

Sea of Faith

Exploring Spirituality, Religion and Ethics

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NEWSLETTER 99, MARCH 2012

Bonus Issue – 16 Pages

BRONZE AGE RELIGION IT NEVER REALLY WENT AWAY

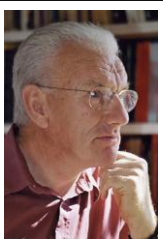
Don Feist's comment on Don Cupitt

This is the first of two articles by Don Feist which were awaiting publication in this Newsletter at the time of his unexpected death on February 22nd, 2012. The other article is on page 11 of this Newsletter and an Obituary appears on page 16. Don wrote:

I've been reading recently Don Cupitt's 2010 book *A New Great Story ...* As with the other Cupitt books I've read, I got cross at times with sweeping, dogmatic statements for which Cupitt gives no evidence. At times I thought he might have a point, but he didn't convince me. But I also thought there were some brilliant insights well expressed.

By "*Bronze Age Religion*" which he refers to at the end, he means the kind of system that developed with the beginnings of agriculture and cities, when, he says, "... religion became extremely objectified, and both the cosmos and within it, the state, became great hierarchies of sacred power and authority."

Here's what I thought were the best bits of the book:



"... An interesting but seldom-marked feature of Jesus' religion ... is that it is not irrational. A very marked feature of church-religions, so called 'creeds', is that they require every believer to hold many beliefs for which here is no good evidence, and many more that are obviously untrue. But Jesus'

religion is simply a call to ethical decision. It asks us to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to burning love for life and for our fellow-humans.

"... Jesus' horrible and tragic death caused a loss of nerve [among his followers]. The fullness of the ethical vision was soon forgotten. Instead, the very small surviving group concentrated their attention upon trying to understand the religious meaning of what had happened. To guide them, they had the

Hebrew Scriptures and other related materials provided by their own culture, and they had their own traditions about the Lord's sayings and their own fast-fading recollections of him. Something of their debates survives in the many-layered Passion Narratives preserved in the Gospels. Those narratives aren't historical; they are records of early debates about what, as they thought, must have happened. Not what did happen, but what must have happened.

"... During the 40s they gradually came to believe that Jesus was not simply and finally lost. No, he had been exalted to Heaven, there to wait as Messiah-designate. Before long he would return in glory to establish his Kingdom on earth for ever.

"... Meanwhile, the community needed to remain in existence, organized and vigilant ... It needed leaders Thus, by the year 50 or so the Church was already emerging as a multinational society and a new creedal religion.

"... The old Bronze-Age cosmology with a heavenly world above and a long chain of command rising above your head all the way up to the highest heaven – all that was coming back.

"... Jesus, well ahead of his time, had wanted his hearers to choose a new kind of divine/human life in a new world. But within twenty years of his death he had been made the basis for a relaunch of the old Bronze-Age type of religion -- a religion of spiritual power that most of us are still stuck with today."

Don Feist

POST-THEISTIC PRAYING

David Simmers asks:

“Can those of us who have stopped believing in a personal god still pray?

What do those of us who still go to church think of during the prayers?

And some of us even lead ‘times of prayer’.

How honest can we be?

I AM ON THE PRAYER ROSTER OF OUR LOCAL CHURCH, and I find leading the ‘prayers of intercession’ more difficult than preparing a sermon. Still, people like me/us do too much intellectualising and neglect the more reflective, more inward side of religion. So even though my efforts are stumbling and very imperfect, I keep trying.

Interestingly, people often come up afterwards and say how much the prayer meant for them. Ordinary church-goers are not as wedded to the old personal-god forms as we might imagine.

This is one recent effort; it could be worthwhile to have other examples, and some discussion of the stratagems we use to ‘pray’ honestly.

Vulnerability

[Genesis 32.22-31; Mt.14.13-21]

Let us reflect and meditate a little about vulnerability. Vulnerability is part of our human lot. We live in a society where there are far fewer risks than in many; but even when we are careful, there are always things that *might* go wrong for any of us, and sometimes they do. It is an uncomfortable thought which we often try to ignore, living as though nothing bad will ever happen; or we can become so fearful, that we are unable to enjoy and use the abilities and opportunities we have.

Yet we *are always* vulnerable; we can fail, or make mistakes ourselves; or things happen to us - in our health, in our economic circumstances, in the well-being of people we care for; in the trust we place in others, in the disappointment of our hopes, in our exposure to accidents, or natural disasters, or crime.

Do we really accept our vulnerability? Have we the faith to believe that we need not be overwhelmed by it? That even if the worst does happen, we have the inner resources to survive? That there are many who care about us and will support us if need arises? Can this be our hope, can this be our faith?

In our vulnerability we are bound together with all humankind in the one bundle of life. Yet as we find our own vulnerability uncomfortable to recognise, so, often, do we find that of others either inconvenient or depressing.

There are so many who are distressed in so many ways. There are shattered lives in Christchurch, much

worse destruction in Japan; there is starvation in Somalia, disruption in Myanmar, the threat of economic disaster in Greece, and millions around the world have justified fears for what the future may hold. Others worry about health outcomes, or job or exam prospects, or whether they will be able to give their children the start in life which they desire.

Each of us may well be conscious of some situation of vulnerability; let us remember it now.

As we face our own vulnerabilities, can we who try to walk the way of Christ have compassion for the vulnerability of others? Can we work for a society which tries to protect the vulnerable, and give care and support when it is needed? Can we *ourselves* give some support and help? Often it seems that it is someone else’s responsibility; or that anything we can do will be so insignificant that it is meaningless. But even the slightest movement of compassion towards one or a few will be an echo of the compassion of Christ, and may well renew the faith and hope of many more.

We are all vulnerable. And we are bound together in one bundle of life. May we have the faith, and the hope, and the love to live with *our* vulnerability, and to care for others in their’s. Amen.

David Simmers, Wellington

A SIGN OF THE TIMES

This is a new form of bar coding (‘Aztec Coding’) which can be read by smartphones with the appropriate ‘App’ installed. If your phone does read it, it will point the phone’s web browser to our website **www.sof.org.nz**



CONFERENCE 2012

From Friday 5th October
To Sunday 7th October

St. Cuthbert's College
in Epsom, Auckland

More details in "From The Chair"
on page 14

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ENVIRONMENTALISM AS A BELIEF SYSTEM

Saving Nature: Religion as Environmentalism, Environmentalism as Religion
by Tarjei Rønnow

A publisher's book note.

Environmentalism has moved into the centre of the most influential social movements in late modernity. From preserving pre-industrial landscapes, advocating the intrinsic value of nature and protecting ecosystems against overexploitation, it has developed into a worldview, ethos and practice, that is radically shifting the frontiers of politics, economics and ethics.

Saving Nature approaches environmentalism as a belief system. It explores the impact of environmentalism on faith communities and vice versa, and analyses how environmental worldviews, values, attitudes and discourses affect religion. By drawing on sources in the sociology of religion and environmental sociology, the study sheds light on the religious dimensions of environmentalism. The author locates the quick growth of environmentalism in the history of allegedly secular modernity, and interprets environmentalism in the context of modernity's re-sacralization.

Available from fishpond.co.nz

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK (NZ)

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The **Secretary** is **Alan Jackson**,
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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 **Treasurer Peter Cowley** (pcowley@paradise.net.nz) your mailing details.

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WHAT PLACE HAS GOD IN AN EXPLANATION OF THE UNIVERSE?

God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?

by John Lennox

192pp, Lion Hudson, £14.99

Introduction

John Lennox is a well qualified academic. He has an MA, a PhD, a DPhil and a DSc. He is a Reader in Mathematics at Oxford University and a Fellow in Mathematics and the Philosophy of Science at Green College. He is also a committed Christian who has been involved in debates with outspoken atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

In this book, he reviews the relationship between science and religion and examines the question of whether the scientific developments over the last millennium have squeezed God into a corner and then buried him.

This book is well endowed with quotes supporting and opposing this view.

"All my studies in science have confirmed my faith" - *Sir Ghillelan Prance (former director of the Kew Gardens)*

"The world needs to wake up from the long nightmare of religion..... Anything we scientists can do to weaken the hold of religion should be done and may, in fact, be our greatest contribution to civilisation". - *Steve Weinberg (Nobel laureate)*

"When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion, it is called religion". - *Robert Persig (in Zen & the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance)*

Is Science Enough?

Lennox acknowledges that science has many achievements. It has led to a much better understanding of the nature of the physical world and the mechanisms through which it operates. It has led to the elimination or control of many diseases. It has released people from many superstitious fears. But it does not lead to the assumption that, because we understand the mechanisms of the universe without bringing in God, we can conclude that there is no God

involved in the design and creation of the universe in the first place.

In recent years, science has taken us in two different directions - one into the cosmology and the expanding universe on an incredibly large scale, and the other into the incredibly small scale of elementary particles. So what is the relationship between humans and the universe? Are we just aliens in the cosmos, an eczema on the face of the universe?

"I cannot believe that our existence in this universe is a mere quirk of fate, an accident of history...Our involvement is too intimate... we are truly meant to be here." - *Paul Davies (physicist)*

"We are the product of a mindless and purposeless natural process that did not start with us in mind." - *George Simpson (biologist)*

The anthropic principle (that the universe was structured to allow the existence of life)

Copernicus overturned the idea that the earth was fixed at the centre of the universe.

Since that time, there is a popular belief that the earth is a fairly typical planet in a fairly typical sun in one of the spiral arms of a fairly typical galaxy which is in a fairly typical universe. However, the fundamental forces (including gravity and magnetism) are amazingly, intricately and delicately balanced. A minute change in any one of these constants would make life impossible and has led many to wonder about the role of a creator.

"It seems that someone has fine-tuned nature's numbers to make the universe... the impression of design is overwhelming." - *Paul Davies*.

Evolution and God

This leads to the situation where the theistic evolutionary view has commended itself to many scientists, including many evolutionary biologists. This led Stephen Jay Gould to comment

"either half of my colleagues are enormously stupid or else the science of Darwinism is fully compatible with conventional religious beliefs and equally compatible with atheism."

He goes on to say "science simply cannot (by its legitimate methods) adjudicate the issue of God's possible existence. We neither affirm nor deny it; we simply can't comment on it as scientists."

"No vital forces propel evolutionary change. And whatever we think of God, his existence is not manifest in the products of nature."

- Stephan Jay Gould (palaeontologist).

"In the evolutionary scheme of thought, there is no longer either the need or room for the supernatural.

The earth was not created, it evolved. So did all the plants and animals that inhabit it, including our human selves, brain, body and soul. So did religion..."

- Julian Huxley (1959)

"To the question: is there a divine purpose for the creation of humans, evolution answers no."

- Monroe Strickenberger

"What lies at the heart of every living thing is not a fire, warm breath, or a spark of life, but information, words, instructions...Think of a billion discrete digital characters...If you want to understand life, think of digital technology" - Richard Dawkins

Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome

project, on completion of the project

"It is humbling for me, and awe inspiring to realise we have just caught our first glimpse of our own instruction manual, previously known only to God."

"The world is too complicated in all its parts and interconnections to be due to chance alone. I am convinced that the existence of life with all its orders in each of its organisms is simply too well put together." - Alan Sandage

(cosmologist).

In conclusion, Lennox says:

"The rational intelligibility of the universe points to the existence of a Mind that was responsible for the universe and for our mind... Our

increasing insight into the fine tuning of the universe in general and of planet earth in particular is consistent with the widespread awareness that we are meant to be here. This earth is our home."

Lennox closes by saying

"I submit that, far from science having buried God, not only do the results of science point towards his existence, but the scientific enterprise is validated by his existence."

This book is a brave attempt to justify the existence of God on scientific grounds. It is unfortunate that he has settled on a somewhat conservative model of God and that he has made some dubious claims when he moves outside his expertise. None the less, it makes for interesting reading and highlights the big gaps in our understanding of the origins of life about 3.5 billion years ago.

Lindsay Vaughan, Nelson

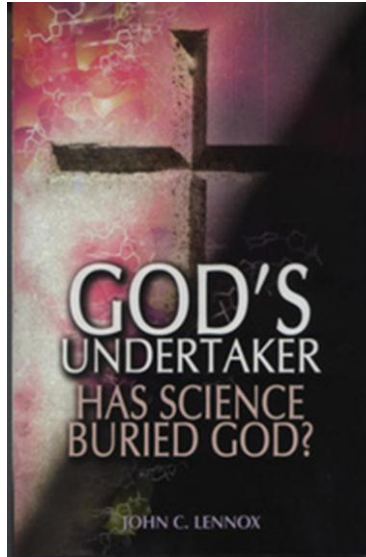
Lindsay has provided Lennox's own epitaph:

"Here lies the body of John Lennox

You ask me why he's in this box?

He died of something worse than pox

Of Darwinism - heterodox."



The origin of life

The oldest ancient microbe-like fossils are about 3.5 billion years old, about 1 billion years after the formation of the earth. There has been much speculation about how life arose from inorganic organic compounds*.

Early experiments showed that amino acids, the building blocks of proteins, could be formed by electrical discharges into an atmosphere of water, hydrogen, ammonia and methane. There are many hypotheses of the origins of life, but little understanding.

"Anybody who tells you that he or she knows how life started on earth some 3.5 billion years ago is a fool or a knave. Nobody knows" - Stuart Kaufmann

"The problem of biogenesis is that Darwinism can only operate once life has started. It cannot explain how life started in the first place." - Paul Davies.

"The tiniest bacterial cell is a veritable microminiaturised factory containing millions of exquisitely designed pieces of molecular machinery ... Far more complicated than any machine built by man and absolutely without parallel in the non-living world. The basic cell structure is essentially the same in all living systems on earth... the roles of DNA, mRNA and protein is the samethere is no hint of evolutionary sequence" - Michael Denton (geneticist).

* your editor was also puzzled. Wikipedia explained it like this:

"The distinction between organic and inorganic carbon compounds, while useful in organizing the vast subject of chemistry... is somewhat arbitrary."

THE BURDEN OF FREEDOM

IS MODERNITY A MISTAKE?

By George Scialabba from his review of John Carroll's *The Existential Jesus* (Scribe, Melbourne, 2007) at www.bookforum.com

The burden of freedom, the responsibility of finding—or creating—one's own purpose and meaning without the guidance of authoritative, inherited creeds and values, is too heavy for all but a few...

The rest of us cannot endure for long the tensions of uncertainty. We must, at some point, stop questioning, quiet our doubts, turn away from moral and metaphysical inquiry and toward life...

"Untrammelled skepticism ends in paralysis. This is true of societies as well as of individuals. No purely rational justification can be offered for trust and self-sacrifice... But without them, social life is chaos, a war of all against all..."

Until a few hundred years ago, this problem scarcely existed. The authority of communities and traditions, though often enough evaded or defied, was rarely put in radical question. There were sinners, doubters, even heretics, but dogma and hierarchy, as the foundations of individual morality and social organization, went unchallenged...

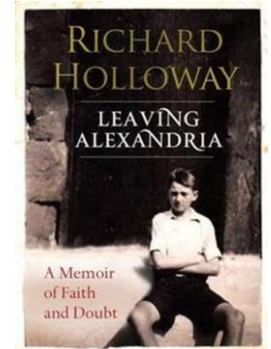
Then modernity happened. Beginning in fifteenth-century Europe, a critical, experimental, libertarian spirit began to flourish, which came to be known as humanism. A crescendo of scientific discoveries, artistic innovations, geographic explorations, and political reforms ensued until, at the end of the eighteenth century, Kant hailed "humankind's emergence from its self-imposed minority" and baptized it Enlightenment. And the prestige of the sacred and the supernatural, of what [Dostoevsky's] Grand Inquisitor called "miracle, mystery, and authority" and declared indispensable to ordinary people's happiness, was correspondingly diminished...

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, humanism's lustre was tarnished. First came the blight of early industrialization, then colonial brutality, totalitarian repression, and the technologies of extermination in concentration camps and global wars. Even after these horrors passed, in the midst of unprecedented prosperity **an epidemic of spiritual emptiness descended: alienation, consumerism, and the loneliness of mass society.** Perhaps, as a minority of modern thinkers has always believed, we cannot live by reason alone...

Perhaps modernity is a mistake.

A MEMOIR OF FAITH & DOUBT

A publisher's book note for
Leaving Alexandria:
A Memoir of Faith and Doubt
By Richard Holloway
Canongate Books Ltd
ISBN: 0857860739



The acclaimed writer, respected thinker and outspoken former bishop Richard Holloway recounts a life defined by the biggest questions: Who am I? And what is God?

At fourteen, Richard Holloway left his home in the Vale of Leven, north of Glasgow, and travelled hundreds of miles to be educated and trained for the priesthood by a religious order in an English monastery. By twenty-five he had been ordained and was working in the slums of Glasgow. Throughout the following forty years, Richard touched the lives of many people in the Church and in the wider community.

But behind his confident public face lay a restless, unquiet heart and a constantly searching mind. Why is the Church, which claims to be the instrument of God's love, so prone to cruelty and condemnation? And how can a man live with the tension between public faith and private doubt? In his long-awaited memoir, Richard seeks to answer these questions and to explain how, after many crises of faith, he finally and painfully left the Church. It is a wise, poetic and fiercely honest book.

Richard Holloway was Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. A former Gresham Professor of Divinity and Chairman of the Joint Board of the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, he is a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

He has written for many newspapers in Britain, including *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Herald* and the *Scotsman*. He has also presented many series for BBC television and radio; his new series, on doubt, will be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 this spring (U.K. 2012).

From the Preface to the King James Bible

"Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light, that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most Holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water."

Miles Smith, Bishop of Gloucester.

BONHOEFFER

PASTOR, MARTYR, PROPHET, SPY

Shirley Goss of Napier has read a riveting biography.

This book, written by Eric Metaxas and published by Thomas Nelson, was brought to our notice by long-term German friend Ekkehard Hoffman who is a retired Lutheran Minister. His brother, living in Tennessee, USA, had read the book shortly before he died and both found it a rivetting read. Their father had also been a Lutheran Minister in Munich during W.W. II and possibly one of the 6000 German pastors who were members of the Confessing Church opposed to the Nazi regime.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 along with a twin sister, Sabine. They were two of eight children. Their father Karl Bonhoeffer, was a University professor and when Dietrich was six years old the family moved to Berlin. From the age of thirteen it was clear that Dietrich would become a theologian. Theology, along with music, remained a passion throughout his life. After study in Germany, and one year at Union Theological Seminary, in the USA, in 1930-31, and also a pastorate in London in 1934-35, Bonhoeffer returned to the Union Theological Seminary in 1939. Soon he realised that he had made a terrible mistake. He made a fateful decision to return to Germany where the “political situation is so terrible”, a decision which was eventually to cost him his life.

The tide was turning in support of Hitler and the Nazi regime to the point where many ordinary citizens including parishioners of the State Lutheran Church were in league with policies to oppress the Jews. For 400 years it had been widely assumed that most Germans were Lutheran Christians with only the vaguest of notions of what the Christian faith was all about. To add insult to injury, the Old Testament was banned by the authorities because it favoured the Jews. However opposition to these measures began to grow. Those who sympathised with the regime were branded as confused, nationalistic heretics whose demands could never be satisfied.

There was also alarm amongst the German Generals. In Hitler's view the gentlemen from the Prussian officer tradition were all too well bred to know

how to deal with someone as vulgar as himself. Hitler had no patience with these upper class cowards. In a single stroke he abolished the War Ministry and created in its place the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW), making himself its head.

Bonhoeffer became convinced that a Church that was not willing to stand up for the Jews was not the real Church of Jesus Christ. Six thousand pastors became members of the Pastors Emergency League. They vowed to rededicate themselves to the Scriptures and lend financial aid to those being persecuted; also to firmly reject the Aryan Paragraph which prevented pastors of Jewish background, who had already been ordained, from serving as Ministers.

This was a major step towards what would eventually come to be known as The Confessing Church.

In Bonhoeffer's words:

**“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil.
God will not hold us guiltless.
Not to speak is to speak.
Not to act is to act.”**

Bonhoeffer became involved with the ecumenical movement which in turn led him to join the Resistance plots against Hitler. But the Nazi pincers tightened and he was imprisoned at Tegel in 1943. Later Bonhoeffer was sent to a series of Concentration camps and was finally executed by hanging at Flossenburg on April 9, 1945. Two weeks later American forces entered the town followed almost immediately by Hitler's suicidal death. World War II was coming to an end but Dietrich Bonhoeffer's legacy remains. Books, like his *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Life Together* and *Letters and Papers from Prison* still inspire. His thoughts on “cheap and costly grace” and on “religionless Christianity” still probe and provoke.

Metaxa's sensitive tome of 542 pages, recounts a grim and frightening period in our history, and of one man's courageous response to it. It reminds us of the value of all our human freedoms, especially the freedom to question and to think for ourselves.

Shirley Goss, Napier, January, 2012



JUNG, THE UNCONSCIOUS AND US

A review by Laurie Chisholm.

In June 2011, Lloyd Geering gave a series of lectures on the Swiss pioneer of psychoanalysis, Carl Jung, at St Andrews on the Terrace in Wellington

The Christchurch group of the Sea of Faith has used two of the set of DVDs that recorded the lectures as the basis of meetings and has found them helpful. The video quality is high and the PowerPoint slides that Lloyd used to accompany his words have been nicely edited-in so that the viewer has a clear and direct view of them.

Lloyd observed that his lectures on Jung have been the best-attended of all the topics he has handled, which I regard as evidence that people have a hunger for perspectives that enrich and deepen their spirituality and for a wise understanding of what it is to be a human being.

The first lecture is on Jung's view of the psyche (Jung's term for what others might call soul or mind). He doesn't start straight in with Jung's ideas, but gives a very broad historical survey, covering Plato, Aristotle, Locke and Freud, setting Jung in context. Only then does he provide an overview of Jung's picture of the psyche, which includes the Ego, the Self, the Personal Unconscious, the Collective Unconscious, the Shadow and the Archetypes. The lecture concludes with Jung's personality theory, which many will be familiar with as the basis of the Myers-Briggs personality test.

The second lecture focusses on religious experience. While Freud regarded religion as an illusion, Jung thought that the breakdown of religion caused neurosis and that religion promotes mental health, helping us to become whole. Using several historically very important examples (the appearance of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes, Mohammed writing the Koran after hearing messages from God through the angel Gabriel, Paul experiencing a vision of the risen Lord at Damascus) Lloyd explained how Jung regarded the unconscious as the origin of such experiences. While traditionally, they have been understood as evidence for the existence of a spiritual or transcendent realm, Jung regards them as projections of the unconscious. This steers a middle way between regarding them as literal truth and dismissing them as some sort of hoax. Lloyd says that such experiences can be honoured for their intrinsic value, but as far as I can see, he does not articulate what that value might be for us moderns.

The third lecture is on Jung's view of God. Again, Lloyd gives us a bird's eye view of the grand sweep of history. Humans have an inbuilt bias to see the world in religious terms. Belief has evolved from polytheism through henotheism (loyalty to one god without denying the existence of others) to monotheism. The gods are to be understood as

projections of the archetypes and the evolution of God parallels the evolution of the human psyche. Although the image of God as a personal being is a false idol, says Lloyd, monotheism has a lasting significance; it affirms the oneness of reality and you could regard the Genesis creation story as the first Grand Unified Theory. He concludes with a look at the way modern physicists talk of God and quotes the theologian Gordon Kaufmann: God is the creativity permeating everything. Helpful thoughts about God, but ones that go well beyond Jung himself.

The final lecture begins with Jung's ideas of synchronicity as a principle that complements causality in explaining the way the world works. Lloyd uses them as a spring-board to articulate his convictions about a unified human future.

Lloyd has not a word of direct criticism of Jung. Nothing about the issues that so raised the ire of Bill Cooke (see Newsletters 79 and 82) such as Jung's possible complicity with the Nazi regime. No questioning of the evidential basis for all the entities such as archetypes, the Self, the collective unconscious and the shadow, that Jung manages to pack into the psyche. Nothing about Jung's own ventures into biblical interpretation, such as his views on Job and on the story of the Fall. Plenty of mention of those who went before Jung, but nothing about post-Jungian therapy or scholars of myth such as Joseph Campbell who use Jungian perspectives.

Lloyd does not focus narrowly on Jung's views but incorporates them into his own broad perspective on things. In the process, Jung's own views could get lost or at least blurred. In particular, I don't think Jung was primarily interested in undermining the claim that religious experience gives evidence of a spiritual world. Rather, he had a therapeutic aim of promoting individuation and integrating the unconscious, regarding communal religious symbols and myths as well as the dreams of the individual as expressions of the unconscious and therefore helpful in this task.

Lloyd is famous for his ability to explain things simply and clearly, and these lectures are one more example of this. I recommend them to other local groups for their use.

Laurie Chisholm, Christchurch

Editor's Notes

An excerpt from a newspaper article by Ian Harris describing this series appeared in Newsletter 96 (September 2011).

This four-part lecture series on DVD can be ordered from St Andrew's Trust, Box 5203, Wellington 6145; \$38 posted. See also <http://satrs.org.nz>.



THE SCIENCE AND THE ROMANCE OF LIFE

A review, by Margaret Whitwell

The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat

Oliver Sacks, Pan MacMillan,

Large Print Edition 2010

This fresh edition of favourite stories will win a bevy of new fans for the author, Oliver Sacks, a neurologist. He writes with a special discernment and flair. The unusual title comes from the first study-story of the same name. The man with the hat problem was unable to recognize faces and some other articles. He had lost the conceptual 'judgement of identity' of those objects.

In the preface, Oliver Sacks confesses that he is equally interested in both the science and the romance of life. We have always had the case history, he says, but we need the personal narrative too. "The patient's essential being is very relevant in the higher reaches of neurology and psychology." Hence his term 'study-story'. It soon becomes clear that besides attending to the exigencies of the neuroscience of his charges, the author builds a genuine empathy with each one.

Among the the tales of more modern happenings is the chapter, 'The Visions of Hildegarde,' which affords a piquant glimpse into the life of Hildegarde of Bingen, (1098-1150). She was a highly intelligent and literate woman who left exquisite accounts of her many visions. One of her drawings, which is pictured in the book, depicts a cascade of stars descending into the sea. Hildegarde, in a consciousness of rapturous intensity and mysticism, interpreted it as 'The Fall of Angels.' Neurologists have no doubt: "her vision was of a migrainous nature. She had experienced a shower of phosphenes in transit across her visual field." Other auras she described such as lights and figures, and so on, are not uncommon to migraine sufferers, although most often the events are regarded as just tiresome and meaningless.

As well as Hildegarde, a few of the other principal characters found peace in theist religion. 'The Lost Mariner' was one of these. Jimmy was an ex-navy man in his fifties when he sustained a severe loss of memory. The author asked: **"What can we do for a man who has lost his whole life, his past, his moorings in time?"** Luria replied: **"Man does not consist of memory alone, he has feelings, will, sensibilities, and moral being."** Jimmy's restlessness was stilled by gardening, which he loved, and he began attending Mass again in the chapel at the Home where he lived. The sisters noticed a rare attention and absorption that was

also present when he contemplated nature and art, or listened to music.

The courage of the human spirit with all its foibles is manifest in the twenty-four vignettes presented in the book. More notable to Sacks are the powers of survival: "The will to survive as a unique unalienated individual, is, absolutely, the strongest in our being, stronger than any impulse, stronger than disease," he declares, and he tells of 'Witty Ticky Ray', a young man battling Super-Tourette's Syndrome, yet who was almost fondly resigned to the dopamine excesses of his illness.

'The Twins' were two men who were arithmetic savants fascinated by prime numbers. The speed of their playful calculations defied analysis.

The book will have a general appeal, except perhaps to the most timid reader. It features the elusive interplay of the basically physical and the psyche. The themes have a detective-like element as fragments of diagnostic evidence are weighed against neurology, but always with the added dimension of 'heart'. And that, too, is among the most valued of the products given by the brain to the mind, is it not?

Margaret Whitwell, Tauranga

A CONTEXT FOR THE BIG ISSUES OF LIFE

Biblical scholar Bart Ehrman is recognized as a pre-eminent expert in the field of biblical criticism. He was recently presented with the Religious Liberty Award by the American Humanist Association. As part of his acceptance speech he made these remarks which bear on SoF's ongoing debate about our mission statement:

"Humanism must make a positive impact on people's lives and be looked upon, even by outsiders, as a good and healthy phenomenon. Among other things, humanists need to provide social outlets that mirror what believers have in their churches. When someone leaves the womb of the church, they need to have somewhere else to go. They need warm, loving, welcoming, safe communities of like-minded people where they can establish social networks and find fellowship with people who share their world views, their loves, hates, concerns, passions, and obsessions. They need contexts within which they can discuss the big issues of life, not just politics but also life-and-death issues. They need places where they can celebrate what is good in life and where they can work to overcome what is bad."

Published in Humanist November / December 2011

A NEW STORY CLEAR AND EVOCATIVE ... LIFE-ENHANCING AND AFFIRMING

A review by Margaret Gwynn

With or Without God: Why the way we live is more important than what we believe.

Gretta Vosper

Harper Perennial, 2009.

I personally found both title and subtitle of this book somewhat misleading. Vosper's main concern is defining a way forward for the Christian church, which she sees as having outlived its viability because it is burdened by outdated paradigms. A series of chapters outlines how to liberate and reconstruct Christianity in the hope of forming a new mix of its original "ideals, passion and hope-filled primordial elements". The world is seen as needing the radical simplicity lying at the core of Christianity and many other faiths – "an abiding trust in the way of love as expressed in just and compassionate living".

As far as the Bible is concerned, we need to jettison the idea that this compilation of ancient stories by many writers is the authoritative word of God for all time, and see it as the work of human beings trying to make sense of events and to find hope for the future. Not a new idea for Sea of Faith members, but Vosper is thorough in discarding and consigning to history all in the Bible that is not life-enhancing.

Where Jesus is concerned, we need to take seriously Schweitzer's conclusion that "a first century Jew has little to say to the ethical and moral struggles of the contemporary world." We must consider the values presented in the text and determine if they are relevant for our time. For example, living without care for the future (Luke 12:22-29) will not challenge us to take up our responsibility for the planet. Conscientious ethical oversight of our resources will probably bring about more lasting benefits than giving all we have to the poor (Matthew 19:21). But we can learn from the way Jesus criticised the systems of his time and do the same with the inflated salaries of industry bosses and the lavish praise given to material wealth.

The old story of redemption from sin and acceptance (provided one's belief was orthodox) is arrestingly simple and enormously powerful. It has also been incredibly damaging, leaving many people with deeply entrenched

feelings of unworthiness and an image of a capricious and sadistic God.

Can we find a new story which is as clear and evocative, but also life-enhancing and affirming?

Vosper suggests we drop the word 'god' altogether as too much associated with an other-worldly being who acts and intervenes. Instead we can use images like light, womb of life, surge of joy, etc, which do not imply an active being. She wonders if sacraments like baptism and communion can ever be rinsed clean from the stain of original sin. She hopes that in time the cross will lose its place at the centre of Christianity as we return to Jesus' main concern – how to live a radically ethical life.

But the book is not solely negative. In her chapter 'Responsible Change', Vosper sees the possibility of a very great role for the church if it uses only spiritually nurturing material from the Bible, presented as myth or metaphor, and develops new material. Above all, she asks for honesty and integrity and a willingness to admit we don't know. As churches are good at creating community, they could be places "where we reflect and process our life experiences with others in ways that encourage us to become compassionate, just and loving human beings".

In her Appendix, Vosper offers non-theistic openings and closings and prayers in which "In Jesus' name, we pray" becomes "As light into light, we pray, and "O God, in your mercy, hear our prayer" becomes "In joy and sorrow, we do not walk alone", or "In this time of need, may love abound".

She challenges us to let go past dreams and to dream again until we arrive at a place of shared values and beliefs where "we will be delighted by the kaleidoscopic beauty of the ways in which different lives, experiences, understandings and traditions have sought to express what to them is of the utmost worth, holy and sacred."

Margaret Gwynne, Napier

Gretta Vosper spoke on this subject at St Andrews on The Terrace, Wellington, in 2010. The lecture series on audio CD can be ordered from St Andrew's Trust, Box 5203, Wellington 6145; You will be invoiced for \$20 + p&p with the order. See also <http://satsr.org.nz>.



ACKNOWLEDGING MYSTERY

ADMISSION OF DEFEAT, OR SIGN OF MATURITY ?

Don Feist submitted this meditation for publication in February 2012

I actively don't believe it ever makes much sense to start a sentence with "The world can be divided into two kinds of people ..."

And yet I've recently become tempted to say: "The world is divided into two kinds of people: those who think the human mind is capable of (eventually) understanding everything, and those who hold that a lot of important things cannot, and never will be, understandable by even the smartest humans".

I believe this holds both in the field of science, and in the realm of spirituality/religion.

Consider this passage on the last page of a recent book by Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow:

"M theory" is the unified theory Einstein was hoping to find. The fact that we human beings – who are ourselves mere collections of fundamental particles of nature – have been able to come this close to an understanding of the laws governing us and our universe, is a great triumph. But perhaps the true miracle is that abstract considerations of logic lead to a unique theory that predicts and describes a vast universe full of the amazing variety that we see. If the theory is confirmed by observation, it will be the successful conclusion of a search going back more than 3,000 years. We will have found the grand design. (1)

This passage reminded me of the bold claim, made over a century ago and generally attributed to Lord Kelvin:

There is nothing new to be discovered in physics now. All that remains is more and more precise measurement.

These are two examples of what I see as hubris on the part of scientists - a belief that nothing is permanently beyond our capacity for understanding.

But there are scientists who take a different view. The late Richard Feynman, according to his biographer,

... believed in the primacy of doubt, not as a blemish upon our ability to know, but as the essence of knowing. The alternative to uncertainty is authority, against which science had fought for centuries. He jotted a note one day: '... teach how doubt is not to be feared but welcomed'. (2)

I see essentially the same acknowledgement of our human limitations in "The Universe Story" where Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry say:

... the story as told here is not the story of a mechanistic, essentially meaningless universe, but the story of a universe that has from the beginning had its mysterious self-organising power that, if experienced in any serious manner, must evoke an ever greater sense of awe than that evoked in earlier times ... (3)

These two kinds of scientists, can be paralleled by two kinds of people writing about religion. First, there are those who believe (at least they speak as though they believe) that they are capable of a clear understanding of God. Most of us, I imagine, have known people who comfortably, and with confidence start a sentence with: "*What God wants is*". We may even have been capable of saying such things ourselves at one time. And at present the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand is in the process of adopting a new statement of faith and commentary. The commentary includes such passages as this:

The sinful propensity of human beings is destined to end in death, and can have no share in the life of the kingdom of God. There will be no place for evil when the reign of God has been fully established. God's purpose for the end involves the final defeat of all that stands against God, including the crushing of Satan (4)

Is there anything in heaven or on earth that people who say this sort of thing will accept is beyond human understanding?

On the other hand, there are people who believe that humans can never be justified in being so specific or dogmatic on such matters. In "The Case for God" Karen Armstrong argues that being so clear-cut is largely a problem of the last four or five centuries. Earlier Christian scholars were more cautious:

For the fathers of the Church, scripture was a 'mystery' not because it taught a lot of incomprehensible doctrines, but because it directed the attention of Christians towards a hidden level of reality. (5)

Further on she explains in more detail:

Gabriel Marcel distinguishes between a problem, 'something met which bars my passage' and 'is before me in its entirety', and a mystery, 'something in which I find myself caught up, and whose essence is not before me in its entirety'. We have to remove a problem before we can proceed but we are compelled to participate in a mystery. It is ... perhaps a modern temptation – to turn a mystery into a problem and try to solve it by applying the appropriate technique. (6)

Mark Vernon argues, in his recent book *How to be an Agnostic*, that it is of the essence of being truly religious that we recognise the unknowability of God. He quotes with approval a writer who says:

.... on the one hand, many people who might think of themselves as religious because they go to church, are, in fact, not religious, because what they seek from church is certainty. (7)

In my earlier years, on the strength of a University science degree, and perhaps also by temperament, I leant towards the more ambitious view of the capabilities of human comprehension. But in recent years, I've become more and more convinced of the position Karen Armstrong, Gabriel Marcel and Mark Vernon expound. In particular, I've become more and more cautious about making any statements that begin with the word 'God'. Debate about whether, or in what sense, God 'exists' has come to seem to me futile, and for all practical purposes I am now agnostic about God.

This development has made me more and more certain that there will always be a large component of mystery limiting our understanding in other areas - about the beginning of things (the much vaunted 'Big Bang'), about space and time, about what is going on in the deepest recesses of every atom, and, not least, about what is going on inside me - in both my body and my mind.

It might have been a good thing if I could have achieved this level of humility 60 years sooner. Just possibly, being willing to acknowledge mystery that is permanently beyond all of us, is the beginning of wisdom.

*Donald Feist**

References:

- (1) *The Grand Design - New Answers to the Ultimate Questions of Life* Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, p. 181
- (2) *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman* James Gleick, p. 371
- (3) *The Universe Story* - Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry. p. 238
- (4) *Commentary on the Kupu Whakapono* para. 132 Online at: <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/about-us/statements-of-faith>
- (5) *The Case for God* Karen Armstrong. p. 99
- (6) *ibid*, p. 274
- (7) *How to be an Agnostic* Mark Vernon. p. 223, quoting John Caput in "On Religion".

* Farewell Don, and thank you for a wealth of contributions.
Noel Cheer, editor.

LARGE VEGETABLES, ECOLOGY, AND GOD

Worth looking in on if you find yourself in Scotland,
as did your Editor and his Punctuation Subeditor last year.

From Wikipedia:

The Findhorn Foundation is a Scottish charitable trust registered in 1972, formed by the spiritual community at the Findhorn Ecovillage, one of the largest intentional communities in Britain. It has been home to thousands of residents from more than 40 countries. The Foundation runs various educational programmes for the Findhorn community; it also houses about 40 community businesses such as the Findhorn Press and an alternative medicine centre.

The Findhorn Foundation and surrounding Findhorn Ecovillage community at The Park at Findhorn, a village in Moray, and at Cluny Hill College in Forres, is now home to more than 400 people.

The Findhorn Foundation and the surrounding community have no formal doctrine or creed. The Foundation offers a range of workshops, programmes and events in the environment of a working ecovillage. The programmes are intended to give participants practical experience of how to apply spiritual values in daily life.

Findhorn Ecovillage has been awarded a UN Habitat Best Practice designation.



The Common Ground is a statement of the values of the Findhorn Foundation community. These are excerpts:

1. **Spiritual Practice:** I commit myself to active spiritual practice and to align with spirit to work for the greatest good.
2. **Service:** I commit myself to the service of others and to our planet, recognising that I must also serve myself in order to practise this effectively.
3. **Personal Growth:** I commit myself to the expansion of human consciousness, including my own, and I recognise and change any of my personal attitudes or behaviour patterns which do not serve this aim. I take full responsibility for the spiritual, environmental and human effects of all my activities.
5. **Respecting Others:** I commit wholeheartedly to respect other people (their differences, their views, their origins, backgrounds and issues), other people's and the community's property, and all forms of life, holding these all to be sacred and aspects of the divine.
6. **Direct Communication:** I commit to using clear and honest communication with open-listening, heart-felt responses, loving acceptance and straightforwardness. In public and in private I will not speak in a way that maligns or demeans others. I will talk to people rather than about them. I may seek helpful advice, but will not seek to collude.
9. **Nonviolence:** I agree not to inflict my attitudes or desires (including sexual) on others.
13. **Agreements:** I commit to keeping agreements I have made and not to break or try to evade any laws, rules, or guidelines; to have honest dealings with all bodies and to pay all charges and dues owing.
14. **Commitment:** I commit to exercising the spirit of this statement of Common Ground in all my dealings.

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WHY FRIGHTENED HUMANS INVENTED GODS AND GOD

Nick Bagnall

Children learn with horror, often at a tender age, that pet animals and even people die. The prospect of sudden non-existence is a psychological threat that for many never goes away. Raised as most are, by parents or grand-parents, all small children have the feeling that there is a grown-up who will take care of them. Some people never get to grow out of this feeling. Honouring one's parents is one thing, but feelings of insecurity used to lead on to worship of dead ancestors, who could hopefully still provide protection after they were dead.

Of course that is also coupled with the departure of those whom we love. Soon we may be bereft of all those we love, and be completely alone. This is a very frightening thought, as is the thought of going alone into death. We bury this thought deep in our sub-conscious. Many lives are lived out in this fear.

Sickness and injury are a somewhat similar threat, and we often question 'why me, why this, why now'. In such circumstances, we may pray for recovery from this trauma. Thus we may temporarily suppress the fear within us. It was only natural to ask older people to help, even if they were already dead.

So it is that throughout history, we humans have developed imaginary creatures to help us to face up to these difficulties. The ancients called them gods. There were Greek gods, Roman gods, Norse gods and other pagan gods to name a few groups. They were so numerous, because people liked to choose one for themselves. Sometimes for a specific need, others because they were familiar to them.

These gods lived of course at the summits of mountains. People didn't at first have the inclination to climb them in those days. But a few did, like Moses, who then came back with stories of having met one god up there, who gave him some rather strange (in today's understanding) commandments. The claim that this god promised some land to the children of Israel, resulted in genocide, as recounted in the Bible. Some Zionist believers would like to replicate that by clearing out the Palestinians today.

Then there emerged the notion of there being one Supreme God, who was in overall charge. Depending on where you were born, you may have called this Jehovah, Allah, Jesus, Christ, Brahma, Shiva or again one of thousands of names. I will just use the Western term 'God' in the rest of this article. Again these were personal choices, to protect one from harm, especially solitude. We all realise how important human community is, for us to thrive.

This notion became so prevalent that it became a common assumption that every person needed a God. Such a Supreme God had to be all powerful, despite the illogicality of that. (God was supposed to have been protecting troops on both sides in many wars.) More usually you were taught about God as a child by your parents, then shared ideas with those around you, to make it more acceptable. I remember being told that there were 50 proofs that God existed. Clearly not one was valid, since the others would not be needed.

For many this constant companion was not enough. They also needed a promise that their own personal awareness would continue on after death. That provided that they behaved themselves, they would move on after death, to this mysterious place, called Heaven.

In ancient days, when it was unknown what was above the clouds, from which thunder and lightning came, that came to be the natural dwelling place of divinity. That must be where Heaven was. Added to this was the fallacy that if you didn't behave, you would be sent to suffer unspeakable suffering in Hell. There were, and still are, volcanos and hot mud pools which coloured the imagination as to what an after-life below ground would be like.

Even when the Bible was first translated into English, those beliefs still held sway. We should know better today, many people have flown above the clouds to find nothing there. Likewise we now understand the geological history of Earth.

For millennia it was the hope of a life after death which consoled people to live with the insecurities of their everyday lives. If they behaved, their god would ensure that they lived on in Heaven after their life ended. This moral code of course suited some people in society. If you were a ruler, it was in your interest that your subjects did 'as they were told'.

However, what was soon forgotten was this; all the gods (including the idea of one God) had been invented by humans. Humans were not made by God in his/her own image, but gods were made by humans in their own image of how God should be. 'Know Thyself' was ancient Greek advice, not 'Know God'.

Charismatic leaders arose, who declared that they, and often only they, had messages directly from this Supreme Being. Disobey at your peril was their message. What power to control others that generated.

Religious faith and state power became blended in the Holy Roman Empire. Later for example in the UK, with Kings / Queens being appointed as Head of the Anglican Church, it was claimed that the Crown's authority came directly from God. Clearly a control mechanism. That Crown continues today in New Zealand

Naturally, many people who didn't, or couldn't, think for themselves, thought it was good to have somebody tell them what to believe. Even if they found it hard to believe some of the stories which they were told, they found comfort in 'knowing' that there was an invisible hand always supporting them, which would still do so when they became ill, or worse still died.

Is it now time for humanity to realise that this world is all that there is, and that anybody who says otherwise is only trying to manipulate you for their own ends. The truth is cold and hard. Realising it enhances our joy in life.

In his book *Love is Letting Go of Fear* Gerald Jampolsky said it all in the title. We can choose to let go of fear, and the book tells one how to do that. To retain an attitude of Love, is recommended. We are all able to do that if we wish.

M Scott Peck in *The Road Less Travelled* says that whether we realise it or not, to love is a choice that we make. Like

many he seems to be coming round to the notion that God is Love. He clearly believes in this mythical God, but why?

Even today many people fear to let go of this illusory benign parent-figure in the sky. Why? Is it because they haven't thought of an alternative? Let's try one.

Evolution is now established as the practical way in which our planet developed first plants, then insects and animals. So far the limit of such development appears to be Humanity. However we do have the capacity to bring this process to an abrupt end, if we don't get more in tune with the environment.

Humanity has evolved over many millennia from the animals that are our ancestors. Realisation of this is closely followed by the realisation that we are all related within the human family, as well as being related to all living things on Earth. Unfortunately it seems that we need to eat some of them in order to live.

What is more, we are also related to inorganics such as air and water. We could live for a few months without food, perhaps a few days without water, but only a matter of minutes without air. Yet we don't have to remember to breathe.

Not only that, but the air that we breathe has molecules that have been re-cycled around for millennia. Indeed if Jesus lived two thousand years ago, he could have breathed some of the same molecules which you have breathed in your lifetime. We do have Life in us all, while we're alive. So what is there not to love in this world?

Any attempt to imagine the vast expanse of the Universe, is a very humbling thing. That whatever created it would have the slightest interest in each one of us is highly unlikely, if indeed it was created by an entity.

On the other hand, it does seem that all creatures living on Earth die here and then cease to exist. Once the Life is gone, their bodies are re-cycled. Why should that not happen to humans? We are not that special.

When those we know die, we may realise that we still have in our memories everything that we experienced with them. Yes, they are not in our presence, but our memories can remain as long as we choose. They will have gone away from us from time to time in the past. Only if we deny that, can we suffer, as we are cutting off a part of our own memories.

However, while we are alive, we have the Life force within us, which makes it possible for us to find enjoyment for ourselves here. Primarily that may manifest as a profound Inner Peace for those who choose to seek within. Such peace does make it easier for us to go out into the world and find more pleasure for ourselves in helping our relatives (the whole of living existence.)

We have the option of enjoying every day of our life, or not. That is an inner choice. To wake each morning is a blessing, if only we can accept that. What we do with our day is up to us. I have personally found that meditation and a weekly hour of silence helpful.

For me the silence is all important. Rather than the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes, I prefer to focus on the *sum ante cogito* or I am before I think. The Latin for now is *iam*. So I am *iam*. To return to simply Being Now is always refreshing.

Meditation eventually becomes a state of peace and quiet in the mind, which can be available at all times of the day.

As Gerald Jampolsky says Inner Peace is the goal, we can always seek it. We have no need for gods, if we can let go of our fears, and just Love Life.

Perhaps then humanity will have really matured.

Nick Bagnall

FROM THE CHAIR

As I look back over the commentary offered on a wide range of topics by the contributors to last year's Newsletters, I notice that some – and particularly the authors of several of the book reviews – were perhaps motivated by the tremendous events and changes occurring on the planet and in our human world. They seem to question more acutely than before much of what we have accepted or even regarded as inviolable in the past.

At the same time within the Sea of Faith in New Zealand, 2011 was a year of continued discussion about our name, objects and activities. This was summarised in the late Don Feist's question in this year's January issue: **"Is what we are doing as the Sea of Faith the best that we could be doing?"** Don wrote this after discussion in a Steering Group meeting to encourage us, twenty years after the Network began, to debate and make suggestions about our future direction. We look forward to a lively and thought-provoking discussion. Perhaps in this we can celebrate that we may still reflect the image of the sea in affirming **"ceaseless change, never standing still, never fixed, always in motion, having no permanent form or shape. A contemporary faith which rides the wave, the swell, embracing perpetual motion – a world-view which offers value, purpose and meaning – a 'faith'."**¹

We can consider this too, as we approach Conference 2012 in which we aim to focus our discussion and reflect on the values which predominate in, and direct our lives today.

To begin, the Steering Committee is grateful to the Auckland Arrangements Committee for their willingness to undertake the detailed planning that is involved. The success of previous Auckland Conferences promises an occasion which we can all look forward to. Bearing the title ...

THE REVALUING OF ALL VALUES: WHAT VALUES DO WE NEED TO SURVIVE?

... the Conference will be held at St Cuthbert's College in Epsom, Auckland from the 5th to the 7th of October. Details of the Speakers appear in Group Letter No 9 (see the Website). They include Sir Lloyd Geering, Dr Val Grant, Professor Andrew Bradstock, and Dr John Peet. **Detail of each presentation, together with registration material, will accompany the May Newsletter.**

In this context, too, we can ask "Is this the best that we could be doing?" We anticipate that, amongst other things, we will think about: when and how values arise, when and how they need to change, whether we need to question today's values, and whether we need new values.

St Cuthbert's can accommodate 150 at the plenary sessions and 125 living-in. Of the living-in accommodation most of the beds are in clusters of 4-5 single bed cubicles.

This year we are governed by our contract with St. Cuthbert's to provide all Conference material and bookings by the 18th September. This means that we must **receive YOUR registration by 5pm on Friday 14th September.**

Accommodation allocations are made on a first-come-first-serve basis, so you may now like to begin to think about keeping that weekend free, planning to attend Conference, and to look forward once again to a stimulating time of discussion and meeting old and new friends.

Natali Allen, Chairperson 2011-2012



¹

From "Frequently Asked Questions" at www.sof.org.nz/ukfaq.htm

Edna Mae Cairns

Edna Mae Ward, known as Mae, was born in Invercargill in 1937. She was the eldest of four children, educated at a local rural school and Southland Girls' High School. On leaving school Mae trained as a teacher in Dunedin and specialised in speech therapy. While in Dunedin Mae attended St. Stephen's Church, North Dunedin, and here she met Ian Joseph Cairns who was studying at the University of Otago. Ian's studies over the next few years took him to Edinburgh as he prepared to undertake missionary work in Indonesia. Mae married Ian on 7 March 1959. They left for Bandung in Java one year later, in March 1960.

Life was not easy for Mae during her years in Indonesia as she and her young family faced enormous challenges and physical hardships within a country confronting political and economical tensions. But she faced them with a strength of character that enabled her family to maintain a balanced view and to make many lasting friendships with the students they daily encountered and these enabled her to look back on her Indonesian experience with a fondness that never ceased to amaze.

They returned to New Zealand and Mae became the lady of the Manse at First Church Invercargill in 1981. In 1985 Mae became Assistant Librarian at the Hewitson Library, Knox College, when Ian took up a lecturing position at Holy Cross College in 1985, and later minister at First Church Dunedin. She held the library position until 1999.

Mae was the Librarian readers sought. She knew her stuff. She was dedicated, diligent and determined. She offered a service with a genuineness that inspired, a listening ear to many an intern, she found obscure titles, obtained whatever books were required through interloan, and could engage in lofty theological discussions.

As a past user noted, "She and I talked of life, the Universe, and Turkish bishops with almost-unpronounceable names ... There was always a glint in her eye, a smile on her face, and a kind word on her lips. When I was tearing my hair out, she was the acme of calm..."

Mae had a great love for books and she devoured the new books that the Library acquired. She was highly delighted to discover a new way to understand her faith through the writings of Don Cupitt. So much so that she introduced them to Ian and together they explored a new and exciting approach to reinterpreting their long held evangelical traditions. During 1992 they organised a six week programme in which a video series on 'Sea of Faith' and non-realism, fronted by Don Cupitt, were shown in the Burns Hall. These evenings were well attended and culminated in a seminar on 31 October 1992 led by the V. Rev. Prof Lloyd Geering. Sixty-

five people attended, much to Mae's delight, and the decision was made that a 'Sea of Faith' group be formed in Dunedin.

The first meeting held on 25 February, 1993 in the Manse, had an attendance of 21. Mae enjoyed this more intimate opportunity to question, discover and discuss the challenges to the traditional interpretations of her faith journey. In fact she would "constantly remind people that they should always try and approach the various discussion topics from a 'Sea of Faith' perspective". It frustrated her considerably when people appeared to overlook the essence of a non-realist's interpretation.

Mae was Secretary of the Dunedin branch from its inception until mid-1995. In 1996 Mae agreed to join a small group who would be named 'members' for the purpose of incorporation. She remained the national contact for the Dunedin Group until 1997.

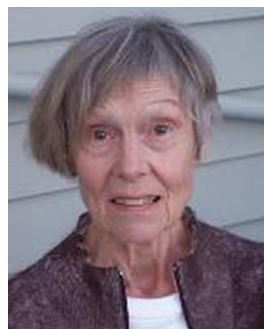
The highlight each year for Mae was the national Sea of Faith Network Conferences. The ideas espoused in lectures and addresses challenged Mae who discussed them in great depth when she returned to Dunedin. Many of the Conference scripts are underlined and annotated and she often followed up the various aspects that required developing or she disagreed with.

Mae and Ian left Dunedin in 1999 when Ian became so ill that he required additional care. Mae's commitment and support to and of the Dunedin Sea of Faith Network during its first six years left a strong impression on many who continue to attend today. Her personal journey, however, led her in time to acknowledge that the Sea of Faith network was a faith community in itself which she eventually moved beyond.

Mae's commitment to people continued, the strong sense to social injustice that developed during her Indonesian years was deeply instilled. When in Wellington, Mae became an active supporter in the Wellington Central Labour Party. The Editor of the Dominion Post became familiar with her many concerns around the inequalities in our society as she posted letters to the paper on a regular basis.

During 2011 Mae became ill and it robbed her of all the skills and strategies she had pulled together over many years that would have enabled her to weather the despair that locked her into herself. Mae's death by choice was not a denial of life so much as a cry of despair for more life.

Mae lived a full life with delight and happiness, caring and friendship, sharing and love. She left footprints on our souls and will be remembered by those of us whose lives she touched.



Yvonne Wilkie

Donald Chapple Feist

The NZ Sea of Faith has lost one of its pillars through the recent and sudden death of Don Feist.

Don was a founding member of the Network and was an important member of the Steering Committee from 2003 to 2006, and from 2008 until the Christchurch Conference of 2011. Because of his strong theological background and the wealth of his knowledge and experience his leadership was greatly respected. He will be sorely missed in Dunedin where he was the driving force for many years and we shall miss him at Conferences, where he so often led Core groups.

Don was born in Christchurch, in 1930, the son of Murray Feist, a Presbyterian minister. Thus Don knew what it was like to live in ecclesiastical circles from the very beginning but, as if this was not enough, he then married the daughter of a minister. Don's father-in-law was Luke Jenkins, a theologian of some weight who had recently transferred to the Presbyterian Church from being Principal of the Baptist Theological College, having found the New Zealand Baptists much more conservative than those in UK from which he came. So both Don and Margaret were firmly rooted in church tradition, but at the more liberal end of the spectrum.

Don and Margaret were married in 1955, by which time Don had graduated with a B.Sc. and B.A and was soon to complete a B.D. at the end of his final year of theological training at Knox College. After serving five years in the very scattered parish of Taumarunui in the King country, Don was called to be the first minister of Calvin, a new parish in Gore. If I remember correctly, that is where I first met Don. Gore, a leading town of the deep South, was theologically conservative and Don was courageously flying the liberal flag. It was during the theological controversy of 1966-7 that Don was instrumental in inviting me and another theological teacher to conduct a full day's seminar at Calvin Church in order to discuss the issues. I

preached in Don's Church the next day.

From Gore, Don was called to Maori Hill Church in Dunedin, where he served for seventeen years before opting to spend his final years of active ministry as the assistant minister of Knox Church Dunedin. Throughout his ministry Don played a leading role in the activities of the wider church as well as those of his congregations and was valued as a person who could get things done and done well. And that is how he will be remembered in the Sea of Faith, both in the Dunedin group and the annual Conferences.

Many felt drawn to Don, as I was myself, for his open honesty and genuineness. Don never stopped growing and exploring. Don and Margaret lived and worked as an inspiring unit and were only three years short of celebrating their Diamond Jubilee. So it was the suddenness of Don's death that took us all by surprise, with less than a fortnight for him to come to terms with the diagnosis. Yet even that illustrated so poignantly the kind of person he was. He seemed to be more at ease with what awaited him than those around him and he was doing his best to help his immediate family become as fully

reconciled to his death as he was himself. Just a week before he died he wrote, "I understand myself now to be in a zone that does not involve dogma or doctrine at all. There is still faith in the sense of big assumptions about how things are in the universe and in all reality, an acceptance that certain values (faith, hope and love, for example) are givens. But I see all that as separate from doctrinal propositions. For me, there's a tragic irony in the way in which the Church, by denying the

reality of death and talking so much about heaven and hell, has inhibited people from responding fully to the life we have".

Here spoke a man of faith par excellence who, to his very end, exemplified all that the Sea of Faith Network stands for.



Lloyd Geering