

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 108, October 2013
Conference Supplement Edition

LIVING WITH AMBIGUITY: RELIGIOUS NATURALISM AND THE MENACE OF EVIL

By Donald A. Crosby: State University of New York Press, 2008.

A review by Alan Goss of Napier

This modest book of 124 pages raises issues which have possibly lurked long in your mind but which have been difficult to express in a coherent way. This is certainly what it did for me. Donald A. Crosby is Professor Emeritus at Colorado State University and before that was a minister of religion which has enabled him to understand how deeper theoretical issues impact on people's everyday lives.

An Ambiguous World

The purpose of the book is to show how, in a world where we experience beauty and horror, life and death, people living in harmony and people maiming and destroying one another we can, nevertheless, experience enough confidence and hope in the future to enable us live full and satisfying lives. It's a tall ask. The world that we live in is an ambiguous world, it's a relentless mixture of good and evil – on the one hand we marvel at the profusions of life forms that we see in nature, also in the variety of earthly creatures with their distinct sizes, habits, plumages and so on. This diversity is due to the process of evolution, all species come into being and all species eventually die. So it is with us humans. "Life and death, evolution and extinction, are correlative". Life is a precious gift, we see, we feel, we are aware; but they must be balanced by our capacity to experience suffering and pain.

Not only is nature pervaded by what the author calls "systemic natural evils" like the epidemic of 1918-1919 which killed around twenty-five million people, or the tsunami of 2004 with a death toll estimated to be around 265,000. These, says the author, are not acts of God nor things allowed by God as part of his purposes. Nor are they evil within themselves. They are not planned, they are not sent to teach us a lesson. Nevertheless we call them evil because of the great suffering, misery and death they inflict on so many lives. Yet we can also rejoice in the wonders of nature, its colour, its variety, its dynamism, its rejuvenating powers: "all reliable sources of both sustaining and demanding hope, purpose and value for the living of our lives". Nature is all around us, we humans are a part of it and connected to it. And, like God, it is beyond explanation.

Does Religion Need God?

Those who believe in a theistic supernatural God believe that life is meaningless unless they are guided and protected by an infinite being with whom they can enter into personal relationships through prayers of praise, confession, petition and so on. They need the help of an infinite power higher than themselves to see them through, they cannot go it on their own.

Crosby respects these contentions, which reflect the faith of millions of people around the world. But he does not find it necessary to believe in or put his faith in such a God. We have each other and, one must add, we have the world. The notion of petitionary prayer has its problems. A theistic deity who must be persuaded to do good is not a worshipful deity. Without our prayers, does the deity forget to do the good things it ought to? Moreover, petitionary prayers do not always work in the way they are intended to. Over time, in desperate situations like the WWII Nazi death camps or the tsunami which recently created havoc in Japan, thousands of people have gone to their deaths in spite of prayers offered by the victims or on their behalf. The frustrations and mysteries of evil still remain, as evidenced in the predicament of Job.

The ambiguities of nature, it's joys as well as its sorrows, cannot be explained away. We are all in the same waka, we can't have the smooth without also experiencing the rough. As Crosby says, "Religion of nature is honest and realistic in this regard. It offers us no pap, no panaceas, no empty promises. It does not build castles in the air. Instead it brings us plumping down to earth. It says, "find your courage, strength and meaning here. You are a child of the earth, and there is no other place to go." This is the beginning and the end of religion of nature's wisdom. Is it enough? For some not, but Crosby finds it sufficient to live an authentic religious life without resort to bogus manipulative magic. We need a change of focus from belief in God who created the world, to a world which, despite and even because of its ambiguities, is a world worthy of our faith, trust and devotion.

The thesis of his book is, in his own words, "that we need to look no further than nature itself to find in the splendour, dynamism, and rejuvenating power of the natural world – within ourselves as remarkable creatures of nature – reliable sources of both sustaining and demanding hope, purpose, and value for the living of our lives."

Crosby reminds us that we humans are an integral part of nature, that nature touches every part of our lives. Like all beings we are products of biological evolution.

I write this on the day that same sex marriages have been given official approval. Our sexual makeup, including our sexual differences, is nature at work. To deny or to disqualify people from sharing our basic human privileges and opportunities is an affront to their very humanity and a denial of the religious rightness of nature itself. This and other related issues, is a question which this book brings to our attention and which warrants the time and effort it demands.

Crosby recalls the work of the Jesuit scientist-priest Teilhard de Chardin,¹ who shocked his fellow Christians when he made what was then a surprising if not heretical statement. Teilhard said that even if for some reason he lost his faith in Christ and a personal God, "I should continue to believe invincibly in the world. The world is the first, the last and the only thing in which I believe. It is by this faith that I live. I surrender myself to this undefined faith in a single and infallible world, wherever it may lead me."

We live on an ambiguous world, there is good and evil, wonder and chaos, life and death, "It is for this ambiguous world that the biblical God declares his love, God is indeed part of its ambiguity". Our task as human beings is to ally ourselves with those forces for good – morally, spiritually, environmentally – already at work in the world to give us, those who follow, hope for the future.

"Find your courage, strength and meaning here.

**You are a child of the earth, and
there is no other place to go."**

Alan Goss is a Life Member of Sea of Faith (NZ)

[1] For a brief but comprehensive account of Teilhard de Chardin's work, see 'Religious Trailblazers' by Lloyd Geering, St. Andrews Trust, Wellington.

OBITUARY

PHILIP POORE

1919 – 2013

Philip Poore was born into a family of forward thinkers in Wiltshire who came out to New Zealand after the 1939-45 war. Here he found a rapport with the country (and New Zealanders with him) due to the strong sense of egalitarianism and social conscience which he had drawn from his father and grandfather.

During the war Philip, a natural leader, served as an officer in Burma and was awarded the Military Cross. His intelligent pragmatism soon became forged with inner steel which became a lasting attribute. He felt the responsibility for the survival of his Ghanaian infantrymen keenly and, after hostilities ended, he went with them back to Africa, "so they could find their way home". Jungle warfare honed Philip's intuition and survival skills and his earlier Anglican faith and religious beliefs developed into a wider spiritual investigation.

In New Zealand and new to the country, and slowly recovering from a debilitating illness, Philip met wife Jenny — a meeting of minds and souls and the beginning of a long and happy marriage.

Holy Trinity Church at Pakaraka remained a sanctuary but after his friend Lawrence Malcolm invited him to a Lloyd Geering lecture, Philip concluded that "the church was going into the future walking backward," Thus he and Jenny joined the Sea of Faith, and became regular Conference attendees, and became leaders in the local discussion group which drew people from all over the Far North.

At the end of his life Philip was comfortable with his beliefs. He had faced death several times and dismissed prayer for salvation, finding it more useful to pray for courage. He lived by the maxim 'Let Kindness be my guide, Reason my friend, and Courage my support'.

At Philip's funeral Holy Trinity Church was full, and a greater number listened to the service outside in the misty rain. The range of footwear beneath the umbrellas, from gumboots to high heels, reflected the breadth of Philip's friendships, made rewarding by his affirmation of others and his thoughtful observations.

Cynthia Mathews

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

The Chairperson is Laurie Chisholm

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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
The copy editor is Shirley Dixon.

CONTENTS

Newsletter 108, October 2013

1. Living With Ambiguity

Alan Goss's book review reminds us that "you are a child of the earth, and there is no other place to go."

2. Obituary: Philip Poore

3. All About Us

How, Why, When, Where, How Much.

4. Richard Dawkins, Lloyd Geering and God in the 21st Century

Retired Bishop Richard Randerson says that they both miss out on mystery.

7. Sacrifice: The Ultimate Altruism

Margaret Whitwell draws our attention to sacrifice in Christianity.

8. How Enlightened are You?

Think about this ...

8. AGM Report

8. Letter to the Editor

8. More on "Fleming"

Snippets from Conference Papers

9. Lloyd Geering

10. Rachael Kohn

12. Nigel Leaves

13. Winton Higgins

15. Speaker CVs

16. The Last Word

New Chairperson, Laurie Chisholm, checks in.

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RACHAEL KOHN AND SEA OF FAITH NEW ZEALAND

In addition to being a Keynote Speaker at this year's Conference, Rachael Kohn (seen below with a friend) hosts the programme "The Spirit of Things" on Radio National, Australia.

On October 13th she presented a programme about The Sea of Faith, The Conference and the book *Honest to God*. You can hear it at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/spiritofthings/honest-to-god/5009830>



Address to Sea of Faith, Auckland, 15 September 2013

RICHARD DAWKINS, LLOYD GEERING AND GOD IN THE 21ST CENTURY: *RELIGION AS A HUMAN CONSTRUCT*

Richard Randerson
randersonjr@paradise.net.nz

Richard Randerson is a retired Anglican Bishop and former Dean of Holy Trinity Cathedral, Auckland.

Some meanings:

1. Like a road sign pointing towards a city, religious words and images are human constructs that point to the reality of God. Creeds, images, liturgies, music, even the pages of scripture, are designed to point to God. We don't confuse the signage with the reality: signs and language merely point the way. And, because they are human constructs, they can be varied in the light of fresh ways of thinking and understanding. This is kerygma in context: in every age the reality of God needs to find expression within contemporary thought forms, while recognizing that any image of God is of a mystery that no human word or picture can adequately express.
2. There is a road-sign but no city to which it all points. The signage is a deception. So 'religion as a human construct' can likewise be an illusion: there is no reality to which it all points. "Humans make God", as Lloyd Geering said recently.
3. Theism is a word often used for the traditional image of God as a supernatural being, with the capacity to think, respond and intervene in human affairs. This, too, in my view, is a human construct, but one that is to be affirmed as being helpful and real for many people. But when it is held as the *only* image of God, excluding any other, it becomes an example of religious fundamentalism: in spite of changes in the contemporary context, there is only one image, one way.
4. There are also fundamentalist atheists who refuse to allow religious people to change their language and imagery in line with contemporary understandings because then, I believe, they can no longer easily knock over the old traditional constructs. The human constructs of science, technology, medicine, law, social mores or philosophy may all change, but not religion's human constructs.

Richard Dawkins is a good example of this last group. In December 2006 I was interviewed by Kim Hill on National Radio. I listened as she first interviewed Richard Dawkins by telephone from Oxford, UK, on his 2006 publication *The God Delusion*. Then for the next half hour Kim and I chatted about the book and Dawkins' arguments.

My opening comment to Kim was that I thought the book to be the most dishonest I had ever read. I said this because Dawkins' attack on religion was based entirely on caricatures and fundamentalist viewpoints. He certainly doesn't want the traditional images changed because then all his arguments would fall to the ground.

Totally absent from the book was any reference to contemporary mainstream theologians such as Rowan Williams, Richard Harries, Karen Armstrong, Marcus Borg or Tom Wright. Academic integrity requires an impartial overview of a spectrum of opinion, not a narrowly selected set of extreme views on which to base a pre-determined conclusion.

Dawkins is well aware of alternative views. He worked at times in Oxford with the then Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, an eminent theologian. On one occasion they wrote a letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair protesting a proposal to introduce the doctrine of creationism into a state school science curriculum. The letter was signed by eight bishops and nine senior scientists, and Dawkins noted that the letter was drafted by the Bishop of Oxford. Church and science lined up in opposing fundamentalist religious viewpoints, but Dawkins nonetheless ignores intelligent religious perspectives, presumably because they would blunt his attack on religious extremists.

But lop-sided as his arguments are, Richard Dawkins has a large global following. There are many today who know little about faith. Gone are the days when most might recall some church upbringing and know the basics of Christianity, even at a Sunday School level.

Caricatures of religion abound in the popular mind. Speculative theories are advanced that Jesus didn't die on the Cross but was revived from a death-like coma and then went off to live by the Dead Sea. There he married Mary Magdalene and they both lived happily ever after. A religiously uninformed population lacks the basis with which to critique such theories, and so they are taken as authentic. There is also a genre of journalists who delight in flow-of-consciousness, caricature-based raves against the Church. Like Dawkins, they exclude any objective or intelligent assessment.

Dawkins has a legitimate target in the extreme fundamentalist viewpoints offered by some church-members. Belief by some in the imminent end of the world leads to conclusions like 'don't bother working for peace, or justice, or to help the poor, or to save the environment: the world will

soon end and all those problems will be forgotten'. Main-stream religion is at one with Dawkins in attacking such gross theological and ethical distortions.

Dawkins directs much of his energy to showing the irrational nature of belief in God, in a theistic sense, as a supernatural being. There is no stand-up, knock-down argument to prove the existence of God. In fact the whole question of belief in God is wrongly construed. For when someone asks: 'Do you believe in the existence of God?', the popular understanding is in theistic terms of whether or not one believes in the existence of a supernatural being. One is an atheist, agnostic or believer on the basis of how one answers that question.

This is where Dawkins gets off on the wrong track to start with. Assuming that the faith question is about belief in the existence of a supernatural being, he cites Bertrand Russell's analogy of a china teapot. Russell's line of argument hypothesises that a china teapot is in orbit between Earth and Mars. The teapot is too small to be observable, so no one can prove it doesn't exist, but who in their right mind would believe it actually does? So it is with the existence of God, says Russell, and Dawkins agrees. The proposal cannot be disproved, but anyone with an ounce of common sense would regard it as ridiculous.

With this *argumentum ad absurdum*, Dawkins dismisses any rational basis for belief in a theistic god. But perhaps we should be grateful to him. For in demonstrating one absurdity, he unwittingly demonstrates an even greater absurdity, and that is the absurdity of trying to address the question of faith within this kind of framework.

I want to suggest that the question of faith is addressed not by an intellectual assent to the existence of something, but arises out of our experience of something at the heart of human living, something many choose to name as God.

People interpret such experience in different ways. There is nothing one can prove.

Here is how I have come to see things over the course of a lifetime.

Let me start with the story of a man in his 60s who was dying of cancer. He was not a religious person, but he wanted me to conduct his funeral in a way that respected the integrity of his non-religious beliefs. I have conducted many such funerals over the years and was happy to accede to his request. I asked him how he viewed life and death, and his answer amazed me. He said: "I don't believe in God, but I have a feeling of being part of something bigger than myself". I was amazed because central to my own experience of God is a feeling of being part of something bigger than myself, something that transcends all human life and creation and links me to every person and part of the world around us.

For another perspective consider the words of Dag Hammarskjöld, second Secretary-General of the United Nations, who wrote:

I don't know who or what put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer 'Yes' to Someone, or Something, and from that hour I was certain that

existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

Hammarskjöld records an experience of otherness, of mystery, something that cannot be put into words, but out of which arose his sense of vocation to serve others. This sense of vocation came strongly also to Moses on Mt Horeb. Moses turned aside to see a bush that was alive with fire, and heard a voice speaking of the suffering of his people Israel, and calling him to the risky task of confronting Egypt's Pharaoh and leading Israel out of Egypt into the freedom of the Promised Land. Again, there was that same sense of otherness, of mystery and of calling.

Exodus 3 reports that Moses asked God who could he tell them had sent him to free his people. God replied that he should say 'I AM sent you'. Here again is a title full of mystery: I AM has connotations of being or essence at the heart of life.

Or again, we are deeply moved when people have the capacity to transcend a massive loss and act with greatness of spirit. One such example moved the nation a few years ago when a young Christchurch mother, Emma Woods, spoke of the death of her 4-year old son, Nayan, who was tragically killed by a car that spun out of control. Emma said of little Nayan: "We had a perfect day at Playcentre, played lots of games together, and had a good time at the mall. I have no regrets about that day – we had fun together".

And of the young driver of the car: "We are pretty clear we don't want this to be the defining moment of his life. He is young, only seventeen. He has got his whole life ahead of him and we hope he will use it to do good things, to be good with people, and maybe eventually to be a good father". I do not know of Emma's spirituality, but her words are an astonishing statement of wisdom and generosity in the face of unimaginable grief. She has drawn on the deepest resources of spirit, while acknowledging the extent of the loss and pain that she will feel through long years ahead.

These experiences and reflections outline a way of thinking about God that is quite different from the traditional one of whether or not one believes in the existence of a supernatural being. We are talking of realities that lie at the heart of existence. They lie beyond the theistic image of God, and point to a mystery no words or pictures can express. The American sociologist, Peter Berger, refers to them as signals of transcendence.

People will choose different frameworks for those experiences – frameworks of religion, humanism, atheism, psychology, or ethics. Nothing can be proved. One can only identify one's experiences, find a framework that gives best expression to them, and choose to live within that framework. For the Church, God has been the name given to these central experiences in life. Words and images have been formed that seek to give expression to the nature of God. Stories, music, paintings and icons are part of the rich heritage of our human expression of the divine. These are human constructs, but for many they constitute a heritage which is very evocative and adds much to the richness of living.

But the heritage can also be a barrier to understanding if interpreted in a literal manner. Much of the heritage is symbolic, and points to a reality lying beyond and beneath what appears on the surface. We do not have faith in the heritage, but in the reality to which the heritage points.

The theistic image speaks of wisdom, love and care for all of God's people. It is an image that works for many people, but increasingly in the 21st century it is an image that has diminishing attraction for many, for these reasons:

First, it conjures up pictures of a three-decker universe of heaven, earth and hell, a universe inhabited by gods, demons, angels and spirits. There can be symbolic meaning to these concepts, but for many today such symbolism is out of reach, and the whole framework rejected.

Second, there is a tendency to anthropomorphism, to construct God in our own human image. A recent address by Lloyd Geering, entitled *How Humans Made God*, addresses this theme. While I disagree with Geering's conclusion, he nonetheless sets out lucidly the dangers of anthropomorphism. Such awareness dates back 2,500 years to the classical Greek era when a philosopher, Xenophanes, satirized this tendency thus:

But if cattle and horses and lions had hands or could paint with their hands and create works such as men do, horses like horses and cattle like cattle, [they] would depict the gods' shapes and make their bodies of such a sort as the form they themselves have.

In other words, if the horses wanted a god they would choose a horse. It could not, of course, be any old nag that whinnied and wheezed and grew old and died. It would have to be a horse characterized by the finest of equine qualities – power, wisdom, eternal youth, leadership and protection of all the equine race. The danger of having a theistic image of God is that we can append the highest of human aspirations to God – love, wisdom, all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, pre-existent – so that our image of God is of a super-human, made in our own image.

Third, the concept of pre-existence leads into the ongoing, sterile debate with science about the origins of the universe. Time and causation did not come into existence until the universe was formed, so concepts of pre-existence and first cause have no meaning outside the existing cosmos. In truth, neither theologian nor scientist has an exact answer about cosmic origins. Endless debate leads nowhere. Science and religion are complementary. Concepts of evolution and the Big Bang add much to our knowledge of the physical workings of the world. Religion offers wisdom as to how we live within that world, our sense of connectedness to all people and the earth, our sense of care for all that is.

Fourth, the problem of evil is another major issue with an anthropomorphic deity. It cropped up with the Asian tsunami a few years ago, or with the more recent Christchurch earthquakes, or at the personal level, when someone we love is dying, or has been killed in a road accident. Did God send such disasters? Or why didn't God intervene to prevent or remove such human tragedy? The concept of a supernatural being who intervenes, or doesn't but should, is a product of

anthropomorphic thinking, a problem avoided by other images of God.

For myself in recent years I have felt increasingly comfortable with the reality of God as mystery. I do not need to have answers to all the "Why?" questions about life and the universe. Like the man I quoted at the outset, I have a sense of being part of something bigger than myself. I have a sense of being cared for. I understand God as love or spirit. In prayer I feel I open myself to such love and spirit which provide a sense of spiritual well-being. Like the experience in prayer which Rowan Williams, former archbishop of Canterbury, describes: "I feel I am being attended to". It is an experience which is personal without necessarily feeling there is literally a Person on the other side. One could describe the mystery as Trans-Personal. It is an experience which clarifies vision, re-sets directions, reminds one of one's calling and values, and helps one reach out with compassion to all in need.

In what sense is God 'real'? God as mystery may seem altogether unreal. A good analogy is that of love. No one would deny the reality of love. It is one of life's most powerful forces, but where does love come from? Is it from some outside source, some reservoir of love on which we can draw, perhaps like one of Plato's forms? Or is it something that springs into life spontaneously whenever people act lovingly to one another? Whatever one's view, the reality of love is the same. The experience of God as love is widespread, and the reality of God may be conceived in the same way as the reality of love.

And here is where I disagree with Geering's conclusion in *How Humans made God*. He concludes his lecture with a quote from Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72):

We must replace the love of God by the love of man as the only true religion. The fate of mankind depends not on a being outside it and above it but on mankind itself...My wish is to transform friends of God into friends of man, believers into thinkers, devotees of prayer into devotees of work, candidates for the hereafter into students of this world.

To which Geering adds:

In the evolving world of human thought the idea of God has now done its work and a great work it was. It is over to us, as humanity come of age, to shoulder responsibilities we once expected the heavenly parent to do for us.

What Richard Dawkins and Lloyd Geering have in common is a simplistic choice between a theistic view of God as a supernatural being, and atheism or humanism. Each limits his view of God to one exclusive, albeit traditional, supernatural image. This is fundamentalism. Each demolishes that one image, Geering in a more sophisticated and erudite fashion than Dawkins. Each concludes the only alternative is humanism or atheism. Each ignores the whole concept and experience of God as mystery, and contemporary images of God. And many today lack the capacity to critique such a fundamentalist dualism.

Richard Randerson



SACRIFICE: THE ULTIMATE ALTRUISM

Margaret Whitwell of Tauranga

In modern parlance sacrifice is almost a sacred word, meaning as it does, unselfishness that entails personal loss. Fallen service personnel are said to have made “the supreme sacrifice”, words of respect and honour.

The imprint of sacrifice on the human mind dates back to pagan times when the word meant an offering made to the gods by those in awe of their fickle mood swings. When the gods smiled, good fortune and favours ensued, but their anger brought fearsome disasters such as drought and pestilence. The practice of human and animal sacrifice was common to many separate cultures. (*Pears and the Web*)

Archaeologists found the bones of sacrificed children in the citadel at Knossos in Crete. A Minoan legend blurs myth with history telling of the Minotaur, which had the head of a bull and the body of a man, and lived in the labyrinth below the palace there. It devoured the maidens and youths sent by Athens annually as a tribute to Minos.

The old Scandinavian religion included human sacrifice as well as that of animals and objects. An early centre was the *Blot*. In the Middle Ages worship took place in a sacred grove or at a simple altar of stones known as the *hörgr*.

Human sacrifices were made in great numbers by the Aztecs. One occurred each morning to aid the sun to rise, scores were needed to dedicate an important temple; the people chosen were politely esteemed as those “who gave their service”. Captured conquistadors met a similar fate until Cortez conquered Mexico.

Hindu gifts to their gods and spirits were of grain, ghee and spices, wood and other inanimate objects. The gift was put into a fire with chants and mantras and thus was carried to the Divas. These devotions can still be rendered at funerals, weddings or privately.

The customary laws for animal sacrifice in Judaism were set out in the book of Leviticus, in the Old Testament. The famous story of Abraham’s obedience in readying his son on the altar is also pivotal. Isaac was rescued in the nick of time when a substitute ram caught in a bush was seen. And the besieged King of Moab sacrificed his loved son and heir to his god in a plea for mercy. He did this on the city wall and his enemies fled in fright (II Kings 3.27). Nevertheless the prophets Jeremiah and Micah spoke sternly against child

sacrifice and the rituals eventually ceased, except among the Samaritans.

A well-to-do Muslim man will sacrifice a cow or sheep at Eid ul Adha. He will keep a third of the meat, give a third to his relatives, and one third to the poor. He knows that it is not the blood that pleases God; it is the giver’s piety.

Sacrifice is the base on which Christianity rests, since Paul’s biblical writings made it a profound theological absolute. The Creed is clear: Christ’s death is the one sacrifice which atones for the sins of the world. From the first, Christian rites were symbolic, using bread and wine and reverent dogmas to remember their divine Lord’s selfless act.

Today human sacrifice is outlawed all around the world, being viewed as murder. The evolutionary thinking articulated by the prophets was echoed by Maimonides, a liberal medieval Jew. He asserted that prayer and meditation were held superior to sacrifice, in God’s sight.

Then a nature hymn encoded the novel idea that singers’ music and adoration was their oblation. The hymn began:

**Sacrifice is the base on which Christianity rests,
since Paul’s biblical writings made it
a profound theological absolute.**

“For the beauty of the earth...”

and each verse ended with the couplet:

**“Gracious God to Thee we raise
This our sacrifice of praise.”**

A later version of the same hymn attributed to F.S. Pierpont, 1864, erased the awful word and the couplet is sung:

**“Lord of all to Thee we raise
This our grateful psalm of praise.”**

Common Praise, Melbourne University Press, 1937

Nowadays too, some Christian church liturgies present the bread and wine as symbols, not of the body and blood as before, but of shared community, the personhood of Jesus, and the spirit.

Time flows, and whether we see sacrifice as religious or simply as the ultimate altruism, it remains a part of the software of the human psyche.

Margaret Whitwell

**We welcome Letters to The Editor.
See page 3 for mailing details.**

HOW ENLIGHTENED ARE YOU?

*If you can live without caffeine,
If you can be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains,
If you can resist complaining,
If you can understand when your loved ones are
too busy to give you any time,
If you can take criticism and blame without
resentment,
If you can ignore a friend's limited education and
never correct him or her,
If you can resist treating a rich friend better
than a poor friend,
If you can face the world without lies and deceit,
If you can conquer tension without medical help,
If you can relax without liquor,
If you can sleep without the aid of drugs,
If you can honestly say that deep in your heart
you have no prejudice against creed, colour,
religion, gender preference, or politics,
Then you have almost reached the
same level of spiritual development
as your dog!*



Found at http://www.enlightened-spirituality.org/Spiritual_Humor.html

AGM 2013

As usual, the Annual General Meeting of the Sea of Faith was held at Conference. We received reports from the Chairperson, the Treasurer, the Local Groups Coordinator, the Archivist, the Resource Centre and the Newsletter/Website Editor.

Two new members – **Gretchen Kivell** from Dunedin and **Professor Doug Sellman** from Christchurch – were appointed to the Steering Committee. **Bev Smith** and **Margaret Gwynn's** four-year term on the Committee expired. Bev served one year as Chairperson and Margaret Gwynn convened the local Arrangements Committee this year. Both were thanked for their good work.

At a brief post-Conference meeting of the Steering Committee, **Laurie Chisholm** was appointed chairperson and **Jock Crawford** was appointed Secretary.

*Laurie Chisholm
Chairperson*

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

I have reread Noel Cheer's article in the August Newsletter and must reply. Not that I disagree with all of it. I agree with most of it, but at times Noel puts up a straw man to knock him down. Noel is right about the qualities of the Kingdom of God – love, compassion, justice and that today's inhumanity in many parts of the world mirrors the inhumanity in Jesus's time.

But I do not think he gives enough credit to the many Christians, and others, throughout the world who are working with the victims of injustice, most of them, I suggest motivated by love, compassion and justice.

In Gisborne, and no doubt in many other towns throughout New Zealand, most of the charitable organisations exist because of volunteers who happen to be Christian. Noel asks Christians to subscribe to a better God than one who requires Jesus to die so as to rescue humankind from condemnation. In my view, most have.

In 1966 Hugh Montefiore, who later became Anglican Bishop of Birmingham, wrote in his book, *A Truth To Tell*, that there were many causes of Jesus's death – ordinary human reasons: Zealots being disappointed in him, his friends running away, Caiaphas wanting him out of the way and so on. Montefiore then says, "But do not think it was your sin that killed him. That is silly talk.....It is sometimes said that God became man in order to die. This is ridiculous". Montefiore then says that Jesus shows divine love in action. I subscribe to that and so do many Christians in today's churches, including most leaders. Most churches have changed, Noel.

Give us credit for that.

Allan Hall Gisborne

FLEMING

"His name was Fleming, and he was a poor Scottish farmer"

Or so we published in Newsletter 107. It now seems not to be historically true. But, on the other hand, it is a sort of uplifting story. If only the world was more like stories such as this!

Conference 2013: Tell Me The New, New Story

MEMORIES OF LINDISFARNE

This supplement contains excerpts from the four Keynote addresses given at the 2013 Conference.
They can be read in full on the website at www.sof.org.nz

Lindisfarne College, Hastings The Original Lindisfarne



The Holy Island of Lindisfarne is a tidal island off the northeast coast of England. It is also known just as Holy Island. It constitutes the civil parish of Holy Island in Northumberland. Holy Island has a recorded history from the sixth century. It was an important centre of Celtic Christianity under Saints Aidan, Cuthbert, Eadfrith and Eadberht. After Viking invasions and the Norman invasion of England, a priory was reestablished. A small castle was built upon it in 1550.

The island measures 3.6kms from east to west and 2.4km from north to south, and comprises approximately 1,000 acres at high tide. The island is located about two miles from the mainland of England. The isle of Lindisfarne is located along the northeast coast of England, close to the border with Scotland. It is accessible, most times, at low-tide by crossing sand and mud flats which are covered with water at high tides. These sand and mud flats carry an ancient pilgrim's path, and in more recent times, a modern causeway.

THEOLOGY BEFORE AND AFTER BISHOP ROBINSON'S *HONEST TO GOD*

Sir Lloyd Geering

Fifty years ago this year Bishop John Robinson published his little book *Honest to God*. No theological book was read so widely as this little volume in the whole of the 20th century. Why was that so?

In some respects it remains a puzzle to this day. It was not because the book was saying anything strikingly new.

First, he sketched Paul Tillich. Tillich had written two popular and widely read books – *The Shaking of the Foundations* and *The Courage to Be*. The first two volumes of Tillich's massive 3-volume *Systematic Theology* were published in the 50's, and Robinson quoted from them. In his search to find a satisfying way of understanding the meaning of 'God' he fastened on Tillich's definition of God as 'the ground of our being'. This showed, as Robinson said, that theology is *not* about a particular Being called God but about the ultimate questions posed by our very existence or being.

Second, Robinson turned to the impact of Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose letters from a Nazi prison provided a rich collection of seed-thoughts that many of us were then mulling over. In particular Robinson was fascinated by the Bonhoeffer's new assessment of Jesus as 'the man for others', rather than as a divine figure.

Thirdly, but much less prominent, was the influence of Rudolf Bultmann. His demythologising of the New Testament had become known to scholars outside of Germany only after World War II. Then Robinson

added a chapter on "The New Morality", writing with approval of an article by Joseph Fletcher [later to become the book *Situation Ethics*].

Thus Robinson was pulling together the thoughts of a number of theologians who were then at the leading edge of Christian thought. If he had done this in a simpler and more lucid manner than was present in the originals, that would perhaps explain the sudden and widespread interest.

But *Honest to God* is not a particularly easy book for the theologically illiterate to read. Even Robinson himself later said that if he had known it was going to be read so widely he would have written it in a much more accessible style.

So why did it become a runaway bestseller? In small part it was due to a set of chance events surrounding the time of its publication. Not long beforehand, Bishop Robinson had achieved widespread public notoriety over his appearance in a celebrated court case where he publicly defended the publication of the unexpurgated text of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Thus the name of Bishop Robinson was already being bandied about in the public arena and this meant that the journalists were on the alert for anything unusual. So the public press chose to announce the arrival of Robinson's little new book with these words on the billboards – "Our image of God must go".



The public impression created from the very beginning was that Robinson was making a break with Christian orthodoxy on the basic issue of the reality of God. Certainly that is made clear on p.13 of the preface where we read, "Whatever we may accept with the top of our minds, most of us still retain deep down the mental image of 'an old man in the sky'". Certainly, if we keep talking of and praying to "Our Father in heaven", how can we avoid having this image of God?

But Robinson was not denying the reality of God but calling for "a restating of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms" and, for such a recasting, he judged that "the most fundamental categories of our theology – of God, of the supernatural and of religion itself – must go into the melting". Yet he was not the first to call for such a radical reconstruction, as we shall presently see. So why the stir?

What *was* new about this book was that it was written by a bishop. Theologians may question and explore, but bishops are expected to be the authoritative guardians of the faith. Moreover it was written in a personal style in which Robinson confessed his own difficulties with orthodox Christian doctrines. He judged them to be expressed in thought-forms and language that had long become obsolete in the world outside of the church. He guessed that his book would surprise some and so he concluded his short preface with these words 'What I have tried to say, in a tentative and exploratory way, may seem to be radical, and doubtless to many heretical. 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'. Those last words have certainly proved to be all too true.

I conclude that it was the personal and public way in which a bishop (already suspected of being a maverick) openly confessed his own doubts that caused this book to ring bells with hundreds of thousands of church-going people. What came over in the book was Robinson's honesty and frankness about his own theological concerns. Many felt so relieved that a bishop was experiencing the same problems as they did with the traditional formulations of the faith.

[Here Lloyd traced the linkage of ideas from Schleiermacher to Robinson.]

Let me now sketch three ways in which Schleiermacher triggered off the theological changes that led to the bombshell dropped by Robinson.

First, [as summarised in this quotation] "Religion answers a deep need in man. It is neither a metaphysic,

nor a morality, but above all feeling. ... Dogmas are not, properly speaking, part of religion: it is rather that they are derived from religion. Belief in God, and in personal immortality, are not necessarily a part of religion; one can conceive of a religion without God, and it would be pure contemplation of the universe." [Schleiermacher *On Religion*]

Second, Schleiermacher's switch from a divine starting-point to a human one took theology out of the hands of the authoritative experts, priests and theologians, and democratized it.

The *third* way in which Schleiermacher's switch from a divine starting-point to a human one led to the modern situation is that it opened the way for dispensing with the word 'God'.

In 1999 Don Cupitt made a study of our everyday discourse and he discovered that, as the word 'God' ceased to be in use, it was replaced by the word 'Life'. He concluded that now that theology has been democratized (thanks to Schleiermacher) it is no longer the academic theologians but ordinary people, speaking out of the experience of living, who have been at the leading edge of theology.

Summary. The theistic image of God had to go. It was too small, too human, too personal, and too objective.

'God' remains as a symbolic term referring to all that transcends us, providing unity to the universe we live in.

Honest to God was a significant marker in the process by which Western culture moved from its traditional Christian base to its current non-theistic and post-Christian stance. It started with Schleiermacher but only since the 60's of the twentieth century did it lead to the increasingly rapid decline of the churches. The nature of this transition is particularly visible in the "Progressive Christian Churches" and the Sea of Faith Network. Just as the Enlightenment gave us freedom to think, so in the realm of theology we in the West are mostly becoming 'do-it-yourselfers' today.

FAITH'S NEW STORY: SCIENCE OR SENSE?

Rachael Kohn

Two thousand people packed Sydney Town Hall to hear an anti-religion cosmologist go head to head with a religious philosopher on the origins of the universe. Lawrence Krauss, the Foundation Professor of the School of Earth and Space Exploration and director of

Arizona State University's Origins Project, who is known for his impatience and impertinence when performing in front of an audience (wearing his orange sneakers), was true to form on this occasion when he debated William Lane Craig, a Christian with two Ph.D.s in philosophy.

The question must be asked, 'What gives these public showdowns oxygen?' Why is anyone interested in witnessing these often painful events that are high on humiliation and low on illuminating dialogue?

I'd venture to say that there is a degree of public nervousness and uncertainty about the future, which it is hoped such 'debates' may help to clarify. Perhaps the people who watch them are hoping for a clear victor, who will confirm the way to go? After all, our societies are fracturing under the strain of difficult questions with huge implications: should the uniqueness of marriage between men and women be defended or consigned to the dustbin of history? Should children be raised by their biological parents or by anyone who fills out a form and promises to care for them? Should violence and pornography be allowed continued presence on the internet, TV, radio, and the theatre? Should we hold on to our traditions of Common Law or should we accept other forms of law derived from religious traditions that hold different values than our society has enshrined in legislation and in our constitutions? Should we endeavor to guarantee jobs for our citizens even if that means foregoing some international treaties on climate change? How can we even believe that climate change is anything we can stop if, as I learned from an astronomer in a previous Sea of Faith Conference, the impact of sunspots is both greater than anything humanly generated and also unstoppable? The latest report from the UN on climate change throws even more doubt on the recent certainties that only a couple of years ago the Australian government was willing to back to the tune of billions of dollars of lost revenue.

How can the debates between believers and atheists on whether God exists offer direction or solace? The answer is far from obvious, but in light of the challenges and anxieties that governments seem less and less able or willing to solve, both religion and science are as important as they ever were in providing some direction, if not also some kind of comfort.

Will the logical, pragmatic, materialist, objective approach of science provide the matter of fact responses to questions that have values at their core? Or will the ancient wisdom, the customary rituals and

the moral traditions of age-old religion provide the stability and encouragement that human communities seek?

Today, the option is not what brand of Christian are you, but are you willing to be Christian at all? Perhaps one could say it is 'minimalist' Christianity that is being proffered, but for those like Borg or Ringma and countless others in the 'emergent church' movement, it is *essential* Christianity, shorn of its many non-Biblical and non-functional dogmas, its uninspiring rituals and its tribalism. If this sounds very Protestant – then let me admit that to a large extent this self directed, innovative, and eclectic approach to being Christian derives from the grass roots voluntarism, which characterized the Protestant Reformation and cast the lay people as the priesthood of believers.

But it is not confined to that wing of the Church, because, in today's world, people are either losing their religion or choosing it. Let me share with you another development that is afoot but which is far more subversive due to the nature of the Roman Church. While Catholics love the idea of a Pope, who provides comfort and unity and is a shining light to the faithful around the world, as is the Dalai Lama to Buddhists, many of them, particularly women religious and priests, are weary of the constraints that the Vatican imposes on them.



The man who discovered the big bang was a priest: the Belgian Georges Lemaitre. (He studied as an engineer, was a decorated artilleryman in World War I, and then switched to mathematics while studying for the priesthood in the early 1920s. He then moved on to cosmology, and to Harvard and eventually on to MIT where he emerged with a second doctorate in physics.) Pope Pius on hearing of the discovery of the Big Bang was delighted, and said in 1951, that the science proved the Genesis story of creation: that out of nothing, there was Light. But the priest scientist, having been elected to the Vatican's Pontifical Academy, cautioned the Pope against such a view, saying "As far as I can see such a theory remains entirely outside of any metaphysical or religious question." (I am indebted to Laurence Kraus' book for this account.)

Today we are seeing a growing number of people

'shepherds should smell like their sheep'

Pope Francis

wisely answering the secularist anti-religion critics, not in slanging matches, but in their deeds. They are doing wittingly or unwittingly what Pope Francis advised when he called the church to 'the periphery' – to those on the outside, perhaps those who are the 'nones' (no religion) on the census. He said, "shepherds should smell like their sheep".

Being among the people, not removed from them, is where believing in God matters because to quote Michael Benedikt, 'God is the good you do'.



TOO MANY NEW STORIES! WHICH ONE DO YOU TELL?

Nigel Leaves

We define ourselves by saying that we live in Post-modernity. One of the characteristics of that philosophical viewpoint is that, following Friedrich Nietzsche, there is *not* 'One Truth' but many 'truths'. So, likewise there is not One 'Big' Story (metanarrative) but many 'little' stories (*petit recits*). Moreover, religions have a wide variety of stories that contest in the religious market-place. There are an estimated thirty-nine thousand Christian denominations, each with its own competing story. I will obviously *not* outline them all. However, I will, attempt to classify, in the spirit of H. Richard Niebuhr [1894-1962 – *Christ and Culture* 1951] what I consider to be the seven major Christian categories of stories that are being promoted today.

The questions that arise will then be: Do you tell any of these stories? Which, if any, is closest to your religious story?

The first of these is one that you will be familiar with:

1. TELL ME THE OLD, OLD STORY

*Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.
Tell me the story simply, as to a little child,
For I am weak and weary, and helpless and defiled.
Tell me the old, old story, tell me the old, old story,
Tell me the old, old story, of Jesus and His love.*

The 'old story' became popular because of a particular understanding of the Christian story, which became one of the corner stones of evangelical Christianity – the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement.

2. TELL ME THE OLD, OLD STORY WITH A DIFFERENT STYLE (Emerging churches)

The second category of story may be easily identified as an 'old wine in new wineskins' story.

To put it succinctly: it is a change in style, not of substance.

This can be seen in the recent of rise of 'Mega-Churches' and what is termed 'emerging churches'. The emerging church urges the faithful to find new ways of "being/doing church" and innovations such as "house church," "café/messy church," "Gen-X services," "Taizé-style worship" have emerged. While it must be acknowledged that the emerging church exhibits many variations, it is best characterized by a desire to tinker with ecclesiastical structures but not with theology.

3. THE OLD STORY IS BEING MODIFIED (EMERGENT AND RELIGIOUSLY PROGRESSIVE CHURCHES)

The emergent and religiously progressive churches have no such qualms about radical theological reformulation.

In short, Christianity is about 'being, not belief'.

The emergent or progressive church is both deeply committed to, and deeply critical of Christianity. After all, Jesus did not come to found the church, but to transform the earth and its people.

4. THE WORLD RELIGIONS' STORY

The fourth category is the World Religions' story. Its origins lie in the 1970s educational methodology known as 'the phenomenology of religion' exemplified in writers such as Ninian Smart and its central theologian and campaigner – the late John Hick.

Beginning in 1973 with his ground-breaking book, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Hick proposed that there needed to be a religious Copernican revolution: one in which 'the universe of faith centres upon God, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion.' At the heart of every religion is the religious believer's experience of God/the Divine etc.

Popular analogies of people walking different paths up the mountaintop to arrive at the same destination popularize this approach.

God is thus greater than all 'gods' and religions merely point towards the existence of something greater than itself.



5. SPIRITUAL STORIES INCLUDING THE GREAT REVERSAL

The fifth category is spiritual stories including the great reversal and is reflected in the popular phrase: "I'm not religious but I am spiritual."

Diana Butler Bass wrote in *Christianity After Religion* (2012) that historically the Church has emphasized the following hierarchy of 'order': *believing* first, then *behaving*, and finally *belonging*. She argues that today amongst those she calls 'spiritual people' a 'great reversal' has reordered those priorities to read: *belonging*, *behaving* and *believing*. After all, belonging is what people need most and recalls how Christianity originated. It began with an invitation into friendship, into creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service.

This great reversal will lead to a new global Christianity that emphasizes community, social justice and spiritual experience.

6. THE ATHEIST STORY: HAS IT ANY STORY TO TELL?

It is often assumed that atheism has no story to tell, apart from its insistence that there is no God. However, that is to mask the wide-ranging agenda that today's atheists who, mirroring the way that gay and lesbians refused to be covered into submission, have 'come out of the closet' demanding to be heard.

The former accommodationism of scientists such as Isaac Newton that gradually over the centuries turned into separation and then eventually to the peaceful co-existence of 'power sharing' is now contested by a scientific monism that asserts that there are not two distinct areas of discourse, but *only* one. This is the scientific story and it is all encompassing. Indeed, according to Sam Harris' latest book (*The Moral Landscape*) science can now determine human values.

7. THE SEA OF FAITH STORY: TWO STORIES

The Sea of Faith story is in fact two stories ('non-realist' and 'secular Christianity') that have been developed by its foundational theologians – Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering. Beginning with Cupitt's *Taking Leave of God* and Geering's, *Faith's New Age* (both published in 1980) they set forth the 'original story' of Sea of Faith. The vision is to free Christianity of its supernatural underpinning and replace it with a non-realist understanding of the Christian faith. People must give up the realist idea of an all-powerful God "out-there" who sustains and creates the universe. Two

phrases occur repeatedly in their books: "the world is outsideless" and "All this is all there is."

So began the idea of non-realism, best expressed in the words of Anthony Freeman: "I do believe in God, and one of the things I believe about God is that he does not exist." You can retain the Christian language but you must strip away the objectivity of God, denude the Church of its supernatural teachings and there will emerge a non-supernatural form of Christianity that is more in tune with modern scientific thinking.

That original story began to evolve in the mid to late 1990s with the emergence of the idea of 'secular Christianity.' The Western secular world is the reformation of Christianity coming to pass — a de-supernaturalized, secular, Kingdom religion of ethical humanitarianism that helps others solely on the basis of our co-humanity "regardless of race, colour, creed, gender, sexual orientation, doctrinal soundness and moral desert".

Cupitt (and Geering) argue that ecclesiastical Christianity will be replaced by informal religious associations and networks such as Sea of Faith. Indeed, Cupitt lays down the gauntlet for Sea of Faith to be 'the Church of the future.' People should move on from Church Christianity, which is in terminal decline, to Kingdom religion, which is what secularism and globalization are pointing towards, though they still have a long way to go.

(IN) CONCLUSION

These seven types or categories of story bring into sharp relief the various options that are available in the religious supermarket. The question that postmoderns will ask is: "can I belong to one or more categories at the same time?". There are no fixed positions anymore.

WHAT IS RELIGION FOR, NOW? A PRAGMATIST INQUIRY

Winton Higgins

Introduction

The rise of post-metaphysical thought from the late nineteenth century liberated those it influenced from the tyranny of metaphysical truth-claims about the cosmos, its origins, God, human nature, the relationship between them, and much else. All such truth-claims arise from human interests and needs, and have no validity beyond that, Nietzsche taught. His American

contemporaries in the pragmatist school of philosophy tacitly agreed: *utility trumps so-called Truth in our working understandings of ourselves and our world*. But powerful institutions with vested interests in metaphysical truth-claims have kept them alive notwithstanding, and most Westerners have missed the post-metaphysical bend in the road. Thus celebrity view-holders like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, for instance, can still make a very comfortable living arguing the toss about 'the God question'.

The Pragmatist Premise

In contrast to most other species, human beings survived, thrived and transformed themselves by using tools. But not all the tools our early ancestors created were physical objects. Language, too, began as a tool in aid of physical survival and well-being. It continues to be a tool that we can and do repurpose at will. For pragmatists like Richard Rorty, we should hone and wield the language tool to be useful, not to be 'right'. And the more we develop and deploy our tools, the more this process extends human capacities.

Religion seems to have emerged as a tool, too, one which we've sharpened, deployed and then redeployed in much the same way as language. We might speculate that the development of religious discourse and ritual enormously extended the range and uses of language, as well as regulating human interaction and reproduction, and the induction of children into tribal forms of life. Religious moral codes enforced these forms of life, which reformers like Jesus and the Buddha later modified by overlaying them with universal ethical commitments, starting with compassion, generosity and wisdom.

By degrees western religious culture took aesthetic expression to greater lengths in the celebration of life, including everyday communal life, as well as communal commemoration of what we nowadays call our life-events: birth, puberty, marriage, having children, mourning the dead, and facing our own deaths.

One particular religious artefact has served us and our predecessors to an extent that can hardly be exaggerated – the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. It exemplifies religion's historical and multifaceted utility. It first appeared in 1549, at a critical moment in Western – and especially English – affairs. It sealed Henry VIII's break with Rome, which ushered in a wholly new form of political community that has since become the global norm: the modern nation-state, with its precise borders and exclusive sovereignty over

all who dwell within them. It was also the beginning of the English Reformation, and largely the work of the liturgical-poetic genius, Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556).

The *Book of Common Prayer* in its successive versions was 'common' in two important senses. It set out to be common to the entire population of England (and later Wales and Scotland), and in its ability to capture – in scintillating vernacular language – common experiences of everyday life

Both Shakespeare and the authors of the King James Bible were marinated in the BCP's vocabulary, metaphors and poetic idiom ... several of Shakespeare's actual plots drew on the BCP's baptism, marriage and funeral rites. He turned liturgy into plot points in such major plays as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

Secularity and Individualisation

[In 1851, eight years before Darwin's *Origin*] Matthew Arnold wrote his haunting lament, *Dover Beach*, over the ebbing of 'the sea of faith'. In 1851 scientific naturalism was not yet the problem. My own guess is that Arnold was recoiling from emerging and linked cultural conditions: religious diversity following toleration, and thus the breakdown of a 'common' religious communion; intensifying secularity; and individualisation gradually eroding community. The image of the teeming indivisible sea receding, and leaving only the cold and sterile shingles (atomised individuals) grating against each other, seems to clinch the loss of an organic community underpinned by a common religious tradition, one that offered shared existential certitudes. According to pragmatist wisdom, *what we are now* is much less important than *what we have the potential to become*.

Theological toleration and diversity of belief turned out to be a strength, not a necessary evil. After all the truth is not metaphysical, it is practical and ethical.

The percentage of regular church-goers in western society continues to shrink. Anecdotal evidence suggests that an increasing proportion of them, too, disbelieve the supernatural premises of liturgy, but that is not going to stop them enjoying the fellowship of an ethical community and a good old sing-along. Belonging (and singing) trump belief.

Particularly fascinating is the survival of the old religious traditions, not least as repositories of cultural history, among the thickets of 'new religious movements'. The BCP remains the normative liturgy of the worldwide Anglican communion in much the same form that Pepys sang along to – the 1662 version.

When we see religious development in this light, we may feel inspired to doff our caps to one of the pioneers of pragmatist philosophy, William James, for his influential *Varieties of Religious Experience*, first published in 1902. Here was a book about religion that didn't focus on privileged religious objects, but rather on their devotees, and the way in which religious practice enhances their lives. "In what ways is religion *useful* to us in enlarging our lives?" he asks.

Ninety years later the then doyen of the pragmatist school, Richard Rorty, sketched the aspirations for intellectual inquiry and cultural development, which aspirations – I suggest – progressive religion today could make its own. As heirs of the French revolution, our public task is to work for an open and free social order in which 'every human potentiality is given a fair chance.' In our private endeavours to *tinker with ourselves* in the service of ethical character-development, Rorty argues, we face a (religiously significant) choice between two strategies – ascetic *self-purification* or aesthetic *self-enlargement*.

Self-purification involves 'the desire to slim down, to peel away everything that is accidental, to will one thing, to become a simpler and more transparent being'. The opposite strategy of self-enlargement entails 'the desire to embrace more and more possibilities, to be constantly learning, to give oneself over entirely to curiosity, to end by having envisaged all the possibilities of the past and the future.'

Self-purification presupposes a metaphysical belief in an original, fixed 'true self' (or soul) to return to, and rules out the post-metaphysical and pragmatist view of the human person as a work-in-progress – the view that supports self-enlargement, and returns to William James's basic idea of religion as life-enriching. Self-enlargement attracts the moral obligation (first announced by the Egyptians and the Greeks) to *know yourself*, now precisely as a work-in-progress. And that task in turn requires creativity – 'the acquisition of new vocabularies of moral reflection', and our becoming 'increasingly ironic, playful, free, and inventive in our choice of self-descriptions'.

Our ancestors developed our religious traditions as tools in aid of survival, well-being and self-improvement. Along with other significant inventions, they have served us well and utterly transformed us into self-aware moral agents. To the extent that they remain living traditions they can go on serving us,



welcome our creative honing in order to remain fit-for-purpose, and so accompany our future evolution. As Darwin put it at the end of his *Origin*, 'There is grandeur in this view of life.'



The Speakers

SIR LLOYD GEERING is a Life Member of The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) and is New Zealand's best-known and most controversial commentator on theological issues.

Lloyd held Chairs of Old Testament Studies at theological colleges in Brisbane and Dunedin before being appointed as the foundation Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. He is best remembered by many New Zealanders for the high-profile 1967 'heresy' trial. Since his retirement in 1984 he has continued to write and lecture widely, and has presented 10 Keynote addresses at Sea of Faith Conferences. He is theologian-in-residence for The St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society.

He is the author of at least ten books, including his autobiography, *Wrestling with God*, (2006). In 2007 he was admitted to the Order of New Zealand.

DR. RACHAEL KOHN has produced and presented the programme *The Spirit of Things* on ABC Radio National (Australia) for sixteen years.

She taught Religious Studies at Sydney University, and in universities in England and Canada, and was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters by the University of NSW in 2005 for her "outstanding contribution to fostering religious understanding" in the Australian community.

Rachael has contributed to many books and journals on the subject of religion and has written *The New Believers: Reimagining God* and *Curious Obsessions in the History of Science and Spirituality*.

DR. NIGEL LEAVES is based in Brisbane, Australia. He is on the staff of St Francis Theological College and Canon of St John's Anglican Cathedral where he is responsible for adult theological education. He is Academic Associate of Charles Sturt University, teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

He is concerned that theology should be both honest and appropriate to the cultural situation in which it is situated. He is fearful that truthful 'God-talk' has been sidelined from ordinary conversation and enjoins theologians to be more creative in their engagement with postmodernity.

Nigel is a highly regarded as a conference speaker and educator; and has lectured extensively in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the USA.

WINTON HIGGINS is a Buddhist. He was born in Sydney in 1941, and is a graduate of the Universities of Sydney, Stockholm and London. After a brief period at the NSW Bar he changed careers to research, writing and teaching in the discipline of politics, mainly at Macquarie University.

He has taught comparative genocide studies and has sat on the board of the Australian Institute of Holocaust and Genocide Studies since 2000. He is a visiting research fellow at the Transforming Cultures research centre, University of Technology, Sydney, and is working on a novel about the first Nuremberg trial. He lives in Sydney.

THE LAST WORD

Another wonderful and successful Conference: our twenty-first!

As I write this, I am still coming down from a high induced by hearing stimulating keynote speeches, seeing familiar faces again, and having good conversations that explore important things. I also had a distinct impression that there were more younger faces than we have seen for a long time.

We were welcomed by **Margaret Gwynn**, chair of the local Arrangements Committee, who observed that by coming to Lindisfarne College, we were paradoxically connecting to an old, old story; Lindisfarne takes its name from a tidal island in England, a centre of early Celtic Christianity and origin of the Lindisfarne gospels, a famous illustrated manuscript.

So what did the keynote speakers have to say about “The New, New, Story?” **Lloyd Geering** began by telling us about Bishop Robinson’s *Honest to God* and the controversy it caused. But he thought that the book was important, not so much for its contents as for being a marker in the retrospective story of how non-theistic and post-Christian modern culture emerged from traditional authoritarian religion. Lloyd gave us an overview of this story. It began with Schleiermacher, who based his theology on personal experience instead of divine revelation. It continued with Ludwig Feuerbach, who regarded statements about God as encoded statements about we human beings. And now, the word “God” is disappearing from everyday language and we are talking instead about “life”, as Don Cupitt discovered.

Nigel Leaves gave us sketches of seven ‘stories’. These stories were more like world-views or a set of fundamental convictions that are finding institutional expression, rather than narratives. They are all derived from Western Christian culture and include fundamentalism, megachurches, emergent and religiously progressive churches, a multi-faith religiosity, a broad-based spirituality and atheism. Interestingly, he sees two different stories underlying the Sea of Faith. (Perhaps it would be better to say “underlying Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering’s influential inputs into the Sea of Faith”, since the Sea of Faith itself does not have an official point of view.) The first is a non-realist Christianity shorn of supernatural teachings, and the second is a secular Christianity that has left the church behind. For the latter story, Christianity is evolving beyond its warped ecclesiastical form into a secular, post-Christian humanism. He concluded by asking us what our own religious story is and suspecting that we live, not by one, but by a multiplicity, of stories.

Rachael Kohn powerfully illustrated the futility of arguments between the traditionally believing and the new atheists. Some months ago in a packed Sydney Town Hall, the anti-religious cosmologist Lawrence Krauss and the Christian apologist William Lane Craig went head to head but shed little light. Such gladiatorial combats attract a certain type, but are best seen as a desperate contest for followers. By contrast, the

recently-staged play *Freud’s Last Session* was able to explore more productively the question of whether to believe or not to believe. Rachael thinks we are in danger of shutting down the religious sense. There is a truth that is very different from what science offers. Values transcend the material world. We must not reduce love to a surge of chemicals or God to a delusion or a creed.

Winton Higgins presented a ‘pragmatist’ approach to religion, by which he means setting metaphysical questions to one side and asking how religion is useful in enlarging our lives. Religion, like language, is a ‘tool’. It has made us more articulate and capable of thinking through existential issues. Surprisingly for a Buddhist, he used the Anglican Book of Common Prayer to illustrate that usefulness. It gave an experience of communal belonging that brought God, king and country together. As “a book to live, love and die to,” it gave meaning to the life-events of birth, puberty, having children and death. He left us with memorable slogans: “The truth is not metaphysical, it is practical and ethical”, and “belonging trumps belief”.

After each keynote speech, we discussed them in Core Groups – for me, the best for years, thanks in part to very nice facilitation by Ralph Pannett in the Group that I was in.

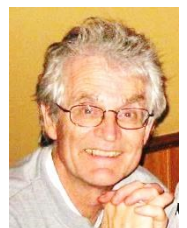
Saturday afternoon had a variety of workshops and local excursions to choose from. Some attended one or both of the workshops provided by the hymn-writer Shirley Murray and the raconteur and Robert Frost enthusiast from the USA, Tom Hall. To fill in those little gaps between events, a number of posters gave thought-provoking quotations on the themes of God and Story.

As has been the custom for many years, at the end of the Conference, Noel Cheer led a Panel Discussion involving all four keynote speakers.

Perhaps the Conference’s greatest coup was staging a 95th birthday celebration for Lloyd Geering on Saturday night, to his complete surprise. A fragile Alan Goss provided the speech, our chairperson, Beverley Smith, read birthday greetings from Martin Prozesky, Don Cupitt, Bishop Spong and Karen Armstrong, and the Rag Tag Scoobie Doobie Good Time Band sang (among other delightful numbers) two songs especially for Lloyd: one about the Geering Controversy and the other celebrating a willingness to change one’s mind in the light of the facts. (In due course you will be able to download them from our website.)

Thanks to the Napier/Hastings local Arrangements Committee for enabling the Conference to run so smoothly – when everything goes just fine, we tend not to notice the work that went into it.

As time goes on, my eager anticipation of the next Conference will increase....



Laurie Chisholm
Chairperson 2013-2014