

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 105, April 2013

THE SEVEN TENETS OF *THE* THEOLOGY *OF* THEOPRAXY

Reflections, by Jock Crawford, on *God is the Good We Do, Theology of Theopraxy*
by Michael Benedikt. 2007. New York. Bottino Books

Michael Benedikt's Seven Tenets (page 213)

1. God is not a person or thing or principle or spirit, God is activity of a certain sort: the free doing of good, where by 'good' we mean that which preserves, honours, or promotes all forms and instances of life.
2. God was not the Creator, nor is God all-powerful or omniscient, God is the newest and weakest 'force' in the universe, a human production, even as God (good-doing) produces humaneness in turn.
3. Freedom is necessary to doing good, and good-doing is necessary to producing more freedom.
4. Science is the friend of true religion, which is faith justified by works.
5. The development of ever fairer and more compassionate laws as well as more broadly life-sustaining social and cultural practices is God's mandate, and our task.
6. Long-evolved religions present powerful and highly specific rituals, images, arguments, narratives, and commandments whose purpose is to effect Tenet 5, and can be respected and practiced without significant alteration when they succeed in doing so.
7. Both the idea and substance of God remain open to evolution.

A couple of Internet reviews:

"To see God as the youngest and weakest force in the universe, rather than the oldest and strongest, lifts eyebrows with most people. You have to reverse roles; God being the child and you being the parent. God's existence 'happens' or is born with every instance of good doing. Somehow, looking at it this way replaces the 'fear of God' with the pull to create and nurture God. It opens a discussion among thinking people of all religions, about our responsibility in creating the good in this world."

"This book gives a refreshing new way to make sense of the concept of God. There is good in most religions of the world, yet I could never quite find one that rang true to me. The wisdom I found in this book has given me a new tool with which to accept the various religious traditions without so much worry over the particulars. If the practice, religious or otherwise, results in good of a concrete nature actually being done, it is the practice of God (theopraxy). It rings true, no matter what church you go to."

I myself think this elegant book is a tour de force by a gifted author. It deserves careful and even repeated reading by all those with an interest in contemporary philosophical, religious and spiritual questions. The book is exceedingly well written and organised into four sections: Declarations, Explanations, Arguments and Reflections. Copious footnotes enhance the main text which is remarkable for its clarity of thought and expression. Michael Benedikt has done us a great service by the writing of this stunning contribution to contemporary thought.

Theopraxy may not be a word in common usage but its meaning and relevance if applied to daily life could greatly enhance our lives on both an individual and societal level.

God is the Good we Do is an idea with an intellectual integrity and simplicity which serves as a wonderful antidote to the diet of dishonesty and mayhem we are served daily by the news media.

Here is an excerpt from page 138 which gives some of the flavour and thinking behind the author's intent:

THE TRUTH is that some measure of goodness is all around. Every iota of tact, every laugh among friends, every moment of patience and offering of help, is an instance of God. Every obedience to law, every washing of hands, feeding a pet, or letting someone sleep is God at work. This is what it means to know that God is immanent and in our hands. That we can walk peaceably and work respectfully among other people, that we tolerate their foibles and can expect the same from them, are miracles that do not appear miraculous because they are 'normal'. And they are normal because they are built upon millennia of learning and transmission of the Word of God (or Way of Heaven), which itself evolves over time. We need only contemplate with the existentialists our ever-present freedom to do almost anything – including lie, murder, steal, dishonour, and abandon – to see that good-doing is always up to us, that it is always a choice, and a choice of which we can later be proud even if we were not fully aware at the time that we were choosing.

Recall the hells-on-earth that dot human history. Bring to mind the ones that exist right now somewhere on the planet. Now look out of your window. Every bird not shot, every walker not carrying a gun, every car waiting patiently for a traffic light to change, every repairman writing up a job fairly, every person dying in a fresh hospital bed rather than on a battlefield or in a gutter, every street that is swept, every bush that is trimmed, every toddler studying a worm ... is God evidenced and instanced.

Look upon these things and be glad. Rejoice at peace and decency. See that for the most part your

'cup runneth over', and more: that by your actions you are one reason for that cup 'running over' for others. Call it the wonder of doing. "The wonder of doing", Abraham Joshua Heschel thought, "is no less amazing than the marvel of being....and it may prompt us to discover 'the divinity of deeds.' In doing sacred deeds we may begin to realize that there is more in our doing than ourselves, that in our doing there is something—nay, someone—divine. It is 'through the ecstasy of deeds' that we learn 'to be certain of the hereness of God.'"

Jock Crawford, Hamilton

Michael Benedikt ...

... is to be one of the Keynote Speakers at this year's Conference. He is the author of *God is the Good We Do* which is described by its publisher, Bottino Books, as a "critique of both traditional and modern arguments for and against the existence of God, with a discussion of the nature of good and the problem of evil, proposing that God exists only as human moral activity, that God is practiced: theopraxy.



There is an item about him on Youtube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zw9tScdg_o

"An honest man's the noblest work of God."

This was noted by Alexander Pope nearly 300 years ago in *An Essay on Man. Epistle III*, line 248.) It has been adapted by Samuel Butler, Robert Green Ingersoll and probably hundreds of others too.

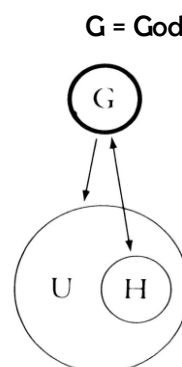
"An honest God is the noblest work of Man"

God, Universe and Humans

From *God Is The Good We Do* pp32-34

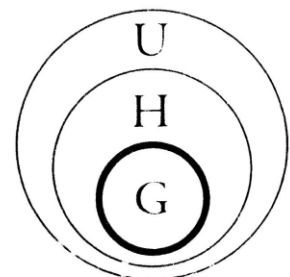
Theism

"God is Personal"



Theopraxy

"God-Making"



ALL ABOUT US

SEA OF FAITH

EXPLORING VALUES, SPIRITUALITY AND MEANING

Our formal name is The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Inc.

We are an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.

We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

The TV series both traces the decline of traditional Christian influence in the West in the past 250 years and invites the viewer to consider what might replace it. In New Zealand the Sea of Faith Network provides a forum for the continued exploration.

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 each year, maintains a website at www.sof.org.nz, 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 Beverley Smith

La Colline, 8A Adams Road, Whataupoko, Gisborne 4010, (06) 868-8208 beverleys@clear.net.nz

The Secretary is Laurie Chisholm

117 Collins Rd, RD4 Christchurch 7674, (03) 325-2142, 021-201-0302 laurie.chisholm@ihug.co.nz

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 and not on paper.

To join, 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 Peter Cowley (pcowley@paradise.net.nz) your mailing details.

Members may borrow books, CDs, and DVDs from the Resource Centre which is managed by Suzi Thirlwall (07) 578-2775 susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz Refer to the catalogue on the website.

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, Porirua 5022, (04) 236-7533 0274-483-805 noel@cheer.org.nz

CONTENTS

Newsletter 105, April 2013

1. The Theology of Theopraxy

The thesis of Keynote Speaker Michael Benedikt

3. All About Us

The who, why, when and where of Sea of Faith in New Zealand

4. Then Tell Me a *New, New* Story

Shirley Dixon continues last month's article.

5. Faith in Cyberspace

Videos on YouTube

5: *Honest To God* 50 Years On

Laurie Chisholm talks of the bombshell of 1963

6: Remember The Jesus Seminar

Now there's the Christianity Seminar

6: Timetable

For this year's Conference

7: Book Reviews

Faithiest; Why Weren't We Told; In Defense of Doubt; The Great Disruption

8: Bits and Pieces

Metaphysics; Depth; Your Good Fortune

10: God's Unemployment Problem

Tom Hall asks about bringing God down to earth

12: From The Chair

A miscellany from Bev Smith

* * * * *

HEAVEN AND HELL

A Vietnamese Buddhist Parable

Imagine two tables laden with food.

Diners at both tables are provided with extra long chopsticks.

At one table diners are trying to feed themselves, but the chopstick length prevents the food reaching their mouths. *This is Hell.*

Those at the other table have learnt to cooperate with each other and feed each other across the table. *This is Heaven.*

First printed in Newsletter 94

NOW ... TELL ME A *New, New* STORY

Shirley Dixon of Titahi Bay comments.

In part 1 (Newsletter 104, February 2013), I said that I can no longer accept the cosmology or theology of Arabella K. Hankey's hymn: *Tell me the old, old story*. I need a 'new, new story' – a story that supports my humanity, that affirms this life on this earth as my real life, and that does not leave me in life-long infantilism and sinfulness, that does not rely on the positing of an afterlife.

I would like to be able to tell you that I have some wise words to say on a possible 'new, new story'; however, this is an impossibility. I believe that one story can no longer suffice. I need multiple stories - contemporary stories as well as traditional ones, secular stories as well as scriptural ones, stories written by and about women as well as by men, stories with a scientific bent as well as those that are intuitive and mystical, stories that address contemporary realities and issues. I need stories that recognise and discuss values and meanings that I can commit to wholeheartedly, stories that are capable of providing guidance as I live day by day.

In my selection of stories it is essential that I attend to both aspects of Karen Armstrong's logos / mythos distinction as I need stories that speak to my heart as well as my head. So I need novels, myths and fantasies as well as history, biography and philosophy.

One of the strengths of the old, old story was that it encapsulated important ideas in memorable metaphors and personifications, and I also need this from the new, new stories to enable me to more easily transact with their meanings. The old, old story was codified into expressive formulas – from Spirituals, to Plainsong, to Quaker quiet, to the theatricality of a Papal High Mass – that spoke to people sensuously and emotively as well as intellectually. And such ways of transmitting stories remain powerful and essential. So I need stories that are presented orally and through poetry, paintings, theatrical productions and movies, as well as in written texts.

The old, old story provided focus, certainty, and authority; it was sanctified in scripture and endorsed by the authority of God and the church. But there is no longer a single focus, or a single certainty, and probably (beyond living within the law of the land) no over-riding authority, and a fixed and limited canon is no longer sufficient. I need new stories that will help me to live with uncertainty, that will assist me to be self-responsible in this complex and multi-faceted familial, social and intellectual contemporary world.

I need stories that are capable of 'speaking' to me as I am, and as our world is now. Many of the stories that appeal to me now are not those that spoke to me when I was younger, and will probably not be the ones that are most meaningful to me in the years to come. Similarly, those stories that speak to you are probably different from those that are meaningful to me.

The good news is that there are plenty – thousands upon thousands - of possible stories to choose from. The bad news is that there are so many that I don't know how to go about finding them!

There are, of course, reviews of books, plays, movies, and art exhibitions in the weekend papers and the *Listener* - as well as the SoF newsletter. But even better is that, as humans, we are social creatures who live in relationship with others - and for introductions to good stories there is none better than the suggestions of friends.

So, I end with some stories that recently have spoken to me eloquently: a memoir: *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* by Elisabeth Tova Bailey; a novel: *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* by Rachel Joyce; an autobiography: *Leaving Alexandria* by Richard Holloway; a movie: *The Well Digger's Daughter*, and my most recent 'find' – a travel book and meditation on growing old: *Travels with Epicurus: A Journey to a Greek Island in Search of a Fulfilled Life* by Daniel Klein.

Shirley Dixon, Titahi Bay

FAITH IN CYBERSPACE VIDEOS ON YOUTUBE

There is an increasing store of video material of interest to SoF people on YouTube. Here are just a few:

Is Secular Religion a Contradiction in Terms?

A conversation between Sydney Buddhist teacher Winton Higgins and New Zealand Christian theologian Lloyd Geering. Recorded at St Andrews on The Terrace, Wellington, New Zealand, on Friday 15 February 2013.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Hj1SNwHmSA>

Religion in the Public Square

This is a voice – call it a think-tank – that promotes public discussion of public issues with no agenda other than to do the decent thing by those issues. Broadcast 17 October 2012

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9G7FVlr8Nw>

Honest to God

50 Years on

Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch gives us what is likely to be the first of many appraisals of John A. T. Robinson's revolutionary book of 1963.

Reading Bishop John Robinson's book *Honest to God* as a second year university student 50 years ago was a turning point for me.

I bought the book from the Presbyterian Bookroom in Dunedin's Octagon on Friday night and had read it by the middle of Sunday afternoon. It turned my interest from science to theology and began an intellectual journey that continues today in my involvement with Sea of Faith. Bishop Robinson introduced me to Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Buber and Tillich. I became an enthusiast for Tillich's re-statement of religion:

God is being-itself, sin is existential estrangement, salvation is the new being, faith is the courage to be.

Re-reading the book 50 years later, I am struck by Robinson's openness and the exploratory, questioning nature of his thinking. Far from "having the answers" or "defending the faith, once and for all delivered to the saints," as bishops are supposed to do, he is letting us in on the doubts that motivate him to keep exploring, and engaging in a re-thinking that he hopes will liberate Christianity, bringing out its intrinsic value for our future. Although he is aware that his questioning will seem radical, even heretical to many, "the one thing of which I am fairly sure is that, in retrospect, it will be seen to have erred in not being nearly radical enough."

The book awakened heady hopes. Its publisher claimed that it was the fastest-selling book of serious theology in the history of the world. For those who did not live through the 60s or would like a reminder, I recommend Susan Howatch's novel *Scandalous Risks*, a novel that accurately portrays the Church of England at this time, and the revolutionary impact *Honest to God* had.

Sadly, those hopes have not (yet) been realized. Today, most church thinking seems bland and contourless. Controversy, such as that surrounding Lloyd Geering, was discouraged for fear of upsetting the faithful. Even Bishop Robinson himself did not continue to be a prophetic voice; *Honest to God* was the height of his popularity and his New Testament scholarship become increasingly conservative, with the defence of an early date for the gospel of John for example.

What excited me most about *Honest to God* was the Tillich-inspired **re-thinking of God**. While God was not for me a sort of grandfather in the sky, He was still in some sense 'out there.' Not 'up there', but 'out there,' beyond, transcendent. Robinson suggested the metaphor of depth instead of height,

and borrowed Tillich's terminology to describe God as the ground of being.

The other key ideas that Robinson wrestled with were Bultmann's **demythologizing of the New Testament**, Bonhoeffer's **religionless Christianity** and Joseph Fletcher's **situational ethics**. Bultmann argued that the central message of the New Testament is in the form of myth: a divine being descends to earth, takes the form of a human being, dies and rises again to the heavenly realm, bringing about our salvation, enabling us to enter that realm too. We moderns do not believe in myths, but we must translate that myth into modern language to get what it really means. Bonhoeffer's paradoxical formulation is perhaps best understood as advocating that Christianity move beyond particular features of the religion of his time. Convincing people of the emptiness and meaninglessness of their lives, so as to soften them up for the Christian message, and praying for an omnipotent God to intervene in the problems of the world or your own personal difficulties, are two such features. Situational ethics means not coming to a real-life situation with prescribed answers or absolute rules, but allowing the decision about what is right and wrong to emerge from the situation.

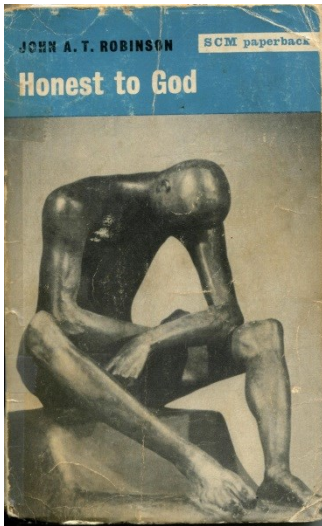
Back then, we liked the sound of "being itself," "ground of being" and "power of being" but we didn't really know what they meant and were unaware of the rich history of associations, from ancient Greek philosophy through to the Existentialism of Sartre and Heidegger, that they have in European ears. When linguistic analysis came along, we were

therefore unable to effectively defend Tillich's ideas.

I find it helpful to think of God-talk like this: The centipede had no trouble

walking, in spite of the large number of legs it had to coordinate. But when it was asked how it managed to do this, it thought about it, became confused and got its legs in a tangle. Similarly, people once talked of God naturally and without reflection. Then along came rational thinking and we tried to make sense of God-talk, ending up with oversimplifications or distortions and losing the ability to talk of or to God. 'God' is just a word, so it must be possible to translate it, saying what we mean using other words, but that doesn't mean it is easy to capture what our unreflecting ancestors wanted to convey. The whole tradition of trying to prove the existence of a divine being was a wrong path, one that began when biblical religion met Greek philosophy.

"... to help us move beyond the theism-atheism divide."



Richard Dawkins has a clear view about this: "...if the word 'God' is not to become completely useless, it should be used in the way people have generally understood it: to denote a supernatural creator that is 'appropriate for us to worship'." Tillich's achievement is to have argued against this in the name of religion. Viewing God as a being, one among others in the universe, even if the

highest or first, is religiously inadequate and inappropriate to the object. Admittedly, the word 'God' will become useless if it does not connect with experience, and we need to be wary of experience-less discussion of experiences that are foreign to us and of merely analyzing the history of the concept. In the meantime, a whole lot of translations of the word 'God' are on offer: a name for our highest ideals and values, the oneness of the universe, the power of evolution, and so on.

Recent times are seeing a resurgence of interest in re-thinking God, continuing in the tradition of Robinson and Tillich: Nigel Leaves' *The God Problem* and Michael Benedikt's *God is the Good We Do* are examples.

Both of these authors are speakers at this year's Conference, so we can expect a lively debate and continuing attempts to be "honest to God."

Laurie Chisholm, March 2013

* * * * *

REMEMBER THE JESUS SEMINAR?

Now there's the **Christianity Seminar**.

The Westar Institute's Christianity Seminar aims to move away from an understanding of Christianity that has been predetermined by the canon and to reconstruct the conversation and debate from the formative moments of the movement. Some questions on its five-year agenda include,

- How did Christianity end up as the official religion of the Roman Empire?
- How did the historical Jesus become the second person of the Trinity?
- How did the earliest followers of Jesus self-identify?
- How did a movement birthed in Judaism come to be anti-Jewish?
- Was the canon the necessary outcome of Christianity?

CONFERENCE 2013 TIMETABLE

(GOOD DRAFT)

FRIDAY 4 October

- 12:30pm–2:00pm **Committees meet over lunch**
2:00pm–2:45pm **Registration.** Tea and Coffee
3:00pm–3:30pm **Conference Opening**
3:30pm–4.30pm **Opening Address: Rev. Prof. Sir Lloyd Geering** *Why Honest to God blew the roof off the church, and let in the fresh air.*
4:30pm–5:30pm **Core Groups**
5:30pm–6:00pm **Happy (half) Hour**
6:00pm–7:00pm **DINNER**
7:00pm–8:00pm **A.G.M.**

SATURDAY 5 October

- 7:00am–**Meditation** space open
7:30am–8.30 am **BREAKFAST**
8:30am–9:30 am **Keynote Speaker: Nigel Leaves**
9:30am–10:30am **Core Groups**
10:30am–11:00am **MORNING TEA**
11:00am–noon **Keynote Speaker: Michael Benedikt.**
Noon–1:00pm **Core Groups**
1:00pm–1:30pm **PACKED LUNCH**
1:30pm–6:00pm **VISITS** (Details to be announced) or **WORKSHOPS**
1:30pm–3:30pm **Workshop: Shirley Murray**
3:30pm–4:00pm Afternoon Tea
4:00pm–6:00pm **Workshop: Tom Hall, Robert Frost, a humanist in verse.**
6:00pm–7:00pm **Happy Hour**
7:00pm–8:00pm **DINNER**
8:00pm–10:00pm **ENTERTAINMENT** – *The Rag Tag Scoobie Doobie Good Time Band*

SUNDAY 6 October

- 7:00am **Meditation** space open
7:30am – 8.30am **BREAKFAST**
8:30am – 9:30am **Keynote Speaker: Winton Higgins**
9:30am – 10:30am **Core Groups**
10:30am – 11:00am **MORNING TEA**
11:00am – 12:30pm **PANEL DISCUSSION**
12:30pm – 1:00pm **Conference Wind Up and Introduction to Conference 2014**
1:00pm **Packed LUNCH**
1:30pm **New Steering Committee Meets**

BOOK REVIEWS

A New Term and A Fresh Approach

Faithleist

by Christopher Stedman,
published by Beacon Press.

This biographical account is by a formerly committed Christian, a gay, young man. He was disillusioned by the double-standards and prejudices of other Christians in the United States, became an atheist, and then found that too many atheists were expending all their energy in being anti-Church.

Chris Stedman is now a Harvard academic, and works country-wide at promoting inter-faith dialogue with believers of many religions. His finding is that a tolerant attitude and a patient dialogue about shared values and ethical standards will produce inter-personal understanding and acceptance between almost any pairing of believers – or non-believers. He has been asked about a possible visit to New Zealand in 2013, and is considering this possibility.

The word '**Faithleist**' has become almost a term of abuse in the United States. It is leveled against professed Atheists by Christian believers when they feel that they are under fanatical atheist attacks. The author embraces it as a book title, at least. One does not need to have perused Wittgenstein to have accepted that the words we use can become traps, or that human language is an arbitrary collection of sounds which rarely convey the full meaning of the communicator's thoughts or intentions.

Some observers have suggested that Atheism can itself become a 'religion', or a belief system. It tends to engage its followers in diatribes against any form of church – as evinced in the writings of the late Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris or Richard Dawkins. The experience of Christopher Stedman was that he

found a greater preparedness to listen, and to engage in constructive dialogue, amongst Christian believers than he did amongst some other atheists.

'Religiosity' in the United States of America has become a war of words comparable to the huge divisions in society which was engendered by such

controversies as that on abortion. Gay marriage as a developing possibility is currently engendering a similar uproar. This is an account of how homophobia within Christianity alienated a gay man, who later developed his own humanism in constructive, inter-faith discussions. As one who has stood on both sides of the divide, he is uniquely placed to provide a meeting-place for religious and atheist people.

Reviewed by Peter Creevey, Christchurch.

A Handbook on 'Progressive' Christianity

Why Weren't We Told?

Rex A. E. Hunt & John W. H. Smith, editors
Polebridge Press

With a foreword by the Rev. Lloyd Geering, this is a collection of notes, ideas, sermons and articles, by a wide variety of theologians and thinkers, most of them New Zealanders or Australians. It has been put together for Polebridge Press, of Willamett University, at Salem, Oregon. The Editors (and contributors, too) are Rex A.E.Hunt and John W.H. Smith, of Australia. Margaret Mayman, Jim Veitch, Noel Preston and Val Webb are just a few of the names of other contributors.

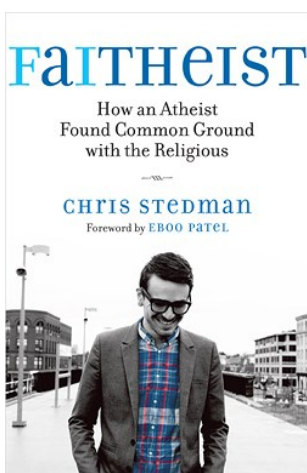
It is a collection for dipping into and thinking about, and is not made for reading straight through. There could be a sermon on every page!

The main burthen of the lay is that theological colleges may have been 'hotbeds' of ecumenism and progressive thought when the current crops of ministers/priests/pastors were in residence, but those ordained persons were not exhorted to spread progressive ideas to lay persons in their church congregations.

Indeed, some of them found that conservative elements in the congregations themselves were highly resistant and bitterly-opposed to new information. Biblical scholarship and archeological news were alike spurned or ignored 'in the pews'.

All of this has produced the current church bodies, of which many are composed of ageing and often fundamentalist attenders, who simply seek spiritual comfort as they near death. Also, many church leaders and theologians have become disillusioned and left the church institutions.

More secular persons outside the churches are now stating that they are 'spiritual, but not religious'. They



do not attend church, but they are Seekers-after-Truth. Young people, particularly, hunger for ethical standards and value systems, but are repelled by the churches' medieval vocabularies and dusty, theological terms. Secular political change has seen sport and commerce intrude into the Sabbath, so that the former socialization via Sunday School has been denied most of the currently youthful western population.

In some belief groups, such as the Religious Society of Friends, there has been a gradual acceptance of 'non-theists', but Progressive Christians have often found themselves frozen out of 'the church'. Not all of them have experienced the trial for heresy which descended on Lloyd Geering; ironically, his persecution by the church has produced a keen following for his controversial writing and lectures.

Now that progressives, such as Greta Vosper of Canada (who wrote *With or Without God*), are finding listeners within the church and in the wider community, this latest publication may perhaps be seen as more leaven intruded into the secular loaf.

*Reviewed by Peter Creevey,
Christchurch Quaker Meeting,
Universalist Unitarians of Canterbury,
Sea of Faith, Christchurch,
Cosmic Celebrationists, Christchurch.*

Not all questions can be answered

In Defence of Doubt: An invitation to adventure

Val Webb

Mosaic Press, Preston, Vic., 2012

The quest for certainty is seemingly part of the human condition. Of course it is ultimately an illusion – an illusion which reinforces another delusion: the desire to be in control of our lives. However, the reality of life's circumstances eventually overtakes us, not all questions can be answered, the seemingly unacceptable cannot be changed.

This can be a very unsettling experience, especially in the domain of religious or theological belief. For Christians, doubting the certainties of belief we once took for granted may take us to the precipice of a more authentic faith, perhaps beyond the bounds of orthodox and creedal propositions: the infallibility of scripture? the virgin birth of Jesus? his bodily resurrection? the existence of a theistic supreme being? On the edge of that precipice some have floundered to the

rocks below, while others soar into a new experience of faith.

Val Webb explores this territory in her latest book *In Defence of Doubt: An invitation to adventure* (a revised and fresh edition of a 1995 publication). For Webb, "Doubt is the grace that allows us to escape from prisons of inadequate belief systems" (p.49). In large part this text is a self exposure, a personal testimony to how the author has honestly faced doubts which, in turn, has led to a richer and more credible faith development.

Following a discussion on 'doubt', the book moves into narrative mode giving an inspiring and very readable overview of many significant figures whose doubts led them to a revised faith. Because, as she says, women have often been left out of the narrative about the survivors of doubt, there is an entire chapter canvassing the stories of women (tellingly, many on this list were unknown to this reviewer).

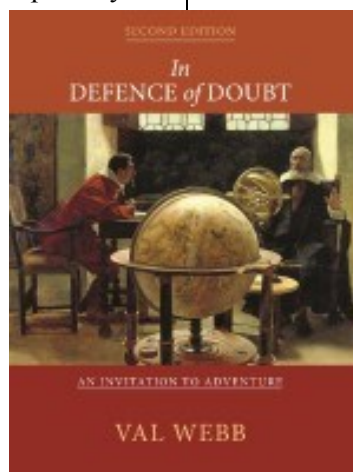
The chapter, "Doubt and the God question" is pivotal in her analysis and provides a very useful summary of 'process theology' and how doubt about theism (the divine being out there) can open the way to pan-en-theism (the divine presence in all).

The Val Webb story is remarkable. In her Brisbane youth she embraced a traditional Presbyterian Christianity, trained as a scientist, married and raised a family, and worked in executive roles within the Queensland Uniting Church Synod. Subsequently, in the USA, she completed a Ph.D in theology. For almost two decades she has been a major contributor as author and lecturer to what is known as the Progressive Christianity movement.

On the prospects for this movement she writes (p.169) "Progressive [theological] thinking has been around for centuries in different pockets and places. The difference today is that this movement is being named, and responsibility for its survival is in the hands of the *laity* as well as clergy who will not be silenced into blind obedience and belief".

That said, Val Webb's own theology is not presented as a new creed. Her mission here is to defend and affirm 'doubt' as a positive necessity to credible and contemporary faith. Sometimes this is called 'living the questions', an adventure which may lead down various pathways. So, *In Defence of Doubt*, is directed to a wide readership; and it is an inspiring gift, particularly, for those wanting to discern a credible approach to belief and faith.

Reviewed by Rev. Dr. Noel Preston
n.preston@griffith.edu.au



Is There Life After Shopping?

The Great Disruption

Paul Gilding

Bloomsbury 2012

There is a terrifying concurrence of human-induced crises bearing down on the planet for which we have no coherent mitigation plan. Global climate, population growth, resource overuse, soil and water contamination are reaching crisis points together, in what Gilding describes as *The Great Disruption*. All of which are immeasurably amplified by our addiction to growth. In the words of Gilding: "If you thought the financial situation...was a crisis,...climate change a cultural, economic and political challenge, then hold on for the ride. We are about to witness humanity deal with its biggest crisis ever, something that will shake it to the core – **the end of economic growth.**"

The author of this apocalyptic book is the grandson of a Methodist minister, and his parents (would you believe Wesley and Ruth) raised him with a strong sense of social conscience. He presents with devastating clarity the link between our addiction to economic growth and the environmental crises of our time, and shows that denial is delaying the inevitable, making the end point more calamitous.

Gilding demonstrates the linkages between these phenomena and, while expressing anger and frustration at the level of denial that exists at all levels, and particularly at the political level, he also looks for and finds hope in the resilience of humankind to finally recognize and find solutions to our addiction. Like any addiction one goes through denial before hitting the gutter and ultimately finding solutions. A sampling of some chapter headings will give you some insight into the provenance of the great disruption: *Beyond the Limits; Are we Finished? Yes there is Life after Shopping*. The great thing about this book is that Gilding sees many positive signs and in his last chapter entitled *Guess who is in Charge* he cites many examples of the growing awareness of the problems and states "The only force on earth powerful enough to fix this now is us."

Assuredly this planet is heading for enormous upheaval; already the world's resources are 40% overcommitted and the consequent disruption is falling unevenly on nations and communities. As the reviewer for the New York Times has so clearly stated: "*Ignore Gilding at your peril.*"

*Reviewed by Warwick Silvester,
a member of Hamilton Sea of Faith and retired
Professor of Botany, University of Waikato.*

BITS AND PIECES

The End of Metaphysics

"The whole history of Western metaphysics from Plato to Nietzsche rested upon a mistake, and it was a very bad mistake. We were running away from **time, finitude and contingency**. We forsook Being and took refuge in dreams of absolute security, rational necessity, timelessness and total knowledge and control. But now with the end of metaphysics, philosophy is at long last returned to its original and founding question, the question of Being."

Don Cupitt: *The Religion of Being* p106

"Those deep things for which religion stands" ...

... the feeling of the inexhaustible mystery of life, the grip of an ultimate meaning of existence, and the invincible power of an unconditional devotion.

These things cannot be excluded. If we try to expel them in their divine images, they re-emerge in daemonic images."

Paul Tillich *The Shaking of the Foundations* p181

IF YOU HAVE
food in your fridge, clothes
on your back, a roof over
your head and a place to sleep

**YOU ARE
RICHER
THAN
75%
OF THE WORLD.**

IF YOU HAVE
money in the bank,
your wallet, and
some spare change
**YOU ARE AMONG THE TOP
8% OF THE
WORLD'S
WEALTHY.**

**IF YOU WOKE UP THIS MORNING
WITH MORE HEALTH THAN ILLNESS
YOU ARE MORE BLESSED
THAN THE MILLION PEOPLE WHO WILL NOT SURVIVE THIS WEEK.**

if you have never experienced
the danger of battle, → **YOU ARE LUCKIER**
the agony of imprisonment or torture, **THAN 500 MILLION PEOPLE**
or the horrible pangs of starvation, **ALIVE AND SUFFERING.**

**IF YOU CAN READ THIS MESSAGE
YOU ARE MORE FORTUNATE
THAN 3 BILLION PEOPLE IN THE WORLD WHO CANNOT READ IT AT ALL.**

GOD'S UNEMPLOYMENT PROBLEM

Tom Hall

“No wonder so many former churchgoers have joined the church alumni association”

It requires only a superficial reading of the so-called sacred writings that constitute the Hebrew and Christian Bibles – or, for that matter a passing acquaintance with most secular histories – to recognize that God was once considered to be a very busy fellow. Under one or another of his several names and descriptive titles – God, Yahweh, Elohim, Lord, Adonai, El Shaddai, El Elyon, El Roi, El Olam, Yahweh Sabaoth – he was always and everywhere hard at work. Except for the day of rest he took on that first Sunday. But he appears not to have enjoyed his Sabbath luxury for long, for soon enough he was obliged to turn that noble ban into minutely detailed law, and presumably went to a good deal of trouble enforcing it. And think of all the other functions he was assigned: he – or she, or it – sent or withheld the rain, wind, and storm; regulated the sun, moon, tides, and seasons; carried out his, her, or its divine will by sending kings to war, and often winning their battles for them lest they pridefully take credit for the victory. Also, according to the record, God was quite fond of inflicting women with infertility until in desperation they offered him special prayers. That way the resulting child could be easily recognized as someone very important. On two notable occasions he even pulled off this little trick without being asked – once in the case of a post-menopausal ninety-year-old named Sarah, and about eighteen centuries later to immortalize an unwed teenager who lived in an obscure Galilean village called Nazareth.

And all the while he had to manage, and sometimes micro-manage, both the daily lives and long-term history of millions of people – always, of course, paying primary attention to an unruly, ungrateful, and often rebellious rag-tag bunch of self-impressed Semitic sheep-herders whom he had for some inexplicable reason chosen as his special favourites. Yes, he was very busy!

“Wait a minute,” you say, “God plays favourites? That’s not fair!” You’re right. It’s not. And that was Job’s entirely valid challenge to the Deity. Unfortunately, the author of that story was unable to break out of the theological mind-set of his times and accept the obvious. So he ‘copped out’ and made Job knuckle under to a divine bully who had been playing games with him in order to impress Satan. That book came out about 500 BCE, probably during or just after the Babylonian Exile, and may well mark the beginning of God’s slide toward the serious unemployment problem he faces today. And a couple of hundred years after Job, things got even stickier

when the ancient secular humanist who wrote the book known as Ecclesiastes in effect trashed the whole theological underpinning of the Hebrew Bible and further limited the deity’s scope of operations.

But of course the two of them made only a small dent in humankind’s willingness – indeed our apparently endless desire – to be bought off with nonsense in our search for peace of mind. (In a recent posting, retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong acutely observed that “Religion is primarily a search for security, and not a search for truth.”) Accordingly, just as they were largely deaf to the ethical prophets, the people of Israel, like their Roman oppressors, were not highly impressed by a first-century teacher named Yeshua, the son of that unwed pregnant teenager I mentioned earlier. He tried to inject some common sense into the theological debates of the first century; but within a few years of his untimely but eminently predictable death, he had been sandbagged, deified, and hustled off the stage by an erstwhile persecutor – an unstable, self-intoxicated, religious enthusiast who persuaded people to worship the martyred teacher as a divine saviour, and thus rescued them from the hard work of living according to his teaching. For that great favour, the church founded by this super-salesman gave him the title Saint Paul.

Even such spiritual luminaries as Michael Servetus and Giordano Bruno made little impact when they tried to limit the divine resumé; both were burned at the stake for their honesty. The Judaeo-Christian tradition had to wait for Galileo to produce hard evidence before at least an appreciable minority of its followers began to recognize the terribly unsettling fact that both Bible and Church had long been handing out taffy. It was bad enough that they presented a distorted picture of the world; it was even worse that applying simple logic to the observable facts of life showed that the supposedly almighty and all-wise ‘guy in the sky’ – who was also reputed to be both an all-loving father and an unforgiving dispenser of justice – was a contradiction in terms. What we had in fact was a sort of Wizard of Heaven, a big voice from behind a carefully constructed screen of pretense. Worst of all, both the voice and the screen were human creations – and not very coherent ones, at that. We had created God in our own confused image. How many important jobs are you going to trust to someone like that? That is if you really think about it. Too bad folks don’t think more.

Then a couple of hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson put out an edited version of the gospels, having removed all the passages he considered to be an insult to the intelligence of any reasonably knowledgeable person. He also opined – a bit too optimistically – that with the growth of free public education and general knowledge, it would not be more than a century before all Christians would be Unitarians. Obviously he didn't make much of a dent either. But knowledge and reason continued to spread, and you know enough about Darwin's contribution to the erosion of the divine job description, and about Freud's demonstration of our gift for self-deception, to understand why our father in heaven began more and more to resemble the Maytag repairman who has less and less to do.

The final blow, of course, has been the growing recognition that heaven and hell, and life after death, and all their related bugaboos are myths that were for centuries used by church and crown to enforce obedience – though today even American politicians remain guilty of that antediluvian swindle. No wonder so many former churchgoers have joined what Jack Spong calls “the church alumni association” – a defection especially evident in Europe where church attendance now represents six percent of the population or less. In the minds of many, all that's left for God to do is to play Santa Claus or Dear Abby to people who are in need or in trouble – and who still think that there's something or someone out there somewhere to call on for help, someone who can arrange a special favor if properly ingratiated. When it finally gets through to us that things happen as a result of people's actions and natural laws (including that of chance), all of a sudden God has a lot less traction in human affairs.

No doubt you're aware of most of that, but you may not have heard about Ludwig Feuerbach and David Friedrich Strauss, eminent Christian theologians who 150 years ago challenged all the supernaturalist hocus-pocus about Christ's divinity and sacrificial death. They focused instead on the life and teachings of Jesus, and discovered that behind the pious myth was a wise and eternally relevant teacher of righteousness. You may have heard of the more than a hundred scholars of the Jesus Seminar who after fifteen years of intense study concluded in 1997 that out of all the various gospel reports of what Jesus said and did, only about eighteen per cent are reasonably accurate. And a few may know of Lloyd Geering, the Presbyterian minister and author of *Christianity Without God*, who, along with Jack Spong and a growing number of clergy, insists that the Christian tradition must soon change radically – or slowly perish. Consider but three specific proposals they offer: First, the incarnation doctrine must be applied not to Jesus alone, but to everyone, for we are all God's children. Second, the work of atonement

(at-one-ment, that is, being one with the universal spirit) is likewise each person's proper quest and responsibility. Third, the real meaning of the resurrection myth is that each believer is daily called to a higher spiritual life and awareness.

Obviously Unitarian-Universalists and Quakers are uniquely positioned to be in the forefront of such a reconfiguration of a tradition that they had the good sense to split away from some time ago. And it might prove an invigorating challenge, for to speak frankly their intellectual and spiritual diet sometimes seems a bit thin. Don't get me wrong: theologically speaking, I'm pretty cholesterol-free myself. It's just that after thirty-odd years of preaching from the Bible, I don't believe that your favourite place of religious refreshment has a duty to offer nothing stronger than 'God lite'. But at least the low-carb regimen doesn't make me gag. A few years ago I attended another church in this area, and by the time the service was halfway over, I could hardly wait to get out in the fresh air again; in fact I had to bail out before they got to the Communion liturgy with its fictitious Last Supper and the exhortation to take a nip and a sip and be saved. My mind felt soiled by all the trinitarian and mythical baggage that was glibly foisted on the congregation as eternal truth.

So how *could* those who envision a yet more vibrant and progressive religion serve this underemployed God? Well, we could begin by writing her a new resumé and job description; and maybe we could decide on some realistic new qualifications, and provide a new alias or two, and redefine what we mean by those descriptive titles. Most important of all, I think, God by whatever name should at long last be brought back to earth, thus reversing the process adopted by those inspired conjurors who aeons ago projected him into an imaginary heaven. Can that be done? Of course it can! It will take time and effort and a great deal of serious and well-informed dialogue. Above all, it will demand that we offer repeated and explicit challenges to the incumbent purveyors of fantasy. For if mumbo-jumbo is often enough pointed out for what it is, and if objective accuracy in theological discourse is consistently required, then religious literacy and honesty will begin to spread. Who knows, maybe in *another* hundred years Mr. Jefferson's dream will have begun to bear fruit. And suppose it should prove to be the case that the G-word represents nothing more than the sum of our highest ideals and noblest aspirations; that would be a pretty good start at redefining what is sacred and helping it to function and bear fruit in our lives. At least it would be honest.

Tom Hall



Tom will present a workshop
at this year's Conference

FROM THE CHAIR

We extend warm birthday greetings to Sir Lloyd Geering who celebrated his 95th year in February.

We are looking forward, as always, to Lloyd's opening address at Conference on Friday 4th October. *'Why Honest to God blew the roof off the church, and let in the fresh air.'*

In the UK Sea of Faith 'Sofia' magazine the Rev. Tony Windross writes "Given the modest size of the Antipodean population, it's extraordinary how it includes two of the theological worlds' most radical voices: Lloyd Geering from New Zealand and Nigel Leaves from Australia. The Rev. Canon Dr Nigel Leaves of Brisbane will be a Keynote speaker at our Conference on Saturday 5th October.

Nigel's latest book *Religion Under Attack, Getting Theology Right* has been ordered by the Resource Centre. Its also available from Amazon.com and from Polebridge Press. Windross writes "Leaves has no time for the transcendent God, refuses to be bound by dogma – and is not ashamed (or afraid) to say so. The Church needs far more like him, not so as to become uniformly non-realist, but to provide some sort of counter-weight to the dead hand of doctrinal orthodoxy".

In this Newsletter. Jock Crawford of Hamilton has prepared a review of Michael Benedikt's book *God is the Good We Do* which is available from the Resource Centre.

Past Chairpersons have made every effort to contact and invite **Karen Armstrong** to this part of the world, but it is not going to happen. Karen's New York publicist advises that Karen will not fly where an overnight is involved – and until an aircraft manufacturer produces an aircraft better than Concord – we will continue to be disappointed. Karen's travel schedule is already booked for 2013 and 2014 and she is also writing a new book.

Don Cupitt, who is one of our life members, tells us he won't be undertaking any long distance flights as osteoarthritis has set in. We wouldn't be the Sea of Faith if it wasn't for Don awakening us to religion being a human creation and setting us on a new path of spiritual awareness. To understand Don in

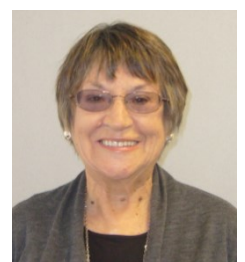
context I recommend Nigel Leaves's *Odyssey on the Sea of Faith, The Life & Writings of Don Cupitt*, (Polebridge Press 2004) followed by *Surfing on the Sea of Faith, The Ethics and Religion of Don Cupitt* (Polebridge Press 2005).

The 2014 Conference: in the past we have held only one Conference in Dunedin and we would very much like this city to host a further one. It looks as though this is going to happen as Marjorie Spittle advises us that eight to ten people would be willing to help. Thank you so much Marjorie and your team. A decision is still to be made on the venue and three schools have been investigated. Watch this space.....

The new Pope. Well, the religious world is abuzz with the news that an Argentinean Cardinal has been chosen and is taking the name Francis I. I hope he will be understanding of the 'progressives' during his papacy. He would be wise to take seriously the words of Auguste Comte who was described as an eccentric and only intermittently sane 19th century French sociologist by Alain de Botton:

"Comte's ideas proceeded from a characteristically blunt observation that in the modern world, thanks to the discoveries of science, it would no longer be possible for anyone intelligent to believe in God. Faith would henceforth be limited to the uneducated, the fanatical, children and those suffering the final stages of incurable diseases. Comte recognised, as many of his contemporaries did not, that a secular society devoted solely to the accumulation of wealth, scientific discovery, popular entertainment and romantic love – a society lacking in any sources of ethical instruction, consolation, transcendent awe or solidarity - would fall prey to untenable social maladies".

From *Religion for Atheists* by Alain De Botton, Hamish Hamilton 2012.



Beverley M. Smith
Chairperson 2012-2013