



## Letter from The Editor

The movie "Avatar" has the most stunning visual effects that I have ever seen. I saw it in 3D and was blown away. Most of it was made in Wellington at Sir Peter Jackson's Weta Workshops.

The story is, shall we say, OK, with stock figures and stock situations. The Vatican was less relaxed when it declared that the way the movie revered nature is to turn ecology into "the religion of the millennium". "Nature is no longer a creation to defend, but a divinity to worship" which "opens the way to a new pantheism tinged with neo-paganism ...". (*L'Ossevatore* 13 Jan. 2010)

It was opinions like these which inspired the arrangers of the 1999 NZ SoF Conference to use the theme "Mother Earth v. Father God?"— the implication being that traditional systems of religious thought broadly conform to either a Sky Father or an Earth Mother dynamic. Some, as in classic Maori, have both and even attempt to reconcile them.

In the modern world this distinction matters because, in the past we were much less alert to environmental damage. As a wit once wrote "we cannot throw rubbish away — there is no 'away'". Since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* nearly 50 years ago (which drew our attention to the dangers of widespread use of insecticide), we have become aware of pollution by waste; groundwater contamination; rainforest clearances; fish-stock depletion and nuclear war (the ultimate in depletion) and, most recently, human-induced climate change. In the process we have become sensitised and, perhaps over- and de-sensitised to what we may and may not do

Such casual negligence rested on suppositions of limitless supplies of oil and coal and fresh water together with the limitless capacities of the sea and the atmosphere to accept all of the contaminants we could throw at them. For centuries Christianity implicitly approved this carelessness then joined the chorus of concern less than 50 years ago.

In practical terms, in the end, it may be a moot point whether we treat the planet as God's creation under our stewardship or as a natural set of interlocking progress currently hospitable to human life.

**If we get it wrong, it will, in the end, be our end.**

*Noel Cheer, Editor*

## Conference Announcement Issue

### Contents

1. Letter From The Editor
2. The Steering Committee and The Conference
2. "Jesus Rediscovered"
2. Resource Centre Update
3. All About Us
3. Letter to the Editor on "Theism"
4. Karen Armstrong makes the Case for God.
6. Is Post-Theism preachable?
7. Is SoF a new orthodoxy?
7. Posters on Buses
8. Random Paragraphs
8. Spirituality without God?
9. A new New Zealand Hymn Book
10. Doubt: a History
10. Conference Theme: Early Thoughts
11. Schweitzer Plus 100
11. Conference Theme: More Thoughts
12. My Journey with Richard Dawkins
14. Religion for a "Post-Copenhagen" world
15. What you told us about "Faith"
16. The Evolution of God
16. Next Month: *Such is Life*



Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,  
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;  
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man  
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give - and take!

*Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam: Edward Fitzgerald translation*



**SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE DUE JUNE 30  
MORE DETAILS LATER**

## The 2010 Steering Committee and Conference



Margaret Gwynn Bev Smith  
Noel Cheer

Fred Marshall  
Steven Warnes

Steve Collard

Peter Cowley (Treas.)

Norm Ely

Philip Grimmatt  
Natali Allen (Chair)

Don Feist

Bev Smith  
Alan Jackson (Sec.)

The National Steering Committee met on 13 February and planned this year's Conference

**Venue: St Patrick's College in Silverstream, north of Wellington**

**Dates: 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> October.**

**Theme: "Compassion and Crisis: Our Human Dilemma"**

The theme will be introduced with stories and parables from various faith traditions and will explore the challenges to Compassion in today's world. This combines some of the suggestions we received for a Conference theme and promises interesting wide-ranging discussion.

To enable "catching one's breath" several interesting, stimulating and relaxing activities are being planned, so keep this weekend free. In the next Newsletters there will be detailed information to enable you to make bookings. As data accumulates it will appear on the website: [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)

At the Conference we hope to be able to use art works in the venue, or in a slide show, and will be inviting contributions which have reference to compassion – particularly if these are from other cultures or traditions. If you have, or see anything that could be used in this way please make a copy or a photograph and in the next Newsletter we will provide details of where to send them.

In forthcoming Newsletters there will be designated sections for Local Groups and for the Resource Centre. The purpose of the first is to exchange news and ideas between local groups, particularly the smaller groups and especially those which do not have web-sites. Resource Centre updates will give ongoing and up to date information of material available to groups and individuals.

*Natali Allen, Chairperson 2009-2010*

## Jesus Rediscovered

Sir Lloyd Geering will give three lectures under this title 25 years after the ground-breaking series *Jesus Reconsidered*, which inaugurated the St Andrew's Trust for the study of Religion and Society.

**Dates:** 12:15pm on each of 25 March (*Excavating Jesus*), 30 March (*The Rise and Decline of CHRISTianity*), 1 April (*Christianity without CHRIST*) **Venue:** St. Andrews on The Terrace, Wellington.

## Resource Centre Update

The Resource Centre is being updated with the purchase of new materials. If you have suggestions, especially about books, please send them to Suzi Thirlwall at [susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz](mailto:susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz)

## 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**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK) and Noel Cheer.

The **Chairperson** is Natali Allen, P.O. Box 120, Rawene, Northland. Phone (09) 405 7755.

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 the Newsletter is emailed.

Send remittance and details to The Membership Secretary, PO Box 15-324, Miramar, Wellington 6243 or Internet bank to 38 9000 0807809 00 and tell pcowley@paradise.net.nz your mailing details.

Members may borrow books, tapes etc. from the **Resource Centre** managed by Suzi Thirlwall phone (07) 578-2775 See the website at **www.sof.org.nz** for a catalogue and for further 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, Phone (04)236-7533 email: noel@cheer.org.nz

## Letter to the Editor

**I find it difficult to offer Bill Robottom [Newsletter 86] the feedback he invites**, because there are many sweeping statements in his article which I am inclined either to challenge, or to ask for an explanation of.

However, one key point I think, concerns his use, and our use, of the word “theism”. There is no entry for this word in the Index to the *Lloyd Geering Reader*, and even if there was, I suspect that precisely what Lloyd used the word to mean may have changed over the 40+ years the book covers.

The two points I want to make about “theism” are:

1. Rejecting theism doesn’t mean, and it doesn’t have to mean, rejecting any concept of a god. A non-theistic position is not the same as atheism.
2. The discussion about theism, in which Lloyd has played a leading and creative part for many years now, is far from over. But the central point being made, I think, by people who say they reject theism, is that they are rejecting a concept of God as a person, in more or less the sense that each human being is a person. I have the impression from several of the things Bill Robottom says, that he in fact agrees with this. He says, for example, “I see an infinite and pantheist God”.

In trying to be clearer in my own mind what we should be talking about here, I have found these words from a fascinating recent book, ***Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*** by Paul F. Knitter very helpful:

“ ... for me God is no longer a Person, but God is definitely, and all the more engagingly, personal. That may be a fine-tuned distinction, but for me and I believe many Christians, it is an important one. .... God is not an almighty, loving Somebody, a divine Personal Being with whom I have essentially the same kind of interpersonal relationship that I have with the other personal beings in my life. .... God is, ... rather, the Mystery of Interbeing that surrounds me and animates me. But it is a Mystery that is also personally present to me. When I say “personally present” I mean that I have sensed that this Mystery touches me and affects me in ways that I can, and must, describe as personal”.

I don’t know where either Lloyd Geering or Bill Rowbottom would stand in relation to the distinction Knitter makes. I’m not sure that it exactly describes my own position. But I believe this sort of careful precision, and this speaking out of experience, are vital in our on-going discussion of theism and the possible alternatives to it.

**Don Feist, Dunedin**

## **Religion Can Be Life-Giving and Life-Enhancing Once Again**

*A Book Review by Don Feist*

*The Case for God -  
What Religion Really Means*

Karen Armstrong,  
The Bodley Head 2009

In his recent book *The Meaning of the West*, Don Cupitt wrote:

“The very strength of Islamic conviction is evidently of a kind that we in the West have not ourselves felt since the seventeenth century, reminding us that .... in the West supernatural faith has been severely weakened or moderated by the application of critical thinking to the Scriptures and the early history of Christianity ...”.

Karen Armstrong, in her new book, shows clearly and convincingly how this weakening has come about, and suggests how we may now be able to overcome it.

The book opens with a vivid account of a visit to the surviving evidence of the religious practices of our ancestors 30,000 years ago, in the labyrinthine caves at Lascaux in the South of France. From such places, she says, we know that:

“From a very early date, people re-enacted their myths in stylised ceremonies that worked aesthetically upon participants, and, like any work of art, introduced them to a deeper dimension of existence. Myth and ritual were thus inseparable .... Without ritual, myths made no sense and would remain as opaque as a musical score, which is impenetrable to most of us until interpreted instrumentally. Religion, therefore, was not primarily something that people thought, but something they did ...”. [p.4]

This is the basic and persistent theme of the book - that, except in Western Christianity in the last few centuries, religion has always been something people did – not primarily something in their heads. And the remedy she proposes for our malaise is that religion becomes once again something that is done, both in ritual action and in moral, compassionate daily living.

The first six chapters trace the development of religious practice from the time of the Lascaux caves until 1500 CE. In the earliest years, outward ritual actions appear to have been of dominant importance, but:

“As life became more settled, people had the leisure to develop a more interior spirituality. The Indian Aryans, always in the vanguard of religious change, pioneered this trend, the ground-breaking discovery that the Brahman, being itself, was also the ground of the human psyche. The transcendent was neither external nor alien to humanity, but the two were inextricably linked. This insight would become central to the religious quest in all the major traditions.” [pp. 27-28]

Chapter 2 brings out what the Hebrew scriptures can tell us about how humans came to identify the transcendent with a single being – that is, how monotheism developed.

Chapter 3, entitled “Reason”, traces the different course taken in Greece, where the transcendent was thought of in rational, rather than personal terms. But the underlying concern was still with how a human might live well:

“The type of wisdom that Socrates offered was not gained by acquiring items of knowledge but by learning to be, in a different way”. [p. 67]

The chapter on “Faith” deals with the early Christian centuries, showing how the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE forced the Jews, deprived of a Temple, to rely on inward and spoken things. Christians too, were laying stress on the inward.

“For the Christians as for the Rabbis, scripture was a symbol, its words and stories merely the outward ‘images of divine things’. [p. 98]

However, within Christianity, emphasis on ‘faith’ proved to have a down side:

“Judaism and Islam have remained religions of practice; they promote orthopraxy, right practice, rather than orthodoxy, right teaching. In the early fourth century, however, Christianity had begun to move in a slightly different direction and developed a preoccupation with doctrinal correctness that would become its Achilles heel.” [pp. 103-104]

**This, in Armstrong’s view, is where Christianity began to lose the plot.**

“Silence” is an important chapter because it follows a strand in Christianity which recognised the limitations of all words for understanding or communicating about the divine. To do justice to how things really are, it is



necessary to acknowledge the inadequacy of all human ideas, so that what is affirmed about the transcendent must also be denied. In addition to using words, the religious person must also do without words. Here, the mystics are important, but so too are parts of the writings of highly verbal people like Augustine and Aquinas.

Three quotations may summarise Armstrong's concern about "Faith and Reason" when she moves on to the West in the Middle Ages:

"By the end of the eleventh century, philosophers and theologians in the West had embarked on a project which, they believed, was entirely new. They had begun to apply their reasoning powers systematically to the truths of faith." [p. 129]

"The university curriculum now [in England in the 13th-14th Century, the time of William of Occam] required students to study logic, mathematics and Aristotelian science before they began their theological studies. The younger generation were, therefore, no longer at home with analogical thinking, because the natural sciences required language to be transparent and univocal". [p. 148]

"The abstruse speculations of philosophers like Scotus and Ockham led to a rift between theology and spirituality that persists to the present day." [p. 149]

In these ways, seed was being sown for what was to burst out in explosive growth in the modern period.

The second part of the book, headed: "The Modern God", traces what has happened since 1500 CE. After referring to Ferdinand and Isabella beginning to transform Spain into a modern nation state, and the discovery of the Americas in 1492, Armstrong explains her choice of this date as a watershed:

"By the sixteenth century, the people of the West had started to create an entirely new and unprecedented type of civilisation, which depended on a radical change in the economic base of society. ....

[T]he modern economy rested on the technological replication of resources and the constant reinvestment of capital. .... This freed it from many of the constraints of pre-modern societies .... [which had] tended to be conservative because they simply could not afford the constant replication of the infrastructure that has come to characterise modernity. Original thought was not encouraged, because it could lead to frustration and social unrest .... Now, however, Western people were gradually acquiring the confidence to look to the future instead of the past. Where the older cultures had taught men and women to remain within carefully defined limits, pioneers such as Columbus were encouraging them to venture beyond the confines of the known world" [p. 162 – 163]

Then follow references to the beginnings of modern science, to Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and others.

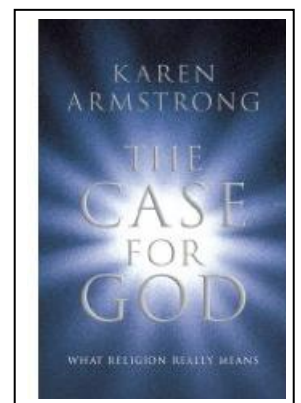
They are relevant to Armstrong's story because:

"By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the notion of truth had begun to change. Thomas Aquinas's .... delight in unknowing was being replaced by a strident lust for certainty and a harsh dogmatic intolerance. The spirituality of silence was giving way to a wordy debate; the refusal to define (.... 'to set limits upon') was being superseded by aggressive definitions of .... dogma. Faith was beginning to be identified with 'belief' in man-made opinions - and that would, eventually, make faith itself difficult to maintain." [p. 183]

In the chapter on "Scientific Religion", Armstrong argues that as science progressed, religion appeared to many to be adapting to the new philosophy and new ideas of knowledge and truth. But in reality, what had always made religion work in the lives of men and women was being betrayed.

"At a stroke, Newton overturned centuries of Christian tradition. Hitherto, theologians had argued that the creation could tell us nothing about God; indeed, it proved to us that God was unknowable. .... But Newton had no doubt that his Universal Mechanics would explain all God's attributes. .... In the laws of gravity that held the universe together, Newton saw evidence of this divine 'dominion' (*dominatio*), the overwhelming force that masters and controls the cosmos. This was the fundamental divine attribute. ... But this domineering God was very different from .... [the self-emptying] God of the Trinity." [p. 199]

More or less in self-defence, Christianity in Europe and North America responded to this upheaval by speaking of faith, not as an involvement with mystery that was too deep for words, but rather as belief in certain statements as reasonable and true. This defensive adjustment seemed to make religion acceptable in a world where science was almost all-pervasive. However, by the 19th Century it was clear that, for many people, this was not working:



“At its best, religion had helped people to build within them a haven of peace that enabled them to live creatively with the sorrow of life; but during the scientific age, that interiorised security had been exchanged for an unsustainable certainty. As their faith ebbed, many Victorians sensed the void that it left behind. .... By making ‘God’ a purely notional truth attainable by the rational and scientific intellect, without ritual, prayer or ethical commitment, men and women had killed it for themselves. .... Europeans were beginning to experience religion as tenuous, arbitrary and lifeless”. [p. 246]

The chapter on the 20th century is entitled, significantly, “Unknowing”. Late in the 19th Century, many scientists were convinced that science had almost completed its task of making the whole of reality fully intelligible. But quantum mechanics and relativity theory, among other things, soon made that view untenable. The First World War showed that there was still a “self-destructive nihilism” at the heart of Western civilisation. Various sciences, from physics to sociology and psychology have suggested not only that what humans do not know – and perhaps can never know – may exceed what we do know, but also that we have nothing like such an adequate grasp of what we do know, as an earlier generation thought. We are coming more and more to acknowledge that “truth is the present state of the debate”.

**Armstrong argues that religious faith and religious activity still are, as they always have been, essential to being fully human.**

“From the very beginning, men and women have repeatedly engaged in strenuous and committed religious activity. They evolved mythologies, rituals and ethical disciplines that brought them intimations of holiness that seemed in some indescribable way to enhance and fulfil their humanity. .... They were not bludgeoned into faith by power-hungry priests or kings; indeed religion often helped people to oppose tyranny and oppression of this kind. The point of religion was to live intensely and richly here and now.” [p. 315]

**And she is optimistic that, despite things having gone seriously astray in the West in the last few centuries, the way is open for religion to be life-giving and life-enhancing again.**

“Modern physicists, as we have seen, are not wary of unknowing; their experience of living with apparently insoluble problems evokes awe and wonder. .... The wonder of modern cosmology seems to derive in no small measure from the physicists’ inherent inability to answer all its questions. They know that the terms they use to describe these natural mysteries – big bang, dark matter, black holes, dark energy – are metaphors that cannot adequately translate their mathematical insights into words.” [p. 296]

“Religious insight requires not only a dedicated intellectual endeavour to get beyond the ‘idols of thought’ but also a compassionate lifestyle that enables us to break out of the prison of selfhood”. [p. 306]

As those who have read any of Karen Armstrong’s earlier books will appreciate, there’s much more in this rich, highly readable book than I could do justice to, even in a much longer review than this. If you want a better understanding of present day Western civilisation and how we got to where we are – or if you are inclined to hope that it may be possible to transform the Christianity you knew in your youth into something that will work in your mature years – I warmly recommend *The Case for God*.

## **Is Post-Theism Preachable?**

.... or is it just an intellectual exercise for those who have given up on church? A couple of years ago I put together a book of sermons I had delivered in ordinary congregational settings presenting post-theism as good news. It was reviewed in the July 2008 SoF Newsletter. A good number of people have actually paid money to buy it, but there are still some taking up room under my desk.

If anyone will send me \$2 in stamps, I will be glad to send them a copy of *Preaching Post-Theism*. David Simmers, 140 Cecil Road, Wadestown, Wellington 6012.

**We will continue the practice established in 2009 of not having workshops at the Conference to allow time for Core Group activity which has proved popular.**

**If you had an ambition to get some material together for workshop addressing the theme, why not write an essay for this Newsletter? Up to 1000 words would be welcome.**

Norman MacLean of Gisborne asks whether SoF is

## **A New Orthodoxy?**

**One of the Sea of Faith's most admirable attractions for recovered Christians is its lack of dogmatism.** Popular writers buoyed up by the Sea, rightly unfurl sails that catch the winds of change in the ever-changing currents of theological and historical thought. Dogmatism, we are assured, belongs to the past: we've left all that behind.

How unfortunate it would be if an ever so slightly dogmatic edge prevailed in print or was articulated from the podium, giving rise to a new orthodoxy. Unfortunately, there is clear evidence of this. It goes along these lines ...

- As an educated and rational person, I naturally assume that I have such a sound grasp of religious thought and practice and history, I can easily identify those mythical aspects which sustained our ancestors but which we have now outgrown.
- Despite the fact that untold millions of highly educated and rational people in other regions of the world – take Asia for example – comfortably accommodate a firm belief in the objective reality of the divine, they are somehow behind *us* in the West who have realised beyond doubt that theism is a childish and completely obsolete concept.
- Although I may never have encountered at a personal level anything that might be termed the paranormal, I just *know* that such stuff is absurd. Not that this makes me in the least like the priestly guardians of thought and conduct in past centuries who vehemently rejected anything they could not accommodate within their faith.
- Equipped with this certainty, I happily dismiss all the evidence for the fabric of the apparently miraculous: inexplicable powers of healing cannot and do not exist; there isn't a shred of evidence for life after death; (here, I cheerfully disregard the whole of human experience along with the scientific data available) there may well be moments of mystical experience but of course, they have absolutely nothing to do with anything that might exist outside of my own consciousness.
- God? Well, really ... Our goodness is godly; god is *us* in action but for heaven's sake, let's not go beyond that for fear of looking hopelessly naïve.
- The vastness of space and the mysteries of time are no impediment to my certainty that what I understand is based on my five physical senses; my place as a speck of being on a minute speck of matter that happens to be a planet. Somehow, despite my insignificance and all my limitations, I see so much more clearly than those poor souls who cling to the wreckage of faith while I skim happily over the relatively well charted Sea.
- Orthodox in my thinking? Absolutely not! I am a member of the Sea of Faith; I read the recommended texts; I accept most of the ideas propagated; I happily dismiss the out-dated dogmas and doctrines that gave my ancestors their rather quaint sense of security....
- Orthodoxy has a travelling companion: arrogance. Humility goes hand in hand with a true open-mindedness that accepts the possibility that not everything can be explained so glibly and that very little in our experience of life is fully comprehended.

**We who voyage on the Sea of Faith need to steer well clear of those shallows where we may so easily founder.**

## **On The Buses**

As a response to the atheist "Bus Campaign", Daniel Phillips of Invercargill has suggested:

**How we came to be here is open to debate / That we are, and in ever increasing numbers, is not. / Choose empathy, compassion, and charity for a stable future.**

Peter Land of Kerikeri suggested:

**God exist? / What is "exist"? / No problem!**



## Random Paragraphs

After a Newsletter has been put together, the Editor sometime finds unconnected, but interesting, paragraphs in the bottom of the In Tray. Here are some such:

**Power:** *The Economist* dated 23 January 23rd 2010 on page 74 asks whether Lord Acton's observation "power corrupts ..." was correct or whether it is simply a matter that power attracts the corruptible.



**Situation Ethics in Six Propositions:** from Fletcher 1963 *Situation Ethics*: (1) Only one thing is intrinsically good; namely love: nothing else at all. (2) The ruling norm of Christian decision is love: nothing else. (3) Love and Justice are the same, for justice is love distributed, nothing else. (4) Justice is Christian love using its head, calculating its duties, obligations, opportunities, resources... Justice is love coping with situations where distribution is called for. (5) Love wills the neighbour's good, whether we like him or not. (6) Only the end justifies the means, nothing else. (6) Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively.

Wikipedia's definition of "intrinsic" is that it denotes a property of some thing or action which is essential and specific to that thing or action, and which is wholly independent of any other object, action or consequence. Could this assert that love exists *independent of* God? Letters to the Editor, please.

## Spirituality without God?

*The Book of Atheist Spirituality*

*An elegant argument for spirituality without God*

By Andre Lecomte-Sponville

Published by Bantam Books, London, 2009

I found this little book a most readable and stimulating treatise on what Comte-Sponville says "are what can be summed in three questions: First, can we do without religion? Second, does God exist? Third, can there be an atheist spirituality?"

On the first question he concludes

"It is possible to do without religion, but not without communion, fidelity and love.... Life is more precious than religion; this is where the inquisitors are wrong. Communion is more precious than churches; this is where the sectarians are wrong. Finally - and this is where the fine people are right; whether they believe in God or not - love is more precious than hope or despair. There is no need to wait to be saved to be human."

In a most entertaining and closely reasoned way foreign to both fundamentalist believers of whatever their creed, and to the Richard Dawkins school of philosophical thought which tends to deny all spirituality by debunking Sunday School type understandings. (Haven't we all finished with that sort of action years ago!)

The author concludes (emphases added):

"Here is where all our different themes converge without conflating.

Fidelity to truth: **rationalism** — the rejection of sophism

Fidelity to love : **humanism** — the rejection of nihilism

Fidelity to a separation of the two — **atheism**.

Here, perhaps — at their culmination — is where the wise and the saintly agree:

**Love**, not hope is what helps us live, **Truth** not faith is what sets us free."

The Washington Post describes this tasty offering thus: "A wonderful book .... offers a generosity of spirit, communion and wisdom."

*John Patrick of Warkworth*





## **A History of Doubt**

*A Review by Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch*

In *Doubt: A History* (Harper 2003) Jennifer Michael Hecht, historian and poet, tells the story of doubt from the ancient Greek philosophers down to the present day. SoFers are familiar with the rise of doubt about traditional Christianity, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but Hecht widens the horizon to include doubt in Islamic and Eastern traditions and Western doubt long before Galileo and Darwin. You could think of the book as a history of civilization, written from the perspective of doubt. Historians tend to focus on stable cultures with impressive shared world-views, such as the ancient Greek city-state or medieval Christendom, but Hecht shows more interest in the times between such cultures, when world views lose their cogency and doubt is strong.

Although Hecht is particularly interested in those who doubted the fundamentals of the Abrahamic religions (the existence of God, the immortality of the soul) she finds doubters of many other things. The philosophers doubted religion, but others doubted the philosophies they produced. The Buddha denied the Hindu notion of the atman, the true self, but others doubted the Buddha's teaching on how to reach Enlightenment.

Although I suspect that she is more of a doubter than a believer, she provides insightful and sympathetic accounts of the various sorts of belief that are doubted - you need to explain what the belief is that is being doubted. In this evenhandedness in the treatment of belief and doubt, she is a welcome contrast to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and other works by the new atheists. One can only lament that her book, written three years before Dawkins' book, has caused so little stir by comparison. Her writing style is delightful and she captures the spirit of doubters and believers in her own, modern words.

There are so many doubters to cover that even in a book of around 500 pages there is only a page or two for such important figures as Nietzsche, Sartre and Bertrand Russell. Although the sheer quantity of information was somewhat overwhelming, I still missed important figures from the history of theology: Tillich, who explicitly treated the theme of faith and doubt, Feuerbach, who regarded talk of God as camouflaged talk of man, Schweitzer, who doubted that we could know anything definite about Jesus, and Bultmann, who regarded the Christian message of the Son of God come down from heaven to save us as myth.

To tell the story of doubt, Hecht sometimes reads between the lines and makes inferences; doubt, after all, was often suppressed. From the story of doubting Thomas, she infers that there were doubters of the resurrection, at whom the story was directed. Many doubters are only known through excerpts quoted by believers who were countering their arguments. Sometimes there is only an argument; but one can generally suppose that there were people who held the view being argued against.

Hecht provides interesting perspectives on doubt. She argues that great doubters and great believers have more in common with each other than with the general population, that doubt played a large and significant role in Jesus and the emergence of Christianity, and that only in recent times has doubt been aggressively anti-religion.

Doubting what the community believes tends to be an isolating experience. This book shows that there is a rich and varied tradition of doubt; we are in good company.

For more, visit <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/doubt>.

### **Early Thoughts On The Theme for Conference 2010**

**"How do we fight clean in a dirty world?"**

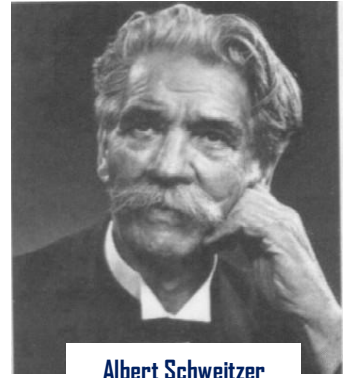
*Anonymous complaint.*

**"Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors".**

*Jesus, the Galilean sage.*

## **Schweitzer Plus 100**

### **The Historical Jesus Industry**



Albert Schweitzer

**A hundred years ago this year, the English translation of Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* cast doubt on ever finding sufficient data to allow us to establish who Jesus actually was and what he actually said. At this centenary the printing presses have reached fever pitch in the production of 'third quest' efforts which offer more optimism than Schweitzer said we were entitled to.**

A recent offering is a compilation of five papers in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* edited by James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, and published in 2009 by the Intervarsity Press. A novel feature is that each paper is followed by an evaluation by each of the other four presenters. Of special note is the excellent summary of the 'quests' to date by the editors in the Introduction.

Despite an offering by John Dominic Crossan, the general mood is to the 'right' of The Jesus Seminar with a greater tendency to take the biblical writing as historically dependable.

Though not one of the formal presenters, John Paul Meier, a Catholic priest and Professor of New Testament in the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame catches the mood when he is quoted on page 37 as saying:

"The reader who wants to know the real Jesus should close this book right now, because the historical Jesus is neither the real Jesus nor the easy way to him. The real Jesus is not available and never will be. This is true not because Jesus did not exist - he certainly did - but rather because the sources that have survived do not and never intended to record all or even most of the words and deeds of his public ministry to say nothing of the rest of his life."

On page 47 Crossan suggests that the quest may have reached a dead end with so much variation among scholars that "historical Jesus research has become something of a scholarly bad joke."

The editors seem to be acknowledging such diversity when they write, on page 53:

"In this present volume, five noted scholars of the third quest - Robert M. Price, John Dominic Crossan, Luke Timothy Johnson, James D. G. Dunn and Darrel L. Bock - come together for the purpose of dialogue about the historical Jesus. Each contributor has produced a number of volumes on the topic. Several have had entire volumes and/or journal issues dedicated to interaction with their own work. Each brings to the dialogue table a different set of methodological lenses - and thus arrives at a different reconstruction of the historical Jesus - than the others."

Perhaps Schweitzer was right on this score at least, when he ended his magisterial volume with these words couched in a now-unfashionable thicket of reverential capitals:

"He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

## **More Thoughts On The Theme for Conference 2010**

**"Chaos of thought and passion, all confus'd;  
Still by himself abus'd or disabus'd;  
Created half to rise, and half to fall;  
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd;  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!"**

**Alexander Pope *Essay on Man***

**"Humans are susceptible to forces beyond our comprehension. We're capable of inflicting immense cruelty on one another and yet we also have the capacity to be tender, to empathise, to feel".**

**Promotional material for Richard Holloway's  
*Between The Monster and The Saint*  
The Text Publishing Company, Australia 2008**

## My Journey With Richard Dawkins

Laurie Chisholm, Christchurch

**Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* hit the headlines a long time ago now and many more books aiming to show religion to be intellectually untenable have since arrived on the market. With tortoise-like slowness, I have been reflecting on the new atheism. I'd like to share my journey, indicating how various people have helped me on the way.**

*The God Delusion* is of course a passionate attack on religion. Although I knew that the kind of religion Dawkins had in mind was mainly US Christian fundamentalism, I was wary, even rejecting, of the book. Just as, in a marriage breakup, one partner would not want to listen to a long harangue of abuse and criticism from the disillusioned other partner, so I didn't really want to listen to Dawkins' polemic. I suspected that it would be emotionally toxic. I suppose there might have been some anxiety that his comprehensive broadsides, coming as they do from someone highly intelligent, might undermine my beliefs or expose unacknowledged and dubious assumptions – but I honestly think that was a minor consideration.

So my first step was to look around for commentary. **Madeleine Bunting's** columns in the Guardian provided a refreshing and provocative counter-position: behind Dawkins' polemic is frustration that religion has not yet disappeared and fear that atheist humanism has failed. Dawkins' attack on religion is intellectually lazy; he hates religion too much to give it the serious examination that it deserves.

**Michael Ruse** has impeccable pro-evolution credentials. He has investigated the origins of the idea of evolution and explored why religious people were opposed to it. One of his most surprising discoveries was that Thomas Huxley, Darwin's bulldog, never referred to evolution in his medical school lectures. Evolution for Huxley was an optimistic philosophy for a new age, something to lecture on to working men's clubs. Before evolution had a solid scientific basis, it served as a world-view, an optimistic, progressive one that was useful for countering the pessimistic official religion of the time, according to which sin was universal and only divine grace could save us. Ruse's conclusion is that the conflict between the evolutionists and religion was never only a straight conflict between evidence-based science and blind faith: it was to a considerable extent a conflict between a humanistic ideology of progress and traditional religion.



**Richard Dawkins**

Still, all this was skirting round Dawkins' challenge. In an attempt to get closer to the scientific side of Dawkins, I obtained *Richard Dawkins. How a Scientist Changed the Way We Think* a collection of essays by scientists, writers, and philosophers. This helped provide some context for Dawkins' contribution and a diversity of opinion on him. Pursuing this further, I bought a second-hand copy of *The Selfish Gene*. I still didn't want to engage with *The God Delusion* but I was becoming more interested in Dawkins' scientific writing, and many commentators who were critical of Dawkins on religion valued his communication skills very highly when it came to scientific themes.

I've now read part of *The Selfish Gene* and can say that he has produced a series of stunning expositions of modern evolutionary theory. Brilliant metaphors (for example, selfish gene, evolutionary arms race, climbing Mount Improbable) all with the aim of communicating this fundamental truth.

Dawkins is overwhelmed by the simplicity and the deep, fundamental truth of Darwinian natural selection. It is a revolution in biology akin to the Copernican revolution in cosmology. Just as the complex movements of the planets and stars are accounted for by Newton's three laws of motion which allow NASA to calculate what is needed to send a rocket to Mars, so evolution provides models for explaining many features of the enormous diversity and complexity of life.

To put it in language that Dawkins might not approve of, Darwinian natural selection is a revelation. It is sacred, unconditional truth that must not be adulterated. But what do we find in the US today? People are increasingly turning their back on evolution and sound science generally. And the reason for this? Religion. Given this background, it is understandable that Dawkins would embark on a campaign against religion. That



this is the background is very clear from *Salon* magazine's interview with Dawkins, long before he wrote *The Selfish Gene*:

**Interviewer:** Still, so many people resist believing in evolution. Where does the resistance come from?

**Dawkins:** It comes, I'm sorry to say, from religion. And from bad religion. You won't find any opposition to the idea of evolution among sophisticated, educated theologians. It comes from an exceedingly retarded, primitive version of religion, which unfortunately is at present undergoing an epidemic in the United States. Not in Europe, not in Britain, but in the United States.

My American friends tell me that you are slipping towards a theocratic Dark Age. Which is very disagreeable for the very large number of educated, intelligent and right-thinking people in America. Unfortunately, at present, it's slightly outnumbered by the ignorant, uneducated people who voted Bush in.

But the broad direction of history is toward enlightenment, and so I think that what America is going through at the moment will prove to be a temporary reverse. I think there is great hope for the future. My advice would be, Don't despair, these things pass.

So Dawkins has decided on an all-out attack. This might not be the best strategy, but you can understand why he is engaging in it. As a result, he ends up including us as part of the target. So a Sea of Faith type of religion (and even Buddhism) cops the flak that is mainly intended for US-style fundamentalist Christianity.

Dawkins attacks religion for the harm it has caused. Ultimately, he acknowledges that this might be one-sided, but then he withdraws to the bottom line, which is that religion is not true. Intellectual honesty and openness require us to reject all religion and superstition. For him, this is a more fundamental objection to religion than the moral harm done. In this, by the way, he hears religious statements exclusively as would-be objective scientific hypotheses.

People in our local Christchurch Sea of Faith group have alerted me to other thinkers with a contribution to make. Ian Crumpton discovered the book *God and the New Atheism* by **John Haught**. It is encouraging to see a theologian engaging with the new atheism and coming up with a response that makes sense. Wendy Crossan-Botting discovered **Stephen Rose**, a neurobiologist who takes issue generally with Dawkins. His response to the intriguing closing words of (the first edition of) *The Selfish Gene* ("We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.") was to ask who the 'we' is that does the rebelling. Surely, it must be a 'we' that has been created by those very genes to be capable of rebelling.

But it was **John Gray** (the Professor of European Thought, not the *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* author of the same name) who impressed me most as a critic of Dawkins and the other new atheists. Evolution (for example in mimicry) favours useful error. Why should an evolutionary biologist have something against religion, if it is a useful error? Religion can be regarded just as part of the way evolved life is; if religion confers some kind of advantage, evolution will tend to produce it. In other words, Dawkins' opposition to religion doesn't make sense on the basis of evolutionary biology. It comes from somewhere else, from a liberal humanism. Humanism and naturalism are, says Gray, two irreconcilable philosophies.

Darwin's theory shows the truth of naturalism; we are animals like any other; our fate and that of the rest of life on earth are the same. Yet, in an irony all the more exquisite because no one has noticed it, Darwinism is now the central prop of the humanist faith that we can transcend our animal natures and rule the Earth.

I found this insight into Dawkins liberating. But the result was not, as you might expect, that I dismissed Dawkins, but rather that I now understand and empathise with where he's coming from. When he loses the air of infallibility that comes from claiming for his views all the authority of Science and Reason, he becomes human and I begin to feel warmly towards him. He is just like me, on a journey, exploring the meaning of life and, for us fragile finite beings, there are no infallible, absolutely right views about that meaning.

I am left with the feeling that instead of arguing against Dawkins and defending religion against his attacks, we should be exploring the consequences of modern biology for our own view of the world. We should focus on the contribution he has made to the understanding of science, particularly evolution. The onus is on those of us who are influenced by religious traditions to articulate them in a way that disentangles religious affirmations from any scientific claims to know how the world is in itself.



## Religion for a "Post-Copenhagen" World

A comment by Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch

*Stephanie McMillan is a US. cartoonist whose political and economic satire is hard and biting. The following comment is inspired by the article "Artists: Raise your Weapons" which appeared on her blog on December 9<sup>th</sup> 2009. See <http://minimumsecurity.net/blog/> If, as McMillan suggests, art should challenge the unsustainable and immoral culture of consumption that we have developed in the West, how much more of a challenge should a genuine spirituality pose?*

In this time of escalating exploitation, poverty, oil wars, torture and ecocide, we don't need religion laced with Medieval imagery of kings, lords, the supernatural, and the life to come. In this time, as countless multitudes suffer and die for the profits and luxuries of a few, as species go extinct at a rate faster than we can keep track of, we don't need angels and miracles, divinities and such distractions. In this time, when the future of all life on Earth is at stake, spare us the constant barrage of commercial banality, seasonally dressed up with a garnishing of religious imagery: Christmas. Easter. Halloween.

In times like these, any faith that does not offer a world view and life style that is in harmony with nature is a betrayal of the worst magnitude, a gesture of contempt against life itself. It is one among the serious problems we face. I refer to the religion of escape, denial, and distraction, dominant in many of the world's historic faiths.

The foundation of any culture is its underlying economic system. Today, faith is either marginalised, or subsumed into conformity with industrial capitalism, reflecting and reinforcing the interests of those in power. This system-serving religion is relentlessly bland. It is viciously soothing, crushingly safe. It seduces us to desire, buy, use, consume. Even to consume the packaged faith, marketed along with all the other brands. It lulls us into euphoria with its visions of etherial peace and felicity, as it slowly sucks our brains out through our eye sockets.

The system exerts tremendous pressure to create religion that is not merely apolitical, but anti-political. When the dominant culture spots politicised religion, it brings the might of its propaganda machine to bear on it to ridicule and marginalise. Political religion may also be vigorously snubbed, ignored, condemned to obscurity, erased. If it's too powerful to make disappear, then it is scorned, accused of being depressing, doom-and-gloom, preachy, impolite, a relic. Also by the way, you can't hold a congregation if your ministry style is not vacuous, cynical and thus commercially viable, so go and fade away with your precious principles and your ageing, shrinking flock..

We're taught that it's rude to be judgmental, that to assert a point of view violates the pure, transcendent and neutral spirit of the faith. This monstrous distortion of what our spiritual capacity really is, is designed to weaken and depoliticize us. In these times, there is no such thing as neutrality — not taking a stand means supporting and assisting exploiters and murderers.

Let us not be the system's tools or fools. People of faith are not cowards and weaklings — we're tough. We take sides. We fight back.

The prophets and the saints have a proud tradition of being at the forefront of resistance, of stirring emotions and inspiring action. Today we must create an onslaught of judgmental, opinionated, brash and partisan work in the tradition of anti-Nazi theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or artists John Heartfield and George Grosz, of radical muralist Diego Rivera, filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, religious leaders Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, feminist artists the Guerrilla Girls, novelists like Maxim Gorky and Taslima Nasrin, poets like Nazim Hikmet and Kazi Nazrul Islam, musicians like The Coup and the Dead Kennedys.

The world cries out for meaningful, combative, politicised religion. It is our duty and responsibility to create a fierce, unyielding, aggressive culture of resistance. The mantras of economic growth and free trade must be exposed for what they really are: conduits of resources to the rich, destructive of the delicate ecosystems and cultures of the earth. We must create faith communities that expose and denounce this evil, that strengthen activists and revolutionaries, celebrate and contribute to the coming liberation of this planet from corporate industrial military omniscidal madness.

**Here I stand. I can do no other.**

## Faith

*Natali Allen has further analysed the Questionnaire.*

*This is a condensed version, the full analysis is on the website [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)*

**What does the word “faith” (as in the name of our Network) signify for you?** In the 2007 survey of Sea of Faith members respondents were offered a 1-5 continuum on which ‘1’ represented trust/life attitude and ‘5’ represented belief/commitment. Just over 40% of the respondents classified themselves as 1 with the remaining 60% in decreasing numbers in groups 2-5.

This was followed by **“Do you want to elaborate on the meaning of ‘faith’ for you?”**

Ninety seven (40% of total respondents) people responded to this invitation, and introduced a wide range of ideas as to what the word “faith” conveyed for them.

Responses suggested that amongst Sea of Faith members there are some who do not wish to use the word and a greater number for whom the word has some meaning.

### **THOSE WHO DO NOT WISH TO USE THE WORD**

Approximately 10% percent of those who elaborated, stated that for them the word was difficult, ambiguous or meaningless.

### **THOSE FOR WHOM THE WORD FAITH HAS SOME SIGNIFICANCE**

Those who defined or explained the word fell into three main groups who:

- Described a relationship between faith and belief, or proof.
- Defined faith as trust, and introduced the object of their trust as life, self, others or “Other”.
- Accepted faith as directive of a way of life.

### **FAITH AS RELATED TO BELIEF OR PROOF**

While some people (7) defined faith as belief, or identified a relationship between faith and proof (11) what was to be believed or proven varied.

### **FAITH AS TRUST**

By far the greatest number of respondents (41) allied faith to trust, hope or confidence, and agreed with the idea which was introduced that year (2007) in discussion at Conference. While some made general statements such as “Faith is about trust” the majority introduced the object of their trust e.g. Trust in Life - either personal or universal.

- **Faith in life – faith in the goodness, and in the fragility of humanity** : Faith denotes for me a positive trusting attitude
- **Trust in Truth:** I trust truth/fidelity
- **Trust in Oneself:** Others referred to personal characteristics, values or action as a basis of faith. e.g.: Trust that accepting responsibility for my life and action is moral and meaningful.
- **Trust in Community or an “Other/God”:** Trust or faith was also placed in other people, the world or the universe as a whole. Confidence that there is “other” and that it is good.

### **FAITH OR TRUST AS DIRECTIVE OF A WAY OF LIFE**

For many (18) the word “faith” signified a commitment to, or a particular way of life or values.e.g. A world view in which the individual relates in a caring way to other living creatures in the environment..

### **And in this group I have included three who allied faith with courage**

In 1987 Lloyd Geering had presented a paper titled “Faith and Doubt On The Margins” in which he wrote:

“Faith is something altogether different (from belief). There were people of faith in the Middle Ages. There are people of faith today. But the body of beliefs held by people at different times and from within which they attempt to express that faith in words may differ very considerably. To recover the full significance of faith it is essential that we divorce it from any notion of commitment to particular beliefs.

This may be illustrated by now showing how faith is related to doubt. The experience of doubt has too often been misunderstood and undervalued in Christian circles. Perhaps this owed something to the story of Doubting Thomas and later to John Bunyan. In his famous allegory about life, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, he described Giant Despair dwelling in Doubting Castle. Now it is true that the absence of faith can be described as despair. But the absence of doubt is not faith but credulity—a very different thing indeed.”

*Natali Allen*

## Development of Ideas about God

A review by Bill Cooke of Auckland

It's not a new idea, giving an account of the development of ideas about God. The first such attempt for the general reader was Grant Allen's *The Evolution of the Idea of God*, published originally in 1897, and reissued by the Rationalist Press Association more than a century ago. More recently Karen Armstrong and Jack Miles have both explored similar territory. Now Robert Wright adds to the genre with *The Evolution of God*.

So does Wright have anything new to add? Yes, no and maybe. The 'no' bit first. Biblical criticism has not moved on in the last century so much that Wright has anything strikingly new to say about changing ideas about God in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. When these scriptures are read in the chronological order in which they were written, we see the idea of God adapt and develop in response to the needs on the ground at the time. To rationalists this was an important insight about the idea of God as a human construct. But until quite recently, this has all been a bit too much for theologians, and even now only the radicals among them dare tread this dangerous territory.

And now to the 'yes' bit. As Armstrong did, Wright carries the story on to include Islam, the final terminus of monotheism. Also, Wright begins the book with a competent précis of contemporary anthropological thinking on cultural evolution. This is needed because here thinking *has* developed considerably over the past century.

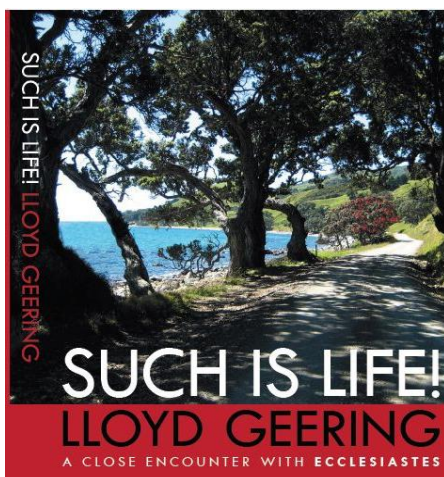
And now to the 'maybe', which has two parts. The degree to which you see this work as innovative and persuasive will depend on your attitude toward evolutionary psychology, for which Wright is a prominent advocate. He achieved renown with *The Moral Animal* (1996) his first major foray into this area. If you are persuaded by evolutionary psychology, *The Evolution of God* will be a valuable extension of the discipline into a new field of inquiry about which it can offer valuable insights. And if you're not, it won't, or certainly not as much. For myself, it was persuasive.

The second feature of the 'maybe' part of the answer about Wright's book is the attitude you will take to the conclusions he draws from his research. Religion, he says, 'arose out of a hodgepodge of genetically based mental mechanisms designed by natural selection for thoroughly mundane purposes.' (p 482) This is a reasonable conclusion from the book. But he rather undermines this conclusion when he declares himself unqualified to conclude from his research whether God exists or not (p 435). For me at least, this was a bit too much like wanting a bob each way. Wright is trying to retain some wiggle room for an Armstrong-style god shorn of the omnis and representing our most lofty emotions. This too will either work for you or it won't. I found this aspect of the book less persuasive. Overall, though, *The Evolution of God* is a useful addition to this most dangerous of insights about the monotheistic brand of god.

**The Evolution of God**  
By Robert Wright  
Published by Little,  
Brown & Co, 2009

## Next Issue: May 2010

A full review of *Such Is Life* by Sir Lloyd Geering.



Published in NZ by Steele Roberts. It should be in bookshops about now.  
See <http://steeleroberts.co.nz/books/isbn/978-1-877448-88-1>

"More than any priest, prophet or even sage before him, Qoheleth [the author of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes] examined the nature of human existence. He asked some basic questions: What does it mean to be human? In the absence of any certainty or permanence, how can we get the best out of life? In doing so he raised the pursuit of wisdom to a higher level. True sages had to do more than collect gems of wisdom, select the best, and pass them on to their students. Wisdom is not an immutable body of knowledge, and it is vain to imagine that it is. We must personally walk the path of wisdom for ourselves rather than expect to receive it from others ready-made. So the role of the sage was not to provide instant wisdom for the foolish and unlearned; the words of the sage, says the Book of Ecclesiastes, were to be like a sharp goad forcing hearers to shake off their complacency and to pursue wisdom for themselves." [pages 24 and 25].