

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The copy for each issue of the Newsletter comes from many sources. While there are still all-too-few contributions from members, there are lush pickings from various other sources.

When assembling this issue I was struck by the sequence that the material could be made to form, and so I did.

The first article – on **agnosticism** – offers an aid for faith, by allowing us to concede that a religious outlook does not require us to sign-up to propositions. This is the point made by Karen Armstrong in her *The Case for God*. “Reason”, as someone else wrote, “doesn’t go all the way down”.

Science, at least in the popular press, is often crudely set in opposition to religion and so it is refreshing to read an account (on page 3) of the **faith profiles** of scientists. Let’s face it, without faith we would never get out of bed in the morning!

Brian Swimme will be known to many who see a **mythic quality** in the scientific account of cosmology. He is co-producing a documentary project to be available mid-year.

It is as near to an article of faith of SoF that religion is a human cultural construct. We make religion. But did it also make us? The **evolutionary-development case** for religion is argued persuasively.

On page 7, we are reminded that consciousness studies, or neuroscience, provides a material locus for ‘mind’ and therefore for ‘self’ or, dare we say, ‘soul’? There’s obviously coherent activity going on in there. What then is its **religious relevance**?

Val Webb, a rising star on the trans-Tasman scene, invites us to see **divinity in everyday experiences**.

“Christianity and Islam are redemption religions, not wisdom religions” writes Richard Holloway who thinks that Karen Armstrong’s promotion of compassion is a fine thing but that it is just **not vintage Christianity**. But it *ought* to be and there’s much work to be done.

Don Cupitt picks up on that. He thinks that we can and we must re-shape Christianity – or abandon it, I hear both messages – so that the ‘Way’ or teaching of Jesus should replace the magisterial divinised emperor-substitute and the **Big Story** that it made.

All-in-all a stimulating line-up. Aren’t you glad that you subscribe?

Noel Cheer, Editor

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CONFERENCE 2011

CHRISTCHURCH: OCTOBER 14-16

“PULLING US BACK FROM THE BRINK: ECONOMICS? SCIENCE? RELIGION?”

As details accumulate they will appear
in the Newsletter and on the website
www.sof.org.nz

AN AGNOSTIC MANIFESTO

Excerpts from an article by Ron Rosenbaum

Let's get one thing straight: Agnosticism is not some kind of weak-tea atheism.

Agnosticism is not atheism or theism. It is radical skepticism, doubt in the possibility of certainty, opposition to the unwarranted certainties that atheism and theism offer.

Faith-based atheism? Yes, alas. Atheists display a credulous and childlike faith, worship a certainty as yet unsupported by evidence—the certainty that they can or will be able to explain how and why the universe came into existence. (And some of them can behave as intolerantly to heretics who deviate from their unproven orthodoxy as the most unbending religious Inquisitor.)

... the unwarranted certainties that
[both] atheism and theism offer ...

Faced with the fundamental question: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" atheists have faith that science will tell us eventually. Most seem never to consider that it may well be a philosophic, logical impossibility for something to create itself from nothing. But the question presents a fundamental mystery that has bedeviled (so to speak) philosophers and theologians from Aristotle to Aquinas. Recently scientists have tried to answer it with theories of "multiverses" and "vacuums filled with quantum potentialities," none of which strikes me as persuasive.

Having recently [been] lectured to by believers and nonbelievers, I found myself feeling more than anything unconvinced by certainties on either side. And feeling the need for solidarity and identity with other doubters. Thus my call for a revived agnosticism.

Let me make clear that I accept most of the New Atheist's criticism of religious bad behavior over the centuries, and of theology itself. I just don't accept turning science into a new religion until it can show it has all the answers, which it hasn't, and probably never will.

Alas, agnostics still suffer from association with atheists by theists, and with theists by atheists. So let us be more precise about what agnostics are and aren't. They aren't disguised creationists. In fact, the term agnostic was coined in 1869 by one of Darwin's most fervent followers, Thomas Henry Huxley, famously known as "Darwin's bulldog" for his defense of evolutionary theory. Here's how he defined his agnosticism:

This principle may be stated in various ways but they all amount to this: that it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty.

Huxley originally defined his agnosticism against the claims of religion, but it also applies to the claims of

science in its know-it-all mode. I should point out that I accept all that science has proven with evidence and falsifiable hypotheses but don't believe there is evidence or falsifiable certitude that science can prove or disprove everything. Agnosticism doesn't contend there are no certainties; it simply resists unwarranted untested or untestable certainties.

Agnosticism doesn't fear uncertainty. It doesn't cling like a child in the dark to the dogmas of orthodox religion or atheism. Agnosticism respects and celebrates uncertainty and has been doing so since before quantum physics revealed the uncertainty that lies at the very groundwork of being.

Humility in the face of mystery has been a recurrent theme of mine. I wrote most recently about the problem of consciousness and found myself allied with the agnostic group of philosophers known as the Mysterians, who argue that we are epistemically, flat-out unable to know the nature of consciousness while being within consciousness. I'm reluctant to call agnostics Mysterians, much as I like the proto-punk ballad "96 Tears" by the Mysterians. But I do like that agnosticism, which in fact can be more combative than its image, does have a sort of punk, disruptive, troublemaker side.

Like I said, it's complicated. But the world has suffered enough from oversimplifications. The agnostic moment has come.

Ron Rosenbaum is the author of *The Shakespeare Wars* and *Explaining Hitler*. This article was found at http://www.religionfacts.com/big_religion_chart.htm

Our T-shirt will read:
"I just don't know"



"That's Irv. Took a yoga class, emptied his mind, and never refilled it."

THE FAITH THAT UNDERPINS SCIENCE

Albert Einstein once asked, "Does the moon exist when no one is looking at it?"

Such questions had been the preserve of philosophers, but, with the discovery of quantum mechanics in the 1920s, they became legitimate queries for physicists, too.

Niels Bohr, one of the founders of quantum mechanics, did not believe that science grants us access to an objective reality and insisted that the task of physics was not to find out "how nature is" but only "what we can say about nature". Einstein, on the other hand, maintained an unshakeable belief in a reality that exists out there. Otherwise, he said, "I simply cannot see what it is that physics is meant to describe".

Einstein based his view of quantum mechanics on his belief in an independent reality - the moon does exist when no one is looking at it. In contrast, Bohr used the theory to construct and underpin his belief that the atomic realm has no independent reality. The two agreed on the equations but disagreed on what they meant.

"Scientists, like everyone else, have beliefs," writes distinguished mathematician E. Brian Davies in *Why Beliefs Matter*.⁽¹⁾ He is not only referring to religious beliefs but to philosophical ones, too. While religious beliefs can be easy to leave at the laboratory door, philosophical beliefs are much harder to sideline.

- **Some mathematicians, for instance, subscribe to a Platonic view in which theorems are true statements about timeless entities that exist independent of human minds.**
- **Others believe that mathematics is a human enterprise invented to describe the regularities seen in nature.**
- **The very idea that nature has such regularities which render it comprehensible is itself a belief; as is the idea that the world we perceive is not some sort of delusion or practical joke.**

The title of Davies's book, significantly, is a statement, not a question. For him, beliefs do matter. Davies offers a series of snapshots of how various philosophical views inform science, rather than a systematic inquiry into the nature of belief. Along the way he discusses the scientific revolution, the mind-body problem, machine intelligence, string theory and the multiverse. The result is a wide-ranging, thought-provoking meditation rather than a populist read. Beliefs, it seems, are a serious business, and they come in all shapes and sizes.

"At the highest level, beliefs become world views, fundamental beliefs that we use to evaluate other beliefs about the world," writes Davies.

World views can be evaluated, compared and changed, but you cannot avoid having one.

Davies is a self-proclaimed pluralist. That is, he believes that humans have a limited mental capacity and will always need a multiplicity of ways of looking at the world in order to understand it. There may be two or more equally valid and complementary descriptions of the same phenomenon, he says - not unlike the concept of wave-particle duality in quantum mechanics⁽²⁾. That does not

mean that all world views are equally good - some simply don't hold up under the scrutiny of experiment.

The scientific revolution that began in the 16th century was a triumph of rationality and experiment over the superstition and speculation of the Middle Ages. Even so, nearly 40 per cent of Americans believe that God created humans some time within the last 10,000 years.

World views are not founded on logic, so the most that one can demand is that they should be consistent with what science has discovered. Yet, as the writer C. S. Lewis noted, some arguments are impossible to refute. "A belief in invisible cats cannot be logically disproved," he said, although it does "tell us a good deal about those who hold it".

New Scientist 9 August 2010

(1) You can refer to the much longer discussion of these matters at <http://andgulliverreturns.info/Book4ALookatHumanValues.pdf>

(2) This point is dealt with very clearly in Hawking's recent *The Grand Design* page 58. The wave-and-particle options for light is an introduction to M-theory - ed.



This 19th C engraving by Camille Flammarion invokes popular opinions of the day as to what medieval people were supposed to have believed about the relationship between the earth and "the heavens". The fanciful view in this detail is that "a missionary of the Middle Ages tells that he had found the point where the sky and the Earth touch..."

Modern science is characterised by its denial that there are separate realms of reality.

ed, after Wikipedia

THIS IS THE PRESS RELEASE FOR AN UPCOMING BOOK AND DVD DOCUMENTARY

JOURNEY OF THE UNIVERSE

***“One day on a Greek island,
and your view of the universe will change forever...”***

Ask acclaimed author and evolutionary philosopher Brian Thomas Swimme about our role as humans in this awe-inspiring universe, and his insights will light up the night skies.

As our host, co-writer, and fellow traveller, he shares his infectious curiosity about life's biggest questions in the epic JOURNEY OF THE UNIVERSE. This documentary project, companion book and 13-part educational series is a collaboration of Swimme and historian of religions Mary Evelyn Tucker. They weave a tapestry that draws together scientific discoveries in astronomy, geology, biology, ecology, and biodiversity with humanistic insights concerning the nature of the universe.

Using his skills as a masterful storyteller, Swimme connects such big picture issues as the birth of the cosmos 14 billion years ago, to the invisible frontiers of the human genome – as well as to our current impact on Earth's evolutionary dynamics. Through his engaging and thoughtful observations audiences everywhere will discover the profound role we play in this intricate web of life.

From the Big Bang to the epic impact humans have on the planet today, this film is designed to inspire a new and closer relationship with Earth in a period of growing environmental and social crisis.

Beautifully filmed in HD, our grand tour begins on the historically rich Greek island of Samos, birthplace of mathematician Pythagoras. Disembarking on the island at dawn, Swimme expertly guides us on an exhilarating trek through time and space, sharing a wondrous view of cosmic evolution as a process based on immense creativity, connection, and interdependence. After the toll of midnight, he sets sail into the star-lit waters of the North Aegean Sea, leaving audiences with a sense of wonder at the mystery, complexity and connectivity that permeates the Earth and universe from the very beginning.

Big science, big history, big story, this one-of-a-kind JOURNEY OF THE UNIVERSE film project has been created by an acclaimed team of scientists, scholars, and award-winning filmmakers.

Available for release in June 2011. This project includes both a companion book and a 13-part educational series. Refer to www.journeyoftheuniverse.org

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See also *The Goldilocks Enigma: why is the universe just right for life?* (Paul Davies. Allen & Unwin 2006). The Afterword of this book offers optional “Ultimate Explanations”

A. The absurd universe: a majority position. Life is an accident, there is no purpose or meaning; life just IS.

B. The unique universe: two versions, both based on finding theoretical explanations for the ‘numbers’: a unique set in one and variable in the other. Both end up with a mystery!

C. The multiverse: all manner of universes pop in and out of existence which are subject to survival of the fittest (for life). We are in one that fits life!

D. Intelligent design – and designer.

E. The life principle – based on the notion that there is a subtle, purpose-like principle at work in the evolution of the universe and of life.

F. The self-explaining universe: appeal to a closed explanatory or causal loop wherein the universe creates itself with ‘foreknowledge’ of what it takes to sustain its own existence and life.

G. Fake or simulation – as in movie series *The Matrix*.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

I am glad to see Margaret Whitwell (Newsletter 92) initiating discussion on Doug Sellman's renaming suggestion but disappointed that she sees so little value in it. My reaction was an instant “Of course! Why didn't we think of this before?” I am so glad at the thought of being able to refer to the Sea of Faith as a/the (national) discussion network, and to avoid the cringe that comes with using the word “faith,” imagining that my hearers are thinking I must be some kind of religious fundamentalist or nut-case.

Margaret's difficulties with the revised objects merit discussion (ours are already way better than the UK's: “To advance the education of the public in religious studies with particular reference to religious faith seen as a human creation.”), but changes to the objects are secondary to the expansion of our name to “Sea of Faith: The National Religious Discussion Network.”

She argues for “exploration” against “discussion” but the issue is about adding “discussion” to the name; the proposed new objects still include “exploration.”

As the Christchurch group intends to bring Doug's proposal as a remit to the next AGM, I would be happy to see other Letters to the Editor expressing an opinion or making suggestions for improvement. [And so would the Editor!]

Laurie Chisholm (Christchurch)

WAS RELIGION AN EVOLUTIONARY DEVELOPMENT?

Charles Darwin foresaw, 160 years ago, that the principles of evolution would one day be applied not only to human anatomy, but also to the human mind:

"In the distant future, I see open fields for far more important researches.
Psychology will be based on a new foundation ...". *Charles Darwin*

In the Name of God:

The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Ethics and Violence

John Teehan, Wiley Blackwell, 2010

John Teehan, an Associate professor of religion at Hofstra University, New York, opens his first chapter with the above quotation from *On the Origin of Species*. The quote is appropriate, because it is only quite recently that an evolutionary and historical approach has been applied to the study of the mind - a genuinely new foundation.

Against those who have held to a 'rational actor model' which has held that humans are motivated by a rational maximising of their own interests, and a 'blank slate' model which emphasises the influence of culture and nurture, Teehan argues for an evolutionary psychology view of the human mind, which holds that:

... the brain we work with today is a collection of task-oriented, problem-solving mental tools - tools, however, that were designed to respond to an ancient environment.

Teehan's particular concern in the early part of this book is to demonstrate that:

... evolution has designed the human mind in such a way that we possess a set of mental tools that shape our moralities and our religions.

Building on this base, he goes on to examine the role that religion has had, and has today, in contributing to violence, and especially terrorist violence.

The opening chapter on 'the Evolution of Morality' makes the case that:

If a society is to function at a level beyond the clan it must develop a system to effectively encourage and reward cooperation, and to discourage and punish defectors and cheats. A crucial implication of this view of moral psychology is that the boundaries of the group mark the boundaries of moral concern.

Teehan then moves on to consider how religious thinking arose, and how this thinking assisted further evolution of morals.

The brain of early humans could not give equal attention to all the sensory stimulation impinging on eyes, ears, nose. Surviving danger required an ability to discriminate and focus on those stimuli coming from the greatest potential hazards - "Is that brown thing a bear, or a rock?" The only safe thing to do was to be ready for the worst. Better to over-react and survive, than to underestimate. "This cognitive strategy" he argues

... explains animism, that is, the tendency to attribute living forces to nature. To see rivers and forests and mountains as alive and exhibiting purposeful action is not the result of primitive irrationalism, it is the result

of the mind's natural function to interpret the world in a meaningful way. ... Understanding a phenomenon as alive is more significant than understanding it as merely mechanical.

A shared belief in supernatural beings not only had this immediate survival value, it also gave support to reciprocal altruism beyond the close family group, and in other ways as well strengthened both the developing moral system, and the bonds of the wider-than-immediate-family in-group. So shared beliefs in supernatural beings became one more marker distinguishing and dividing 'us' from 'them' - the in-group from all other humans.

In the next two chapters, Teehan looks at how religious ethics, understood from this evolutionary perspective, found expression in Judaism, and then Christianity. Looking carefully at each of the Ten Commandments in turn, he shows that they represent a stage in Judaism, evolving

... from primitive strategies for promoting group cohesion ... to an articulated moral system designed to meet the particular needs of a people struggling to succeed in the competitions of life at a particular period of history - but still constrained and guided by the ultimate goal of group cohesion serving reproductive success.

Christian apologists have generally held that Christianity is uniquely distinct from other religions - not least in its moral tradition. In support of this they quote Jesus: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you", and Paul's claim that in Christ there is "neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

But Teehan asks the question:

Does the moral teaching set out in the New Testament seek to establish a universal moral code or does it fulfil its evolutionary function of regulating in-group behaviour, establishing the boundaries of the group, and providing signals of commitment to that group?

His first step towards an answer is to show how Paul, the gospel writers and the early Church constructed the figure of *Christ*, out of what they knew about Jesus. Doing this was necessary, he says, to

enable the Christ to assume the moral role necessary to support and enforce the religious ethics of emerging Christian communities.

[As an aside, I was intrigued to see how Teehan, without ever mentioning 'realism' or 'non-realism' took it for granted that 'Christ' is a human construct, and implied that the various figures of Jesus in the gospels are equally human constructs.]

Teehan's answer to his own question, after a careful and detailed study, is that Jesus did propose a radically new morality - one not based on kinship loyalty, but one in which the in-group was made up of those who shared his moral values. This is the significance of his words:

"Here are my mother and brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, my sister, and mother". This move, Teehan claims, was a high-water mark in human moral progress. But in the early Church

... this achievement was quickly subordinated to faith in Jesus as the basis for membership, closing off that most promising path for moral progress.

Faith in Jesus the Christ, baptism and the Lord's Supper soon became marks of commitment to the in-group, and means of distinguishing them from everyone else, the out-group. Christians may have been keener than adherents of other religions on bringing people from the out-group into the in-group, but they were then, and have continued to be, just as much committed to the distinction between an in-group and an out-group, and to knowing whether the dividing line is, as in any other religion.

Teehan comments:

It is not fair to blame Jesus or Paul for this. The idea that we can make moral behaviour the sign of membership for the in-group makes sense only if we can agree on what constitutes acceptable moral behaviour. Since evolution designed us to see acceptable moral behaviour as that which my group designates as acceptable, breaking away from this mindset is very difficult, even today.

It is important to Teehan's purpose in this book to establish that, in Christianity as much as in other religions, the moral code evolved to support the survival and flourishing of the in-group, which always requires being at the very least wary of every out-group. Teehan repeatedly stresses that moral traditions always evolve in such a way as to assist the survival and reproduction of an in-group, because he sees this as central to understanding religiously-based violence.

By the end of his chapter on Christianity, Teehan has shown that

Beneath the rhetoric of a transcendent morality lies a moral logic that has its ultimate source in our pursuit of inclusive fitness"

[that is, our inherited programming to favour, to defend or to make sacrifices for either close kin, or some wider in-group].

St Thomas Aquinas ... argues that part of the reward for the blessed ... is to witness the suffering of the damned. ... There is something very powerful at work here, something very different from the gospel of love, of which Christians are so rightly proud. There is also a gospel of hate and enmity embedded in the moral tradition of Christianity; and with an evolutionary perspective we can see that both of these gospels have their roots in the same ground, the in-group/out-group mentality that infuses our moral instincts.

It has been common for Church leaders and others to argue in recent years, that religion is, by nature, a force for good and for peace, and to distance the Church and the faith from any violence committed by its adherents. Pope John Paul II, for example,

... consistently drew a distinction between the Church, which cannot sin, and the 'sons and daughters' of the Church who committed atrocities in misguided zeal.

But Teehan carefully examines, among other things, the biblical account of the scorched earth policy of the Israelites as they moved through Canaan, the Book of Revelation and Martin Luther's justification of the slaughter of German peasants. He shows, I believe quite convincingly, that violence against an out-group, in defence of the in-group, was integral to the moral system of Judaism and has continued to be so in Christianity.

This argument is summed up in these words:

The particular danger that Christianity presents stems, interestingly, from its most highly touted merit: its universalism. ... Christ's message is often held as superior, for it is for all humans ... All may be saved; all are worth of moral concern for all are God's children. This is a vitally important moral advance ... But there is a flip side to Christian universalism and this is exclusivism - anyone can be a Christian, but only Christians may be saved.

And he quotes, clearly with approval, another writer:

The Christian union of all humankind into a single brotherhood encouraged a certain intolerance. The doctrine crucial to Christianity that 'all men are brothers' ... turned all too easily into the doctrine that "only my brothers are men, all 'others' are animals and may be treated as such".

Not surprisingly, since Teehan is based New York, there is a section in which he looks closely at the violence of 9/11, showing how the words of President Bush and Osama bin Laden illustrate the conclusions listed above.

A final chapter on 'Religion Evolving' offers some hope that humanity may not be stuck for ever with our tendency to commit atrocities against one another in the name of religion. One of the problems to be overcome is our proneness to claim certainty and final truth for the position we hold.

The Bible has contributed to violence in the world precisely because it has been taken to confer a degree of certitude that transcends human discussion and argumentation.

One thing the world needs, therefore, is that people generally come to accept that:

'What we find in the various religious texts are accounts of different human cultures struggling to deal with shared human problems. They are records of humanity's efforts at moral world-making, and as such they have great value to any student of human nature or human history. ...

The Bible, the Qur'an, and other sacred writings have enduring value to the human community - not as divine texts revealing a higher truth but as textbooks containing the results of some of the most significant social experiments in human history, whose failures we can learn from, as well as their successes.

I have been gradually realising, for some time, that Christianity is not the perfect and ultimate answer to humanity's need for and capacity for religion, that I once thought it was.

This book has given that process a hefty shove along. Teehan has convinced me that Christianity has some serious flaws I hadn't been aware of before. But I wonder

whether, in focussing on Judaism and Christianity as evolving institutions and on their moral traditions, rather than on individual Jewish or Christian people, the book has missed something.

We live in a time when increasing numbers of people have been evolving their own personal spiritual or faith position, grounded of course in the religious traditions and institutions of their communities, and yet no longer bound by those institutions to the degree that most people in the past have been. I have the impression, for example, that there is now, in New Zealand, a significant number of people who are not as strongly influenced by exclusivism or even a 'gospel of hate' as a substantial element in each of the churches is. Perhaps here there is even more ground for hoping that humanity can outgrow, before it is too late, the darker side of a moral tradition that undoubtedly did serve smaller, less interdependent human communities in their struggles to defend themselves and reproduce.

I would like to see the results of some research which compares the moral values of individuals who have begun to enter what James Fowler identified as stage 4 or stage 5 of faith development, with the moral values of the institutional churches as a whole, as these are revealed by the actions and decisions of their governing bodies.

But to raise these questions is not to diminish Teehan's achievement. I believe the back cover is accurate in saying, "this is a thoughtful and sophisticated attempt to bring scholarship in evolutionary biology and cognitive

psychology to bear on religious ethics." I found it clear and systematic, unsettling, humbling, and very well worthwhile reading.
Donald Feist, Dunedin.

Michael Timmins

A brief but heartfelt tribute from Alan Leadley to Michael Timmins who died on the 9th February 2011

The Hamilton Chartwell Cooperating Church (St Albans) was packed with people on 11th February. People who wanted to pay tribute to a wonderful gentleman and an active Sea of Faith member, Michael Timmins. An engineer who worked on a number of the Waikato dams, Michael was also well known for his resilient pursuit of truth on matters theological and religious, and for his commitment to a wide variety of community groups, such as Rotary, Red Cross, IPENZ, and Probus.

Michael's family was at the centre of his life. His much loved wife Pattie, sister Dorothy, children Susan and David, son in law Kerry, grandchildren, Julia, Jennifer, Abraham, Victoria. Right up to the time of his death he retained an optimism, energy and an open enquiring mind. His son David named the 'fruits of the spirit' (Galatians 5) as strongly present in his father. He was an active member of the Waikato Sea of Faith, and we are poorer for the absence of his refined and gentle presence.

MEDITATION AND THE BRAIN

How God Changes Your Brain

Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, Ballantine Books, 2010.

This book consists of two separate parts which don't really blend. One section explores surveys of people's ideas about God. "What does God feel like?" explores the varieties of spiritual experience. "What does God look like?" compares drawings of God done by children, people of different faiths, agnostics and atheists. "Does God have a heart?" describes the development from an authoritarian God to a benevolent, mystical deity. "What happens when God gets mad?" studies the damaging effects of anger and fear on the brain.

These chapters are interesting, but more valuable, for me at least, are the sections exploring the effects of meditation on the brain. Human beings constantly balance a selfish fight for survival and the desire to co-operate. A more primitive part of the brain, the amigdala, controls our fight or flight impulse. Meditation slows down this part of the brain. The newest part of the brain, the anterior cingulate, is involved in compassion, social awareness, learning and memory. This part is stimulated by meditation practices.

Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg was asked to work with people suffering memory loss. and he devised a programme using a sixteenth century Indian practice called Kirtan Kriya. Participants were asked to practise this for twelve minutes a day for eight weeks. Brain scans were taken before and after the programme and, somewhat to Newberg's surprise, there was already a measurable increase in activity in the anterior cingulate and an improvement in cognitive tests.

Other chapters describe more ways to exercise the brain. Smiling, for instance, is beneficial, and so is yawning. Apparently, yawning not only relaxes us, but also brings us into a heightened sense of awareness and deepens spiritual experiences. Twelve exercises are described in detail, some being ways to relax the body and others enabling a stilling of the mind's constant activity. Some of the exercises come from different religious traditions, but the authors have chosen to remove religious inferences so that the book will reach the broadest possible audience. It is left to the reader to decide whether or not to bring his or her beliefs into the exercises.

This is a more scientific book than the one described in the January newsletter – *Fingerprints of God*, by B. B. Hagerty, but it still seems to me an uneasy mix. The surveys of ideas about God have nothing to do with changes in the brain. The sections on meditation have little to do with God and should really have been titled "How meditation changes your brain". But, of course, this would have been a much less provocative title.

Margaret Gwynn, Napier

INTERACTING WITH THE DIVINE

Notices of two books by Val Webb

Val has held various leadership positions in the Uniting Church of Australia. In 1982, in response to personal faith questions, she began religious studies part time at the University of Queensland. Following the family's return to Rochester, Minnesota in 1988, Val completed her Ph. D. in Theology at Luther Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota in 1996. Since then, Val has taught religious studies at several colleges. She has written eight books and now lives with her family in Mudgee, New South Wales where she continues to write, teach and lead workshops.

Like Catching Water in a Net: Human Attempts to Describe the Divine.

Val Webb, New York and London: Continuum, 2007. Hardcover.

Winner of 'general religion category,' USA Best Books 2007 Awards.

Any discussion of the Unknowable is metaphorical and thus tentative, humanly imagined, limited and open-ended; and 'truth' comes in many shapes and sizes, depending on where you stand. It is unhelpful to narrow God-talk to a few images, many of which are not necessarily the major images in the sacred texts. This book explores a plethora of Divine metaphors, asking where they came from and why; evaluates whether they still hold water or leak like sieves; and ponders where and how to go from here. It begins with the human inclination to ask about Something More; talks of the metaphorical nature of God-talk; and explores Divine images — saying nothing or describing what the Divine is not (or whether the Divine is at all); Divine formlessness; images from nature; Divine attributes; anthropomorphic metaphors and their problems when they are seen as reality, especially male ruler images. Metaphors across religions are included to demonstrate the common human search. The book also examines the nature and authority of the Bible and thus its claim that the Jewish Jesus was/became God, with consequences for all subsequent God-talk and religious truth claims. Contemporary challenges from science and inter-religious dialogue lead to new images which may or may not satisfy God-seekers. Rather than an apologetic for or against the Divine, the book invites readers to observe, think and ask, responding to one's own questions and experience in order to decide whether or not a Divine shape fits into their world view.

There is a difference between knowing that Something exists (or doesn't) and knowing what it might be (or not be). The former comes through experiences of awe, presence or fear in unexplained events that on reflection seem orchestrated from beyond, the core of any religion. The latter is a second-hand knowledge - human explanations of a Something that then become the doctrines and rituals of the clan.

Many people have no useful Divine images. They have walked away from their religious tradition because its God was unbelievable or alien or because their churches, synagogues, or mosques were unable to offer new ways to talk about the Sacred.

Stepping out with the Sacred: Human Attempts to Engage the Divine.

Val Webb, New York & London: Continuum 2010. Hardcover.

Today, our doctor may be Muslim, our lawyer Jewish and our best friend Buddhist, a plurality of encounters multiplied by global travel and politics. In my last book *Like Catching Water in a Net*, I discussed how humans have described the Divine. This companion book describes how humans have engaged the Divine across religions and centuries, through rituals, art, sacred places, language and song. I have included my own experiences, both personal and observed through travel in many countries, meandering along winding trails, talking over the fence, and drinking wine with strangers, both literally and figuratively. I have also drawn on centuries of theology, literature and travel writing, conscious that, to engage the Sacred-beyond-description, we need all the stories we can find, even if only to remind us of the distance still to go and the limitless (and sometimes unsuccessful) journey. As a teacher of world religions and art, and an artist myself, I have tried to create a woven-together, reader-friendly, vividly-painted, theologically reflective reading experience.

The rituals we do to engage the Divine are always cultural and contextual - they have much to do with what is considered culturally right and proper at the time. Since most religions have begun in patriarchal cultures, their attitudes to women, established by men, have been claimed as GOD's will. The veiling of women, covering women's heads in worship, excluding women from sacred spaces during menstruation, 'purifying' women after childbirth and denying women priestly activities, all originated in cultures where women were named as subordinate to men and functioned mainly in private spaces. What can and cannot be worn in church or mosque, for both men and women, although argued from comments in the Bible or Qur'an, reflect ideas of modesty and social etiquette at that time.

If we did a survey of human beings, asking them to identify the best moments of their lives, I am confident that the overwhelming majority would not be about something they read or learnt, but about something they experienced through one or more of their senses. If we asked them to identify the moments they felt most in touch with the Sacred, however that is named, again the overwhelming majority would name an experience processed through their senses, rather than through a text. This is not very encouraging for us writers, but I also admit that it is true.



IS CHRISTIANITY COMPASSIONATE?

Richard Holloway welcomes a guide to compassion, but has some doctrinal quibbles

Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life

Karen Armstrong

Bodley Head 224PP £12.99

It feels irreverent, if not actually blasphemous, to question a work by Karen Armstrong. Since her book *A History of God* was published in 1993, she has established herself as a historian of religion of magisterial authority. A one-woman industry on the subject, she has produced a string of texts that have been marked not only by their depth of research and understanding, but by their wisdom and sanity.

This has been particularly important at a time when religious warfare has broken out with all the old bitterness but is being waged with new and more destructive weapons. She has positioned herself as an independent mediator who interprets religion with considerable intelligence to its cultured despisers, while at the same time taking on religion's angry warriors, who often appear to be ignorant of the theological subtleties of the faiths they claim to champion.

If we can talk about an Armstrong project, there seems to be two main planks in its platform, both of them built solidly into her new book. The first is her concept mythos as opposed to logos as the language of religion. Logos is factual, scientific knowledge, whereas mythos is "an attempt to express some of the more elusive aspects of life that cannot easily be expressed in logical, discursive speech". For instance, she discusses the Greek myth of Demeter, goddess of harvest and grain, and her daughter, Persephone. She says that to ask the Greeks whether there was any historical basis to the myth would be obtuse. The evidence for the truth of the myth was the way the world came to birth in the spring after the death of winter. I agree that the Demeter story is a proper myth, one that uses narrative to express a timeless truth.

The same would be true of the myth of the Garden of Eden, a story not about an aboriginal couple who pinched an apple, but about the enduring existence of human discontent. Any intelligent reader gets a myth, the way they get a Steve Bell cartoon.

But what about the resurrection? Christians think that this is not a myth in the Armstrong sense of a timeless truth encapsulated in a story, but is an actual event – Jesus got up and got out of the tomb – one of whose purposes is to assure us of our own life after death. Whatever you make of the Christian claim, it resists any attempt to turn the resurrection into a myth in the sense of that word as used by Armstrong. I think it's a myth in the way she describes, but the church does not. This is why I think Armstrong's myth project has about it a whiff of the disingenuous. It is the way she and I and many others hold on to the great scriptural tropes, but it is not how the church's official teachers hold them: the Pope, for example, would clearly dismiss it as an error or a heresy. I don't fault her for holding out this lifeline for people who want to hold on to Christianity without

buying its awkward supernatural claims, but it is not how the church understands things.

The second plank in her platform is that compassion is, as it were, the distilled essence of the world's great religions. She is an immensely compassionate human being and has recently initiated a charter for compassion in order, as she puts it in the preface to this book, to "restore compassion to the heart of religious and moral life... At a time when religions are widely assumed to be at loggerheads, it would also show that... on this we are all in agreement ...". *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* is both a manifesto and a self-help manual. As a manifesto, it promotes her campaign to place compassion at the heart of religion; as a manual modelled on the 12-step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous, it offers exercises aimed at increasing our own compassion. It would make a brilliant guide for leaders of retreats and workshops on the compassionate life, and as a repository of digested wisdom from the world's religions I cannot recommend it too highly.

But is she correct in suggesting that, at bottom, the essence of the main religions boils down to compassion? It is probably correct where Buddhism is concerned, and it is from Buddhism that her best insights and examples come. I think she is on shakier ground when she applies it to Christianity and Islam. Christianity and Islam are redemption religions, not wisdom religions. They exist to secure life in the world to come for their followers and any guidance they offer on living in this world is always with a view to its impact on the next.

This radically compromises the purity of their compassion agenda. Let me offer one example to prove my point. At a meeting of primates of the Anglican communion, I was accused by one archbishop of filling Hell with homosexuals, because I was giving them permission to commit acts that would guarantee them an eternity of punishment, for no sodomite can enter Heaven. My worldly compassion for gay people, my campaign to furnish them with the same sexual rights as straight people, was actually a kind of cruelty.

The price of their fleeting pleasures in this world would be an eternity of punishment in the next.

I can think of other examples from other moral spheres where an attempt to act compassionately towards certain categories of sufferers runs counter to Christianity's doctrinal certainties. The point at issue here is whether Christianity, as it presently understands itself, is a religion whose central value is compassion. If the answer is yes, it can only be what we might describe as eschatological compassion, because the church's doctrinal certainties and their corresponding prohibitions do not feel like compassion to those who are on their receiving end down here. They say justice delayed is justice denied.

The same must be true of compassion.

from *The Guardian Weekly* 14th Jan 2011

Richard Holloway was formerly
Bishop of Edinburgh in the Scottish Episcopal Church

**Christianity and Islam
are redemption religions,
not wisdom religions**

A BETTER METANARRATIVE

"It's time", says Don Cupitt, "for A New Great Story"

A New Great Story
Don Cupitt, Polebridge Press 2010

A 'Great Story' or 'Grand Narrative' or 'Metanarrative' is an abstract idea that claims to be a comprehensive explanation of historical experience or knowledge.

As Cupitt puts it on page 120:

'A Grand Narrative' was a Big Story of Everything that reassured all those caught up in it that in the long, long run Everything was going to be All Right.

Additionally, a metanarrative is an untold story (or at least one that is not easy to be specific as to details) which unifies and totalizes the world, and justifies a culture's power structures. Examples of these stories are Nationalisms, Islam and Christianity. Cupitt adds Marxism as one of the bigger recent disappointments and hints that Christianity is in similar bad shape.

The concept of metanarrative was introduced and criticized by Jean-François Lyotard in his work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). In this text, Lyotard refers to what he describes as the postmodern condition, which he characterized as increasing skepticism toward the totalizing nature of metanarratives and their reliance on some form of "transcendent and universal truth". Cupitt says that Nietzsche put an end to such optimism. (p122)

Lyotard and many others say that metanarratives should be abandoned for a number of reasons. Attempts to construct grand theories tend to dismiss the naturally existing chaos and disorder of the universe. Further, metanarratives are created and reinforced by power structures and are therefore not to be trusted. Metanarratives also ignore the heterogeneity or variety of human existence. They are also seen to embody unacceptable views of historical development, in terms of progress towards a specific goal. The latent diverse passions of human beings will always make it impossible for them to be marshalled under some theoretical doctrine and this is one of the reasons given for the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

All of these objections are felt by Cupitt but, instead of following the recommendation of Lyotard *et al* in replacing grand, universal narratives with small, local narratives, he proposes a new metanarrative:

the new story is not a story of Fall and Redemption, but the strangely-roundabout story of how we have become ourselves. (p9)

In the Introduction in pp6-9 he explains how the melange of Plato, Aristotle and the Christian Grand-Narrative just won't wash any longer and that "science-based secular humanism" has proved a failure. Therefore we need a new narrative that is "fully secular and up-to-date in science and philosophy, but which avoids paradox and is religious."

The promotional material from Polebridge Press says: "Cupitt sees the history of religion as culminating in the teaching of Jesus, who announced a new age in which human beings are at last fully themselves, fully reconciled to each other and to life." On an appendix on pp123 to 125 Cupitt signals an end to Christology. He writes (*passim*):

My own view, in conclusion, is that we now have to give up the whole cycle of Christological dogmas: the Immaculate Conception ... the Virginal Conception ... the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, the Ascension and Heavenly Session, the Second Coming and the Last Judgment. None of these doctrines is now rationally defensible - except that my Great Story looks for a Second Advent of the *teaching*, and not the person, of Jesus; and the Heavenly Session of Jesus may be taken as prefiguring the 'anthropomorphism' of more recent times. The cosmic Christ, like the cosmic Buddha, foreshadows modern radical humanism. Unfortunately, that is not all: I have reluctantly concluded that the title 'Christ' must also be given up, because it presupposes the acceptance of a theology of history in general, and Jewish national messianism in particular; and when I give up the title Christ, I have a consequent problem with words like Christian and Christianity. For me, everything is contingent, and it is just a contingent fact that a certain man named Jesus of Nazareth happened to work out for himself and to teach a way of living that seems to me to be the *Summum Bonum*, the top, the best there is for us mortal human beings. So I wish to abandon Christology altogether, and instead to focus attention upon the teaching of Jesus.

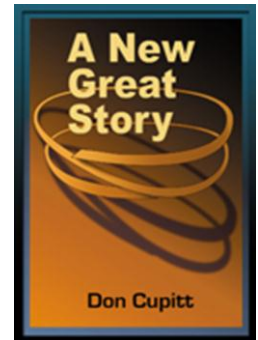
Why not follow Lyotard and others who distrust Grand Narrative and discard metanarratives altogether? Cupitt savages the classic Christian metanarrative but then proposes a leaner, more earthbound one in its place.

Perhaps, after all, in the human scheme of things certain mental and emotional structures are not only inevitable but are also necessary. As Cupitt has it in this book, it was only by becoming 'religious' (broadly construed) that we could become human. A metanarrative ties all the loose ends together and focuses our devotion and our living.

I hope that there will other reviews of this rather fine book.

Noel Cheer, Titahi Bay, (who freely plundered Wikipedia)

Next Month: *The Fountain: A Secular Theology*
dedicated by Don Cupitt
"To the Members of Sea of Faith with my gratitude"





STEERING COMMITTEE 2010-2011

This group photograph was taken on 29 January 2011 when the Steering Committee met for its annual "One Day" planning event. We planned the 2011 Conference for Christchurch from October 14 to 16.

In the centre (appropriately!) is Chairperson Natali Allen.

In the foreground, Laurie Chisholm (who will head the Christchurch Arrangements Committee) has just finished showing us a slideshow of the venue.

Ranged around, clockwise, are: Bev Smith, Don Feist, Noel Cheer, Peter Cowley (Treasurer), Phil Grimmett, Maureen Roxburgh, Margaret Gwynn, Steve Collard, Steven Warnes.

The inset shows the photographer and Secretary, Alan Jackson.

2010 SoF CONFERENCE CDS

Ordering CDs

CD recordings of the Conference addresses will remain available until June 1st, 2011. To order CDs either:

- Go to the website www.sof.org.nz, download and print the order form and send it to me with remittance.
- Phone me or write me a note and I will mail you an order form.

Each CD will cost you \$10, irrespective of content.

There a \$4 postage charge for up to 4 CDs.

**Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper St,
Titahi Bay, Porirua 5022
Phone (04) 236-7533**

CD Contents (each 'bullet') is a separate CD.

"Compassion" Presentations

The Conference opened with five short presentations on "Compassion" from speakers of different faith traditions. The session and panel discussion were led by Lloyd Geering.

- Lloyd Geering Introduction + David Zwartz (Judaism) + Arjahn Tiradhammo (Buddhism) + Sultan Eusoff (Islam)
- Lloyd Geering Introduction + Jim Cunningham (Christianity) + Bill Cooke (Atheism) + The Panel Discussion

Keynote Presentations and Concluding Panel Discussion

- Dr. Valerie Grant: "The Is-Ought Argument: Evolutionary Origins of Human Behaviour"
- Professor Kevin Clements: "Equality and Small Goodnesses in Aotearoa-New Zealand: Honouring The Other, The Quest for Respect"
- Emeritus Professor Ian Pool "Population, Development and Quality of Life: Compassion and Sustainability"
- Panel Discussion: Valerie Grant; Kevin Clements; Ian Pool; Lloyd Geering. Chaired by Noel Cheer

The Omnibus CD

- This is not an ordinary CD. It contains all of the above audio sessions in mp3 format. It can be copied to and played on the Apple iPod, iPhone, iPad and in other 'mp3 players'. It can be played directly on most computers, most DVD players, and many of the newer CD players. Readers should purchase this option only if confident that they can use mp3 files. In addition, text files of major papers (in pdf format) are included.

THE LLOYD GEERING/ STEPHEN BATCHELOR PANEL DISCUSSION

This event took place in St Andrew's on The Terrace on November 5, 2010 and was chaired by Noel Cheer. The hour-long discussion ranged over the similarities and differences between Christianity and Buddhism and broadly concluded that only by significant bringing-up-to-date can these two faith traditions remain relevant.

To obtain either a DVD or an audio CD of this event send either \$24 (DVD) or \$14 (CD) to Peter Cowley, P.O. 15-324, Miramar, Wellington 6243. That includes packing and postage, even overseas.

FROM THE CHAIR

Forty years ago Barry Commoner introduced his book "The Closing Circle"¹ with questions. To quote:

"Our assaults on the ecosystem are so powerful, so numerous, so finely interconnected, that although the damage they do is clear, it is very difficult to discover how it was done. By which weapons? In whose hand? Are we driving the ecosphere to destruction simply by our growing numbers? By our greedy accumulation of wealth? Or are the machines we have built to gain this wealth - the magnificent technology that now feeds us out of neat packages, that clothes us in man-made fibres, that surrounds us with new chemical creations - at fault?"

And then in conclusion he wrote:

"In our progress-minded society, anyone who presumes to explain a serious problem is expected to offer to solve it as well. But none of us - singly or sitting in a committee - can possibly blueprint a specific "plan" for resolving the environmental crisis. To pretend otherwise is only to evade the real meaning of the environmental crisis; that the world is being carried to the brink of ecological disaster not by a singular fault, which some clever scheme can correct, but the phalanx of powerful economic, political, and social forces that constitute the march of history. Anyone who proposes to cure the environmental crisis undertakes thereby to change the course of history"

Today crises are not limited to the environment. Each of the forces Commoner identifies is seen to be in crisis in and of itself, and each has impact on others. As an ecologist, he proposed that the problems he saw in 1971, and we still face today, are related and sprang from a single cause. That cause he summarized as "progress" enabled by exploitation of the earth's resources and life on it, including human life. "Progress" beyond the realm of nature and disturbing the balance within it.

Over the past few years, feedback from Conference participants has identified economics and the environment as areas of interest and possible Conference topics. In response to this, the 2011 Conference which is to be held at Rangi Ruru Girls School in Christchurch on the 14th - 16th October, is titled "**Pulling Us Back From the Brink: Economics? Science? Religion?**" During two full days we hope to explore potential in present day values, processes and technology, to avert the crises that we now face.

As usual we plan a series of speakers who can introduce us to and explore the topic from differing perspectives, and thus provide opportunity for stimulating exploration, thought and discussion.

The Christchurch group are organising the Conference so we know we can look forward to a warm welcome, and a pleasant and interesting weekend. Those who know Rangi

Ruru will appreciate the attractiveness of the campus, and many of us look forward to the beauty of spring in Christchurch.

Accommodation this year will be predominately in twin and four bedded rooms and there are several motels close by for those who wish to use them. We plan that the structure of the Conference will be similar to that of last year with Core Groups for discussion and a variety of activities on Saturday afternoon and evening.

There are probably few unaware that our Conference will be held on the same weekend as one of the semifinal games of the Rugby World Cup in Auckland, so it is not too early to consider whether to attend and how to travel. To assist with this, the full programme and registration form will accompany the next Newsletter in May. We hope you can join us there and we look forward to meeting old and making new friends.



Natali Allen
Chairperson 2010-2011

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 five **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, Ian Harris and Alan Goss.

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

¹ Commoner, B. (1971): *The Closing Circle: Confronting the Environmental Crisis*. London. Jonathan Cape.