

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

[www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)

Newsletter 115, November 2014

THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS

## JOHN RAWLS

**“ ... if you are born poor,  
the chances of you remaining poor  
(and dying young) are simply  
overwhelming and incontestable.”**

### INTRODUCTION

Many of us feel that our societies are a little, or even totally, ‘unfair’. But we have a hard time explaining our sense of injustice to the powers that be in a way that sounds rational and without personal pique or bitterness.

That’s why we need **John Rawls (1921-2002)**, a twentieth-century American philosopher who provides us with a ‘failproof’ model for identifying what truly might be unfair – and how we might gather support for fixing things.

### 1. THINGS AS THEY ARE NOW ARE PATENTLY UNFAIR

The statistics all point to the radical unfairness of society. Comparative charts of life expectancy and income projections direct us to a single overwhelming moral. And yet day-to-day, it can be hard to take this unfairness seriously, especially in relation to our own lives.

That’s because so many voices are on hand telling us that, if we work hard and have ambition, we can make it. Rawls was deeply aware of how the American Dream seeped through the political system and into individual hearts – and he knew its corrosive, regressive influence. Sure enough, there seem to be lots of people who bear out the morality tale to perfection; presidents who came from nothing, entrepreneurs who were once penniless orphans. The media parades them before us with glee. How then can we complain about our lot when they were able to get to the pinnacle?

Rawls never accepted this. Certainly he was aware of the extraordinary success stories, but he was also a statistician who knew that the rags-to-riches tales were overall so negligible as not to warrant serious attention by political theorists. Indeed, to keep mentioning them was merely a clever political sleight of hand designed to prevent the powerful from undertaking the necessary task of reforming society.

As Rawls forcibly reminds us, in the modern United States and many parts of Europe too, if you are born poor, the chances of you remaining poor (and dying young) are simply overwhelming and incontestable.

But what can we do about this? Rawls was politically canny. He understood that debates about unfairness and what to do about it often get bogged down in arcane details and petty squabbling which mean that year after year, nothing quite gets done.

## 2. IMAGINE IF YOU WERE NOT YOU

A lot of the reason why societies don't become fairer is that those who benefit from current injustice are spared the need to think too hard about what it would have been like to be born in different circumstances. They resist change from ingrained bias and prejudice, from a failure of the imagination.

Rawls intuitively understood that he had to get these people on board first – and somehow manage to appeal to their imaginations and their innate moral sense.

So he devised one of the greatest thought experiments in the history of political thought. This experiment is called **'the veil of ignorance'** and through it Rawls asks us to imagine ourselves in a conscious, intelligent state before our own birth, but without any knowledge of what circumstances we were going to be born into; our futures shrouded by a veil of ignorance. We wouldn't know what sort of parents we'd have, what our neighbourhoods would be like, how the schools would perform, what the local hospital could do for us, how the police and judicial systems might treat us and so on.

The question that Rawls asks us all to contemplate is: **if we knew nothing about where we'd end up, what sort of a society would it feel safe to enter?** In what kind of political system would it be rational and sane for us to take root – and accept the challenge laid down by the veil of ignorance?

Well, for one thing, certainly not the United States. Of course, the US has a great many socioeconomic positions it would be truly delightful to be born into. Vast swathes of the country enjoy good schools, safe neighbourhoods, access to colleges, fast tracks into prestigious jobs and some highly elegant country clubs. To be generous, at least thirty per cent of this vast and beautiful nation has privilege and opportunity. No wonder the system doesn't change: **there are simply too many people, millions of people, who benefit from it.**

But that's where the 'veil of ignorance' comes in handy: it stops us thinking about all those who have done well and draws our attention to the appalling risks involved in entering US society as if it were a lottery, behind the veil of ignorance – without knowing if you'd wind up the child of an orthodontist in Scottsdale, Arizona, or as the offspring of a black single mother in the rougher bits of eastern Detroit. Would any sane birth-lottery player really want to take the gamble of ending up in the seventy per cent of people who have substandard healthcare, inadequate housing, poor access to a good legal structure, and a sloppy system of education? Or would the sane gambler not insist that the rules of the entire game had to be changed to maximise

the overall chances of a decent outcome for any single player?

## 3. WHAT YOU KNOW NEEDS TO BE FIXED

Rawls answers the question for us: any sane participant of the veil of ignorance experiment is going to want a society with a number of things in place: they'll want the schools to be very good, the [public] hospitals to function brilliantly, they'll want the standard access to the law to be unimpeachable and fair and they'll want decent housing for everyone.

The veil of ignorance forces observers to accept that the country they'd really want to be born randomly into would be a version of Switzerland or Denmark – that is to say, a country where things are pretty good wherever you end up, where the local transport system, schools, hospitals and political systems are decent and fair whether you're at the top or bottom. In other words, you know what sort of a society you want to live in. You just hadn't focused on it properly until now.

Rawls's experiment allows us to think objectively about what a fair society looks like in its details. When addressing major decisions about the allocation of resources, to overcome our own bias, we need only ask ourselves: 'How would I feel about this issue if I were stuck behind the veil of ignorance?'

## 4. WHAT TO DO NEXT

A lot will depend on what's wrong with your society. Rawls ... recognised that the veil of ignorance experiment would throw up different issues in different contexts: in some, the priority might be to fix air pollution, in others, the school system.

But when he addressed the US of the late twentieth century, Rawls could see some obvious things that needed to be done: education would have to be radically improved; the poor as well as the rich would have to be able to run for election; healthcare would have to be made attractive at all levels.

Rawls provides us with a tool to critique our current societies based on a beautifully simple experiment.

The fact that we simply couldn't sanely take on such a challenge now is a measure of how deeply unfair things remain – and therefore how much we still have left to achieve.

*Abbreviated from*

<http://thephilosophersmail.com/perspective/the-great-philosophers-john-rawls/>

**Does New Zealand have a John Rawls?**



John Rawls  
1921-2002

# ALL ABOUT US

## SEA OF FAITH: EXPLORING VALUES, SPIRITUALITY AND MEANING

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.

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

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.

"Sea of Faith" 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, Sea of Faith 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](http://www.sof.org.nz), assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

We have five **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, Ian Harris and Fred Marshall. (The late Alan Goss was, for a time, a Life Member).

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Deadline dates for submitted Newsletter copy for 2015 are: 21/12/14, 21/02/15, 21/04/15, 21/06/15, 21/08/15, 21/10/15.

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

**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](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz) your mailing details.

**Bonus:** If you already receive the paper version then you can receive the email version in addition, *at no charge*. Send an email requesting that to [pcowley@paradise.net.nz](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz)

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*Supplied by Laurie Chisholm*



# *Personal Odysseys*

**Paths travelled by members of Sea of Faith**

**Andrew Meek, Dunedin**

When I was a child growing up in a Brethren family living in a provincial NZ town, the Bible was the ultimate and only guide for belief and practice. It was seen as the inerrant Word of God and the study of it was taken very seriously. Miracles were largely seen as literal historical events as was the creation story, Noah's ark, and the physical return of Jesus 'as a thief in the night' to take the true Christians to heaven and leave all the sinners behind. God was a real entity with whom you could converse and Jesus was his sinless son.

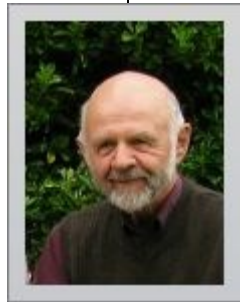
My abiding memories of church as a child was being forced to sit quietly for hours listening to how sinful I was and the need to be 'saved', reinforced with stories of Christ's second coming and the glories of heaven contrasted with the eternal torments of hell and the 'lake of fire'. It was always a relief to get up in the morning and find that my parents were still there. I would quite like now to have a word or two with those preachers as such fears and scars take a long time to go away. Interestingly, even at this early stage, doubts about the truth of such teaching were beginning with thoughts such as – 'It seems hard to believe that the Queen is going to hell, but she can't be saved, she is Anglican and not a real Christian'.

School life was again influenced by the views of my parents and while it was certainly not an unhappy time things such as not being permitted to attend social activities such as school dances and formals and a tight restriction on Sunday activities tended to separate you from your peers. This idea of separation I suspect came from Paul's admonition to 'Come out from among them and be ye separate...'. Your peers were of course all going to hell if the church's teaching was to be believed.

Unfortunately unless you could claim to have had some form of conversion experience you were also in the same boat and this feeling of exclusion and sinfulness was reinforced by the seating arrangements at the weekly communion service. This focussed on a table holding bread and wine with the seating for those accepted into the fellowship (the 'saved') arranged around it and with seating for the sinners at the back. Having a number of unsupervised and 'sinful' children and young people in

the back rows was of course not a clever idea and there were often painful repercussions later for misbehaving during this time. My father held the biblical view that to spare the rod was to spoil the child and he was not going to have spoilt children.

To offset to some extent this social deprivation there was school Crusaders and a Youth for Christ group which both had an enthusiastic following and which I enjoyed and participated in. It was really nice to be part of a group with commonly held beliefs and the feeling of solidarity that goes with that especially if the group is seen as being slightly different.



Moving to the city at the start of an engineering career and having no connections other than Brethren ones, it was logical that I continued my association and this time with a more open Assembly. This turned out to be a very generous and friendly community with a vibrant youth group and subsequently a very supportive 'young marrieds' group and over the years I became fully involved in the various activities. My wife and I met and were married there, I ran the Every Boys Rally for several years, played the organ, taught bible class, sat on the deacons court and was an elder for a number of years. Little by little however the disconnect between what was understood to be inspired truth and what I was reading from other sources started to become an issue and I took the view that since this was my church I had the right to express my increasingly liberal views on such things as evolution, virgin births and the interpretation of scripture even if these differed from what others thought. This latter period proved extremely stressful as there were so few people with whom you could discuss such things without being accused of 'causing your brother to stumble'. There was also the associated imagery of drowning with a millstone around your neck. This growing divide was compounded by my discovery of a liberal church bookshop and being introduced to the writings of Lloyd Geering and others who were free in their criticism of a fundamentalist view of scripture and who promoted a non-realist understanding of god. This was exciting and liberating because here were people

openly saying things which made so much sense but were at odds with what was considered to be the 'truth'. In addition to this was Lloyd's formation of a local Sea of Faith group and my enthusiastic involvement. Here was a group of people who discussed a wide range of theological and ethical issues freely and honestly and I felt at long last to be in a place where I could be truthful to myself. It was great.

Unfortunately this didn't make for a comfortable existence at the Assembly and their concern over maintaining correct teaching led to a revision of their Statement of Faith reinforcing its very conservative bias to which I could not conform. This led to my wife and me taking leave of them and joining with our local suburban co-operating parish church.

This period was special in lots of ways as it was a community church with a warm heart and a spectrum of theological views with the Bible seen by most as being interesting rather than the inerrant Word of God. We were fortunate also to have outstanding Presbyterian and Methodist ministers who allowed room for differing views although the need to continually translate personal god talk into a much broader understanding of what the god idea could be was often a struggle. However the involvement with music, the youth group, the shared meals, the fundraising and the numerous social occasions made the effort worthwhile and it was a very enjoyable few years. Unfortunately small community churches were on the decline and eventually it closed with most members moving to a variety of city churches depending on their personal preferences.

I have to confess that while I no longer agreed with much of what was traditionally believed and had embraced a non-realist understanding of god, being part of a community which made time for a weekly meeting with teaching, liturgy and music (worship if you prefer) was something I was reluctant to give away. So we still have an association with a large city church with exceptional music, a magnificent building and a kind and generous membership. Translating god talk is, however, ongoing.

It is clear to me now in the latter stage of life that there is no evidence for a realist personal god who can be interacted with or who interferes in any way with the events of life but it is also my experience that such beliefs are able to underpin generous and loving communities. The danger of course is that the stories and myths of our sacred texts are seen as literal truth rather than simply being the bearer of truth, and that our personal beliefs come to be seen as God-given truths to be defended with rules and dogma and which can easily slide into extremist ideologies.

So for me today an authentic world view should be based on reality with our mythologies seen simply for what they are. To find a coherent way of seeing life in the context of millions of years of biological evolution, to sense our place in this vast universe, and to marvel at the immense complexity of life and this collection of cells and chemicals and stuff which comprise me – this is my on-going odyssey.

*Andrew Meek, October 2014*

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## PLEASE LISTEN TO ME

**When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving advice, you have not done what I asked.**

**When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings.**

**When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problems, you have failed me, strange as that may seem.**

**All I ask is that you listen.**

**Not talk or do, just hear me. Advice is cheap: 50 cents will get you both Dorothy Dix and Dr Spock in the same newspaper. And I can do that for myself. I'm not helpless. Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.**

**When you do something for me that I can and need to do for myself you contribute to my fear and weakness. But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I quit trying to convince you and can get about the business of understanding what's behind this irrational feeling. And when that's clear, the answers are obvious and I don't need advice.**

**So, please listen and just hear me, and if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn; and I'll listen to you.**

*Author unknown*

# Imagine that you belonged to a Protestant church in Germany during the rise of Nazism.

This year, 2014, is the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Barmen Declaration, a declaration of faith formulated in response to determined Nazi attempts to conform the Protestant churches to its ideology.

Creeds generally define orthodoxy and exclude deviant views as heresy, so today they are often thought of as something archaic and taking them seriously is viewed as evidence of rigid, old-fashioned thinking. As the so-called heresy trial of Lloyd Geering showed, people today think of heresy as an essentially outdated concept.

But imagine that you belonged to a Protestant church in Germany during the rise of Nazism. Hitler promises support for the church and indeed claims that he wants to build it into a powerful *Reichskirche*. You are expected to go along with Hitler's claims of having been chosen by Providence to lead the German people and to accept him as your ultimate authority. A new Germanic spirit is to define society and the church as well. The negative side quickly became apparent; already in 1933, pastors and other church employees with a Jewish background began to be removed from their posts. Those of Jewish heritage were not even allowed to be church members. Voices were raised against the Old Testament as something Jewish and therefore to be rejected. Church government is to be centralized under a Nazi-friendly Bishop for the whole Reich.

How would you respond, and what convictions would you set against Nazi ones? Perhaps you would emphasise universal human rights and oppose racism of any sort, but the Barmen Declaration focused on classical Christian faith and defended its purity against distortion or being co-opted by other agendas.

Faced with what for them was a totally new and unprecedented situation, 139 representatives of regional Lutheran, Reformed, and United Protestant churches came together in Barmen on 29-31 May 1934 for a 'confession synod'. They agreed on the wording of the Barmen Declaration, for which Karl Barth provided the initial draft. To agree with the Barmen Declaration was not like mumbling the Apostle's Creed in church; it was a "here I stand, I can do no other" stance at a particular historical moment. It was not intended as a political act, though it had

important political effects. It was intended more as an inner-church call to hold firm to classical Christian faith. It did not oppose National Socialist ideology per se and the synod members were, in fact, almost all conservative politically. It was an important part of a long struggle in the church (the '*Kirchenkampf*') and led to schism, the formation of the 'Confessing Church' – a free church alongside the Nazi-led state church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer ran a seminary for training pastors of the Confessing Church until the authorities closed it down. His book *Life Together* arose from that experience.

The full title of the declaration is **Theological Declaration on the Current Situation of the German Protestant Church**. After a long introduction setting the scene, it proposes six theses. Each thesis begins with a biblical verse, makes a positive affirmation and then rejects the contrary affirmation as false teaching. It rejects the notions that the church should become an organ of the state, that the state should take over the role of the church, that the church should recognize sources other than the one Word of God as divine revelation (this language reflects the neo-orthodox theology of the time) and that the church could be instrumentalized in the service of other agendas.

Though a very important milestone, the Barmen declaration was seen in retrospect to have been too focused on inner-church matters and not enough on the wider scene, especially the fate of the Jews. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was very soon aware of this and declared "Only those who cry out for the Jews have a right to sing Gregorian chant." Barmen continues to be regarded as a very important part of recent German history and the German churches have celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> and 80<sup>th</sup> anniversaries.

The full text of the Barmen Declaration is found at [www.ekd.de/english/barmen\\_theological\\_declaration.html](http://www.ekd.de/english/barmen_theological_declaration.html)

*Laurie Chisholm*



#### THE SWASTIKA CROSSED OUT AND THE CROSS RISING:

A protest and witness against Nazi tyranny and any effort to take the role of God and control of the church.

#### THE FIRE:

The suffering and death which follows from defense of the faith against tyranny, as for some of the Barmen signers. But the cross survives such persecution and the crisis of war, rising out of the flames.



# CULTIVATING THE ART OF RENEWAL

*Ageing – a curse or a gift?*

*Will you choose to become fossilised – or transfigured?*

*Spirited Ageing: Cultivating the art of renewal*

Juliet Batten

Ishtar Books 2013

Psychotherapist, artist and teacher, Juliet Batten begins *Spirited Ageing* by defining spirituality as connection with the pulse of life; and she ends with a blessing she composed, with a line each for the eleven themes discussed in her book. I quote it here for its own beauty, but also because it gives a condensed but eloquent sense of the themes and, most especially, of the tone of Batten's writing.

## **Blessing for Spirited Ageing**

**As you age, may you love and care for your body.**

**May a positive attitude become as natural and easy as breathing.**

**May you release clutter and cherish your inner treasure.**

**May you delight in the richness of your many selves.**

**May your relationships be rich, varied, and nourishing.**

**May passion inspire you to an expanded way of being and giving.**

**May you face the shadow with courage and strength.**

**May you tend your energy body so that it is enlivened and clear.**

**In old age, may you discover deep fulfilment.**

**When the time comes, may you be ready to release into death like a snowflake held in a warm hand.**

Batten writes lucidly and seriously, but with a delightful light touch that makes her ideas eminently accessible. She supports her ideas and experience by quoting and commenting on a range of authors whose writing is relevant to her topic.

In addition, I was impressed by Batten's quoting from twenty 'ordinary', older New Zealanders whose opinions she had surveyed. These 'ordinary' voices speak from a

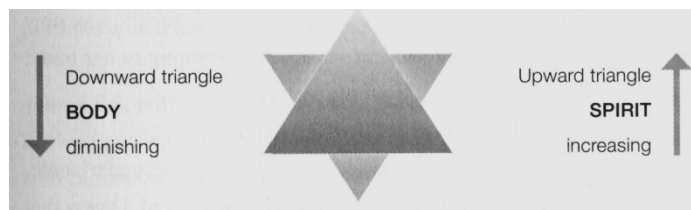


range of perspectives which, in turn, create a rich picture of living positively, fulfilling and inspiring in one's later years. (I note that Derek Pringle of Auckland SoF was a contributor.) I also like the way Batten 'teaches' through story – through relating her own experience and that of others.

There is nothing platitudinous about Batten's book. Not only does she set out goals and aspirations for a fulfilling and satisfying old age – of ways to enter the last stage of life with as much inner well-being as possible – she provides many ideas on how to achieve this in terms of

both the practical and the spiritual. Among these are things to reflect on, to write about, and to do.

Batten summarises her thesis on spiritual ageing in a simple but effective diagram:



The aim is to disidentify from the **diminishing** triangle – the body, and to shift your identification to the **increasing** triangle – the spirit.

This spirit encompasses wisdom, awareness, creativity, the power of renewal, an openness to possibilities, and spirituality. Batten also avers that, as with so much of our spiritual work, age is an ally.

Old age is a special time of life and Batten's book *Spirited Ageing* is positive, helpful and affirming in showing us ways to undertake this journey with grace, gratitude and humour.

*Shirley Dixon, Titahi Bay*

Recommended retail price: \$37.00 ISBN 978-0-473-22727-2  
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[www.seasonalinspiration.blogspot.com](http://www.seasonalinspiration.blogspot.com)

# CONFERENCE ROUNDUP

## Starting with The Last Word from re-elected Chairperson Laurie Chisholm

**Another wonderful Conference.** What follows is my attempt to summarise it, so it might better be regarded as a “First Word”, something to read before plunging into the detail of individual keynote addresses. Of course, it is only my personal take on things and probably everyone at Conference would tell a slightly different story.

**Lloyd Geering** introduced the Conference theme. He clearly explained the difference between Greek thinking, which sees humans dualistically as a combination of immortal soul-substance and physical body, and Hebrew thinking, which has no doctrine of a spiritual afterlife. For Greeks, we are enfleshed souls; for Hebrews, we are animated bodies. While psychoanalysis concentrated on the mind, ignoring the physical brain, psychosomatic medicine emerged early in the twentieth century, highlighting their interconnectedness. Lloyd went on to outline the controversial views of Julian Jaynes, who proposed a grand theory explaining the origin of consciousness as well as of belief in gods, and then to explain Karl Popper’s concept of three worlds, as a way of overcoming traditional dualism.

**Reuben Johnson**, far from talking up brain science’s ability to answer all our questions about spirit, soul and free will, approached matters with humility, respect and caution, and was disinclined to use brain science to attack belief systems. Benjamin Libet’s famous experiments have often been interpreted as a demonstration that free will is an illusion, as the brain produces a readiness potential before the mind’s act of will to initiate an action. Reuben quoted later research that questioned this conclusion and revealed a much more complicated picture.

**Sandra Winton** reflected on her psychotherapeutic work with clients who have religious issues. For her, psyche and soul, psychology and spirituality, are inextricably intertwined, like the warp and weft of the fabrics she is learning to weave. In the Sea of Faith, it is often said that faith is more a matter of personal trust than of abstract belief in the truth of doctrinal propositions, and Sister Sandra made this concrete by providing insights from traditional psychoanalysis as well as very recent early childhood research. These illuminate the way that early interactions with caregivers establish the sense of fundamental trust (or not). Three

case studies illustrated how differently people respond to religious ideas depending on their psyche and the early life experiences that helped form it.

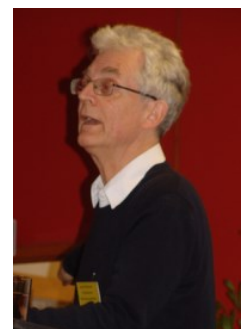
Later on Saturday morning, **Bernard Beckett** gave us some fundamental philosophical reflections, served up in a lively, easy-to-understand way, no doubt drawing on his experience and skills as a High School teacher. Although we might want to believe only in matters solidly established by reason and evidence, unfortunately many of our core assumptions cannot be established in this way. When differing beliefs clash, they may not be able to be resolved by an appeal to the facts. We haven’t managed to explain consciousness, and reason can only play a useful role in deriving moral truths if we begin with some unprovable moral axioms. There are different levels of meaning and truth, so that focussing on the physics of pixels on a TV screen would lead you to miss the most important significance of what is going on: the moving visual images of the TV programme.

On Saturday afternoon, some went on excursions to the **Orokonui sanctuary** or to the **Museum and Chinese garden**, while others, like me, attended in-house workshops.

**Tom Hall** gave us biblical exegesis in the classic style—even a sermon—except that his text came, not from the Bible, but from the extra-canonical Gospel of Mary Magdalene. According to this gospel, Jesus entrusted a secret teaching (*gnosis*) to Mary Magdalene. This teaching allows us to overcome the powers that rule this world and in death to ascend through the heavens, using the received *gnosis* to get past the gatekeepers guarding each heaven.

In his workshop, **Leo Hobbis** gave a very clear survey of evidence that does not seem to fit with a ‘materialist’ view of consciousness: near-death experiences, out-of-the-body experiences, and twin studies that seem to imply a non-local connection between the minds of the twins.

Saturday evening saw a rehearsed reading of the play “**Freud’s Last Session**” by actors from Dunedin’s Fortune Theatre. This play imagines C.S. Lewis,





Christian apologist, meeting with Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis and inveterate critic of religion, at the outbreak of World War II and just before Freud's death. (If you would like to follow up on this, have a look at Matthias Beier's introduction to a discussion with the actors after a performance in Indiana, USA: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuw09BLmNWs>. Beier looks for commonality between Freud and Lewis in their suffering and experience of love, moving beyond the theism/atheism divide.)

**Richard Egan** is a persuasive advocate for the need for spiritual care as an integral part of end-of-life patient care. If you find the word 'spirituality' vague and hard to get hold of, his perspective is a great help. Don't struggle with definitions of the word; instead, map the terrain it covers. Richard is part of a world-wide movement that is exploring spirituality because it is seen to be important in health care. Theologians have warned about selling out to the 'Zeitgeist' – the spirit of the age, fearful that we will give up religious convictions in order to be modern. Richard begins with the Zeitgeist: let's try to understand the Zeitgeist better – and that includes a Maori input. New, too, is his 'evidence-informed' perspective. Drug therapy aims to be evidence-based, but spiritual care cannot be that, but it can be usefully informed by evidence gained, for example, from questionnaires. It is important to recognise that people may have spiritual needs, especially at the end of life. People have widely different understandings of spirituality, and some reject the very concept, but Richard is open to them all. Providing spiritual care must be done appropriately; ethical guidelines specify for example that you do not impose spiritual care. If you would like more than Richard's PowerPoint slides, check out <http://spiritualityandwellbeing.co.nz/>.

The **Panel Discussion** at the end of Conference was again chaired by Noel Cheer and is, for many, the highlight of the Conference. Noel asked the panellists if they thought that brain science entailed a revolution in thought comparable to those that Copernicus and Darwin brought about. Surprisingly, all answered "No." Something similar happened in Leo Hobbs's workshop; while opinion seemed to be equally divided between those who accepted a 'materialist' view of mind and those who thought there is 'something more', nobody seemed to want to probe the difference or to get into an argument about it.

**Looking back on Conference, two things stand out for me.** The first is that nobody really questioned that spirit, soul and free-will would survive the scrutiny of brain science. Reuben Johnson came closest, conceding that a small minority of mechanistically minded people think it wouldn't. However, let me venture the bold opinion that a scientific approach to the brain, looking at

the electrical activity and the brain chemicals at work and at the firing of nerve cells, is in principle incapable of finding soul, spirit, or free will. These are at a different level of reality, perhaps emergent properties of the complex system that is our neural network. The challenge is to integrate these two very different approaches: the objectifyingly scientific and the interpersonal.

The second is Richard Egan's perspective on spirituality. Thanks to him I can completely let go of feeling that I need to argue the intellectual case for spirituality. Spirituality (or whatever else you want to call it) just is part of life and no matter how much religious institutions decline or become irrelevant, spirituality will emerge in some form or other. His role in introducing spirituality into health care and life in general, is just to explore what is, not to persuade anybody of anything.



### WALL POSTER AT CONFERENCE

Consciousness can no more modify the working mechanism of the body or its behaviour, than can the whistle of a train modify its machinery or where it goes. Moan as it will, the tracks have long ago decided where the train will go. Consciousness is the melody that floats from the harp but cannot pluck its strings, the foam struck raging from the river that cannot change its course, the shadow that loyally walks step for step beside the pedestrian, but is quite unable to influence his journey.

*Julian Jaynes, The Origin of Consciousness, p17*

### RECORDS OF THE CONFERENCE

As much as possible we keep a record of Conference papers and (on some lucky occasions) an audio record.

As we go to press we are not confident that we have a comprehensive audio collection of the 2014 Conference but we do have a full set of printed copies.

In the pages that follow the abstracts are sets of interesting excerpts, rather than skilled condensations.

If these samples make you want to see more, then go to the full versions on the website at <http://sof.org.nz/doclist.htm#CONFAP>

## WHAT GOES ON IN OUR HEADS? ... or ... EXPLORING INNER SPACE

BY EMERITUS PROFESSOR SIR LLOYD GEERING



[I]t is not from the Bible but from the Greeks that our ancient human forebears began to think of our inner world - our inner space - as an entity, one so complete in itself that it could exist apart from the body. From them in general and from Plato in particular, Western culture developed the dualistic

understanding of the human condition that is commonly expressed in the phrase 'body and soul'.

Knowing practically nothing of how the brain operates, they approached the topic from the subjective starting point of their own experience of thinking, reasoning and remembering. It appeared obvious to Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics that our subjectivity or consciousness is of a different order of being than are the objects that we can see and touch. So they concluded that in each of us exists a non-physical entity they called *psyche*, which we translate as 'soul', or 'mind'. They used the word more widely than later became the tradition. It was due to Plato that we came to associate the soul with the head for that is where he located the rational part of the soul that he deemed to be immortal.

By contrast the Hebrews had no doctrine of a spiritual after-life and it is interesting to compare their *nephesh* with Greek *psyche*. Like *psyche*, *nephesh* also is derived from a root meaning to breathe but now note the difference. For the Greeks the psyche or soul was in the body. This gives us our common notion of a human being as body and soul. Each of us is an enfleshed soul. When the flesh dies, the soul carries on. *Psyche* even came to mean 'ghost'.

For the Hebrews the *nephesh* (or soul) is an animated body. We do not **have** souls: we **are** souls. When our bodies die, we die. *Nephesh* even came to mean 'corpse'. Any post-death existence had to take the form of a bodily resurrection. Hence we see the importance of resurrection in Christian thought.

**Thus it is from the Greeks that we inherited the dualist tradition of the human condition as a body and soul, or alternatively mind and body.** But what is the soul? What is the mind? Is it an entity that can operate independently from the body? Theologians and philosophers generally gave these questions rather different answers.

**Theologians** were concerned with the fate of the soul and developed an elaborate doctrine on what happened to the soul after the death of the body.

**Philosophers** preferred the word 'mind' and discussed, as the body/mind problem, how the mind is formed and how it interacts with the body. The philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) believed the mind at birth is completely empty - a *tabula rasa* - a clear blackboard waiting to be written on, an empty container waiting to be filled. That was the state of affairs in both theology and philosophy until the eighteenth century.

More recently the philosophy of mind (mental philosophy) became known as psychology. **Psychology** means 'the study of the psyche', otherwise known as the soul or the mind. As

late as the 1930's, when I first studied psychology as a student, it was still within the philosophy department. I was introduced to Freud and Jung in a philosophy course named 'Abnormal Psychology'.

The advent of what became known as depth psychology did appear to make some positive progress in our understanding of how the mind works. Freud spoke of our dreams as "the royal road into the psyche". Freud's psychoanalysis and Jung's analytical psychology are both still used today by their respective practitioners to help people understand themselves. I have personally found Jung's model of the psyche to be quite helpful both in self-understanding and in offering a fruitful way of understanding religious experience.

But depth psychology is still confined to the subjective study of the psyche and pays no attention to the **physical brain**, where the psyche supposedly operates. Perhaps the first sign of a change taking place was the introduction of the term 'psychosomatic' early in the twentieth century. It led the philosophical mind/body problem into the medical fields of anatomy and physiology by recognising that the mind could cause changes in the physiology of the body and vice-versa. In other words, the mind was not to be regarded as an entity independent of the body. Minds cannot operate without the brain. The long supposed duality of body and mind must be re-connected into an indivisible whole.

**It is ironical that the wholeness of the person long assumed by the biblical tradition has proved to be nearer the truth than the dualism coming from the Greeks.**

## CAN THE SPIRIT, THE SOUL AND FREE WILL SURVIVE THE SCRUTINY OF A NEUROSCIENTIST?

BY DR REUBEN JOHNSON

Let us hypothesize that the spirit, the soul, and free will are either physically located within our brains, or are at result of brain function, or both. Francis Crick did this with his book *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*.

**The Astonishing Hypothesis is that 'You', your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules... As Lewis Carroll's Alice might have phrased it: "You're nothing but a pack of neurons". This hypothesis is so alien to the ideas of most people alive today that it can truly be called astonishing.**

For Crick, the man who [in 1953 helped to] crack the genetic code, the complexity of consciousness and the soul will ultimately be explained when know how all the building blocks fit together and function.



In the 1980's Benjamin Libet at the University of California (LA), carried out a series of experiments in order to examine the relationship between conscious experience of volition and the readiness potential.

Libet's famous finding was that the BP [*Bereitschaftspotential* or readiness potential] started about 0.35 seconds earlier than the subject's reported conscious awareness that now he or she feels the desire to make a movement. The ramifications of such an observation where that free will is nothing but a rationalisation produced by the mind after the fact in order to explain its actions. However, Benjamin Libet found that subjects could prevent movement at the last minute. This led Libet to conclude that we have no free will in the initiation of our movements but that we do have the ability to veto these actions – he called this the 'free won't'.

In 2009, at the University of Otago, Judy Trevenan and Jeff Miller of the psychology department carried out an experiment that cast doubt on Libet's experiments. They found that the readiness potential was present irrespective of the decision made. "It would appear therefore, that the readiness potential is not specific to movement preparation and that Libet's results do not provide evidence that voluntary movements are initiated unconsciously".

In Paris in 2012, Aaron Schurger's team, seemed to find an explanation. They hypothesised that readiness potential might represent the background noise of electrical activity of the brain and that in order to initiate movement a certain threshold would need to be crossed. If this was the case then repeating Libet's experiment it would be possible to see faster reaction times with more accumulated background noise. And, indeed, this is what they found. They concluded that what looks like a pre-conscious decision process may not in fact reflect a decision at all. It only looks that way because of the nature of spontaneous brain activity.

There have been more sophisticated tools applied to Libet's paradigm by way of fMRI at the Max Planck [Institute] in Germany which have appeared to show more impressive results than with EEG with brain activity. [One set of findings] suggested that the outcome of a decision can be encoded in brain activity up to 10 seconds before it enters awareness. In the words of the researchers, "This delay presumably reflects the operation of a network of high-level control areas that begin to prepare an upcoming decision long before it enters awareness."

As Lavazzo and De Caro have said:

"It should be clear that this experiment adds something very interesting and may even represent a major breakthrough for the intense debate dealing with the inaccuracy of conscious reports on our own mental lives.

A different issue, however, is whether it has anything interesting to say about the free will problem ..."

One of the main philosophical objections to this experiment, and indeed to Libet's, has been raised by Daniel Dennett in that it assumes what he refers to as 'Cartesian materialism', with his Cartesian theatre in which there is a tiny theatre in the brain where a homunculus performs the task of

observing all the sensory data projected on a screen at a particular instant, making the decisions and sending out commands.

Andrea Lavassa and Mario De Caro of the University of Rome have pointed out that:

"Freedom does not imply consciousness, then; and so, by the logical principle of contraposition, lack of consciousness does not imply lack of freedom."

## PSYCHE AND SOUL: A WOVEN FABRIC BY SISTER SANDRA WINTON

**I will try to think with you about how religious belief sits in the psyche, looking at the fabric from the other side as it were.** I am currently learning to weave and I find that weaving with its long warp threads that hold the structure and its weft threads that cross back and forth to form the fabric is a metaphor that comes to my mind as I attempt to think about the relationship of soul and psyche in the inner world.

This is a large topic that could be approached in many different ways. I will draw out three threads for us to look at.

- One relates to the **inner pre-conditions for religious faith** or its opposite – doubt.
- Another tries to consider how the **psychological and religious strands interweave** in the person.
- The third looks at what might be the **mental conditions for a faith** open to change and growth.



For the psychoanalyst, everything begins with infancy and the earliest years of life.

In this way of thinking, when a person, and particularly a child, is introduced to religious teachings, these ideas do not come into a bare, empty space. God steps through the door into an inner world that is already inhabited. The baby that psychoanalysis envisages, is not a blank slate on which the Sunday school teacher writes.

This is a ... simplified sketch, using three foundational thinkers of psychoanalysis, **Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott.**

- The Freudian toddler's inner world is dominated by erotic and aggressive drives. It is presided over by a father who is both longed for and competed with for mother, who is both authority and rival. It is filled with the experience of infantile helplessness.
- The inner world of the infant as described by Melanie Klein is focused on the mother. It is peopled by the figures of aggression, retaliation, hate that could bite the breast, and envy that desires to spoil anything seen as good. The Kleinian baby lives in a dramatic world in which all-good and all-bad are at war and one must choose a side; it is an achievement to allow these enemies to converse so that good and bad can be seen in each person.



- According to Donald Winnicott, the infant is subject to primal fears which need to be contained in an experience of being reliably held by mother if a sense of security is to develop ... So when Jesus or God step through the door of a person's inner world, they have to negotiate with these existing residents for place on the couch or a chair at the table.

Winnicott conceived of a mental state which he called a 'space'. He attempted to describe the mental development that becomes visible when an infant can begin to see and use an object, not just to chew or suck, but to represent something else. ... This mental capacity he considered to be the product not of the infant's brain growing in isolation but as arising in the interaction between the mind of the mother and that of the infant. Winnicott saw this inner space as the environment in which play was possible, psychotherapy was possible, and where creative experience and cultural experience such as religion might be located.

[For example ...] in this mental space an object is neither just what it literally is (a wooden stick horse) nor what it is in the mind (mother, father and child). Paradoxically, it is both. For play to occur each reality is held in a tension – as the object is both negated as actual and yet retained as actual while existing as a thing of the mind

Another way of approaching this is to look at creative experience. If I go to a play, for instance, I will not enter into the artistic experience if I see the actors only as people I might know in real life. On the other hand if I believe that what is taking place on the stage is real, I am equally incapable of entering into the theatrical experience. You might recall the scene in Jane Campion's *The Piano* where the Maori audience leap onto the stage to stop a 'murder'. To enter into the theatrical experience, I have to be able to believe that **what is occurring on the stage is simultaneously real and unreal**. Coleridge (1817) talked of 'a willing suspension of disbelief'.

This inner space, or mental capacity is reflected in contemporary research. James Fonagy and his colleagues distinguish in the very young child 'two modes for representing internal states' which they call 'psychic equivalence' and 'pretend' modes. In the former mode "ideas are not felt to be representations but, rather, direct replicas of reality". In play mode, on the other hand, they suggest, "it becomes possible to free representations from their referents and allow these freed representations to be modified, creating a more flexible mode of thought".

The capacity for a creative space, what Winnicott called a play space, is different from true make-believe. In make-believe, parents indicate by subtly observed gestures and exaggerated expressions that this is pretend. Daddy is not really going to gobble the child up. But I believe that this concept may be useful to us when we move, as very many thinking believers in our time are doing, away from literal pictures of God, as father or Don Cupitt's 'policeman', to a faith language that is more figurative, more fluid and symbolic, more open to paradox and ambiguity, more representative of personal inner space.

From this space we might listen to the great Dominican Thomas Aquinas who wrote at the beginning of his *Summa*

*Theologica* that everything that theology might say about the divine is 'by way of analogy'. What if we think of the way of not knowing? We might hear a friend who said to me "For me God is the connection between everything". Or we might read the poet who speaks to God as "the deep innerness of all things". We might listen to the deep experiences of our inner selves. We may find ourselves swung loose from the certainties in which we were raised, needing to "find our way onward", in the words of the cartoonist Leunig, "by feeling".

And perhaps this is what I will leave you with also – paradoxical truths: that certain religious ways of being are shaped and determined by psychic processes; that spiritual and religious maturity is not co-equivalent with psychological maturity. That beliefs are shaped in individual inner space and that inner space itself is a product of human relating.

**In this view psychotherapy and religion can lead in the same direction – search for truth as honest as we can make it and efforts in human relatedness, intimate love and community. Sometimes one thread dominates, sometimes another.**

## CONSISTENCY'S CURSE

BY BERNARD BECKETT

**I suspect that a commitment to modern science precludes a belief in our having access to objective morality.** That is, as best I can tell, it is

logically inconsistent to believe both that science provides our best description of the physical world, **and** to believe humans' moral instincts give them access to higher truths. Here I will sketch out an argument in support of this claim. It's not watertight, but for now I find it more convincing than any argument to the contrary that I can find. Three important scientific concepts underpin this argument.



- The first is the notion that **the physical world is probabilistically deterministic**. That is, the state of the physical world at time T can be thought of as a probability function of the physical world at time T-1. This is the old notion of the physically closed universe, tweaked for the beautiful success of the probability functions of quantum physics. It is fair to say, as best I can tell, that we do not have a better predictive model of physical states than this one.
- The second concept is that of natural selection, which we take to be the best explanation of complex design in nature. **Complex design in nature emerges** because some aspect of that design engenders the greater reproductive success of the replicators. We need not argue that natural selection is the only game in town, but only that it is the best explanation of complex design.
- The final concept is the role of the brain in information processing. Science would posit a one-to-one correspondence between physical activity in the brain, and patterns of thought. Again, we need not dismiss the possibility of the hard problem, or pan-psychism, epiphenomenalism or any other optimistic variant. We need only accept **a direct correspondence between mental activity and brain activity**.

Now, consider a world in which the human being has innate knowledge of true moral imperatives. ... The question becomes, is there a mechanism by which this knowledge could be accessed by the brain, without running foul of our scientific concepts. I argue that none of the proposed mechanisms can do this job.

One solution would be that we evolved instincts that are morally true. The problem is that instincts, to the extent that they are selected for, are biased towards pragmatic, rather than objective truth. If we have evolved an instinct to care for our family, for instance, the evolutionary mechanism suggests that this instinct spreads because it is reproductively helpful. So, unless we redefine objectively true as pragmatically true, we are in a bind.

A counter argument suggests that not all our instincts are useful, that an instinct evolved in one context can re-express itself in quite another. This, I think, should be ceded. Many of our [present-day] behaviours are responses to environments foreign to our evolutionary past, and furthermore we have developed a malleable mind that is highly responsive to social norms. ... What is lacking in this argument of re-calibrating evolved instincts is any explanation as to why these new applications should themselves be truth seeking. How might the true moral nature of the universe calibrate with our behavioural patterns? There appears to be no good mechanism.

One hope, put forward by the likes of Roger Penrose, is that Platonic truths themselves direct physical brain processes (his favoured candidate being quantum collapse.) This, as I understand it, asks us to believe that we will one day find, within the brain, quantum processes that do not behave according to our current equations. That is, we are asked to reject current science to allow for the process. I don't argue he is wrong to hold out this hope, I only point out the necessary inconsistency with current models.

Another, popular, answer is that the human mind has evolved the capacity for higher order reasoning, and through reason, we may construct our moral knowledge, in the same way that we construct mathematical knowledge. The problem, for me, is that such a process of reasoning can only take us from one set of accepted truths, or axioms, to its implications. If we cannot first grasp some starting moral truths, then reason will be of little help when it comes to establishing more.

Finally, I would consider the mystic nature of consciousness, the famed hard problem. If we cannot explain how the subjective nature of consciousness emerges from the decidedly non-subjective description of the brain's building blocks, then surely there is room, within this mystery, for the consciousness to be the mechanism by which knowledge of the moral world enters our brain. By this theory, the consciousness emerges as an entity above and beyond the sum of its parts, capable of reading the moral truths upon which the universe is founded. My problem with this, is it requires we violate the model of brain/mind correspondence. If each physical brain state is sufficiently caused by its previous states (any machine thus constructed would reach the same conclusions) then even if consciousness can be properly envisaged as a higher level of organisation, its behaviour must still be consistent with the behaviour of the lower level brain parts.

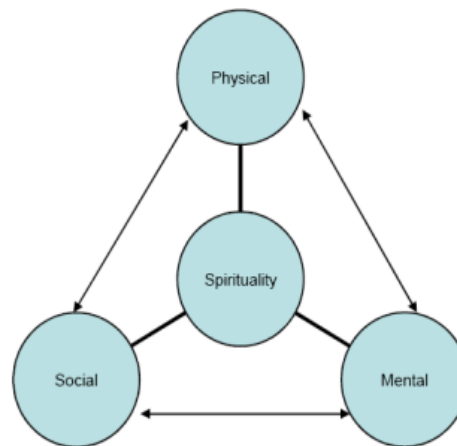
My conclusion, then, is that I must either drop a belief in our access to objective moral truth, or drop my faith in particular scientific models on the grounds that they do not allow a belief I would like to hold, or I should drop my attachment to consistency. Which of these I might choose to do is not, as far as I can see, itself a matter of argument. Rather, inevitably, taste must intervene (I fact I rather fancy the pragmatist's escape.)

## CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY IN HEALTH CARE: A RE-EMERGING ISSUE

BY DR. RICHARD EGAN

*These excerpts are from the the Powerpoint presentation "Spirituality: what is it?: Evidence from NZ Hospice Study" given at the "Spirituality in Aging" Conference in August 2009.*

*Citations appear in the full version on the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)*



**How one understands, studies and explains spirituality may be considered as much related to the individual researcher's beliefs and worldview, as to his or her discipline, methods or subjects.**

Interrelations between contexts are expressed as an analogy with the structure of a Maori *whare* (house).

### One-line definitions of 'Spirituality', mostly from patient surveys

- how one looks at the world and oneself
- it extends to my whole being, relationships and where I am in this world
- I think being spiritual is being a good Christian
- it is the essence of who I am
- [it] embraces the essence of what it means to be human.

### Literature Overview

- Definition – a ubiquitous issue
- Discourse dependent (country, community, demographic, culture, academic, religion)
- Spirituality religion relationship some agreement
- No consensus / gold standard definition
- Commonalities
- Universal?
- Assessment / care / carer / ethics
- Criticisms



### Definition Commonalities in Literature

Unruh found 92 definitions which he categorized into seven themes:

- relationship to God, a spiritual being, a higher power, or a reality greater than the self
- not of the self
- transcendence or connectedness unrelated to a belief in a higher being
- existential, not of the material world
- meaning and purpose in life
- life force of the person, integrating aspect of the person
- summative

### Relationship between spiritual well-being and spiritual distress

Spiritual Components	Spiritual Distress
Values, beliefs, hope	Valuelessness, normlessness, angst, fear
Meaning, purpose	Meaninglessness, ennui, hopelessness, despair
Awareness	Uncertainty, lack of awareness
Transcendence, religiosity	Self-Centred, religious pain/guilt
Identity, relationships, connectedness	Dissolution, disconnection, isolation, guilt

### Interview Results

- **Religious:** “I do see it [spirituality] as religion” (nurse)
- **Existential:** “I believe it’s about belief systems” (patient)
- **Summative:** “[it] embraces the essence of what it means to be human. It is concerned with personhood, identity and meaning and purpose in life. The spirit holds together the physical, psychological and social dimension of life” (chaplain)

## CONSCIOUSNESS AND REALITY

### A WORKSHOP BY LEO HOBBS

Our understanding of mind and consciousness is closely entwined with our perception of reality. In this workshop we will examine some aspects of human experience, including near-death and death-bed experiences, which seem problematic for a purely materialist or physicalist view of mind.

Do our mental states correspond to states of matter alone or do we need something more? Participants are encouraged to share any personal relevant experiences.

### Reading List

*Irreducible Mind ; Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* by Edward Kelly and Emily Kelly and contributors, 2007. (This book of some 800 pages is a tour de force covering



over a century of research and observations on mental phenomena)

*Entangled Minds* by Dean Radia, 2006

*The Art of Dying* by Peter Fenwick and Elizabeth Fenwick, 2008, (includes the subject of consciousness generally as well as the authors' special knowledge of the near-death and death-bed experiences).

*Erasing Death* by critical care specialist, Sam Parnta, 2013, *Consciousness beyond Life* by eminent cardiologist Pim van Lommel, 2010

*Proof of Heaven* by Eben Alexander 2012, (Of particular significance because the author is a neurosurgeon writing about his own NDE).

*Opening Heaven's Door* by Patricia Pearson, 2014, (An insightful and sensitive account of many near death and death-bed experiences, some involving her own family).

*Twin Telepathy* by Guy Lyon Playfair 2002.

*Is There an Afterlife?* by David Fontana, 2005. (This book by a very experienced transpersonal psychologist covers a wide range of anomalous phenomena).

*Shadows of the Mind* by theoretician and cosmologist, Roger Penrose, 1994,

*Occult Chemistry*, by theosophists Charles Leadbeater and Annie Besant (Available for download from the internet)

*A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock*, by Evelyn Fox Keller 1983. (Describes the remarkable insights of this plant- geneticist and Nobel Laureate).

*A Change of Heart*, by Claire Sylvia and William Novak, 1997, (The story of a woman who, after receiving the heart and lungs of the young victim of a motor cycle accident, experienced a striking transfer of some of his personality traits.)

It is well worth watching some of the Youtube videos on brain and consciousness for which there are links given in the Conference 2014 material on the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz), I particularly recommend the presentations by Bruce Greyson, Mario Beauregard, and Barbara Arrowsmith-Young.

### Websites

[www.Opensciences.org/](http://www.Opensciences.org/) dedicated towards a post-materialist science.

[www.Wisewiki.org/](http://www.Wisewiki.org/) aiming to provide a comprehensive data base including consciousness and unexplained anomalies.

The Skeptiko website at [www.skeptiko.com/](http://www.skeptiko.com/) also has many relevant interviews.

The UK Society for Psychical Research is also in process of establishing a comprehensive database on psychic phenomena.

### WALL POSTER AT CONFERENCE

If our brains were simple enough  
for us to understand them,  
we wouldn't be able to  
understand them.

anon



## THE GOSPEL OF MARY, A WORKSHOP BY TOM HALL

[This presentation draws on *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* by Karen King, published by Polebridge Press 2003]

The Gospel of Mary of Magdala (GMar) is based on ... a neo-platonic dualism of spirit and matter in which the soul is portrayed as a divine spark from on high that takes on the burdens of humanity when it joins with an earthly body, and then seeks to regain its home in the realm of perfection when that material shell returns to dust.

It was written in Greek in c.125 and was one of about twenty-five non-canonical gospels. But this was a different kind of gospel, neither biography (as with the four canonical gospels) nor a 'sayings' collection (e.g. Thomas, Q). Rather, it is a post-resurrection dialogue, a genre that features special teaching, rebuking or comforting the disciples, and encouragement of preaching.

Why this form? It answers doctrinal or ethical questions (such as the modern "What would Jesus do?" or "What would Jesus say?"). Debates of this kind led to the Council of Nicea two centuries later, in 325. Today we have only a fragmentary copy (eight of the original eighteen pages) in Coptic and two small Greek fragments. The one existing manuscript was bought in Egypt in 1896 [and] was finally published in German in 1955 and in English in 1961.

This text has been summarised as "a radical interpretation of Jesus' teaching as a path to inner spiritual knowledge". It rejects both crucifixion as redemptive sacrifice, and salvation as bodily resurrection. Mary Magdalene is no longer the rehabilitated sinner, nor merely the first to see the risen Jesus, but is the 'Disciple-in-chief' who best understands and exemplifies Jesus. She is no longer the 'hijacked heroine' who was defamed by Gregory the Great in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, but stands alone as 'Apostle to the Apostles' and exemplar of women's leadership roles in early Christianity.

GMar offers a Jesus seen through a Greek lens, that of Platonic mind-body dualism rather than Stoic 'deal with it' materialism. This was no doubt a reason for rejection. As turf wars and doctrinal clashes among Church Fathers spread, problems of canonicity arose. Which of growing number of gospels were acceptable? .

Clearly GMar is a work of fiction, and this raises questions of why these particular scenes, questions, portrayals, and doctrines were included. What were the agenda items of this writer, this community, this Christianity? Why, for example, ask about the nature of matter? Why 'no such thing as sin'? Why 'adultery'? What doctrine(s) are affirmed or denied? note the familiar 'two good ears' advice.

Why does the Saviour leave? Why does he forbid further rules? Then a new dialogue: Mary and other disciples. How many different dialogues? Why the dialogue format? Note the issue of visions: the mind-body problem.

Tertullian and GMar agree that only the pure receive visions; a love of the material world dims spiritual acuity. But they disagree on human nature.

- Tertullian: A person consists of unified body and soul, "soul is sown in the womb together with flesh."
- Mary: A human combines body, soul and mind. Mind is the divine element; it alone can direct soul to spiritual life.
- Tertullian: A polluted soul results in sinful actions by body; the only cure is faith in Christ leading to resurrection of body and soul.
- Mary: Soul must learn its true nature, turn away from body, recognize and strive to fulfill spiritual potential of true self, discover inner 'child of true humanity' (cf. 'inner Christ', 'That of God').



Four missing pages later, Mary is describing the difficult task of the disembodied spirit in its attempt to ascend to its true home and find peace and rest in God: challenged by a series of Powers who seek to bar its ascent. Knowledge is needed both to recognize one's spiritual nature and to answer these evil guardians.

Clever writing: the challenged soul each time employs its knowledge and insight to turn the Power's indictment against it. Note that, at the end of this passage, "The soul replied ... silence" is very difficult. "In a world I was set loose" ... "exists in time," (v. 28) is better read thus: "And while still a member of humanity I was set free by discovering the true nature of humanity and thus escaped the mortality of temporal life" (this edit was OK'd by Karen King).

Why does Mary fall silent? Are objections by Andrew and Peter credible? Why does the writer include them in his (obviously fictional) account?

Why does Mary weep instead of 'pulling rank'? Note Levi's counter-attack; why Levi? What aim(s) can we infer from next-to-last verse? From the last?

It is not hard to improve on Tertullian's 2<sup>nd</sup> century notion of physical resurrection of body and soul; even Paul's paradoxical contrivance of a spiritual body is more sensible. But we humans have long been addicted to the hope of immortality. In short, this little salvation drama is hardly a literal account of anyone's after-death experience, but can be seen as a compelling mythic or poetic rendering of the human condition. For as we travel through life on our several journeys into an unknown future, we every day encounter a number of opportunities to choose the right deed over the wrong, to be benevolent rather than uncaring, to put the welfare of others ahead of offering self-serving justification for our own desires. I submit to you that we live our whole lives among the gatekeepers of heaven, and our spiritual health is measured by how we answer their challenges.

## PANEL DISCUSSION PREFACE

BY NOEL CHEER

There are only two words in common use in the English language that are composed of only one letter – 'a' as the indefinite article and 'I' as the personal pronoun.

For the most part 'a' gives us no problems, but that which we call 'I' has become hugely problematic. There is general agreement among thinkers – who disagree on just about everything else – that 'I' is a product of the brain. But, as has been observed in many contexts, the brain is a biological organ – someone once referred to it as 'thinking meat'. So how does meat get to think?

For most of us in the Sea of Faith Network, we assume that it is our right to discuss whatever we want to without being answerable to religious traditions, canons and dogmas. We are a 'talk-shop', constrained only by relevance, appeals to evidence, and personal courtesy.

This has lead us to confront interesting dilemmas such as the fact that the major religious traditions, canons and dogmas came to birth in that part of our cultural history which preceded the findings of what I will call the 'intellectual revolutionary squad': **Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Freud, Crick and Higgs.**

The major paths of faith came to birth in a world in which it was supposed that the sun circled the earth, that big objects fell faster than small ones, that humans were made in a special creation process and lived at the top of list of earthly creatures and just below the heavenly.

**Copernicus and Galileo** re-assigned our Earth to being a satellite of the sun and not vice-versa.

**Newton** showed that our companion planets in the solar system obey the same laws of motion as do apples upon earth.

**Darwin** located humans as part of the animal kingdom and showed that we are made of the same stuff.

**Freud** showed us more down-to-earth explanations for the supposed visitations by angelic and demonic creatures.

**Einstein**, and scientists who followed him, showed that reality is quite contrary to our earthbound intuitions as to time, space, duration and magnitude.

**Crick** helped unlock the DNA code and went on to lay a foundation for understanding brain activity which we call neuroscience.

And **Higgs** has shown us the boson.

Another group of issues arises from the claim that we can no longer assume that we have a soul that could exist separately from the body – except in poetic terms. Our ‘selfness’ – or soul – is no longer thought to be an independent entity but is instead a product of the brain which is a specialised organ of the body – all of which participates in – and is bounded by – time and space. Later we will look at what equivalence, if any, there is between ‘psyche’, ‘mind’ and “soul”.

When a person uses the word ‘I’ to identify herself, what is the nature of the agent which asserts selfness. And where is it located?

Francis Crick began his book *The Astonishing Hypothesis* by declaring that: ‘You’, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.

This is rapidly becoming scientific orthodoxy. But, not all scientists go along with it. Today, will we?

The most recent revolution in science is just beginning – the one that wants a modern-day account of consciousness – that properly locates ‘I’. There’s a good chance that it will be more disruptive and more contentious than even Darwin’s bombshell.

**Inner space is, in many ways, bigger than outer space.** Each of Earth’s five billion inhabitants has an unbelievably complex inner space which even top research scientists barely understand.

How can we, denizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, continue to operate in a concept space which speaks of ‘visionary’ and ‘revelatory’ experiences? How can we consent to talk of people returning from death, of creatures – even God – speaking to us from another realm of reality?

How can religion survive what has been called ‘the acids of modernity’: the post-Enlightenment understanding of cultural relatives; the subconscious realm that blends the unreal and the real; the autonomy of neural processes?

How can the major world religions continue to command the allegiance of well-meaning but educated people?

### The Panel



Dr Reuben Jones, Sister Sarah Winton, Dr Richard Egan,  
Sir Lloyd Geering, Noel Cheer (chair)

## AGM 2014

Each year, the Sea of Faith holds its AGM at the annual Conference. This year, the following happened:

- Maureen Roxburgh’s 4-year term came to an end.
- Norm Ely and Bruce Tasker were elected onto the Steering Committee.
- We received reports from all the different portfolios.
- We amended one of our rules to allow Peter Cowley to continue as a member of the Steering Committee, to make it possible for him to continue as our Treasurer.

- We were informed that George Dodd is the Local Arrangements Committee convenor for the 2015 Conference which will be held in Auckland.

Peter Cowley’s financial report indicated that a review of the Sea of Faith’s finances had been carried out. The Steering Committee has subsequently received the report of that review. After noting various limitations of the review, it concluded “...nothing has come to my attention that causes me to believe that the accompanying financial statements do not fairly represent the financial position of the Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Inc. as at 30 June 2014 and results of its operations and cash flows for the year ended 30 June 2014.”

At a brief post-conference meeting of the Steering Committee, Laurie Chisholm and Jock Crawford were re-appointed chairperson and Secretary respectively and Gretchen Kivell was appointed local groups coordinator.

## FEEDBACK FORM ANALYSIS

The theme for Conference 2014 was “Exploring Inner Space: Will ‘spirit’, ‘soul’ and ‘free-will’ survive the scrutiny?” ‘Free-will’ survived alright, although serious doubt was cast on its presence in all people, while ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’ got a good looking at and perhaps a number of delegates have a somewhat modified formulation of these traditional religious concepts now.

In any event, Conference 2014 was a highly successful Conference judging by the responses to the feedback form from 68 registrants.

Firstly, the organisation of the Conference was highly rated. 88% of respondents gave the maximum appreciation response to the overall organisation question. Marjorie Spittle and fellow Dunedin local organisation team take a bow!

Of the presentations, Lloyd Geering and the Panel (brilliantly chaired by Noel Cheer) once again were the most highly rated with 94% and 85% of participants scoring these the highest rating respectively. There was also strong endorsement of ‘Richard Egan’s presentation (74%) and Sandra Winton’s (68%). Core groups were generally highly rated both in terms of the amount of time devoted to them in the conference as well as the quality of participation. However, some groups clearly functioned better than others.

There were a range of highlights described by participants, the top five being the Panel, Lloyd Geering, Core Groups, the Venue and the Saturday evening event.

The main reason participants gave for attending the conference was to meet with others of similar interest (30%), followed by the theme (23%), the speakers (18%), opportunity for discussion (14%) and the Panel (12%).

The most common final comment was a big thanks to the organisers for such a worthwhile conference, while two suggestions stood out – to put the year of joining SoF on the nametags and having all the Saturday events on the registration form.

A full analysis of the feedback form is available on the website.

Doug Sellman, October 2014

## Conference Next Year!

**Auckland: October 2 to 4, 2015**  
**For developments, keep reading**  
**the Newsletter and**  
**the website [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)**

The Newsletter publishing team: Noel Cheer, Shirley Dixon,  
Yvonne Curtis and Pete Cowley wish you a merry  
Christmas – however you celebrate it.  
We’ll be back next year!