



Letter From The Editor

**In this issue we're knee-deep
in heresy and de-construction.**

- Lloyd Geering suggests that the Jewish sage tradition had a lot going for it – and that Jesus is all the more relevant for being thought of as a sage.
- Stephen Batchelor goes to the very heart of Buddhism and denies the importance of rebirth.
- Comte-Sponville promotes the idea that atheists could, and should, have a 'spirituality'. Even atheists should not throw out the 'spiritual' baby with the 'God' bathwater.
- To cap it all off, Messrs Borg and Crossan do something of a rehabilitation job on Paul – heresy enough for some!

The best sense that I can make of all this is that a formal, structured dogmatically-expressed 'religion' is a special case of the natural, human, social, phenomenon 'religion' itself. True, a particular path of faith will have, to quote George Steiner*, "its own characteristic idiom, its own set of emblematic images, flags, metaphors, dramatic scenarios. ... It pictures the world in terms of certain cardinal gestures, rituals and symbols." But Steiner is suggesting that historical *accidents* are read as timeless *essences* as does that Batchelor in respect of Buddhism and that The Jesus Seminar finds in Christianity.

If we look on religion-in-general as the capacity to ascribe over-arching value and then to commit to it – what Lloyd Geering repeatedly points to as "a conscientious concern for what really matters" then are we not obliged to dig down through the layers of any specific dogmatic system and to reveal the common 'religion' layer possessed by most humans?

Comte-Sponville put it like this: "**... most important of all – not God, not religion, not atheism, but spiritual life.**"

After all, it's what makes us human.

Noel Cheer, Editor

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Come to The Edge

"Come to the edge."

"We can't. We're afraid."

"Come to the edge."

"We can't. We will fall!"

"Come to the edge."

And they came.

And he pushed them.

And they flew.

Guillaume Apollinaire, Polish-French Poet, 1880-1918



Annual Subscriptions are due on June 30.

**If yours is due to lapse you should
find an enclosed reminder.**

Email subscribers will be reminded by email.

* *Nostalgia for the Absolute*, CBC Massey Lectures 1974 p4

A review by Don Feist of Dunedin

Nothing New Under The Sun?

A new book by Sir Lloyd Geering will surely arouse interest and eager anticipation in Sea of Faithers.

But what's this? "A close encounter with Ecclesiastes"? Fear not. This is not a biblical commentary on one of the most neglected books of the Jewish scriptures. Here we have Lloyd recapitulating much of what he has been saying for the past forty years, but with a fascinating new twist. Using the

Such Is Life! A close encounter with Ecclesiastes
Lloyd Geering 2010
Pub. Steele Roberts
Aotearoa New Zealand

format of a series of conversations with an ancient Jewish sage, Lloyd shows that much of what we have chosen to call "post-modern" was already being explored twenty-three centuries ago. Through these exchanges, Lloyd also offers many fascinating comments on matters ranging from existentialism to the emancipation of women and the Holocaust, and from the sage Jesus to Karl Barth, Colin McCahon and communism.

In the first of these dialogues, Lloyd tells the writer of Ecclesiastes*:

"I have long been fascinated by the little book you wrote. In spite of the great changes that have taken place in the world since you expressed your thoughts some of them sound as if they are particularly relevant to the world we live in today."

Each of the following dialogues is then devoted to exploring one major theme: **What do you mean by 'God'?** which leads on to: **Nature and Us; Is life Unfair?; Is Death the End of us?; Chance or Purpose?; Why Search for Wisdom?** and finally **Conclusions about Life**. In each dialogue Lloyd clarifies or teases out what Ecclesiastes was getting at, and also spells out for Ecclesiastes' benefit (and ours), what has happened since then and what is similar to, or quite different about, our day and our world-view.

What makes eavesdropping on these conversations so interesting is that Lloyd shows time and again that Ecclesiastes, living and writing in that period of religious upheaval and innovation which we now know as the First Axial Age, was grappling with many of the questions that are bothering us, and coming to similar existentialist, humanist and secular answers. If the sense of futility and the feelings of despair which this search generated for Ecclesiastes sound more extreme than we feel, many of us will still resonate with the sense of loss or bewilderment that for him, went with finding that old certainties could no longer command conviction.

In probing what Ecclesiastes means by 'God', Lloyd brings out the fact that he never used the more personal name 'Yahweh', and never alluded to 'the mighty acts of God' in history which are central to other parts of Jewish scripture. He only ever used the Hebrew *Elohim* - a word of plural form, which had once clearly meant 'gods' - and he often uses it in an impersonal sense which might well be translated as 'Nature' rather than 'God'. Providence and miracles were also concepts as problematic for Ecclesiastes as they have become for many of us.

This leads naturally into the next dialogue: **Nature and Us**. The literary purist may here wrinkle her nose a little, because Lloyd, under the form of speaking to Ecclesiastes, is often clearly more concerned to address his modern reader - a slight awkwardness which Lloyd himself acknowledges. But the most fastidious reader will surely still appreciate both the insights and the perspective that this literary device provides, and Lloyd's unfailing clarity and incisiveness.

* in Hebrew "Qoheleth"

Ecclesiastes is painfully aware of how often **life is unfair**:

"Some righteous people get what the wicked deserve, and some wicked people get what the righteous deserve! This I say, makes no sense at all".

Although this reality has been wrestled with at least since the days of Job - another great Jewish sage, a little before the time of Ecclesiastes - this dialogue brings out very clearly how the problem takes a different aspect once one has rejected a theistic concept of God.

The next conversation, unsurprisingly, asks **Is death the end of us?** Here Lloyd has the chance to describe how the unfairness and injustices in human life led the Jews to take over from Zoroastrianism a belief in resurrection, and how necessary this was for maintaining any hope in the face of adversity. Later, within Christianity, belief in resurrection became overlaid by, and confused with, the idea of the immortality of the soul. Once again, we find that modern post-Christians and an ancient Jewish sage have a surprising amount in common.

Chance or purpose? is the theme of a dialogue that ranges from the puzzling of the ancients over storms, disasters and the seasons, to quantum physics and the Big Bang.

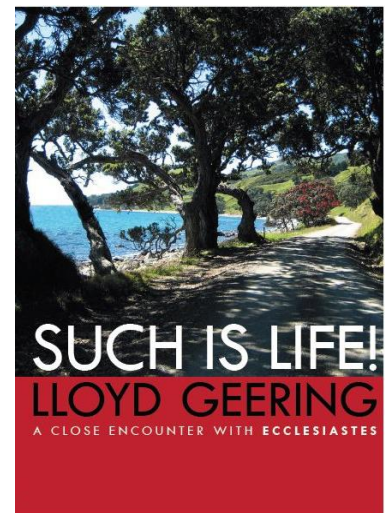
The detail of what scientists can tell us, and the explanations they can offer, are a long way from the understanding of the ancients. And yet we, like them, are a long way from comprehending the complex interactions of chance and necessity, uncertainty and the Laws of Nature, either in the natural world or in human life.

The next dialogue is devoted to a key theme: **Wisdom**. The writer of Ecclesiastes keeps referring to his commitment to careful observation. He refuses to accept things on the basis of either ancient authority, or 'God says ...'. In this, he shows the beginnings of a scientific approach to knowledge. And yet, in his old age, he felt that the pursuit of wisdom, like everything else, was no better than chasing the wind. Against this, Lloyd argues eloquently that seeking wisdom is always worth doing, and can of itself give purpose to life. He also makes illuminating connections with the Buddha's search for Enlightenment, with several Greek philosophers of near Ecclesiastes' own time, and with a later Jewish sage in the Wisdom tradition, Jesus of Nazareth.

'Conclusions about life', the final dialogue, looks at such apparently conflicting statements by Ecclesiastes as: "The best that anyone can do is to eat and drink and enjoy himself in his work" and on the other hand "The day of death is better than the day of birth" - a tension in the book which Lloyd does his best with, but I feel, never resolves.

But wait! There's more! Bookending the dialogues of the central section of the book are two excellent essays. Chapter 1, 'The heretical book of the Bible', gives a very clear account of the evolution of sacred Jewish and Christian scriptures from oral traditions and a variety of writings spread over a thousand years. It also puts the book of Ecclesiastes in context among the Jewish Wisdom literature, and shows how much this strand differs from the priestly, monarchic and prophetic strands in the Jewish scriptures. "Its message," Lloyd says, "is quite impossible to reconcile with most of the rest of the Bible." So those who assert, "The Bible says ...", or who suggest there is a single basic thread running from Genesis to Revelation, are doing serious disservice to the facts about this highly varied collection of writings.

After the dialogues, Lloyd gives us his own translation of the whole of Ecclesiastes, and an Afterword. Much of this will not be totally new to those who have been reading Lloyd Geering for years. But his brief account of "the long and complex history of religious thought and



cultural change”, and his summing up of the characteristics of a secular state, and secular thought, have never, I suggest, been expressed more clearly or succinctly. Here also, Lloyd relates Ecclesiastes to the Axial Age of which he was a part, and underlines points of agreement between Jesus and Ecclesiastes as two sages within the Jewish wisdom tradition.

“... the sage Jesus complemented the sage Ecclesiastes in a most important and positive way. But whereas Ecclesiastes focused on the world's lack of any clear purpose and on the fact that nothing lasts, Jesus fastened on what it is possible to make of life here and now while it does last.”

In conclusion, Lloyd suggests that:

“In the 21st century, humanity must either take the necessary steps to become a mutually caring global community or bring about its own demise. As we face the coming worldwide crises, little could be more relevant than the words of these two Jewish sages, Ecclesiastes and Jesus of Nazareth.”

A bonus in a book that reads more like a novel than a contribution to theology or religious studies, is a number of quotable and memorable gems such as:

“Christian fundamentalists, and even such a great theologian as Karl Barth, may be judged to be the modern counterparts of Job's comforters.”

and:

“It may be said that for Ecclesiastes the proverbial glass was half empty, but for Jesus it was half full”.

In this his latest book, Lloyd Geering has shown that he has as much ability as ever to inform us and enlarge our understanding in a highly readable way. I highly recommend “Such is Life!”

Donald Feist

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** which is managed by Suzi Thirlwall susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz, phone (07) 578-2775

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

See the website at **www.sof.org.nz** for further details.

Overload!

Owing to an influx of book reviews, some submitted material will be held over to the next issue.

A Review by Alan Goss of Napier

Sad and False Assumptions

In some church circles The Apostle Paul often gets a bad press. Some see him as distorting Jesus' straight-forward message by resorting to out-of-this-world words and phrases which confuse rather than clarify.

Others take exception to his attitude towards women which seems condescending and puts them in their place. His position on slavery often comes across as soft, even affirming. In this important book Borg and Crossan introduce us to a Paul who is totally at odds with these sad and false assumptions. In the later chapters they expand on key Pauline terms like 'Christ Crucified' and 'Justification by Grace through Faith', introducing us to a radical Paul who had a mystical experience of the risen Christ. This radical and visionary mystical Paul the church has, in the authors' terms, "deradicalized, emasculated, diluted into a conservative icon who now needs to be reclaimed and seen in a new light." Borg and Crossan show us the way.

The First Paul
Marcus Borg and
John Dominic
Crossan
SPCK

In the Bible, thirteen letters are attributed to Paul. Of these there is scholarly consensus that at least seven letters are genuine, that is written by Paul himself. These are **Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians and Philemon**. Of the rest, three letters (the 'pastorals') were almost certainly not written by Paul, or were written in Paul's name. The

remaining letters are 'disputed' and probably written some time after Paul's death. The authors claim that such letters were written over Paul's name but 'are anti-Pauline'. They represent a taming of Paul, a domestication of Paul's passion on topics such as life under Roman rule. So Borg and Crossan identify three Pauls:

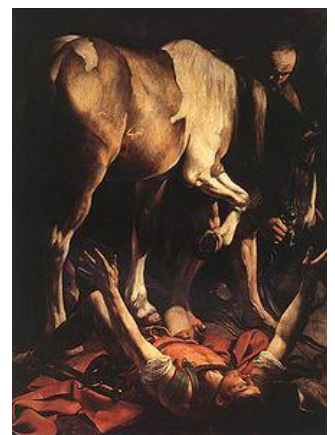
- The Paul of the seven genuine letters, labelled the **radical** Paul.
- The Paul of the three pastoral letters where the author (not Paul) develops but also softens Paul's radical message to fit the customs and values of the time - the **reactionary** Paul.
- The Paul of the disputed letters, written a generation or so after his death. In major aspects of Paul's theology these are regarded by the authors as anti-Pauline. This is the **conservative** Paul.

The genuine letters of Paul, the authors insist, are remarkably consistent with the message of Jesus.

The radical Paul was a follower of the radical Jesus who challenged the ways of Rome and who, like Martin Luther King, gave people a different vision of how life should be.

On the road to Damascus (the authors challenge the location) Paul 'saw the light' – that is, he saw a new kind of Judaism in the light of Jesus. On the issues of slavery and the status of women Paul was adamant - equality before God was the rule. The reactionaries and the conservatives, in the unauthentic Pauline letters, saw it differently. But that wasn't Paul.

A chapter on Paul's missionary methods is illuminating; whereas Luke, in Acts, talks "about three thousand" being baptized (Acts 2:41) this figure is almost certainly exaggerated. A more sober estimate suggest about two thousand Christians in the whole of the Roman Empire by the year 60. Paul's communities were small, probably less than a hundred and around a dozen or so. Rather than



*The conversion on the way to Damascus,
by Caravaggio.*

'house churches' people met in shops or workshops. But the facts are sketchy and Paul wasn't interested in detail. Belonging to these small communities meant following a crucified Lord and entering a way of life that was vastly different from the heavy-handed tactics of Imperial Rome.

In his letters Paul used sacred terms and solemn titles like peace, justice, gospel, salvation, grace, God, Lord, Redeemer, Saviour, most of which for the majority of people today would be classified as 'religious'. From their experience of Greek and Roman ruins in Asia Minor Borg and Crossan show how all these terms and titles were associated with the Roman Emperors such as Augustus Caesar who were accorded divine authority and given divine status. They were gods. In a stroke of genius Paul transferred these titles and terms from Caesar to Christ; a very risky and dangerous thing to do.

Rome didn't laugh! Paul shows in his writings that the ways of Rome - peace through violence and subjugation - are in stark contrast to the ways of Christ - peace through non violent justice. Terms like 'Christ Crucified and Risen' not only had personal significance but also political meanings as well. He used metaphorical language to describe his own personal religious experience but also to clarify the political difference between Christ's ways and Rome's.

The book raises some issues. Much of what passes as Christian spirituality today is person-centred, platitudinous, pleading and soft-centred as a mallowpuff. Paul gives it some spine. His experience of the crucified and risen Christ on the Damascus road radically changed his life and set up a confrontation, not only with Rome but with some of his fellow apostles. The 'scales fell from his eyes' and he saw that, in Christ, a radically new way of life was possible. That was Paul's experience but not necessarily ours. **Is it not true that other people, from other faiths or even no-faith, have had similar experiences of the scales falling from their eyes and seeing life in a totally new way?** In our personal relationships with people from other faiths and races, in our values and life-styles, in our positions on climate change, population growth, clean energy, the environment, terrorism and many other issues, the scales in our eyes may fall and the light shine through. This is not to advocate abandoning Paul, precisely the opposite. We need to be more aware of the biblical tradition and our own rich cultural roots.

In our global and secular world we are moving beyond the idea of a supernatural personal God and moving towards a more mature understanding of Christian faith which is more human and less dogmatic, more open and inclusive. In a media-soaked society we will recover the use of myth, ritual, story, saga and symbol so that we can look at a world which is more loving and less grasping, more compassionate and less acquisitive. But whatever road we take, Paul will travel with us. Without him Christianity would probably have disappeared off the map after a few generations. We can thank the old warrior for that, also the authors of this book for helping us to reclaim the real man and his radical message to the world.

Alan Goss, Napier, March 2010

Sea of Faith In Australia National Conference

Ethics After God?

Sunshine Coast 17 - 19 September 2010,

Speakers: Lloyd Geering, Gail Tulloch and Neville Symington,

More information at www.sof-in-australia.org

A Review by Bill Cooke of Auckland

An Atheist Appreciates Mysticism and The Absolute

John Patrick reviewed this book in Newsletter 87 and it is worthy of further notice.

Alister McGrath must be so embarrassed. Within months of the appearance in 2004 of his book *The Twilight of Atheism*, a major new wave of atheist thought blossomed forth. From all around the world, atheists of different stripes have given voice to their life free from the transcendental temptation. In most cases, however, the only new atheists cited are the two D's (Dawkins and Dennett) and the two H's (Hitchens and Harris). But the new atheist phenomenon is much broader than this.

Perhaps the most interesting of the new expressions of atheism is *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* by the French philosopher André Comte-Sponville. A short book, it's divided into three sections. Part

***The Book of Atheist Spirituality*
André Comte-Sponville
London: Bantam, 2006)**

One is a survey of religion, which is critical, without being feverishly so. Part Two goes over his six main reasons for being an atheist [see the left box on the next page]. And the third part opens up the question of whether we can plausibly speak of an

atheist spirituality, and if so, what it might look like.

The first two parts are well reasoned, brightly written, and generally unexceptionable. Comte-Sponville's canters genially through gloomy things like the nihilist tone of postmodernity or the ontological argument for the existence of God. But it is in the third part that this book breaks new ground. What can be meant by talking of atheist spirituality? Comte-Sponville does all the right things to defuse prejudices and does not get unduly hung up on vocabularies, none of which are free from faults. He is also quick to put distance between spirituality, as he uses the term, and the cloying narcissism it is so often associated with. He rightly draws our attention to the ancient Greeks and to Buddhists and Taoists as people who can think in terms of spirituality without inferring anything religious by this.

Sometimes Comte-Sponville skirts too close to the rocks for me. As well as spirituality, he speaks of the absolute and of mysticism at various points. He is quite clear about their being grounded in the material, but once these words get bandied around, I begin to twitch. But it's to Comte-Sponville's credit that this was my problem rather than his. The challenge was for me to stop twitching and read with an open mind what was being attempted here. After all, he is giving expression to something atheists have understood for centuries, the immeasurable immensity of the universe and our utter irrelevance to it, and the challenge this poses to our sense of importance. Comte-Sponville does a good job in giving voice to how we get our heads around the reality of the situation. Reiterating atheists from Lucretius to Bertrand Russell, he knows that 'the contemplation of the immensity that contains us makes us all the more aware of how puny we are. This may be wounding to our ego, but it also enlarges our soul, because the ego has been put in its place at long last' (p 147). This important insight forms the kernel of the positive contribution atheism can make toward a spirituality that can sustain us through the dark decades that loom ahead.

It is worth noting that Richard Dawkins has, for many years, said much the same thing, and yet has a fearsome reputation as 'militant'. Dawkins' only crime in this respect appears to be the different vocabulary he uses to express this 'oceanic feeling' that Comte-Sponville talks of. Comte-Sponville

has done atheism an enormous service by employing this sort of language, despite the shudders of discomfort it will generate down many an atheist spine. To equate spirituality with religion is to hand over the whole realm of metaphysical speculation and identification to those with supernaturalist terms of reference. And this would be a mistake. Atheists, no less than monotheists, have a coherent view of themselves and the universe, one a lot freer of anthropocentric consolations and delusions, and we are in Comte-Sponville's debt for opening this important strand of dialogue up to a wider audience.

Bill Cooke is a member of the Auckland Sea of Faith. His next book, *A Wealth of Insights: Humanist Thought Since the Enlightenment* is due for publication later this year.

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The Right to Not Believe

A final word to sum up and conclude this chapter: we have discussed six major arguments, the first three of which lead me not to believe in God and the latter three of which lead me to believe that he does not exist. They are:

1. The weakness of the opposing arguments, the so-called proofs of God's existence.
2. Common experience: if God existed, he should be easier to see or sense.
3. My refusal to explain something I cannot understand by something I understand even less.
4. The enormity of evil.
5. The mediocrity of mankind.
6. Last but not least, the fact that God corresponds so perfectly to our wishes that there is every reason to think he was invented to fulfil them, at least in fantasy; this makes religion an illusion in the Freudian sense of the term.

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Chapter III

Can There Be an Atheist Spirituality?

Let us conclude with what, to my mind, is most important of all – not God, not religion, not atheism, but spiritual life. Some will express surprise: 'What? You, an atheist, take an interest in spiritual life?' Of course I do. Not believing in God does not prevent me from having a spirit, nor does it exempt me from having to use it.

People can do without religion, as I showed in the first chapter, but they cannot do without communion, fidelity and love. Nor can they do without spirituality. Why should they? Being an atheist by no means implies that I should castrate my soul! The human spirit is far too important a matter to be left up to priests, mullahs or spiritualists. It is our noblest part, or, rather, our highest function, the thing that makes us not only different from other animals (for we are animals as well), but greater than and superior to them. 'Man is a metaphysical animal,' said Schopenhauer – and therefore, I would add, a spiritual animal as well. This is our way of inhabiting the universe and the absolute, which inhabit us. What could be better, loftier or more fascinating than the spirit? Not believing in God is no reason to amputate a part of our humanity, especially not *that* part!

Random Paragraph

Criticism: "The honorable tradition of criticism carries with it a displeasing aspect. This is especially the case in the higher academic circles. Reputations are too frequently made when pygmies stand on the shoulders of giants and when iconic and sometimes heroic figures are symbolically cut down to size. The theory is that, if the critic saws off the legs of those who have managed to stand tall for generations, the midgets can win handily in face-to-face combat with the dead. This is not to deny that even the most talented are sometimes in error; criticism is a useful art. It is, however, a derivative art. Criticism finds acceptance in a culture that measures success by small errors rather than by large-scale successes."

Irving Louis Horowitz, in an article titled "Assaulting Arendt", found at www.firstthings.com

A short review by Noel Cheer, freely paraphrased from a publishing blurb

Confession of a Buddhist Atheist

I have read this book and I thoroughly recommend it. It is a personal account of the author's thirty-eight year engagement with Buddhism.

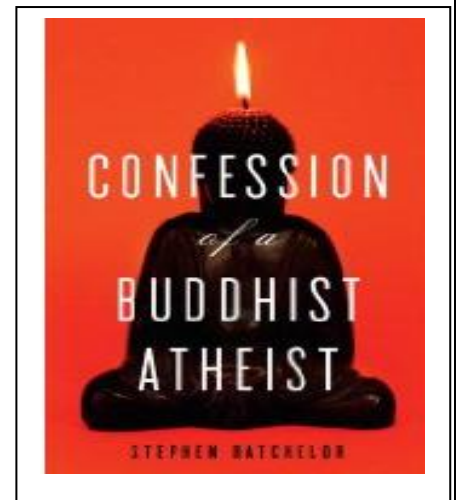
The first part of the book, **Monk**, follows his journey from England at the age of eighteen on a hippie-like trip to India; his first meeting with the Dalai Lama in 1972; his six years training as a Tibetan Buddhist monk; his disillusion with the Tibetan tradition; and his departure for a three year Zen training as a monk in South Korea.

The second part, **Layman**, recounts the author's return to lay life in Europe and focuses on his quest to find out who was Siddhattha Gotama, the historic Buddha, and discover what is truly distinctive in his teaching. This quest interweaves reflections on early Buddhist doctrine, a journey through modern India to visit the sacred sites of Buddhism, and a detailed reconstruction of the Buddha's life on the basis of the primary scriptures, the Pali Canon.

Batchelor's is a stripped-down Buddhism. Read his earlier book *Buddhism without Beliefs* to see the process set out. Much of what colours Buddhism – especially for Westerners – says Batchelor, is particular to time and place. Even *karma* – “a scheme of moral book-keeping” (p.176) – and rebirth – the delivery mechanism for *karma* – are products of cultural history and not essences of Buddhism. Though it was a conscious departure from Vedic Hinduism, Buddhism uncritically continued to embody some of its ideas.

Some readers will recognise their responses to a Jesus shorn of supernaturalism in this passage which articulates well the increasing emphasis on orthopraxy over dogma in Christian life:

Buddhism has become for me a philosophy of action and responsibility. It provides a framework of values, ideas, and practices that nurture my ability to create a path in life, to define myself as a person, to act, to take risks, to imagine things differently, to make art. The more I prize Gotama's teachings free from the matrix of Indian religious thought in which they are entrenched and the more I come to understand how his own life unfolded in the context of his times, the more I discern a template for living that I can apply at this time in this increasingly secular and globalized world. (p181)



Stephen Batchelor will speak on “Deconstructing Buddhism” in a public talk at the Lecture Theatre, Rutherford House, Victoria University of Wellington, Lambton Quay, Sunday November 7th, 2010.

Continuing to be Honest to God

For the past eight years, Ian Harris contributed a column to the Dominion Post called **Honest to God**. However, last November the paper's new editor axed it. But it continues fortnightly in The Otago Daily Times.

Broadly, it explores new ways of understanding and expressing Christian faith in the increasingly secular world of New Zealand in the new millennium, and it comments on issues of current interest.

Recent (i.e. post-Dompost) topics include: making the most of the recession; what to make of the Virgin Birth; forgiveness; changing perspectives on the afterlife; the Charter for Compassion; the Humanist Society's bus advertising campaign, Richard Dawkins' secular dogma; the scapegoat and the lamb (at Easter); and child sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church.

Some former Dominion Post readers have expressed interest in continuing to read the column, so Ian is making it available via email. It will appeal to Sea of Faith members. Anyone beyond Otago who would like to get the column via email is invited to let Ian know at ianharris@extra.co.nz. And – like grace – it's free.

New in The Resource Centre

BOOKS

- B193 Armstrong, Karen: *The Case for God*
B194 Armstrong, Karen: *On the Bible*
B195 Armstrong, Karen: *Islam*
B196 Boulton, David: *Who On Earth Was Jesus?*
B197 Cupitt, Don: *Jesus and Philosophy*
B198 Geering, Lloyd: *Coming Back To Earth*
B199 Geering, Lloyd: *Such Is Life*
B200 Spong, John: *Eternal Life: A new Vision*
B201 Warner, Marina: *All Alone of Her Sex, The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*
B202 Blaiklock, E.M. *Layman's Answer, An Examination of the New Theology*. [response to Lloyd Geering's *God In The New World*]
B203 De Botton, Alain: *The Consolations of Philosophy*
B204 Cooke, Bill: *Heathen in Godzone, Seventy Years of Rationalism in New Zealand*
B205 Livingstone, Dinah ed. *This Life on Earth* SoF UK 2009

DVDs

- D5: **The Big Questions** Paul Davies and Phillip Adams
In The Beginning; The Creative Cosmos; The Riddle of Time; The Ghost in the Machine (Consciousness); The Theory of Everything; What Does It All Mean?; Speaker biographies
D6: **More Big Questions** Paul Davies and Phillip Adams
Science and Truth; In Search of Eden; Are We Alone In The Universe?; Does God Play Dice?; Einstein's Legacy; Cosmic Butterflies; Speaker Biographies
D4: **A History of Christianity** by Diarmaid MacCulloch
The First Christianity; Catholicism; Orthodoxy; Reformation; Protestantism; God In The Dock (science and scepticism)
D3: **The Last Western Heretic**: Lloyd Geering
D2: **Living The Questions** Liberal Christianity 13-part series
D1: **The Sea of Faith** The foundational 1984 TV series

Audio CDs

- C6: Cupitt, Don: *Religion After God* 2006
C7: Geering, Lloyd: speeches at the 1967 "heresy" trial
C8: Conference 2006 "Is Nothing Sacred" Panel Discussion: Cupitt, Tacey, Cooke

If you are a financial member then you can borrow any of the above by contacting the Resource Centre Curator, Suzi Thirlwall at 34 Briarley St, Tauranga. Her phone number is (07) 578-2775 and email address is susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz

You can see the full list on the website www.sof.org.nz

Have you got a spare book that you know others would like to read? Why not send it to Suzi for the Resource Centre?

Letter to the Editor

I want to respond to Don Feist's invitation in the last Newsletter to use careful precision in discussing possible alternatives to theism.

The writer who has most influenced my current thinking is Carol Christ in her book "She who changes: r\Re-imagining the divine in the world". From the perspective of process philosophy, she challenges concepts such as omniscience and omnipotence and proposes instead a universe co-created every moment by the divine and all individual beings in the cosmos.

Because we have an individual existence and a degree of creative freedom, we can have a personal relationship with the divine. Goddess/God (Christ's term) is omnipresent and influences the universe through persuasion. We are all encouraged to use our freedom and creativity to increase beauty and harmony in the universe. For earth dwellers, some evil results from the nature of our planet, but most is the result of human choices, so there is genuine risk for all participants, including Goddess/God in this co-creation.

Goddess/God has a clearer and deeper sense of possibilities for the future than any other individual, but can and will be surprised by the future actually co-created. We are engaged in a cosmic adventure, sustained by a divine power that profoundly desires that all individuals enjoy life as much as possible, a power exerting a persuasive influence on all individuals in the universe towards life.

This is the divine power that speaks to me in sunrises and bulbs and the changing seasons.

Margaret Gwynn

Oops

In the Match issue of this Newsletter, the article *Religion for a "Post-Copenhagen" World* was attributed to Laurie Chisholm. It should have been Ian Crumpton of Christchurch. Apologies to both, Noel Cheer, Editor

Deadly Incentives of Dog-Eat-Dog Economics

The author J. Wes Ulm (a physician-researcher from Harvard Medical School) takes the view that “Social Darwinism isn't only morally wrong; it doesn't even perform the function it claims to perform: fostering real competition” “Fundamentally, the cachet of the cutthroat fosters all the wrong incentives, and without regulatory networks and transparency to manage such raw capitalistic impulses – which Adam Smith himself underscored – five deadly incentives are reinforced.”

Here, in summary, are those incentives:

1. It rewards **unscrupulous behavior**. Social Darwinism encourages an all's-fair outlook in which backstabbing, exploitation, and outright chicanery are perversely promoted.
2. It too easily **equates profits to generated wealth**, ignoring the fact that a company can rake in enormous profits for itself without actually contributing real goods and services. Not all profits are equal, but in a system of survival of the fittest, any profits will do.
3. Social Darwinist systems also **stifle dissent, constructive criticism, and creative thinking** by subordinates. In a cutthroat workplace, even those who calmly report obvious design flaws (or supply constructive criticism) are penalized, because they disrupt the quick rollout of short-term-profit-maximizing products.
4. It **commoditizes human beings**, with ruinous effects on morale. The loss of institutional know-how and declining morale lead to an accumulation of blunders.
5. It **promotes short-termism**, the most pernicious and deadly incentive. Social Darwinism compels an obsession with easily quantifiable, immediate metrics of success that miss the big picture of an institution and economy's overall viability; in so doing, it also isolates competing individuals from supposedly 'fuzzier' yet important considerations of the broader public good.

Why an economic analysis in a 'religious' journal? Mostly because of point 4 – the commoditizing of people. Kant probably wasn't the first – and he certainly wasn't the last – to observe that people must be treated as ends and not merely as means. Good though this article is, it gives as its reason for not so treating people the merely pragmatic reason that people get de-moralised. Isn't it deeper than this?

The full article can be found at http://www.democracyjournal.org/j_wes_ulm_social_darwinism.html

Noel Cheer

Letter to the Editor

What to do with church religion is probably the major preoccupation of SoF. Laurie Chisholm's article in the last Newsletter makes a strong contribution to the topic.

I imagine the “Waihopai Three” would be in close agreement with him. While concurring with what he says, I think I take my own point of departure from something originally written in Latin which translates as follows:

“Religion has many parts. We ought not to work on one part only. The deepest is the mysterious; from there it is allowable to conduct material affairs. So one must not be in a hurry to do works, unless one has first acquired a quiet mind. This is the most important thing.”

Moving from here I find the problem is how to make religion effective and not to destroy it. The several religious systems which exist today all had perceptive, thoughtful, indeed inspired original formulations. That all tend to follow a deteriorating course does not cancel their original validity and we must be careful not thoughtlessly to destroy them, not least for ourselves.

We must also however, address the task of restoring that validity by finding a contemporary formulation that expresses the essential insights into the way the cosmic process and its issuance in human life works, such that, being in awe of the mystery it expresses, we constantly remind ourselves of the elements of life in the world and in the cosmic environment that make for 'fullness of life' and engender in us spontaneous worship.

The mystery does, for mundane purposes, need to be cast in the form of liturgy and its working out in the world be indicated in a teaching and be made effective by moral discipline. The liturgy needs to be embodiment of a convincing myth by an organically developed aesthetic and symbolic expression which inspires people to practice the precepts of good religion, beginning with the most essential element, the practice of contemplation, which active and distracted people find hardest to do. It is to the extent that one realizes that being precedes doing and conditions it that life is experienced as 'heaven' and not as 'hell'.

Peter Land, Whirinaki, Hokianga

From The Chair

Following the last Steering Committee meeting, Conference planning is well under way.

Invitations have been issued to nine speakers. Five will introduce us to the theme of **compassion** as expressed in a variety of religious traditions (and, or including, atheism). Four others have been asked to introduce their thoughts about the practice of compassion in the context of today's world of presumed human or environmental crisis, from the perspective of their respective discipline or interest.

We are planning to repeat the Core discussion groups after each speaker and to reintroduce visits on Saturday afternoon following the Annual General Meeting. Registration forms will be mailed with the next Newsletter, so meantime, if at all possible, plan to keep the weekend of the 1st to 3rd October free to be at St Patrick's College in Silverstream, Upper Hutt.

You will perhaps have noted that there has been considerable activity related to the Resource Centre and our thanks go to Suzi Thirlwall for the time and effort she is devoting to this. New acquisitions will now appear regularly in the Newsletter. As a member of a small and isolated local group which has found the Centre an ideal source of material for us, I urge you to look at what is available, particularly the increasing numbers of DVD's.

I have now completed the analysis of the *qualitative* responses to the 2007 Membership Survey. In discussion with the Editor it has been decided that summaries of this material will no longer appear in the Newsletter, but as a whole on the web-site, along with the *quantitative* material prepared by Ralph Pannett in 2008. For those who do not have access to the internet, printed copies are available from the Resource Centre.

The value of this material lies in the picture it gives of ourselves and the extent to which it can be used by Local Groups and the Steering Committee as a basis for further discussion. For example if we wish to look at the how a Local Group functions, or how membership could be increased, there are a variety of comments about how we perceive ourselves, the groups we belong to, and the 'youth' we might attract. The material is subjective and offered by individuals as honest feedback and suggestions in response to the statement: **"Your Steering Committee thinks it is important at this time that we discover what you think about your SoF Network, so we can better plan for the future."**¹

The analysis has reinforced the claim that the Sea of Faith Network is an association of people of a wide range of views "who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non dogmatic and human oriented standpoint"², and that it does have a major role in providing "encouragement, stimulation and support in fellowship with others engaged in the quest for meaning and fulfilment as a human activity".³

We can do this in so far as we recognise that all views are of equal value and that understanding comes through communication with others who respect an opinion enough to explore it fully, and as Laurie Chisholm has written of his 'Journey' with Richard Dawkins - we recognise that each person "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."⁴

Natali Allen
Chairperson 2009-2010

¹ Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Questionnaire 2007.

² Sea of Faith New Zealand: Position Statements

³ Sea of Faith New Zealand: Position Statements

⁴ Chisholm; Laurie: March 2010, Sea of Faith Newsletter: [My Journey with Richard Dawkins](#).