

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 106, June 2013

LIVING BY CHANGING TRUTHS?

Lloyd Geering

**given at St Andrew's on The Terrace, Wellington
on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of his ordination**

"By faith Abraham...went out, not knowing where he was to go". *Hebrews 11: 8.*

I am grateful for the invitation from Margaret Mayman [Senior Minister] at to speak to you on the 70th anniversary of my ordination to the Christian ministry. The first time I preached in his church was actually before my ordination. It was in January 1942. I was then serving here for three months as a student Assistant to Brian Kilroy. And little did I suspect then that I would become associated again with this church some forty years later, first as a mid-week lecturer, and then as a worshipping member. So much has happened since then and so many changes!

It is about those changes that I wish to speak this morning – not so much, however, about changes in buildings and institutions. True, in those days this church had twice as many seats as now and it was pretty full morning and evening. But I wish to speak about the changes that have taken place in our thinking and believing.

I did not enter into the life of the church until 1937. That was my second year as a university student. I took on board what was current in the church then. Only twelve months later I offered myself as a candidate for the ministry. One of my three much older brothers, on learning of this, told me I was making a great mistake for, as he put it, "All the churches will be closed in thirty years!" That is how it looked even then to some people outside of the church. Seventy years later that remark sounds sadly more in touch with reality than it did then.

Inside the church of those days there was no hint of such a possibility. The Churches were pretty full and new parishes were being established. The number of communicant members was growing each year. The ecumenical spirit was strong. The National Council of Churches was founded in 1941 and many were keen to see the churches unite.

Moreover, the theological training I received, starting in 1940, was very liberal and open-ended. We believed the church was courageously coming to grips with the rapidly changing world of thought. Our biblical teachers were well-versed in the new way of studying the Bible that emerged during the nineteenth century. One of them even poked fun at the few in our classes who still interpreted the Bible as the literal word of God.

Our theological teacher, John Dickie, had actually written the chief text book we used. True, it makes for rather quaint reading today and makes him look very conservative. But relative to those times it was breaking new ground, so much so that a few old-timers wanted to charge him with heresy because of it. Its genre we now refer to as liberal Protestant thought. Dickie had already adopted the new direction that Protestant theology had taken in the 18th century due to the influence of the German theologians, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl. You probably have not heard of them. We heard a lot about them. Schleiermacher is said to be the first modern theologian, in that he shifted the starting-point of theology. It had long been the exposition of divinely revealed and

truths. It was called dogmatics. From Schleiermacher onwards, however, theology became the understanding of religious experience.

So John Dickie defined theology as the intellectual exercise in which one thinks through one's Christian experience and relates it to all other knowledge. When that other knowledge is changing and expanding so rapidly, as it is today, that is a very tall order, though a necessary one. No wonder there are few good theologians today. Even John Dickie, though cautiously accepting the idea of human evolution, was having a struggle to incorporate it into his theology.

I was also fortunate in being one of the first group of students to be taught church history by Helmut Rex. He had just arrived from Germany in 1938 as a refugee from Hitler's Nazi regime. When war broke out in 1939 it was inadvisable to induct a German into a parish and so he was invited to lecture. He opened my eyes to the way Christian thought has changed and evolved through the centuries and is still doing so. As a result of these early influences my own theological journey through life has been one of continual change and development. I have slowly come to realise that there is no such thing as unchangeable Christian truths.

Indeed, there is no such thing as absolute truth. Truth is not a thing - something that remains constant and unchangeable for all time.

Truth is a quality or a value, like love, compassion and honesty. Values always hide a subjective component, for what is of value to one person may not be of value to another. It is because of this subjective element in the very concept of truth that the expression of truth in human language is always subject to change through the centuries. There can be no unchangeable truths, divinely revealed or not. This is why Schleiermacher changed the basis of theology and opened the door for the development, first for liberal theology and later for even more radical theology.

This is also why Christianity must undergo change to remain alive. Otherwise it turns into a lifeless monument commemorating the past. It so happens that the new way of understanding the Bible actually demonstrates how the truths by which we live have always kept changing. The Bible is not a collection of eternal truths and does not speak with one voice. It is a collection of books

written over a period of a thousand years, in three different languages and by a host of authors. It witnesses to a path of faith in which beliefs are continually changing. The Bible itself well illustrates the comment of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Beliefs must be distinguished from faith. Beliefs belong to the century one lives in. Faith goes on from age to age because it is not a set of beliefs but an attitude – the attitude of trust".

The Biblical witness to the path of faith starts with the story of Abraham, a figure who is equally honoured in what later became three great faith traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Abraham is held up in the Bible as a model man of faith, not for his beliefs but for his faith. Actually Abraham is more of a symbolic figure rather than a historical one. The simple little story of him that was read is symbolic of the journey of life. Life is a call to walk forward into the unknown in order to reach an as yet unseen goal. We must leave the familiar things behind and we must travel onwards without any guarantees we shall ever reach our goal. Most of us experience this particularly in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. On the way to mature adulthood we may experience high-points so enriching

that we would like them to stay with us forever. Abraham acknowledged his high-points by building altars. Nevertheless he journeyed on, still going toward the South. That's how the

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little story ends. So it is with us. We must continually walk onwards in faith to the end of our days.

Many centuries after the story of Abraham was first told, the anonymous author who wrote Hebrews saw Abraham as the pioneer of the path of faith – one that had been walked by a long succession of Hebrew heroes and heroines. It was the same path but it led through very different surroundings. These people had become, as the author said, a veritable cloud of witnesses to what it means to live by faith, even though they did very different things from one another.

Now the author assembled his list to be a prelude to the role of Jesus in the ongoing path of faith. How was Jesus of Nazareth to be related to this ongoing path of faith? What we find in the New Testament are documents that reveal how the first Christians wrestled with this very question. Orthodox Christianity came to birth as the answer.

... to page 4

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

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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 106, June 2013

1. Living by Changing Truths

Lloyd Geering recommends abandoning certainty

5. The New Story of Faith and Belief

Karen Armstrong summarises it

6. Good Character

Stuart Crossan recommends training in “good character”

7. Why I am still a Christian

Rinny Westra is a “cultural Christian”

8. Descartes v. Wordsworth

Stephen Batchelor counterpoints them

9. Salvation v. Disaster

It's the latter if Asians want to live like Americans

10. One Tree Hill

Reflections on life and death through a song by U2

12. From The Chair

Bev Smith reflects

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Sea of Faith Conference 2013 at Lindisfarne College, Hastings

Air travel to Hawkes Bay can be very expensive. People who will be travelling by air to the 2013 Conference are advised to book tickets early.

As far as accommodation is concerned, there will be ample single rooms available at Lindisfarne College. However, those preferring to stay in a motel need to be aware that there is a race meeting in Hastings during the weekend of 4-6 October and it would be wise to book early. Possible nearby motels are Frimley Lodge Motel, Elmore Lodge Motel and Cumberland Court Motel.

**Margaret Gwynn
Local Arrangements Committee**

From page 2 ...

After more than fifteen centuries that question has resurfaced in modern times.

Is Jesus of Nazareth to be regarded as a further example on the Hebrews' list of men who walked the path of faith – perhaps even the man of faith par excellence?

Or is he to be regarded as more than that – as a divine figure who is the object of faith? And is faith in him necessary for human salvation, as traditional Christianity has long asserted?

What the modern study of the Bible has revealed is this. The New Testament does not give a definitive answer that is final for all time, as it has long been supposed. What the New Testament has bequeathed to us is the evidence of how the first Christians went about solving the problem in their day and age. This is something we all must do afresh for ourselves in whatever age we live in. That is the nature of all truths – especially those by which we live.

We now find that there are not only conflicting answers in the New Testament but the very conflict is of just as much help to us as what may appear to be the commonality of the various voices. To illustrate this, I now point to the contrast between Paul and the person who wrote St. John's Gospel and other so-called Johannine writings. I shall just call him John.

The traditional answer – the idea that Jesus was the eternal Son of God – was largely the creation of Paul. It was his thought that came to dominate traditional Christianity, particularly in the West. His thought even influenced the writing of the first three Gospels. But the Gospel of John is notably different and it had greater influence in the Eastern church than in the Western.

John did not see Jesus in the same way as Paul did. For example, Paul believed Jesus to have ascended into heaven from which he would shortly return. We call this expectation the Second Coming. John was writing fifty years later. Jesus had not returned. John was concerned to discover the truth about Jesus and he is the only Evangelist to speak about truth. Indeed he put the very question that concerned him into the mouth of Pilate the Roman Governor, "What is truth?" This should not be dismissed as a cynical remark on the part of Pilate, as we so often do. It is the question John himself was pondering over. He had already put the answer into the mouth of Jesus, as "I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice."

Unlike Paul, John did not expect a Second Coming of Jesus. Jesus was already present in the life of the church through the influence of his teaching about love. But John conveys his insights in a rather strange, mystical way by writing his Gospel at two levels.

At face value it is an account of the life of Jesus from birth to death just like the other three Gospels. But, at a symbolic level, it is saying something more. John portrays Jesus as if he were the personification of his teaching. That is why John, unlike the other evangelists, put words like these into the mouth of Jesus:

I am the Way, the truth, the Life.

I am the door.

I am the bread of Life.

We have the first intimation of this symbolic and creative thinking in the opening sentence of the Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word." And he goes on – "And that Word was God." "And that Word became flesh and dwelt among us".

What is meant by the Word? Let me make this suggestion. The Word is the message or truth that creates. It's the message that brings life and hope to us.

But what was this word or message? It was what Jesus taught about how to live. Not only did he teach us to love one another – to show compassion, to go the second mile. He even taught us to love our enemies. This is the word or teaching that is the Way to live, this is the Bread of Life, this opens the door to a new life, one that leads to the coming of the Kingdom of God. So John's Gospel, under the guise of the story of Jesus, is the exposition of how Jesus' teaching was already shaping the ongoing life of the church in John's day.

This is in strong contrast to Paul who had shifted attention away from the teaching of Jesus to Jesus himself. With Paul, the messenger had become the message. Paul himself had never heard Jesus speak. He was a late-comer on the Christian scene, one who had been largely influenced by his experience on the road to Damascus. Now move fifty years further on. Paul's teaching had become so mainstream that it was hard to counter it head-on. But John wanted to shift attention back to the teaching of Jesus. Indeed, he makes this much clearer in his letters where he says, "This is the message which you have heard from the beginning that we should love one another". So John wrote his Gospel at two levels, as I have tried to show.

All this and much more has come to light as a result of the work of Biblical scholars, and particularly in those of the "Jesus Seminar". When they removed the supernatural cloak with which the historical Jesus was so

quickly clothed by Pauline Christianity onwards, they uncovered what they call the footprints and voice prints of a Galilean sage, who stood in the long tradition of the Jewish sages. This man, far from being a divine figure, was primarily a teacher, a man who first came to be honoured for his wisdom.

The rediscovery of the original Jesus has been very timely, for he and his teaching are much more relevant to the way we understand the world today than the traditional figure of a divine Christ who burst into our earthly world from a heavenly world in order to save our souls for another world.

Strangely enough the nearest person to him in the Bible is not Moses, though some in the New Testament compare him with Moses. But Jesus was not a law-giver. Nor were the prophets nearest to him, though he did come to be spoken of as a prophet. Rather, nearest to him was the all too often neglected sage we call Ecclesiastes, which means the Preacher or Proclaimer. The reason for saying that is that the search for the genuine teaching of Jesus has led to the conclusion that Jesus never spoke about himself and rarely about God. He spoke chiefly about the Kingdom of God, by which he meant an harmonious society. And he taught mainly in parables and one-liners, just as the sages before him had done. That is why even his disciples were sometimes left puzzled by his parables. These often ended in an unexpected way that forced the hearer to change his mindset, or puzzle out the meaning for himself.

Jesus did not reveal unchangeable truths. He was a man of his time and reflected the culture in which he was reared. We Christians may still regard Jesus as the sage par excellence, but he was not the only sage. The path of faith to which he belonged is not the only path. There have been other paths and we must respect those who follow other paths. The birth of Jesus was not a cosmic event that cut human history in two parts. Only the Christian West calls this year 2013 AD.

These are a few of the ways in which Christian beliefs have changed during the 70 years since I was ordained to the ministry. But that does not mean we must reject the past. I rejoice in the cultural past. The understanding of it has helped me to make sense of the present and to look hopefully into the future. Even though Christianity is not the only path of faith, it is the one that, with all of its failings, has done most to bring the modern global world into existence. The secular and scientifically based culture of modernity came out of the Christian West. That is indisputable. It was because of

its Christian base that the West has nurtured the values that now challenge all humans to work for human equality, social justice, and global harmony and peace.

Like Abraham of old, I am not at all clear about the way ahead, either for the church or for the human race as a whole, but I continue to go into the unknown, walking the path of faith that started in Abraham's time and drawing my values and inspiration from all who have followed in his steps. And John's Gospel, under the guise of the story of Jesus, is the exposition of the Word in the ongoing life of the church – in particular the man known as Jesus of Nazareth.

Lloyd Geering 2013

Karen Armstrong summarises The New Story of Faith and Belief

“[Nowadays] ... faith is equated with belief, but this equation is of recent provenance. Originally the meaning of the word ‘faith’ was akin to trust, as when we say that we have faith *in* a friend or an ideal. Faith was not an intellectual position but a virtue: it was the careful cultivation, by means of the rituals and myths of religion, of the conviction that, despite all the dispiriting evidence to the contrary, life had some ultimate meaning and value. The Latin word *credo* (translated now as ‘I believe’) seems to have derived from the phrase *cor dare*: to give one's heart. The Middle English word *beleven* meant to love. When Christians proclaimed: *credo in unum Deum*, they were not so much affirming their belief in the existence of a single deity as committing their lives to God. When St. Anselm of Canterbury prayed in the eleventh century: *credo ut intelligam* (“I have faith in order that I may understand”), he was not blindly submitting to the doctrines of religion in the hope that one day these incredible assertions would make sense to him, if he abdicated his critical intelligence. His prayer should really be translated: “I commit myself in order that I may understand.” The meaning of dogma would ... be revealed [only] when he lived a fully Christian life, embracing its mythology and rituals wholeheartedly. This attitude is foreign to modernity. Today people feel that before they live a religious life, they must first satisfy themselves intellectually of its metaphysical claims. This is sound scientific practice: first you must establish a principle before you can apply it. But it is not the way that religion has traditionally worked.”

Faith and Modernity by Karen Armstrong featured in *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity* pub. 2005 World Wisdom, Inc. edited by Harry Oldmeadow.

Good Character

Rev. Stuart Crosson, Vicar of St. Matthew's Anglican Church, Dunedin

As a father of three school-age boys, one of the most important responsibilities I have is to encourage these boys to grow into men of good character; or as Celia Lashlie puts it in her book *He'll be OK*, "All parents have a God-given responsibility to raise their children in a way that allows them to flourish and find their rightful place in the world. I believe cultivating good character lies at the heart of this calling".

If we ignore character development in our young people and focus solely on areas of knowledge acquisition, skill development or economic productivity, we run the risk of moral train wrecks. The recent court case of Ewan MacDonald, the two murders on the Kapiti Coast and the boy-racers in Christchurch killing bystanders, all point to young men who have lost their moral compass.

In recent weeks, I have come across a small, yet significant, movement in New Zealand schools that has heartened me greatly which focuses on character development. It is called

'Cornerstone Values' and is being practiced in a number of primary schools right here in Dunedin. They include

George Street Normal, Musselburgh and Fairfield Primary Schools. We might well ask the question, "Who decides what represents good character?" The Cornerstone model is based on research done by C. S. Lewis (of *Narnia* fame), who studied a number of human civilisations including Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Indian and discerned eight basic character traits which were common to all societies. These were respect, responsibility, honesty and truthfulness, consideration for others, compassion, kindness, obedience [to rightful authority] and duty [obligation].

The Cornerstone model was developed in an Invercargill school back in the early 90s and fits well within the New Zealand public school curriculum and its requirement to teach values to our children. All schools teach some form of values, but they often appear to take on the political and philosophical influences of our post-modern culture and are quite selective in their approach. Some of the values the New Zealand curriculum guides our schools into teaching include curiosity, diversity, ecology.

It doesn't take a genius to realise that behaviour in our classrooms has deteriorated in recent decades. Disrespectful and violent behaviour has become widespread across New Zealand schools. What teachers

and the wider community struggle to find are ways that will improve this bad behaviour and prepare our children for adulthood. Research does, however, suggest that schools that have implemented Cornerstone Values, with its emphasis on character development, are producing very positive results.

To look to our schools as the primary avenue for character development is not the whole story. There are at least three other environments for this vital task. Churches have for two thousand years taken a lead in promoting good character. It could be argued that the declining influence of Sunday School on New Zealand children has negatively impacted behaviour in 'Monday school'. Voluntary societies such as Girl Guides, Boys' Brigade (Iconz), Girls' Brigade, Boy Scouts, can and have contributed to the raising of our children in healthy ways. However, the primary environment for character development has always been, and must continue to be, the home. Mum and Dad passing on to their children,

consciously and unconsciously, the deep matters that enable us to get on with one another and the world. When good character is lost to a

generation, what gets passed on is not always helpful.

Last week a friend told me how someone had broken the jaw of a workmate who was minding their own business in a restaurant in the Octagon. What allows someone to do such an unprovoked and malicious act of violence in our city? New Zealand, along with many other Western societies, finds itself in desperate need of a moral reformation that will only be brought about by attending to the character development of our children. Appealing to 'my rights' and 'my freedoms' and to other culturally and politically motivated 'values', cannot be allowed to be the dominant cry in our classrooms and homes. There are deeper and more objective currents that shape our character and these must be rediscovered. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "In my inner being I delight in God's law".

If you are a Mum or Dad, a teacher or a coach, perhaps a question you might want to consider is: "What type of character are you helping to form in the children you love?"

Stuart Crosson

**respect, responsibility, honesty and
truthfulness, consideration for others,
compassion, kindness, obedience and duty**

WHY I AM STILL A CHRISTIAN

Rinny Westra

who wrote the article “On Reading The Bible” in Newsletter 104

I use this title conscious of the fact that it was also the title of a lecture and a subsequent booklet by the late Professor E.M. Blaiklock under whom I studied classical Greek and Biblical History and Literature at the University of Auckland from 1963 to 1965. He deliberately chose it as his attempt at a refutation of Bertrand Russell’s article entitled “Why I Am Not A Christian”. Speaking for myself I find myself much closer to Bertrand Russell’s position than to that of Professor Blaiklock, but I still wish to use his title for my article.

Terminology is important, so I begin by explaining what I mean by “Christian”. To me it refers to anyone who belongs to a community whose values are related in some form or other to Jesus of Nazareth, and who still acknowledges their indebtedness to that heritage. The usual symbol of that link is that a person has been received into that community by baptism – for the majority of Christians this means baptism received as an infant as they were born into that Christian community. This goes back to the time when the church was almost identical with a particular community and culture, and often the church involved was a state church such as the Church of England or the Church of Scotland. The British monarch is, in fact, head of the Church of England, and when she is in Scotland she is a member of the Church of Scotland. Many Orthodox churches are also part and parcel of their cultural community, such as the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the Coptic Church of Egypt.

In my own case I was baptised into the then Netherlands Reformed Church, which was the Dutch state church until the early 1800s, and still numbers the Dutch royal family among its members. (That church is now part of the Protestant Church of the Netherlands, which was formed by the union of the three main protestant denominations in that country in recent years.)

Many of those linked to these churches are what I would describe as “cultural Christians”. The churches that they relate to are bearers of the Christian heritage and traditions, with the Church year providing occasions for public holidays (Christmas and Easter, for example), the beauty of religious music, art and architecture, the services to mark national days such as Waitangi Day and Anzac Day, and chaplaincy services to the armed forces, hospitals, prisons, universities, and so on. These are all

part of what is known as Christendom, which has in fact collapsed (and rightly so), but we are still left with its remnants which are all part of our wider cultural heritage. By no means all of these remnants are negative, and I am a cultural Christian insofar as I am happy to relate to the positive aspects of this heritage. (Even Richard Dawkins has described himself as a cultural Christian.)

I am happy to identify myself as such a cultural Christian. I do so even though I am a rationalist, i.e. someone who takes logic and reason and the scientific method as basic to my understanding of life, the world and the universe. I do so even though I am a humanist, someone who draws his values and ethics from the vast resources that we have in the long history of human life and culture. I do not need supernatural revelations from some invisible other realm to try to be good. In fact, with Daniel Dennett in his book *Breaking The Spell: Religion As A Natural Phenomenon*, I do see religion including Christianity as a purely cultural and natural phenomenon. And with seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza I believe that the term “nature” covers everything there is. He even went further and spoke of “God or Nature”, saying these were essentially the same. You could take your pick as to which term you use. Insofar as the word “God” can be used to describe the creative forces of nature and the laws of nature, I am still prepared to use the word “God”, noting that some scholars refer to the laws of logic and mathematics as the “mind of God”. I do admit that this usage can become rather confusing because so many people still think of God as a personal being living in a supernatural other world.

Not all people who call themselves “Christians” are going to accept my understanding of being Christian. They will demand a personal conversion – being “born again” – and accepting a hardline conservative/fundamentalist belief system before someone can claim to be a Christian. Back in 1901-02 in the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion (entitled “The Varieties of Religious Experience”) delivered in Edinburgh, the great American philosopher and psychologist William James distinguished between two basic types of religious experience: once-born and twice-born. Once-born are those who have been born into religious/Christian families, baptised as infants and remain committed members of their faith community. Twice-born are those

who are converted into a faith and community that they were not born into, or those who have “gone astray” and been converted back to faith when they are older. Both these types have their role in religious experience, and there is a place for both of them. What has happened is that the twice-born, the “born-again” Christians, tend to set themselves up as the only ones who can truly call themselves Christians, and tie this in with a belief system that rationalists and humanists cannot accept. Despite this, most Christians through the centuries and in the Christian world today are once-born and cultural Christians. (Some of whom do hold to very conservative beliefs.)

There have been and are, of course, many bad things in religion and in Christianity. These are easy to enumerate, and as rationalists and humanists we major on doing this. Anti-Semitism, which is already present in the New Testament; the Crusades; superstition; anti-science efforts such as creationism and intelligent design; devaluation of nature and the physical world; opposition to women’s rights; homophobia; sexual abuse by the clergy; abuse of power. And much more. But these can also be found in other societies and institutions including secular ones.

There are also more positive aspects, and these have been put forward in two recent books. Atheist philosopher Alain de Botton in his *Religion For Atheists: A Non-believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012) spells out positive social contributions such as wisdom, community, kindness, education, tenderness, pessimism, perspective, art, architecture and institutions. These are his chapter headings, as he points out how much poorer society would be without the influence of religion in these areas.

Francis Spufford, in a book entitled *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012) does not argue for the metaphysical truth of Christianity but for how its key symbols can make much sense as we deal with our personal and emotional lives. From my perspective, I do not need to believe in a literal and physical resurrection to make sense of the symbol of death and resurrection as showing how many failures and dead ends can lead to new hope and new lives as new doors open for us when we feel we have reached the end of the road. Or of the wonders of reproduction that can be symbolised for us in the image of the Madonna and Child. Going back to de Botton’s emphasis on the pessimism of religion as an important contribution, I also draw attention to a key consideration for Spufford in what he calls “the human propensity to fuck things up” (p. 27) which he then refers to in the rest of the book as HPtFu.

In Christianity, it seems to me, the positives still seem to outweigh the very real negatives.

Think of the contribution of modern Christians such as Albert Schweitzer, Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemoeller, Desmond Tutu, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, New Zealander Michael Lapsley in apartheid South Africa, and many others.

Which is why I find myself having considerable difficulty feeling part of NZARH Inc, when it continually confronts me with an almost fundamentalist bias against religion and slogans such as “If mankind is to survive religion must die.”

Rinny Westra

Descartes v. Wordsworth

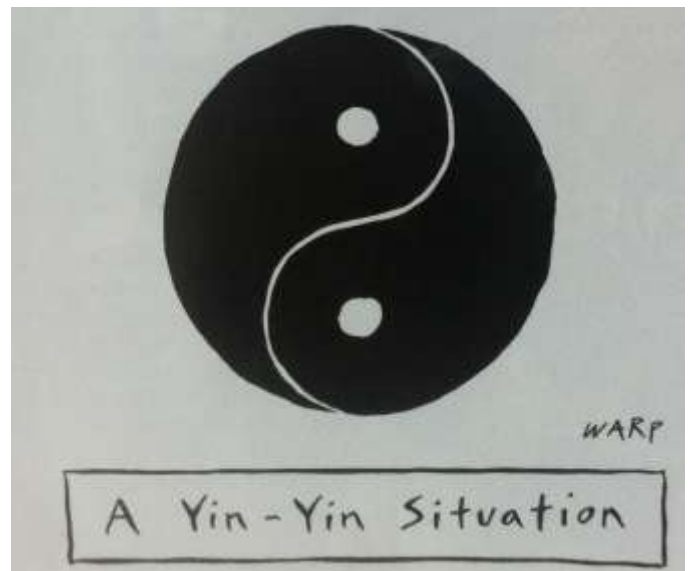
”The soul of early modern man[kind] found itself split in two: detached Cartesian reason at odds with exuberant Wordsworthian emotion.

Since the rationalists believed in systematic human progress and the establishment of an ordered world, they demonized chaotic outbursts of unbridled emotion that threatened their goals.

The romantics, however, asserted the primacy of feeling and regarded any attempts to impose abstract rules, controls, or measurements as a form of demonic inhibition.”

Stephen Batchelor, *Living With The Devil*, p.42

Anticipating The Marriage Equality Act?



The New Yorker 3 October 2011

This Newsletter ... was composed and edited on a laptop during an overseas trip, which. That might account for any raggedness.
Noel Cheer

A Recipe for Salvation – Or Disaster?

Peter Creevey of Christchurch

'the United States of America and Europe have 'dropped the ball'

In absorbing *Consumptionomics*, the first publication by Chandran Nair, the reader needs to be well aware of the author's perspective. He is an Asian man – one individual - setting out to tell over half of this world's population what it should do. His book is sub-titled "Asia's role in reshaping capitalism and saving the planet"; it is a worthy objective indeed!

Chandran Nair is a founder of Asia's Global Institute for Tomorrow (GIFT), an independent social think tank dedicated to advancing understanding on the impacts of globalization. He was also (until 2004), chairman of Environmental Resources Management, a leading consultancy in Asia and the Pacific, and he is still providing advice and coaching to business leaders, governments and multinational corporations.

One is reminded of the huge task which besets an individual trying to urge any course of action upon a New Zealand government, even in those halcyon days when one could get the Prime Minister on the telephone.

Put simply, Nair is telling Asia that, because the United States of America and Europe have 'dropped the ball' in counteracting climate change, profit-centered banking and resource depletion, then it is up to India, China, et al, to take responsibility and to price-in those taxes and adopt those policies which will avoid over-exploiting the planet. Otherwise, Asia could perhaps even end up watching the extinction of *homo sapiens*.

All of the truisms have been paraded before humanity in the past, from the 1970's circulation of the Club of Rome's warnings in "Limits to Growth", to the more doom-laden forecasts of Lovelock, Ehrlich, Hansen and others. Nair accepts these, while balancing them with the writings of Sachs and Stern, and goes on to propose that the abuses perpetrated upon Asia and the whole of humanity by Western Capitalism could, and MUST, be negated by the adoption of better values and ethics by strong Asian governments.

It is a consummation devoutly to be wished. Currently, there are crises in banking (caused by the World Bank and IMF); there are crises in resource depletion (in fossil fuels and rare minerals); and there are crises in State policy-making (often traceable to the profit-centered advice of multi-national corporations).

Can these all be turned around? Much of the real and potential power rests with China, which has the source of the Mekong and the Ganges Rivers within its borders. But beyond natural resources, the principal threat to the future rests with the understandable ambitions of Asia's peoples. If they – the populations of India and China – are firmly resolved to "live like Americans", then this planet can not possibly sustain the effects.

Already, village people in India and China are busy acquiring the material possessions of the West, often before they even have clean drinking water (and it is indeed pure

water supplies which could yet become the cause of this century's wars!)

Nair points out that the policy ball is now in Asia's court, to impose workable carbon taxes, institute bans against certain classes of imports, and show respect for nature and the environment,

What the West has failed miserably to do is now supposedly left to Asia.

Should that give us hope?

"A Reasonable Faith"

<http://www.sofn.org.uk/docs/a-reasonable-faith.pdf>

This booklet is an introduction to the mind-set of Sea of Faith. Written by David Boulton, it ends by inviting the reader to subscribe to the UK Network. We recommend that you join our NZ Network by going to <http://sof.org.nz/latestcontents.pdf> and using that to subscribe.

Worth Looking At



ATHEIST SPIRITUALITY

A forum for exploration of the meaning of spirituality for atheists.

<http://atheistspirituality.net/>

Some atheists take a responsible attitude to "religion" even while not agreeing with it. "Religious" people will find much to agree with at this site.

Inventing Reality - A Primer

Self: "Sartre's view is that we define ourselves by what we do, that human beings have no essence, but create themselves by their actions. Merleau-Ponty expresses the same idea as, "You are what you do to others." **Carol Ochs, *Behind The Sex of God*, p.39**

God: "'God" is a symbol that gathers up into itself and focuses for us all those cosmic forces working toward the fully humane existence for which we long." **Gordon Kaufman *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God*, p.50**

“One Tree Hill”

Reflecting on Life and Death

Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch

The U2 song “One Tree Hill” is a profound meditation on life, death and grief, written in response to the death of Greg Carroll, Bono’s 26 year old, Maori, personal assistant and stage manager. The band met Greg when they were in New Zealand on tour in 1984. He was working as a local stage manager and the band were so impressed that they hired him. In 1986, just before the start of recording sessions for “The Joshua Tree”, Greg was taking home Bono’s motorbike, when he was killed in a traffic accident. The death was devastating to the group. Greg’s body was flown back to New Zealand and buried in traditional Maori manner. Bono attended the tangi and sang “Let it be” as well as “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door.”

On his return to Dublin, he wrote “One Tree Hill.” Although very popular, this song has been rarely sung in concert, perhaps because of the grief it evoked in the group. However it was sung in Auckland in 2010, in memory of those who died in the Pike River mine disaster. Bono said, “People deal with grief in different ways. In Ireland we sing...”

The song is named after the volcanic hill in Auckland, which Bono visited around the time he first met Greg.

They took me up to the top of a place called One Tree Hill, where a single tree stands at the top of the mount, like some stark Japanese painting, and we looked around at this city that's made by craters of volcanoes. I remember it so vividly, I think, because it meant something to me about my own freedom.

Fundamental to the song is the image of a river running to the sea. In the four occurrences of this image in the chorus, there is a progression. Initially, it is “you” (Craig) who has run like a river to the sea. It is his death being mourned. But every death of someone close to us reminds us of other deaths. And so the second chorus applies the image to a violent death at the hands of a brutal dictatorship. Death is so much worse because it often happens through violence, hatred, and oppression

by other humans. The third chorus applies the image to us: “we run like a river, run to the sea.” His death is an existential experience that reminds us of our mortality. We too are subject to the irreversible flow of time. The comforting thought that Craig is now merged into the great ocean that is the totality of reality is extended to include us in our mortality.

The image of the river running to the sea has a background in Eastern religion with its theme of extinction, a final release into nothingness. The West, by contrast, talks about immortality and resurrection. Perhaps U2 found those Western images unusable, because they have been taken so literally and objectively. However, biblical images are not absent from the song. “When the stars fall from the sky and the moon has turned red” echoes the apocalyptic language of the book of Revelation. Perhaps the experience of an individual death awakens the fears of the collapse of our whole world that have always lain not far below the surface of our rational consciousness. Beyond this collapse, the song evokes the hope of a togetherness that is utterly transcendent of our everyday reality “I’ll see you again, when the stars fall from the sky and the moon has turned red over One Tree Hill.”

The song has other vivid imagery. “We see the sun go down in your eyes” expresses how the eyes of a person lose their sparkle when life goes out of them. “Rain in the heart” evokes the pain of grief within.

A sceptical questioner might well point out that the image of the river running to the sea is not empirically verifiable and argue that it merely throws a nice-looking cover over an unpalatable reality. A river flowing gently into the ocean is not actually very similar to sudden death in a motorcycle accident. In defence, we can argue that death per se is fundamentally inconceivable. When we attempt to think about death, our conceptions always involves us as subject looking at us as a no-longer-existing object. The best we can do is project images like this one onto an inconceivable blank. This is something that humans have always done. Drewermann puts it this way:

The history of culture gives numerous indications that in the course of the human spirit becoming aware, the senses were more and more fervently called upon to contradict their own witness to the transitoriness of human existence and to form symbols, that, as in the Easter night ritual of the Catholic church, make the prison walls of the world transparent for the light of eternity. The secret of the moon, which after three days of death is resurrected to new beauty, the birth of the sun at the end of the night in the rising of the morning, the blossoming of flowers and corn out of the depths of the earth, the spraying of sparks from the coldness of stone, the lighting of fire from dead wood, the breathing of the wind over the water – everything served as a sign and a witness to the immortality of human life.

Viewed like this, the river running to the ocean is just one more feature of nature that we humans press into service as a symbol to counter the fear of death. Bono, creative though he is in his use of imagery, has picked up something that has a long and diverse history in the religions of innumerable cultures.

At the end of the song there is an abrupt change of tone. The words: “O great ocean, O great sea. Run to the ocean, run to the sea” are given slow, solemn, hymnic treatment. Is this merely the sigh of one overwhelmed by the greatness of it all? To me it seems more like a prayer of adoration, addressed to a non-personal totality. This is immediately followed by: “Run to the ocean, run to the sea.” Not a call to commit suicide, of course, but to affirm the path we are on, to live life actively, even though it irrevocably leads to death, and not to fear or seek to evade it, in the spirit of Bette Midler’s song “The Rose”, which laments: “the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live.”

What better words could you wish for at a funeral? The driving rock rhythm of U2’s music is certainly not everyone’s cup of tea, especially at a funeral. But where else are there words that avoid the wooden literalism of traditional Christian hymnody yet honestly speak to our grief and face the reality of our mortality?

Laurie Chisholm

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Tree_Hill_\(song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Tree_Hill_(song))

<http://www.u2faqs.com/songs/#10>

<http://www.u2.com/discography/lyrics/lyric/song/99/>

One Tree Hill

We turn away to face the cold, enduring chill
As the day begs the night for mercy, love.

A sun so bright it leaves no shadows
Only scars carved into stone on the face of earth.

The moon is up and over One Tree Hill
We see the sun go down in your eyes.

You run like a river on to the sea
You run like a river runs to the sea.

And in the world, a heart of darkness, a fire-zone
Where poets speak their heart then bleed for it.

Jara sang, his song a weapon in the hands of love.
You know his blood still cries from the ground.

It runs like a river runs to the sea.
It runs like a river to the sea.

I don't believe in painted roses or bleeding hearts
While bullets rape the night of the merciful.

I'll see you again when the stars fall from the sky
And the moon has turned red over One Tree Hill.

We run like a river runs to the sea
We run like a river to the sea.

And when it's rainin', rainin' hard
That's when the rain will break a heart.

Rainin', rainin' in your heart
Rainin' in your heart.
Rainin', rain into your heart
Rainin', rainin', rainin'
Rain into your heart.
Rainin', ooh, rain in your heart, yeah.
Feel it.

From The Chair

Greetings from Eastland.

During the month we had a population increase with the thousands of visitors coming to pay their respects to the late Parekura Horomia, MP. Tribal differences were set aside. A peace offering at the tangi ended 150 years of bitterness between East Coast Ngati Porou and Tuhoe. Such was the mana of the man to have achieved this.

Looking ahead – everything is in place for the 2013 Conference 4-6 October to be held at Lindisfarne College, Hastings. We would advise you to make your air travel arrangements to Hawkes Bay early, and book motel accommodation if you are not planning on staying on campus. Registration and full details will be in the August Newsletter.

survival. For some, dying, is the fear of failing to complete their life's work; others are satisfied that they are biologically living on through progeny, business or creativity.

My particular stance was about life energy being transformed back into consciousness, and I contributed Lauris Edmond's poem (see the box).

Brian Clegg was talking about his book *The Universe Inside You*, that it is not just biology that deals with the human body and the experiences we have as humans. There is much more physics involved than one might think and some of the most exciting discoveries are being played out in the human body. There are seven octillion atoms in a body. A new born baby arrives with

every atom millions of years old. The atoms come from when the solar system was formed, or all the way back to the Big Bang.

Dr Randall Thompson, an American Cardiologist would like to have a physicist consulting alongside, and worries that science is somewhat detached; then he could maybe have some answers to give to his patients – who ask, "Why me?"

Applied Astronomy

For Ruth

To answer the question posed by Mr Hoyle - was there one big bang or does creation endlessly continue – I need not peer among the midnight-shadowed stars; this tiny creature proves both theories tenable. Her beginning was the still moment in a moving ride, dark beyond all discovery; spinning atoms caught into a new grain of life; soundless explosion. Yet almost everything is still to come.

Black-haired scrap of frowning dim absorption, your wide eyes wander still
In cloudy space beyond the earth, strange shore on which you find yourself washed up
By storms whose source you cannot guess.

But your struggle has begun; from this hot and troubled little head the smell
of crying comes; we are inordinately grateful when you smile.
You are the surety we need that shocks of birth and death are
Big bangs only and in between, creation's widening circles may carry us perhaps
Beyond the farthest stars.
Small girl, dearly loved, you have picked up your life.
I wish you strong and easy holding of it.

Conference 2014 – We are very pleased to announce that Dunedin will be the place to be for 3-5 October, 2014. The venue – "Tolcarne", the boarding residence of St. Hilda's College, is in the centre of the city in the suburb of Maori Hill, less than 2 kilometres from the Octagon. There are plenty of motels in North Dunedin, a short drive away.

Recently, I listened on National Radio to a talk by Brian Clegg, English author and popular science writer/broadcaster. I was reminded of when, in 2004, I attended the Sea of Faith Conference in Sheffield; a highlight was the 'What Kind of Death' workshop.

We often ponder on how we are going to die – it is better to look to how we will live.

According to Death Certificates there are 6,000 ways of dying. Evolution has programmed us into living –

An exciting vaccine-making prototype is under way for Foot and Mouth disease. A particle accelerator creates a copy of the shell of the virus. The vaccine doesn't have to be kept in a fridge and would be valuable in hot countries. It is potentially safer than a live, infectious virus. Foot and Mouth disease is similar to polio and there would be no risk with a synthetic vaccine. Listen to the BBC program: www.net/universeinside.

Beverley M. Smith
Chairperson 2012 -2013

