

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 109, December 2013

ARE WE TOO SOPHISTICATED? Naivety Might Be Good for Us

Marcus Borg, in his book *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*,¹ wrote:

“... a major need for contemporary readers of the Bible is to move from pre-critical naivety through critical thinking to post-critical naivety.”

Pre-critical naivety is an early childhood state in which we take it for granted that whatever the significant authority figures in our lives tell us to be true is indeed true. In this state ... we simply hear the stories of the Bible as true stories.

Critical thinking begins in late childhood and early adolescence. One does not need to be an intellectual or go to college or university for this kind of thinking to develop. Rather, it is a natural stage of human development; everybody enters it. In this stage, consciously or quite unconsciously, we sift through what we learned as children to see how much of it we should keep. Is there really a tooth fairy? Are babies brought by storks? Did creation really take only six days? Were Adam and Eve real people?

Post-critical naivety is the ability to hear the Biblical stories once again as true stories, even as one knows that they may not be factually true and that their truth does not depend upon their factuality. [It] is not a return to pre-critical naivety. It brings critical thinking with it. It does not reject the insights of historical criticism but integrates them into a larger whole.’

Alain de Botton, in his book *Religion for Atheists*,² wrote:

“ ... this book does not endeavor to do justice to particular religions; they have their own apologists. It tries, instead, to examine aspects of religious life which contain concepts that could fruitfully be applied to the problems of secular society. It attempts to burn off religions' more dogmatic aspects in order to distil a few aspects of them that could prove timely and consoling to skeptical contemporary minds facing the crises and griefs of finite existence on a troubled planet. It hopes to rescue some of what is beautiful, touching and wise from all that no longer seems true. ... Religions are intermittently too useful, effective and intelligent to be abandoned to the religious alone.”

1) Marcus Borg, from pages 49-51 of *Reading The Bible Again for the First Time* HarperSanFrancisco 2001. His preferred spelling was “naivete”.

2) Alain de Botton, pages 19 and 312 of *Religion for Atheists* Hamish Hamilton Books 2012

FAREWELL MARGARET



Though I am/was a confirmed Anglican and are now an apostate, I recently went to church.

Apart from weddings and funerals I don't do that often. I gave up some decades ago when I found the experience injurious to my faith – a sentiment I have heard often from SoF people. But, this occasion was different. It was at St Andrew's on The Terrace in Wellington, a Presbyterian Church. The event was the last Church service to be conducted by the outgoing minister, the Rev. Dr Margaret Mayman, who is moving to Australia.

This church is different from most others that I have visited. Theology is done with a light touch and emphasis is on social justice and gender equality. Margaret and her partner, Claire Brockett, recently made a same-sex marriage. They had been early adopters of the Civil Union in 2005.

There is a strong affinity between Sea of Faith and St Andrew's and a significant overlap of membership too. Both organisations, together with the SoF pre-cursor Ephesus, have similar outlooks. SoF would own to a less theistic approach with little or no ritual and no specific Christian (or any other) affiliation. Perhaps SoF provides a haven for people who are somewhat religious (or questing or curious) where congregants at St Andrew's have more focussed views on where their expressions of faith stand. However, that there is an overlap shows that human warmth comes out on top.

Sheltered under one wing of St Andrew's is The St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society which is still looking for a more market-friendly name. The Rev. John Murray set up SATRS about 30 years ago, in part to provide a vehicle for Lloyd Geering to interface with the secular public. I have been a Board (read "Committee") member for some time and qualify on the grounds of having a spiritual, though not Christian, outlook. That is made possible by its constitution which happily interacts with non-Christian faith positions. Ramsay Margolis, who took over from Margaret as Chairperson, is Buddhist.

I carry no denominational label but I strongly identify with "the Jesus way" that was spoken of several times in Margaret's exit service. St Andrews strongly identifies with the Progressive Christianity movement which, I suspect, will prove in time to be transitional from traditional Christianity to whatever comes to replace it. With tired metaphors, creeds that strangle thought, and anachronistic supernatural imagery ("... and all the company of Heaven ..."), the traditional form needs a 'New Reformation'. That phrase was part of the title of one of the books written by John A.T. Robinson. Fifty years ago, he wrote *Honest To God* and, in Lloyd Geering's words, "blew the roof off the church." But the roof on St Andrews looks strong and it is not a roof in any oppressive sense. The congregation is bright, alert and, at Margaret's exit service, crowded the church and sang joyfully.

Goodbye Margaret, we know that you will light up Pitt Street Uniting Church in Sydney as you did St Andrews!

Noel Cheer

CAN EVERYTHING BE BOUGHT?

If you could come up with the money, should you be able to do the following?

- Buy the right to game-shoot an endangered rhino.
- Have the private cell-phone number of your doctor.
- Pay for someone to stand overnight in a queue for you to buy tickets to a prestige concert
- Buy the life insurance policy of an ailing person, pay the premiums and collect the death benefit when he/she dies.
- Consider a speeding ticket as the legitimate cost of speeding, removing any moral dimension from your action.

These, and many others examples, are dealt with in *What Money Can't Buy, The Moral Limits of Markets* by Michael Sandel, Penguin Books 2012.

From pages 6 and 7:

"The years leading up to the financial crisis of 2008 were a heady time of market faith and deregulation—an era of market triumphalism. The era began in the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher proclaimed their conviction that markets, not government, held the key to prosperity and freedom. And it continued in the 1990s, with the market-friendly liberalism of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, who moderated but consolidated the faith that markets are the primary means for achieving the public good.

Today, that faith is in doubt. **The era of market triumphalism has come to an end.** The financial crisis did more than cast doubt on the ability of markets to allocate risk efficiently. It also prompted a widespread sense that **markets have become detached from morals** and that we need somehow to reconnect them. But it's not obvious what this would mean, or how we should go about it.

Some say the moral failing at the heart of market triumphalism was greed, which led to irresponsible risk taking. The solution, according to this view, is to rein in greed, insist on greater integrity and responsibility among bankers and Wall Street executives, and enact sensible regulations to prevent a similar crisis from happening again.

This is, at best, a partial diagnosis. While it is certainly true that greed played a role in the financial crisis, something bigger is at stake. The most fateful change that unfolded during the past three decades was not an increase in greed. It was **the expansion of markets, and of market values, into spheres of life where they don't belong.**

To contend with this condition, we need to do more than inveigh against greed; we need to rethink the role that markets should play in our society. We need a public debate about what it means to keep markets in their place. To have this debate, we need to think through **the moral limits of markets.** We need to ask whether there are some things money should not buy."

From where should we get our ideas, evidence, examples?

Noel Cheer

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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The Newsletter Editor is Noel Cheer, the Copy Editor is Shirley Dixon and Distribution is by Yvonne Curtis.

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 (listed above) or Internet bank to 38 9000 0807809 00 and tell 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, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay, Porirua 5022, (04) 236-7533 0274-483-805 noel@cheer.org.nz

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* * * * *

BEWARE OF SUBSTITUTES!

".. those deep things for which religion stands:
the feeling of the inexhaustible mystery of life,
the grip of an ultimate meaning of existence,
and the invincible power of an unconditional devotion.

These things cannot be excluded.

If we try to expel them in their divine images, they re-emerge in daemonic images."

Paul Tillich *The Shaking of the Foundations*, p181

JAMES LOVELOCK

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

The guru of Gaia is a maverick environmentalist who supports fracking and nuclear power.
Does he believe that the human race has a future?

By John Gray in *The New Statesman* 27 March 2013.

A resolute independence has shaped James Lovelock's life as a scientist.

On the occasions over the past decade or so when I visited [Lovelock] at his home in a remote and wooded part of Devon to discuss his work and share our thoughts, I found him equipped with a mass of books and papers and a small outhouse where he was able to perform experiments and devise the inventions that have supported him through much of his long career. That is all he needed to carry on his work as an independent scientist. Small but sturdily built, often laughing, animated and highly sociable, he is, at the age of 93, far from being any kind of recluse. But he has always resisted every kind of groupthink, and followed his own line of inquiry.

At certain points in his life Lovelock worked in large organisations. In 1941, he took up a post as a junior scientist at the National Institute for Medical Research, an offshoot of the Medical Research Council, and in 1961 he was invited to America to join a group of scientists interested in exploring the moon who were based at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). It was during his time at NASA that Lovelock had the first inklings of what would become the Gaia theory – according to which the earth is a planet that behaves like a living being, controlling its surface and atmosphere to keep the environment hospitable to life. He has since worked closely with other scientists, including his former doctoral student Andrew Watson, who is now a professor of environmental science, and the late American microbiologist Lynn Margulis, in developing the theory.

Lovelock has always cherished the freedom to follow his own ideas and stood aside from institutions in which science is conducted as a vast collective enterprise. Partly this is an expression of his ingrained individualism, but it also reflects his radically empiricist view of science as a direct engagement with the world and his abiding mistrust of consensual thinking. In these

and other respects, he has more in common with thinkers such as Darwin and Einstein, who were able to transform our view of the world because they did not work under any kind of external direction, than he does with most of the scientists who are at work today.

Lovelock was born in 1919 in Letchworth, Hertfordshire. His parents were working class – his mother had left school at the age of 13 to work in a pickle factory – and because he could not afford to attend university he took a job as a laboratory assistant after leaving school. Most of the science he learned as a boy came from the books he borrowed from the public library in Brixton, where his parents ran a small

business. Far from viewing this as a privation, Lovelock believes it helped him to become a generalist who could move freely between the proliferating disciplines, increasingly narrowly defined, into which science has been divided. If he had received a specialised scientific education he might never have developed the Gaia theory at all.

As Lovelock explains in *Homage to Gaia: the Life of an Independent Scientist* (2000), the idea of Gaia came to him when he shared the view of the earth from space

of the Apollo astronauts: “Suddenly, as a revelation, I saw the earth as a living planet.” Much later, when already nearly 90 years old, he eagerly accepted Richard Branson’s gift of a trip into space on the Virgin Galactic shuttle when it makes its inaugural flight. He wanted, he told me, to see the face of Gaia.

There can be no doubt that the idea of Gaia came to Lovelock as a kind of epiphany. But the Gaia theory originated in the experimental difficulties of detecting signs of life on Mars, and he has developed the theory in rigorously scientific terms, producing a computer model of a virtual planet (Daisyworld) in which a self-regulating climate could emerge from simple organisms by a process of natural selection. The novelist William Golding was a neighbour of Lovelock’s in the Wiltshire village of Bowerchalke and became a close friend. He proposed the name of Gaia – the earth goddess in Greek mythology – for the self-regulating planet. Although



“SUDDENLY, AS A REVELATION, I SAW THE EARTH AS A LIVING PLANET.”

Lovelock is grateful to Golding for his inspired suggestion, he views the notion of the earth as a self-regulating system as an integral part of science.

This insistence that Gaia is science, rather than myth or mysticism, has distanced Lovelock from greens for whom environmentalism has become a religion. An agnostic, he recognises the need for transcendence. As he put it to me in a recent email exchange, “It has always seemed that many would have faith in Gaia . . . I prefer to keep a trust in Gaia; it is more consistent with science.”

Turning to Gaia for a God-substitute, as some greens have done, seems a fundamental error. **Though vastly older and stronger than the human species, Gaia is neither omnipotent nor immortal – and, unlike the God of western monotheism, it has no particular interest in human beings.** The goal of a self-regulating system is to renew itself, rather than preserve any of its constituent parts, and if human beings become an obstacle to that end they will find Planet Earth increasingly inhospitable.

As a view of the world, the Gaia theory is thoroughly ecocentric, and this is another feature of Lovelock’s ideas that has put him at odds with recent green thinking. “I am old-fashioned green,” he told me, “a follower of [Aldo] Leopold, Blake, and of the naturalist instincts of Rachel Carson, those where she was concerned about the effects of pesticides on wildlife, especially birds.”

In the Gaia theory, human beings aren’t at the centre of things. To be sure, humans are having a big influence on the planet. Through carbon emissions and by destroying the biosphere, we are altering the planet irreversibly. That doesn’t mean we can control the change in climate our activities have set in motion. The earth system will respond so as to restore some kind of balance, regardless of human plans.

In rejecting anthropocentrism this way, Lovelock finds value in the larger system in which human beings belong, with other animal species. During his time as a medical researcher, he was required to measure the heat that causes burns by burning the exposed skin of live rabbits. Even though they weren’t anti-vivisectionists, he and a colleague refused to do so, and performed the test on their own skin instead. To begin, he found the effect “exquisitely painful”, but after a time it faded away and he was able to perform the experiments on himself without difficulty.

As this story shows, other living things are not, for Lovelock, simply resources to be exploited by humans;

but he rejects firmly any Romantic belief in the intrinsic benignity of the natural world of the kind that is often found among urban greens. As he put it to me, “Modern greens are mainly concerned about people living in cities and the effects of changes in the environment on humans. Because they are city-dwellers and only rarely see or walk in the natural world, many of them have a confused idea of what is natural. I have the feeling that urban greens would rather eat deadly nightshade in their salads than GM lettuce.” In his book *Eco-socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice* (1993), the left-environmentalist David Pepper berated Lovelock for his “distaste for seething urban humanity”. However, the real difference between Lovelock and conventional greens of all political stripes is his consistent rejection of any view in which the chief role of the earth and its diverse life forms is to serve human wants and ambitions.

This rejection of anthropocentrism helps explain another manner in which he differs from contemporary greens. One of the reasons why Lovelock has long supported nuclear power is that its impact on the environment has been vastly less malignant, even in cases of disaster such as Chernobyl and Fukushima, than industrial technologies such as coal mining. His view of nuclear power is one that I share – along with Mark Lynas and George Monbiot, among others – but it is

anathema to most greens. More recently he has come out in support of fracking, not as a solution to our energy problems but as a way of buying time. Lovelock favours these technologies on pragmatic grounds, but there are deeper reasons why his view of them is at odds with that of most contemporary greens.

While it would be an exaggeration to represent most of those active in green movements as neo-Luddites, greens are generally scornful of technical fixes. If they favour new technology, they do so as part of a drastic change in society, which to many of them implies rolling back globalisation and relocalising economic life. What they have in mind, in effect, is a post-industrial economy powered by low-tech means – windfarms, solar energy and the like – and fed by organic farming. Rightly, to my mind, Lovelock is sceptical of all such schemes. The great majority of human beings want the style of life that advanced countries enjoy, and they will not be persuaded otherwise by sermonising.

In any case a low-tech, relocalised economy would not deal what Lovelock regards as the fundamental problem: the rising numbers of human beings. Climate change has not always been caused by us; there appear

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**“... FRACKING ... [IS] A WAY
OF BUYING TIME”**

to have been several large shifts before the human species existed. However, if the current global warming is anthropogenic (as Lovelock still firmly believes), human numbers play a critical role in the process.

When I suggested to him that the perennially unfashionable Thomas Malthus may in the long run be shown to have been on the right track, he responded: “Yes, John, I agree strongly with you that rising population is probably the greatest danger. If we had stayed at Malthus’s numbers, one billion, there would be no climate problem.”

Like nearly all economists, most greens insist that Malthus was wrong. The problem, they say, lies in the resource intensity of the western way of life; what we need to counter this is a global redistribution of power and wealth. I am not sure if Lovelock shares my view that this is an entirely utopian prospect, but he is clear that sustainable development – the current mantra – cannot deal with the challenges posed by a rising population. What is needed instead, he suggests, is sustainable retreat: a strategy of reducing the human impact on the planet by abandoning old modes of food production and embracing high-density urban living. (There are parallels between Lovelock’s ideas on these issues and those of Stewart Brand, the editor of the Whole Earth Catalog.)

Almost certainly, a world population of ten billion or more – the level that experts estimate we will reach some time later this century – cannot be maintained indefinitely.

And yet, by using the technologies most demonised by contemporary greens – genetically modified food, fracking and nuclear power, for instance – humankind could make possible a decent standard of living until our numbers fall globally (as they are doing already in some parts of the world) and eventually stabilise at a lower level.

The realistic alternative is a succession of intensifying resource wars in which endangered human groups fight for control of oil, water, minerals and arable land: “a global decline into a chaotic world ruled by brutal warlords on a devastated earth”, as Lovelock described the darker human prospect in *The Revenge of Gaia* (2006).

He remains open to the possibilities of geo-engineering, deliberately changing the oceans, air or land surface of the planet with the aim of countering global warming, but questions whether we understand the climate well enough to manage the large risks that geo-engineering involves. “We are not clever enough to handle either the earth or ourselves,” he says. The way forward is to use human inventiveness to adapt to a shift

in the environment that can no longer be prevented, and leave recovery to the resilience of Gaia. For the foreseeable future, human beings will most likely muddle through.

In some earlier statements he envisioned a future in which the species might be reduced to small numbers of hunter-gatherers [obliged to eke] out a meagre existence in the Arctic. Such projections were meant to serve as wake-up calls rather than forecasts, but Lovelock concedes that they do illustrate the dangers of “relying too much on model predictions”. He is now more concerned to stress the inherent difficulty of predicting the precise course of climate change. Not for a moment has he become a “sceptical environmentalist”; the scientific evidence points unmistakably in the direction of anthropogenic climate change. He remains what he has always been – a thoroughgoing empiricist, ready to temper his views as the world and our understanding of it changes.

**IN DISLODGING THE HUMAN ANIMAL FROM PRIMACY
IN THE WORLD, THE GAIA THEORY CAN BE
SEEN AS COMPLETING DARWIN’S WORK.**

Lovelock has sometimes been portrayed as a prophet of doom. That picture has nothing in common with the man I have known for many years. Cheerful, humorous and life-affirming, he is a passionate talker – and an equally passionate walker. Where he differs from many is that his life affirmation is not restricted to human beings. He tells me his next book will consider the possibility that evolution may produce another species, one more capable than human beings have been of coexisting with other life forms on the planet. His intellectual iconoclasm showing no signs of diminishing, Lovelock, in his tenth decade, continues to produce ideas that fundamentally challenge the prevailing world-view.

A unique thinker, he has no obvious successor, yet in gaining wide acceptance of the idea that our planet is a self-regulating system, he has had a profound effect on many branches of scientific inquiry. Along with millions of others, I can’t wait to hear the latest thoughts of the scientist who, more than any other alive today, has changed the way we think of the earth and our place on it.

John Gray’s most recent book, *The Silence of Animals*, is published by Allen Lane

STOP PRESS. While putting the finishing touches to this Newsletter we learned that Nelson Mandela has died. We have lost a truly honourable and decent man. More in the next issue.

Fifty Years Ago

1963 WAS A MONUMENTAL YEAR

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the death, by assassination, of President John F. Kennedy.

That event somewhat overshadows the death — on the same day, **22 November 1963**, of at least two other remarkable people: the Christian apologist C.S. Lewis (*Narnia*, *Mere Christianity* etc) and the intellectual author Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*, *Ape and Essence*, *Island* etc). They both left us with remarkable literary and philosophical legacies.

We briefly acknowledge The Beatles' first L.P. of March 1963.

But 1963 also gave us the publications by several other remarkable people who have left an indelible mark on western culture. If these authors had something in common it was that they have toughened us by insisting that we give up on illusions.

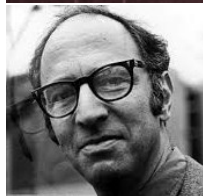
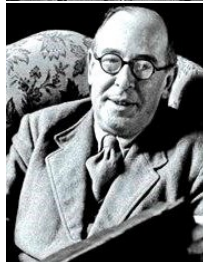
That they should all have surfaced in or around 1963 is itself remarkable.

Environment

Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* launched the environmental movement. (It was published in late 1962, but it took a few months to get here! Isolated voices in the past had expressed concern about our cavalier handling of the earth, our air and water and the ecosystems that enfold the planet, but Rachel Carson touched a nerve with her picture of a springtime without birdsong — a "silent spring". She, and those who followed her, showed that we cannot throw rubbish away — because there is no "away". Had it not been for this kind of wakeup call, we might have gone closer than we already have to the brink of environmental catastrophe. The current concern with climate change concern has its roots in environmentalism.

Christianity

The next wakeup call was to Christianity, which even in 1963, still took the view that it was the only genuine form of spirituality. In the past there had been many challenges to traditional Christianity from atheism and from other religious paths of faith but, in 1963, the



challenge came from right inside the establishment — from a Bishop of the Church of England. The thesis of John A. T. Robinson's small book, *Honest To God*, wasn't new to theologians — they had talked about such things for at least a century. Here was a man at the centre of the Church of England establishment saying that the establishment itself was out of date and that it was systematically making itself irrelevant. Also at that time the Catholic Church was being challenged by their second Vatican Council. The record shows that the C of E establishment barely heard the revolutionary drumbeat. Many millions of Christians left formal association with Christianity, some with copies of *Honest To God* tucked under their arms. Twenty years later they were seen wading ashore in the Sea of Faith!

You can read an excellent summary of both the genesis of *Honest to God* and its effects at <http://sof.org.nz/2013geeringkeynote.pdf>

Catholicism had to wait until this year (and Pope Francis) for acknowledgement that fundamental change was necessary.

Science

In late 1962 the scientific establishment came under a similar level of scrutiny with Thomas Kuhn's magisterial *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. He rebuked scientists for dogma and for orthodoxy — which are quite out of place in science. The fiercely loyal Richard Dawkins sometimes comes across as doctrinaire and inflexible, as though he was unaware of speech registers such as metaphor. Kuhn pointed out that science does not progress by a steady accumulation of knowledge within fixed and timeless concepts. On the contrary, it can progress only when sufficient data that doesn't fit the concepts, builds up and bursts those concepts. When next you say "paradigm change" think of the man who gave it to us — Thomas Kuhn.

Top to bottom:

J. F. Kennedy, Aldous Huxley, C.S. Lewis, Rachel Carson, John A. T. Robinson, Thomas Kuhn, Marshall McLuhan. Missing: The Beatles.

Obfuscation

The previous three, and many others like them, hacked away at the foundations of the smugly-contented systems that then prevailed — Commerce and Christianity and Science. In their 1963 shape they were heirs of the contentment that two centuries of technology and colonisation had brought.

But these critics paved the way to the sceptical post-Modern way in which we now think. We're much less seduced by big-picture stuff — we want ideas and systems that actually work.

And so when Marshall McLuhan wrote that "the medium is the message" in 1964, he was drawing attention to the sinister attempt to rewrite the world in terms that are agreeable to those who have the power to influence the news media. While McLuhan wrote of this practice 50 years ago its still true today, as the sinister News of the World debacle witnesses. If you have recently seen a US military TV briefing you, quite literally, will have the picture.

Without exception, the news that we consume is spun, doctored, edited and shaped. This is done, not to distil the essence or to make things clearer, but to produce the desired effect on the willingness of the consumer to ... well ... consume. Even that is sinister — we are "consumers" first, and citizens second.

In this season of war, and with the lessons provided from 50 years ago by Rachel Carson, John A.T. Robinson, Thomas Kuhn and Marshall McLuhan, we should proceed humbly into a world that is on the one hand much less predictable than we have known for a long time ... but on the other hand rich with unimagined possibilities.

Noel Cheer: adapted from a talk on Radio NZ 6/4/2003

ALDOUS HUXLEY: PROPHET OF OUR BRAVE NEW DIGITAL DYSTOPIA

... one of the ironies of history is that visions of our networked ["online"] future can be bracketed by the imaginative nightmares of Aldous Huxley and his fellow Etonian, George Orwell. Orwell feared that we would be destroyed by the things we fear — the state surveillance apparatus so vividly evoked in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Huxley's nightmare, set out in *Brave New World*, his great dystopian novel, was that we would be undone by the things that delight us.

Brave New World was published in 1932. The title comes from Miranda's speech in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "Oh, wonder! / How many goodly creatures are there here! / How beauteous mankind is! Oh brave new world, / That has such people in't."

Huxley's story is set in the London of the distant future — AD 2540 — and describes a fictional society inspired by two things: Huxley's imaginative extrapolation of scientific and social trends; and his first visit to the US, in which he was struck by how a population could apparently be rendered docile by advertising and retail therapy. As an intellectual who was fascinated by science, he guessed that scientific advances would eventually give humans powers that had hitherto been regarded as the exclusive preserve of the gods. And his encounters with industrialists like Alfred Mond led him to think that societies would eventually be run on lines inspired by the managerial rationalism of mass production ("Fordism") — which is why the year 2540 AD in the novel is "the Year of Our Ford 632".

In the novel Huxley describes the mass production of children by what we would now call in vitro fertilisation; interference in the development process of infants to produce a number of "castes" with carefully modulated levels of capacities to enable them to fit without complaining into the various societal and industrial roles assigned to them; along with Pavlovian conditioning of children from birth.

In this world nobody falls ill, everyone has the same lifespan, there is no warfare, and institutions and marriage and sexual fidelity are dispensed with. Huxley's dystopia is a totalitarian society, ruled by a supposedly

Orwell feared that we would be destroyed by the things we fear — the state surveillance apparatus so vividly evoked in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Huxley's nightmare, set out in his great dystopian novel, *Brave New World*, was that we would be undone by the things that *delight* us.

benevolent dictatorship whose subjects have been programmed to enjoy their subjugation through conditioning and the use of a narcotic drug — soma — that is less damaging and more pleasurable than any narcotic known to us. The rulers of *Brave New World* have solved the problem of making people love their servitude.

[Today we have] ... failed to notice that our runaway infatuation with the sleek toys produced by the likes of Apple and Samsung — allied to our apparently insatiable appetite for Facebook, Google and other companies that provide us with 'free' services in exchange for the intimate details of our daily lives — might well turn out to be as powerful a narcotic as soma was for the inhabitants of *Brave New World*."

adapted from an article by John Naughton, in *The Guardian*, Friday 22 November 2013

PROMOTING A CENTRIST ORTHODOXY

Shrinking of a moderate centre is 'global danger,' says British Chief Rabbi

By Miriam Shaviv June 25, 2013 from
<http://www.timesofisrael.com/growth-of-ultra-orthodoxy-is-global-danger-says-british-chief-rabbi/>

LONDON – Retiring British Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks has launched an attack on ultra-Orthodox Judaism, which “segregates itself from the world and from its fellow Jews.”

Speaking at his own retirement dinner Monday night, Sacks drew an equivalence between assimilated Jews “who embrace the world and reject Judaism, and those who embrace Judaism and reject the world.”

That the centre is shrinking is “worse than dangerous,” said Sacks. “It is an abdication of the role of Jews and Judaism in the world. We are here to engage with the world, to be true to our faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith.”

During his 22-year tenure, which will come to a close on September 1, Sacks was often accused of deferring too much to Haredi rabbis – including amending the text of his book, “The Dignity of Difference,” in response to criticism by ultra-Orthodox leaders – leading some in the audience to speculate that he will take a harder line post-retirement.

Monday night, the last in a series of communal events marking his departure, highlighted his position as a leading religious voice in Britain today.

The guest of honor was Charles, the Prince of Wales who, in a deliberate misquote of the prophet Isaiah, called Lord Sacks “a light unto this nation.”

Lamenting the declining status of religion in modern Britain, Prince Charles praised Lord Sacks for “keeping alive the essential importance of faith in an increasingly God-less age.”

He also thanked him for promoting the principle of tolerance, expressing “mounting anxiety” at “the apparent rise in anti-Semitism, along with other poisonous and debilitating forms of intolerance.”

On a personal level, Prince Charles admired Lord Sacks’s “lightness of touch and elegant wit,” and said that he had personally benefited from his advice.

“Your guidance on any given issue has never failed to be of practical value and deeply grounded in the kind of wisdom that is increasingly hard to come by,” he said.

Prince Charles singled out three books by the Chief Rabbi for particular acclaim: “To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility”, “The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society” and “The Great Partnership: Science, Religion and the Search for Meaning.”

This turned out to be a running theme, with successive British leaders citing the influence of Sacks’s writing on their own thinking. In a video message, former prime minister John Major said, “As a student of your books over many years you have absorbed more hours of my time than I can possibly

remember,” while Labour’s former prime minister Gordon Brown, with whom Sacks was reputed to have had a particularly close relationship, praised his book “Politics of Hope” for suggesting a way “between markets and state... He saw that the ethics of markets were an issue long before the financial crisis.”

Prime Minister David Cameron said that “The Home We Build Together” “had a significant influence on my own mission to build a bigger and stronger society right here in Britain,” which was a cornerstone of his platform in the early years of his premiership.

Introducing Sacks to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu at Downing Street several weeks ago, he described him, “without thinking... as ‘my rabbi,’” Cameron revealed.

“It was a symbol of the impact that you have had on this country far beyond the Jewish community,” he said. “Because over the past two decades you have been not just a leader for Jewish people but for all of us. You have challenged us to stand up for the place of religion in modern society. You have promoted the importance of ethics and responsibility providing not just a religious voice but frankly a moral voice in our country too.”

The 800 guests at the dinner in central London included Conservative government minister Iain Duncan Smith and Labour’s shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer Ed Balls. Also in attendance were former Labour foreign minister David Miliband, Israeli ambassador Daniel Taub and, of course, chief rabbi elect Ephraim Mirvis

In a rare display of solidarity amongst Britain’s Jewish religious leaders, there were representatives from all the denominations, including Reform’s Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner and the Liberal movement’s Rabbi Danny Rich.

The evening was supported by the Chief Rabbinate Trust, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish Leadership Council and the Orthodox United Synagogue, which officially employs the chief rabbi.

In Sacks’s own address, he thanked the British Jewish community for transforming itself, building more day schools, creating new institutions and enlivening cultural activities.

“Anglo Jewry is just less stuffy than it used to be,” he said. “There’s less ‘oy,’ more joy, and that’s how it ought to be.”

Although the Chief Rabbi has not yet indicated what formal position he is likely to accept after September, he seemed to stake out a strong role for himself promoting a centrist Orthodoxy, pledging to work to “inspire a new generation of leaders for the Jewish world, rabbinical, educational and lay, who will have the courage to face the world and all its challenges without fear, will have the responsibility to lead and the spirit to be a source of light in a



Chief Rabbi
Lord Jonathan Sacks

sometimes dark and difficult world.

"I want to inspire young Jews throughout the world to believe in and live a Judaism that is tolerant, inclusive, embracing, non-judgmental; that is intellectually open and ethically uplifting; that is neither defensive nor arrogant, but that lives the life of faith in such a way as to enhance the life of others within and beyond the Jewish community."

He expanded on the vision in a new pamphlet, "A Judaism Engaged with the World," which was personally signed and handed to every guest, and is available for free download.

As in the previous event for Lord Sacks, an interview with journalist David Frost in front of 2,000 people at the Barbican, the evening was marked by humour, with several digs at the chief rabbi's favourite football club, Arsenal.

Lord Sacks himself recalled the time he went to an Arsenal game with the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, only to see their team lose 6:2 to Manchester United. Asked by a newspaper whether this proved that God did not exist, he responded, "No, it proves he's a supporter of Manchester United."

That the centre is shrinking is "worse than dangerous," said Sacks.

"It is an abdication of the role of Jews and Judaism in the world. We are here to engage with the world, to be true to our faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith."

He also described his meeting with Pope Benedict XVI in September 2010, on erev Yom Kippur.

"There was the Pope dressed entirely in white, dressed in a white yarmulke, dressed as if he was a chazzan," or cantor, said the Chief Rabbi, drawing laughter from the crowd. "I will claim my reward in heaven for not saying, 'Good yontiff, Pontiff.'"

[Note from the Auckland CCJ Jewish Co-President Wendy Ross: 'good yontiff' is the anglicised version of 'good yomtov'. Yomtov means festival. Good yomtov as a greeting means: I wish you a good festival.]

ERASMUS LECTURE: ON CREATIVE MINORITIES

On Monday 21st October 2013, Rabbi Lord Sacks delivered the twenty-sixth Erasmus Lecture in New York. <http://www.rabbisacks.org/erasmus-lecture-creative-minorities/>

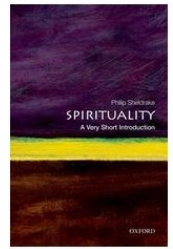
Hosted by First Things (<http://www.firstthings.com>), the topic of the lecture was "On Creative Minorities" and focused on what Christians could learn from Jews about how to ... "thrive in the secular world that no longer regards faith as central".



WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction

Philip Sheldrake, Oxford University Press, 2012, from pages xv and 122.



"... this book is a very brief summary of a vast and complex field of human behaviour. However, I want to end by summarizing what I see as the three critical features of the concept of 'spirituality' and how and why it makes a difference to us both as individuals and as groups.

First, spirituality expresses the reflective human **quest for identity and meaning** beyond a purely pragmatic approach to life.

Second, it suggests that a full human life needs to move beyond self-absorption to a sense of **the greater good and service of others**.

Finally and vitally, spirituality relates to a process of **unlocking the creativity and imagination that enables us to touch the edge of mystery**.

In the end, the spiritual way of life reaches out towards a wholeness and completeness that we never definitively grasp. There is always 'a more'. As a result, the spiritual quest is paradoxical. It suggests that in order to seek the totality of everything we must let go of a desire simply to accumulate more things. In that sense, 'spirituality' acts as a counter to the culture of consumerism ..."

See publisher's blurb at <http://blog.oup.com/2012/11/is-spirituality-a-passing-trend/>

SoF CONFERENCE 2014

Details, including Theme and Speakers, will appear in the February Newsletter. In the meantime and, as they become finalised, they will be put on the website www.sof.org.nz

PAGAN CHRISTMAS

Supporters of using terms such as "Happy Holidays" in place of "Merry Christmas", including atheists and agnostics, argue that many of the symbols and traditions that Western societies have come to associate with Christmas were originally syncretized from pre-Christian pagan traditions and festivals that predate Jesus, and thus need not be directly associated with Christmas.

Specifically, symbols and behaviors such as caroling, Christmas trees, mistletoe, holly wreaths and yule logs, have pre-Christian origins.

Wikipedia

Christmas Eve, 1928.
Could this be you?



BUYING NEW EXPERIENCES, NOT THINGS, TIED TO HAPPINESS

BY RICK NAUERT PHD

A new study suggests that those who spend money to do things are happier than those who spend their money on possessions.

Reviewed by John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on January 27, 2012
<http://psychcentral.com/news/2012/01/27/buying-new-experiences-not-things-tied-to-happiness/34167.html>

In the study, investigators determined [that] extraverts and people who are open to new experiences are more apt to spend more of their disposable income on experiences, such as concert tickets or a weekend away, rather than hitting the mall for material items.

Investigators, led by San Francisco State University Professor, Ryan Howell, discovered the habitual “experiential shoppers” reported greater life satisfaction.

To further investigate how purchasing decisions impact well-being, Howell and colleagues have launched a website where members of the public can take free surveys to find out what kind of shopper they are and how their spending choices affect them.

Data collected through the “Beyond the Purchase” website will be used by Howell and other social psychologists.

The site is designed to study the link between spending motivations and well-being, and how money management influences our financial and purchasing choices.

In the current study, Howell and colleagues surveyed nearly 10,000 participants, who completed online questionnaires about their shopping habits, personality traits, values and life satisfaction.

“We know that being an ‘experience shopper’ is linked to greater well-being,” said Howell, whose previous research on purchasing experiences challenged the adage that money can’t buy happiness.

“But we wanted to find out why some people gravitate toward buying experiences.”

Investigators determined an individual’s personality via a model that classifies how extraverted, neurotic, open, conscientious and agreeable a person is.

People who spent most of their disposable income on experiences scored highly on the “extravert” and “openness to new experience” scales.

“This personality profile makes sense since life experiences are inherently more social, and they also contain an element of risk,” Howell said. “If you try a

new experience that you don’t like, you can’t return it to the store for a refund.”

Researchers believe it may be helpful if people would realize that life satisfaction and happiness can be influenced by their spending habits.

“Even for people who naturally find themselves drawn to material purchases, our results suggest that getting more of a balance between traditional purchases and those that provide you with an experience could lead to greater life satisfaction and well-being,” he said.

The research findings are published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology*.

Source: San Francisco State University

APA Reference: Nauert, R. (2012). Buying New Experiences, Not Things, Tied to Happiness. Psych Central.

INSOLENT BELIEF

“In religion, and in every deeply serious view of the world and of human destiny, there is an element of submission, a realisation of the limits of human power, which is somewhat lacking in the modern world, with its quick material successes and its insolent belief in the boundless possibilities of progress. ‘He that loveth his life shall lose it’; and .there is danger lest, through a too confident love of life, life itself should lose much of what gives it its highest worth. The submission which religion inculcates in action is essentially the same in spirit as that which science teaches in thought; and the ethical neutrality by which its victories have been achieved is the outcome of that submission.”

Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*
Unwin Paperbacks 1917/1986 p47

MISTAKES

An excerpt from Newsletter 72 in which Margaret Gwynne reviewed Carol Christ’s *She who Changes – Re-imagining the Divine in the World*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.)

Carol Christ refers to the “six theological mistakes” of traditional Christianity:

- unchanging, perfect God
- omnipotence
- omniscience
- God unsympathetic in his goodness
- immortality
- infallible revelation

THE LAST WORD

Popular wisdom has it that two subjects are best avoided in conversation: politics and religion.

No doubt this wisdom has been distilled from many bad experiences. When a salesperson tries to convince us to buy their product regardless of our personal circumstances, we put up a defensive wall and disengage. Recently, at the Canterbury Show Day, I saw a stand inviting us to participate in a survey on Jesus. Although I am very interested in exploring who Jesus was, I walked past the stand, expecting that I would be manipulated by some fundamentalist group and that no real dialogue could result.

Something in our nature leads us to form irrational attachments to particular groups and causes. Football fans end up having such loyalty to a particular team that they come to blows with fans loyal to another team. Religion seems particularly prone to absolutizing particular points of view; instead of seeing shades of grey, it insists that there is only black and white.

However, although avoiding these subjects is understandable, the result is tragic. There are matters of deep, even ultimate concern (Paul Tillich's definition of faith), but we are inhibited from talking about them. How to best arrange public affairs, what is the meaning of life, what are our deepest convictions, what it is that gives us strength to stand against the reality of this world, with its wars, exploitation, injustice and disregard of environmental consequences?

A supportive space can free us to break the taboo. There we can safely explore what most deeply concerns us. There we can try ideas on for size, explore counter-arguments, be stimulated by the opinions of others, and adopt new ideas after thorough testing. Such a space can be deeply liberating. For me, Sea of Faith's role is to be such a space. As Ralph Pannett said, a safe space to discuss unsafe things. I would even go so far as to call such a space sacred and untouchable. Just as a psychotherapist does not attempt to tell her client what to do, but rather helps her make her own choices in freedom, so we are not promoting a party line or trying to convert others but are engaged in an open-ended quest for truth.

Sea of Faith began with Don Cupitt's TV series of that name. This was about confronting traditional religion with Copernican cosmology, Darwinian evolution and Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophy. You might conclude from that that Sea of Faith has a tightly focussed agenda: seeking out fundamentalism, supernaturalism and superstition and exposing them to the light of reason and modern science. However, I would rather think of our origin like this: when through the BBC TV series, ordinary

churchgoers became aware of this fundamental challenge, they needed a safe space to explore it and the Sea of Faith emerged. As time went on, the nature of the challenges has evolved, but the safe space continues. A new generation has emerged that has not been socialised into the culture of mainline Protestant churches. Modern cosmology has made us much more aware of the amazing universe we inhabit. Environmental issues call for the development of truly green perspectives. So today, as Nigel Leaves said at Conference, there are a number of different stories and we are probably influenced by several of them. Sea of Faith has become more diverse.

Political parties often issue appeals for unity and hope thereby to gain in political influence. There is no doubt that pressure groups and think tanks have managed to change public opinion by consistently promoting a definite, specific line. What makes Sea of Faith different is that we have no such line. The Catholic Church has its Pope, Protestant churches have their confessions of faith, but we are just a facilitating space. Unity is not the goal. Religion and spirituality are becoming more of an individual quest and less something carried by institutions. Conforming to the group is easy, but truly becoming an individual is hard.

Maintaining such a space is not straightforward. Genuine respect for the views of others is a difficult art. Dealing with "true believers," often a problem outside Sea of Faith, could be required within. I would not want to attack and debunk others' convictions in the manner of some cult de-programmers, though I know that fundamentalists can show a high level of destructive aggression towards views that threaten their own. Here it is important to protect our own integrity and the diversity of the group. Perhaps gentle humour is the best approach. The extent to which people feel free to voice contrary opinions will be a measure of the level of trust among us.

All the stories Nigel Leaves spoke of are in some way part of us and our culture. Our common humanity unites us across these differences. The Sea of Faith can help us develop further on our own journey. But wouldn't it be nice if it could play a role in society as well, encouraging mutual respect, preventing extreme religious groups from disengaging from wider society and encouraging others to explore their most basic convictions?

Laurie Chisholm
Chairperson 2013-2014

