "For my part," he says, "I take my stand in human anatomy"; elsewhere he insists upon "the necessity, in each particular case, of an



William Paley 1743-1805

"The need to understand organisms has been a much sought goal of science since its birth as biology. History shows Aristotle and Charles Darwin as two of the most powerful biologists of all time. Aristotle's teleological method was supported widely for over 2,000 years. One scientist remarks that the Aristotelian teleology "has been the ghost, the unexplained mystery which has haunted biology through its whole history" (Ayala). If Aristotle's approach has frightened biology, then Darwin, who actually nicknamed himself the "Devils Chaplain," and his idea of natural selection has virtually dissected Aristotle's ghost. While Aristotle explained biology through a plan and a purpose, Darwin debated that randomness and chaos are responsible for the organic world as we know it".

Jordan Hoffman: www.fratfiles.com/essays/3634.html

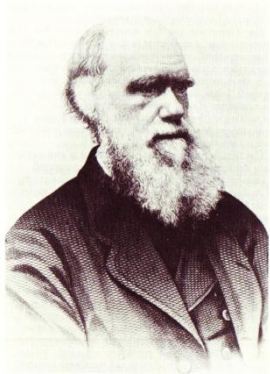
"the modern West has taken shape, not through the stimulus of, but rather by a struggle *to get away from*, the suffocating influence first of Aristotle (after 1600) and then of Plato (after 1800). The rise of modern science in the West was the result of a successful battle against Aristotle, fought chiefly by Galileo. ...".

Don Cupitt *The Meaning of The West* page 5

"In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there: I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there forever: nor would it perhaps be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a *watch* upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that, for anything I knew, the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? Why is it not as admissible in the second case, as in the first? For this reason, and for no other, viz. that, when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive (what we could not discover in the stone) that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, *e.g.* that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, of a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner, or in any other order, than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it. To reckon up a few of the plainest of these parts, and of their offices, all tending to one result."

William Paley *Natural Theology* 1802

intelligent designing mind for the contriving and determining of the forms which organized bodies bear.” In making his argument, Paley employed a wide variety of metaphors and analogies. Perhaps the most famous is his analogy between a watch and the world. Historians, philosophers and theologians often call this the Watchmaker analogy. The germ of the idea is to be found in ancient writers who used sundials and Ptolemaic epicycles [‘wheels within wheels’] to illustrate the divine order of the world. These types of examples can be seen in the work of the ancient philosopher Cicero, especially in his *De natura deorum*. During the Enlightenment, the watch analogy occurred in the writings of Robert Boyle and Joseph Priestley. Thus, Paley's use of the watch (and other mechanical objects like it) continued a long and fruitful tradition of analogical reasoning that was well received by those who read *Natural Theology* when it was published in 1802.



Charles Darwin 1809-1882

Since Paley is often read in university courses that address the philosophy of religion, the timing of his design argument has sometimes perplexed modern philosophers. Earlier in the century David Hume had argued against notions of design with counter examples drawn from monstrosity, imperfect forms of testimony and probability. Although these examples may ring true with many twenty-first century readers, they did not appeal to most of Paley's eighteenth-century contemporaries. Notions of evidence and probability were different then and it took time for Hume's arguments to be accepted by the reading public; in fact his philosophical works sold poorly until agnostics like T. H. Huxley championed Hume's philosophy in the nineteenth century. By then Paley was long dead.

Charles Darwin read *Natural Theology* during his student years and stated later, in his autobiography, that he was initially convinced by the argument. His views, of course, changed with time.

Today Paley's name evokes both reverence and repulsion and his work is cited accordingly by authors seeking to frame the history of human thought. In this context, it should perhaps be remembered that Paley was a product of his time and that his *Natural Theology*, for better or for not, stands as a notable entry in the canon of Western thought.

The Great Chain of Being

The Great Chain of Being or *scala naturae* is a classical and western medieval concept of God's strict and natural hierarchical structure over the universe. The chain is composed of a great number of hierarchical links, from the most basic and foundational elements up through the very highest perfection, in other words, God.

God, and beneath him the angels, both existing wholly in spirit form, sit at the top of the chain. While earthly flesh is fallible and ever-changing, Spirit is unchanging and permanent. This sense of permanence is crucial to understanding this conception of reality. One does not abandon one's place in the chain; it is not only unthinkable, but generally impossible. The hierarchy is a chain and not a ladder. (One exception might be in the realm of alchemy, where alchemists attempted without success to transmute base elements, such as lead, into higher elements, either silver, or more often, gold — the highest element.)

In the natural order, earth (rock) is at the bottom of the chain; where elements possess only the attribute of **existence**. Moving on up the chain, each succeeding link contains the positive attributes of the previous link, and adds (at least) one other. Rocks possess only existence; the next link up — plants — possess **life** and existence. Animals add not only **motion**, but **appetite** as well.

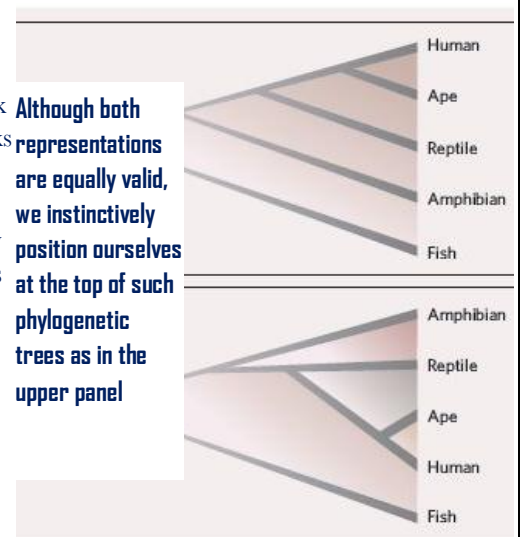
Man is a special instance in this conception. He is both mortal flesh, as those below him, and also **spirit**. In this dichotomy, the struggle between flesh and spirit becomes a moral one. The way of the spirit is higher, more noble; it brings one closer to God. The desires of the flesh drag one down. The Christian fall of Lucifer is especially terrible, because that angel is wholly spirit, but who defies God, the ultimate perfection.

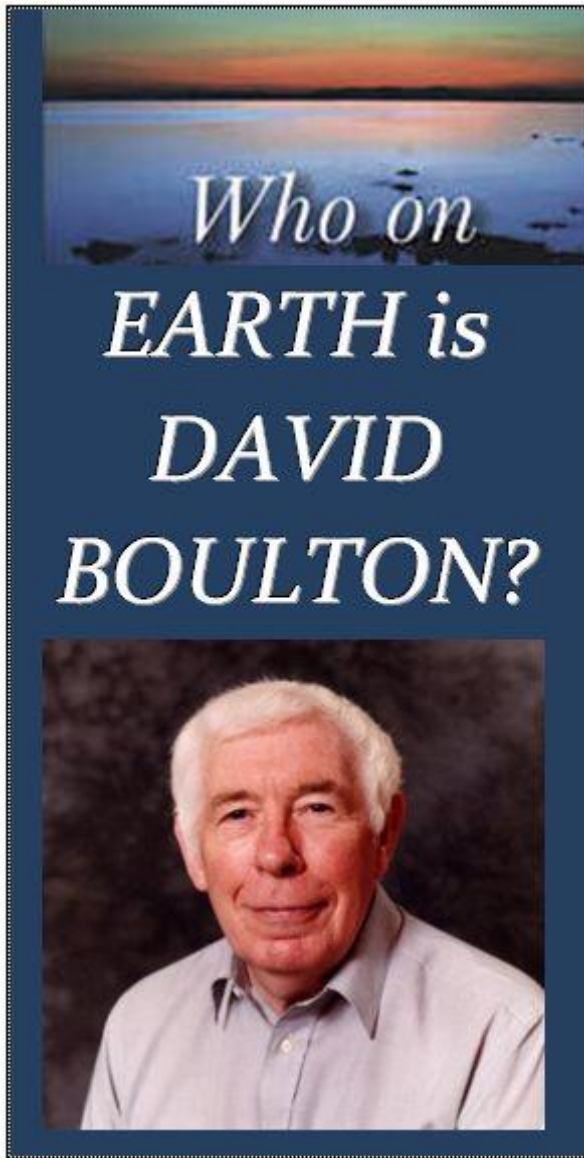
Each link in the chain might be further divided into its component parts. In medieval secular society, for example, the king is at the top, with beneath him aristocratic lords, the Church and the peasants below them. Solidifying the king's position at the top of humanity's social order is the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings. In the family, the father is head of the household; below him, his wife; below her, their children. The children might be subdivided so that the males are one link above the females.

Modern western culture maintains some of these divisions. Just as Milton's *Paradise Lost* ranked the angels, so Christian culture conceives of angels in orders of archangels, seraphim, and cherubim, among others. The lion is still conceived as the king of the beasts, and the oak as the king of the plants.

The Great Chain of Being was despatched as a scientific tool by Darwin, though it remained a literary conceit and a source of comfort for creationists.

Although both representations are equally valid, we instinctively position ourselves at the top of such phylogenetic trees as in the upper panel





David Boulton will be a Keynote Speaker at this year's Conference. But, who is he?

Television: David joined Granada TV in 1965 after five years in print journalism. After a short spell in Granada's London press office he transferred to Manchester to work as a researcher on the regional news magazine programme *Scene at 6.30*. He became a producer on the programme in 1966 and was appointed its editor in 1967. In 1968 he moved from regional to nationally-networked programmes.

In 1969 he joined the weekly investigative series *World in Action* as a producer/director and over the next three years made 22 films in Britain and around the world, specialising in covering 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland. His film *South of the Border* was banned by the Independent Broadcasting Authority for including scenes of a Sinn Féin party conference. In 1972 he became Editor of *World in Action*, which won the annual Sun newspaper award for 'current affairs programme of the year' in 1975.

In 1978 he joined his fellow former editor of *World in Action* Leslie Woodhead in forming Granada's specialist Dramadocumentary Unit in a defiant response to calls for the controversial new form to be banned for blurring fact and fiction. They announced that, unlike many of the mixed-genre 'docu-dramas' imported from America, a Granada dramadocumentary would be "an exercise in journalism, not dramatic art. 'Dramatised' is merely the qualifying adjective: the proper noun is 'documentary'... No invented characters, no dramatic devices owing more to the writer's or director's

creative imagination than to the implacable record of what actually happened."

A fine example of this style was the reconstruction of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the crushing of Alexander Dubcek's Prague Spring. Written and co-produced by David Boulton and directed and co-produced by Leslie Woodhead with Czech co-producer Eva Kolouchova, *Invasion* won for the team the Royal Television Society's 1981 'Award for outstanding services to broadcasting'.

In 1981 David Boulton was appointed Granada's Head of News and Current Affairs, resuming executive responsibility for *World in Action* in an expanded department which included making current affairs programmes not only for Granada and the ITV Network but also for Channel Four, the BBC and the short-lived Superchannel. The following year, under his editorial direction, Granada opened the first fully computerised regional newsroom, in a renovated area of Liverpool's dockland.

In 1985 he became Commissioning Editor, Arts and Features. His newly networked arts series *Celebration* won the 1987 BP Award for 'best television arts series', and his documentary *The Gingerbread Revolution*, on the role of artists, actors and playwrights in bringing down the Czechoslovak communist regime won him an International Emmy outstanding achievement award in 1990.

On leaving Granada he founded his own broadcasting consultancy, David Boulton Associates. He closed his broadcasting career with retirement in 2005 but continues to guest-lecture on television journalism and broadcasting regulation.

Quaker and SoF: David has had a long association with the UK Sea of Faith Network and has been both editor and committee member. He is best known today for his books and articles exploring and promoting a

brand of open-minded humanism that rejects supernaturalist religion but respects and celebrates the best of our religious heritage and tradition in so far as it offers an enabling dream of what he calls 'the republic of heaven'. He is a member of the British Humanist Association and of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

Writer and Speaker: David has written for many publications, including most recently *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *New Internationalist*, *New Humanist*, *Sofia* and Quaker journals including *The Friend*, *Friends Quarterly*, *Journal of the Friends Historical Society* and *Proceedings of the Quaker Theology Seminar*.

He was a keynote speaker at the New Zealand Sea of Faith Network Conference in 2004 and spoke on 'the republic of heaven' because, as he wrote, **"I want to call it a republic because I want us to be citizens, not subjects. And I want us to acknowledge that building the republic of heaven is our responsibility, not one we can leave to a heavenly king."** This was in reference to his then new book *The Trouble with God*.

This year his keynote address will be informed by his latest book *Who on EARTH was JESUS? The Modern Quest for the Jesus of History* which takes up the chronicle of historical-Jesus research after it was so depressingly abandoned by Albert Schweitzer a century ago.

Contact: David's email address is dboulton@btinternet.com. He lives with his wife (and for one book at least, co-author), Anthea at Hobsons Farm, Cowgill, Dent Sedbergh, Cumbria LA10 5RF UK

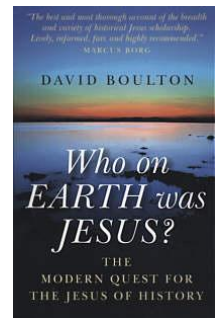
Selected Books by David Boulton

Who On EARTH was JESUS?

O Books (John Hunt Publishing), Winchester (UK), Washington (USA), 2008 £14.99, US\$24.99 ISBN 978-1-84694-018-7

A comprehensive study of all the principal contemporary schools of historical Jesus scholarship. Some of the 'Jesus detectives' discussed in this book: Dale Allison; Thomas Altizer; Marcus Borg; Kathleen Corley; John Dominic Crossan; James Dunn; Bart Ehrman; Robert Eisenman; Alvar Ellegard; Robert Funk; Roy Hoover; Karen King; John Kloppenborg; Helmut Koester; Gerd Ludemann; Hyamm Maccoby; Burton Mack; John P. Meier; Annette Merz; Aaron Milavec; Robery J. Miller; Stephen J. Patterson; Norman Perrin; Joseph Ratzinger; James M. Robertson; E. P. Sanders; Bernatrd Brandon Scott; Morton Smith; Gerd Theissen; G. A. Wells; Walter Wink; N. T. Wright ... and more.

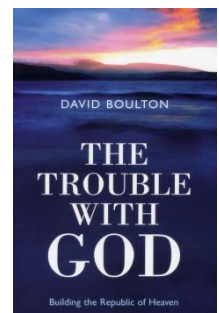
Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh, wrote: "Boulton is an investigative journalist by trade, and here he sets out to find out what historians have discovered when they have gone searching for the man scholars describe as the Jesus of History before he became the Christ of Faith. On this level alone the book is an enormous achievement ..."



The Trouble with God: Building the Republic of Heaven

O Books (John Hunt Pub.), Winchester (UK), Washington (USA). £11.99, US\$24.95
ISBN 1 905047 06-1 First edition 2002, international revised and expanded edition 2005

It tells three stories. First, the author's journey from religious fundamentalism to religious humanism. Second, God's journey from badly-behaved tribal monster-deity to an idealisation of human values, incarnated within the wholly human spirit. Third, the building of the republic of heaven, "which is our goal when kingdoms are no more, and all the responsibility is ours". Don Cupitt wrote: "David Boulton is a highly entertaining writer, with a great gift of being funny and serious at once".

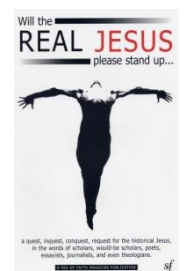


Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up [Editor]

Sea of Faith Network (UK), 2000, £3.00 inc. p&p

A magazine-format miscellany of extracts from writings about Jesus by "scholars, would-be scholars, poets, essayists, and even theologians", from Ignatius and Celsus to Keats, Shelley, Dennis Potter and Oscar Wilde. Illustrated.

This is available as a free pdf download (its about 3 mB) from www.sofn.org.uk



Obama's Nonbeliever Nod Unsettles Some

"We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers."

Not everyone was happy with President Barack Obama's nod to nonbelievers and non-Christians in his inaugural address. Some of the stiff criticism about Obama's religious inclusiveness is coming from African-American Christians who maintain that not all faiths were created equal.

"For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness," the new president said. "We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this earth," he also said. Nothing too controversial, proclaiming that America's strength lies in its diversity.

But between those two statements, the new president got specific: "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers."

By mentioning, for the first time in an inaugural address, the 16.1 percent of Americans who check 'no' when asked about religion, Obama turned it into the most controversial line in his speech — praised by The New York Times editorial board and cited by some Christians as evidence that he is a heretic, and in his well-spoken way, a serious threat. With that one line, the president "seems to be trying to redefine American culture, which is distinctively Christian," said Bishop E.W. Jackson of the Exodus Faith Ministries in Chesapeake, Va. "The overwhelming majority of Americans identify as Christians, and what disturbs me is that he seems to be trying to redefine who we are." Earlier this week, Jackson was a guest on the popular conservative Christian radio show *Janet Parshall's America*, where a succession of callers, many of whom identified themselves as African-American, said they shared the concern, and were perplexed and put off by the president's shout-out to nonbelievers.

Parshall noted that atheists were celebrating the unexpected mention, and indeed they were: "In his inaugural address ... President Barack Obama did what many before him should have done, rightly citing the great diversity of America as part of the nation's great strength, and including 'nonbelievers' in that mix," said Ed Buckner of American Atheists.

"His mother would have been proud," Buckner said, referring to the fact that Obama's mother was not a church-goer. "And so are we."

Jackson said he and others have no problem acknowledging that "this country is one in which everybody has the freedom to think what they want." Yet Obama crossed the line, in his view, in suggesting that all faiths (and none) were different roads to the same destination: "He made similar remarks in the campaign, and said, 'We are no longer a Christian nation, if we ever were. We are a Jewish, Hindu and non-believing nation.'"

Not so, Jackson says: "Obviously, Jewish heritage is very much a part of Christianity; the Jewish Bible is part of our Bible. But Hindu, Muslim, and nonbelievers? I don't think so. We are not a Muslim nation or a nonbelieving nation."

With all the focus on Obama as the first African-American president, the succession of black callers to Janet Parshall's show was a reminder that the 'community' is not a monolith, and that many socially conservative black Americans are at odds with Obama's views, particularly on abortion and gay rights. Nor do they all define civil rights in the same way.

The Rev. Cecil Blye, pastor of More Grace Ministries Church in Louisville, Ky., said the president's reference to nonbelievers also set off major alarm bells for him. "It's important to understand the heritage of our country, and it's a Judeo-Christian tradition, period". But his even bigger beef with the president, he said, is that a disproportionate number of "black kids are dying each day through abortion. President Obama is supportive of abortion, and that's a genocide on black folks. Nobody wants to talk about that as a civil rights issue."



"We're all in this together."



But he used Lincoln's Bible for the swearing-in

from <http://news.aol.com/article/obamas-nonbeliever-nod-unsettles-some/316339>
via the NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists and our own Mary Boekman.

Apocalypse Postponed?

"How many times does the end of the world as we know it need to arrive before we realise that it's not the end of the world as we know it?"

Michael Lewis in 'Panic: The Story of Modern Financial Insanity' reviewed in *The Economist* 29 November 2008

My View

From the Chair, Norm Ely

Communication of information between members of Sea of Faith both in New Zealand and internationally is a primary function of the Steering Committee.

As members of SoF tend to be 'of a certain age', your Steering Committee is presented with some interesting issues to resolve, to the benefit of members. At the same time we need to communicate in ways that are attractive to potential (and younger) new members. Examples of this are:

- **Local meetings.** These are slowly but steadily eroding especially in non-urban areas. As members age, getting out to a meeting becomes more difficult. Driving, especially at night; cooler weather; poor conditions in winter; disabilities — all of these contribute to the difficulties.
- **Conferences: regional and national.** Some members are financially quite able to meet the cost of transport, accommodation and registration. But many of our members are not in this financial position so they attend National Conferences only if they are local or easy to get to. (For that reason we cycle the national Conference: top of the NI, bottom of the NI, SI). For the majority of our members, both comfort at the Conference and quality of accommodation are very important, and some find shared accommodation and shared facilities unacceptable. In turn, fewer people attend unless the venue and accommodation are good.
- **Use of technology.** While most of our members are 'on the Internet' many are on dial-up and are less able to receive more detailed information (Newsletter, large documents, colour documents). They are effectively unable to take part in network visual communications or multi-participant contact (which require cameras and microphone/speaker systems as well as broadband). Furthermore, at least 10% of our members are *not* on the Internet at all.

The Steering Committee is very much aware of the needs of our members, and providing for all these needs has proven a challenging matter.

Providing 'in-house' Conference venues that meet our needs and have good technology, comfortable seating and good break-out facilities — as well as good single/double room accommodation — is almost impossible, especially if the venues are to be located in areas that are easy for members to travel to. This is complicated by the requirement to keep costs down.

The alternative of finding good venues that meet our needs and that have good accommodation close by and within an acceptable price range is equally challenging.

I suggest that all of this is going to require a rethink by future Steering Committees. They will need to look closely at the locations of Conferences, the time of year and even which days of the week.

How can members improve their contact with other members of SoF and the Network itself as well as receive more information from Sea of Faith? We provide a wide range of facilities which are currently underused. Examples are:

- **Website.** We have a very good website with a large amount of information available that is very easy to get to, quick to open and easy to use. But how many of you use this site? Our indications are that not very many use this site regularly. Its at www.sof.org.nz
- **Newsletter.** This is very much our 'Flagship'. A great provider of information, discussion and comment. However, at least 20% of members don't subscribe to this regularly. In some cases a Newsletter is sent to a local group who 'share it around'. At least people get to see it, but still many don't. In addition, the national organisation does not get the revenue from the extra Newsletters that could have been distributed.
- **Archives.** We have a very good Archive run by Alison Eng. But how much information do members send to Alison for archiving? Do Local Groups send information to Alison? The answer, according to my information, is that very few use the service we provide.
- **Resource Centre.** Again we have a very good Resource Centre with lots of information for the individual as well as for Local Groups. How many of our members use this service? Not many. There is a catalogue of its contents on the website.

These are issues that require not only the ongoing attention of the Steering Committee but a willingness to adjust quickly. It also requires a good input by members and their use of the resources the Steering Committee provides. Hopefully this will allow for better interchange of ideas and information as well as better knowledge for you all.



Norm

Agnostic Faith

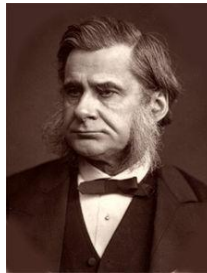
'Follow Your Reason'

THE DARWIN BICENTENARY YEAR has brought a rash of media fits which put 'science' and 'religion' in opposition. It is fair to say that many in each camp do see irreconcilable differences. But what is all too rarely publically acknowledged is the vast number of people who can happily reconcile their scientific side with their religious, while doing justice to both. As something of a bridge, consider 'agnosticism'. This passage is from Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism Without Beliefs*:

The force of the term 'agnosticism' has been lost. It has come to mean: not to hold an opinion about the questions of life and death; to say 'I don't know' when you really mean 'I don't want to know.' When allied (and confused) with atheism, it has become part of the attitude that legitimizes an indulgent consumerism and the unreflective conformism dictated by mass media. For T. H. Huxley, who coined the term in 1869, agnosticism was as demanding as any moral, philosophical, or religious creed. Rather than a creed, though, he saw it as a *method* realized through 'the rigorous application of a single principle.' He expressed this principle positively as: '**Follow your reason as far as it will take you,**' and negatively as: '**Do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable.**' This principle runs through the Western tradition: from Socrates, via the Reformation and the Enlightenment, to the axioms of modern science. Huxley called it the 'agnostic faith.'

Huxley himself wrote of his coining the term:

When I reached intellectual maturity, and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a freethinker, I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until at last I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last ... So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of 'agnostic'. It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the 'gnostic' of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant...



The extract comes from Huxley's 1889 essay on agnosticism which can be read in full at:

<http://alepho.clarku.edu/huxley/CE5/Agn.html>



2009 Steering Committee

Left, front to rear: Betty Manning, Fred Marshall, Don Feist, Natali Allen
Right, front to rear: Phil Grimmett, Peter Cowley (Treasurer), Steve Collard, Alan Jackson (Secretary)
Centre: Norm Ely, Chair
Photographer: Noel Cheer (backbencher)

2009

Readers with a fondness for round numbers might like to note that 2009 represents

1930 years since Vesuvius destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum
910 years since the First Crusade took Jerusalem
820 years since the Third Crusade
540 years since Spain united under Ferdinand and Isabella
500 years since Henry 8th became King of England
400 years since Kepler's laws of planetary motion
360 years since the beheading of Charles I of England
300 years since birth of Samuel Johnson
280 years since the beginning of Methodism
240 years since Tasman found New Zealand
220 years since the first US President (Washington)
200 years since the birth of Abraham Lincoln
200 years since Darwin's birth
190 years since the founding of Singapore
150 years since Darwin's *On The Origin of Species*
140 years since the opening of the Suez canal
110 years since the start of the Boer War
100 years since US explorer Peary reached North Pole
100 years since the first cross-Channel balloon flight
80 years since the Wall Street collapse
70 years since the outbreak of WW2
60 years since founding of the People's Republic of China
60 years since the founding of NATO
60 years since the NZ Citizenship Act
50 years since Castro took over Cuba
50 years since unmanned Russian rocket landed on moon
40 years since the first Concorde flight
40 years since the first humans landed on the moon
30 years since the Shah of Iran was replaced by an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini
30 years since the first woman PM of UK, Margaret Thatcher
20 years since the collapse of the Berlin Wall
20 years since Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* controversy
10 years since the "Y2K" panics

From The Archives

Newsletter 30, March 1999.

In case you didn't already know, you have a 'Final Vocabulary'

Richard Rorty in *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader* pp96-97

All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives.

I shall call these words a person's 'final vocabulary'.

It is 'final' in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. These words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only hopeless passivity or a resort to force.

A small part of a final vocabulary is made up of thin and ubiquitous terms such as 'true', 'good', 'right', and 'beautiful'.

The larger part contains thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, 'Christ', 'England', 'professional standards', 'decency', 'kindness', 'the Revolution', 'the Church', 'progressive', 'rigorous', 'creative'.

The more parochial words do most of the work.

I shall define 'ironist' as someone who fulfills three conditions:

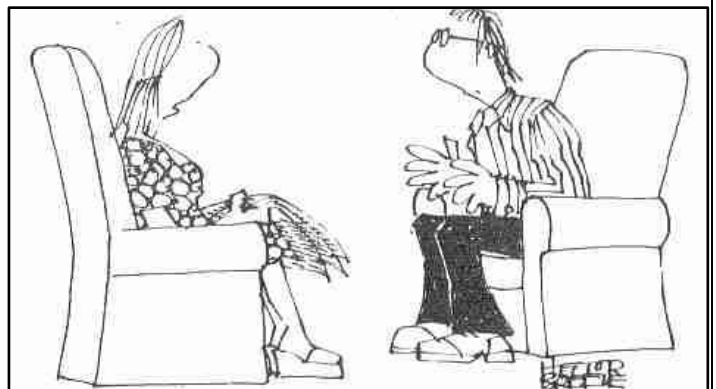
- (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary [that] she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books [which] she has encountered;
- (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts;
- (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, [or] that it is in touch with a power not herself.

Ironists who are inclined to philosophise see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal meta-vocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.

Richard Rorty was an American intellectual whose often deeply unconventional approach to mainstream philosophic thought brought him wide public recognition as one of the leading thinkers of his era. He died on at the age of 75 on June 8, 2007.

"The modern world is the child of doubt and inquiry, as the ancient world was the child of fear and faith".

Clarence Darrow, counsel for the defense in the Scopes 'monkey' trial in 1925 which tested the right to teach evolutionary theory.



Substitutionary atonement is perfectly clear to me — its your analogies I can't understand.

JESUS CHRIST

Doug Sellman, Christchurch

BELOW IS A COPY OF A PAINTING TITLED "JESUS CHRIST" that I commissioned last year from the well known Christchurch-based photorealist painter Kees Bruin. It depicts Jesus Christ as two contrasting images. The painting could have been titled "Jesus and Christ". On the left is an image of Jesus as a real Middle Eastern man in his early thirties with a face full of complex human emotion. The image on the right is of Christ, the defining deity of Christianity gazing heavenward with victorious superhuman emotion.

Why did I commission this painting?

I was brought up in a fundamentalist Christian family, the eldest of four living children. My parents, and my two brothers and a sister have all continued as fundamentalist believers in the standard Protestant package; literal interpretation of the Bible including miracles and other supernatural events, a soul that will survive death and go to either heaven or hell (no purgatory in our household!) and the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ as an historically unique God-event. However, I have been the family exception and with the influence of a long medical and psychiatric education (MBChB, PhD, FRANZCP, FACHAM), the support and stimulation of Helen Cederman my extraordinary late wife, the explanation and reassurance of various books, of particular note the works of Lloyd Geering, and the richness of close friends. I have managed, over time, to extricate myself from this religious delusional system, a world that I was deeply attached to and involved with in my youth. However, it has been an agonising journey; featuring, amongst other things, a very troubling gulf between me and my closest family members. It has taken a long time (I am now 53) to begin to feel some equanimity. I view this painting as marking the ending of an internal healing process.

Interestingly, Kees the painter, a friend from way back, continues to be a fundamentalist Christian. During the nine months or so of painting, Kees and I engaged in an ongoing struggle and numerous debates about these two images. Kees' natural inclination was to merge the two, so he tended towards idealising Jesus and humanising Christ. The purpose of the painting of course is in the opposite direction, to make the theological point that Christianity is founded on the fantastic creation of a new god, Christ, albeit based on a real man, Jesus of Nazereth. The end result is probably less contrasting than I first envisaged, and perhaps would be viewed by some as a compromise between Kees and I. But I'm actually happy now if Christians can meaningfully identify with the two images. I like the inclusiveness. However, I'm also quite happy if it provokes some thinking about the difference between reality and fantasy.

Some have looked at the painting without initial explanation and said, "Ok, I can see that's Jesus Christ on the right, so who's that on the left?" Excellent!

All Sea of Faith members are more than welcome to come around and have a look at the painting when you're in Christchurch if you'd like to.

Doug Sellman, email: doug.sellman@otago.ac.nz

