

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 123, March 2016

MY SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY: PART 2

Laurie Chisholm, Chairperson of the Sea of Faith New Zealand

Laurie resumes At the age of 45, I needed to begin again. My marriage and my work career had both collapsed and I had moved to England to join my new partner. Financially, it was essential that I work. I was turned down as a health food shop assistant by an African woman young enough to be my daughter, on the grounds that I was not familiar with British currency and could not give change rapidly enough. I was accepted as a waiter or back room assistant at a Pizza restaurant, but was told that it was hard work with long hours and no-one of my age did it. On my way back from the job interview, I called in to a temping agency that was offering free word processing training. I surprised the worker there (and myself) by delivering the fastest typing speed of any male on their books. While we were talking, the phone rang, and the result was that I had work next morning. The word processing and dictaphone training came later.

Surprisingly, it was my touch typing ability that turned out to be my only marketable skill. After a week or two, I had continuous employment as a temporary word processing operator, later moving to a fixed position with an engineering company managing their design documents.

While in England I was able to return on holiday to Germany, to see my old parish again and to visit some favourite places with my new partner. There I also visited Gerhard Pfisterer, who handed me a fat book with the words, "I think you might be interested in this." I read some of it and took copious notes. Just before leaving Germany, I decided that I really needed to have this book. I went into the first bookshop I could find in Munich, and there it was, featured on its own little table, with a well-worn reading copy on top of a pile of shrink-wrapped copies for purchase. The book was Eugen Drewermann's *Clergy: Psychogram of an Ideal*, a depth-psychological analysis of what it means to be a priest or a nun. Published only in the previous year, it was already in its seventh printing. In spite of the scholarly presentation (six levels of heading, 900 pages in all, with 150 pages of footnotes and bibliography), it was a best-seller, and the very public conflict between Drewermann and the Catholic hierarchy was ramping up.

What attracted me in the book was first of all the description of Drewermann's therapeutic work with priests and nuns, but also his vivid images, the way he contrasted the free and personal calling of a shaman in traditional societies with the regulated and institutionalised calling to the priesthood in the Catholic Church, and his complex analysis of the family dynamics that predestines people to live for others, by becoming priests. I will allow myself just one quotation:

In the 25 years, in which I was a priest in the Catholic Church, no shock is more enduring in my memory than the confirmation of how right Sigmund Freud was... when he said that when a person comes to us and talks about God, and the therapy is reasonably successful, it turns out after two or three years at the latest that God was not named as the background of personal existence, as trust in the courage of his own freedom, but quite the opposite, as the bonds of infantile fears and permanent guilt feelings that were never removed, as an endless mistrust, as enslavement of feelings, ... basically as the superego's defence against the ego. Every religious institution that, like the Catholic Church, claims to represent God... doesn't really want people's freedom. Quite the opposite. It steals freedom from the soul and enslaves it through its divinised institutions. ... There is a bundle of infallible dogmas. All you have to do is repeat them, and you can't go wrong. There is a sack of commandments and if you follow them, you are pardoned and justified, or so we're supposed to believe. And the whole difficulty of a personally lived existence doesn't arise, the very idea is forbidden. If that's the way it is, the confrontation of "Church or Couch" is unavoidable.



Almost everything about Drewermann was startlingly different from the theologians and scholars I had hitherto studied. The question he asked towards the end of the book was a good example of this: “What is it about Christianity that is saving?” For Drewermann, this boils down to using psychotherapeutic tools to articulate the empirical equivalents of the process that theology calls ‘salvation.’ His answer in this book, focused on the role of the priest/nun, was a reformulation for today of the traditional evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. This book was the beginning of my journey into the fascinating, powerful, many-sided and multi-layered world of Drewermann’s thinking. Every year, I bought a book or two and became determined to become familiar with this thinker. Now, some sixty-three books by and about him later, I continue to be in awe of him and the wisdom of his thinking. I have set up a website where I try to summarise his work (www.drewermann.info).

We returned to New Zealand in 1990, so that my partner could take up a role with the then Wool Research Organisation of New Zealand. I assisted with some translation work, then got a job with Trimble Navigation translating their surveying software into German. Gradually, I moved from translation into technical writing, shifting in 1997 to Tait Electronics, where I remained until retirement.

I attended the Hornby Methodist Church and was invited to be their quarter-time minister, which I did for a time and found very gratifying. The Presbyterian Church’s continuing conflict and conservative resolutions on homosexuality among other things meant

that it rather ceased to feel like my spiritual home. I started attending the local Sea of Faith group and this is now effectively my spiritual home.



Laurie Chisholm February 2016

DO UNTO OTHERS ... ?

“As producers [of goods], we seek to obtain the most possible for our work. As consumers, we pay the least possible. The consequence of these combined transactions is that every day of our lives we steal and are stolen from”.

Paul Reclus in *La Révolte*, 21 Nov 1892, Paris

“HISTORY DOESN'T REPEAT ITSELF, BUT IT DOES RHYME.”

attributed to Mark Twain

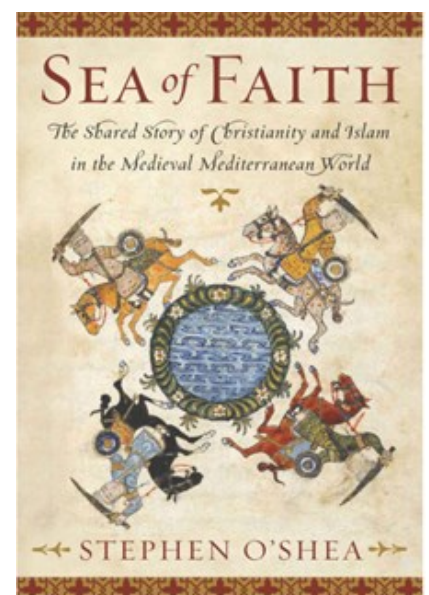
Sea of Faith: Islam and Christianity in the Medieval, Mediterranean World

Stephen O'Shea

The nearly land-locked Mediterranean Sea has a surface area nearly ten times the land area of New Zealand. This is such a small stage (or arena), one might think, for all the world-shaping activity that it has hosted.

This book borrows SoF's identity label and uses it to name the interaction between Christians and Muslims from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries, when these paths of faith contended for primacy in the Mediterranean world. At times acrimonious, at other times harmonious, the encounter between the two creeds in the Middle Ages provides a backdrop to much of what informs, and misinforms, public opinion on present-day conflicts.

Recounting seven major battles encircling the Mediterranean: Yarmuk (636), Poitiers, Manzikert, Hattin, Las Navas de Tolosa, Constantinople, and Malta (1565). Stephen O'Shea shines vital new light on the distant past while offering invaluable perspective on the two faiths' ongoing contest for spiritual and political primacy.



Beware: this book is nearly 10 years old and may best be looked for in a library.

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, 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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Publication deadlines for submitted Newsletter copy for the rest of 2016 are: 21/4/2016, 21/6/2016, 21/8/2016, 21/10/2016.

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 Refer to the catalogue on the website at www.sof.org.nz.

Membership of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both charges drop to \$15 if the Newsletter is emailed and not on paper.

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

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The Conference is coming together:

**OCTOBER 7 TO 9, SILVERSTREAM
(NEAR WELLINGTON)**

**"With or Without God:
Community in a Post-Theistic Age"**

WE WILL ALL DIE
ONE DAY.
BUT ON ALL THE
OTHER DAYS
UNTIL THEN,
WE WILL NOT.

SOURCE UNKNOWN

Laurie Chisholm: Subversive Scripture 1

BORN OF A VIRGIN

Taking scripture seriously is not the same as taking it literally. On the contrary, examining scripture closely is an important way of undermining traditional literalism, alongside reason and science. In that sense, scripture itself is subversive. Looking at it closely makes it increasingly difficult to take literally and presses towards a more symbolic or inward understanding.

In what follows, I look at the tradition of the virgin birth.

Although liberal Christians regard this as optional, and SoFers will have long since ceased to believe it literally, there is still a lingering view that the Christian doctrine of Jesus as son of God is based on the Virgin Birth as a miracle in which God overrides the normal laws of nature to enable a pregnancy without the involvement of a man. This concept did also play a large role in the Catholic Church's ostracising of Eugen Drewermann; In a long debate with his archbishop, the bitter, protracted and exhausting discussion on the Virgin Birth occupied thirty pages of text (and a further 13 pages of critical analysis of the archbishop's arguments) and failed to reach agreement.

Only Matthew and Luke refer to the Virgin Birth; it is quite likely that Mark, John and Paul do not even know of it. Certainly they do not refer to it in contexts where this might be expected. In Luke, there is also a miraculous birth story for John the Baptist. In Matthew, the story of the Virgin Birth follows a genealogy that traces Jesus' ancestry back to David and Abraham. So there are two rival, logically incompatible traditions: in one, Jesus is the Son of God in the sense that he doesn't have a human father. In the other, Jesus is a son of David, the messiah, through Joseph his father having a whakapapa that goes back to King David. It is interesting, and for me liberating, that the Gospel of Matthew itself wants to hold on to both these lines of thought, even though they cancel each other out when taken literally. If Jesus is a son of David, he cannot be the son of God. If he is the son of God, born of a virgin, he cannot be the messiah in the sense of a descendent of king David. And so we have the awkward wording in Matthew 1:16:

And Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary; of her was born Jesus who is called Christ

Instead of the expected:

Jacob was the father of Joseph

Joseph the father of Jesus

Luke also incorporates a (significantly different) genealogy, one that goes right back to Adam, and has a

similar awkwardness. Instead of "*Jesus, being the son of Joseph*" it has "*Jesus, being the son, as it was thought, of Joseph...*" In other words, the descent from the Davidic line is factually incorrect, and any messianic claim is based on what people erroneously thought was the case.

Matthew has another contradiction. He claims that the virgin birth took place in fulfilment of a prophetic word:

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they will call him Immanuel, God-with-us.

The trouble is, they called him Jesus, not Immanuel.

In the early church's desperation to demonstrate the scriptural basis of their faith in Jesus as son of God, they found a passage, but glossed over the fact that it was half-fulfilled at best. Moreover, scholars usually interpret this text as a mistranslation. The Hebrew word for a young maiden of marriageable age was translated into a Greek word that has the technical meaning of

"virgin." The prophet never meant to prophesy a birth from

a virgin, but simply to announce that by the time a young woman became pregnant and gave birth, things would have improved so much that she would name the child "God with us." It was not a prophecy of events far in the future, but was tied to what was going on at that time and referred to the immediate future.

The bible is a library, not a book, and it reflects the diversity of different times and places. To rescue the Bible from fundamentalism, we need to be aware of that diversity, to celebrate it and (in particular) to undermine claims that only fundamentalism is truly "biblical." When we attempt to make the Virgin Birth something factual, biological, objective, miraculous, we end up in hopeless contradictions, especially if we follow the traditional church teaching that Mary was a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. We are for example left trying to explain away Mark's talk of Jesus' brothers and sisters. We need instead to understand the birth stories symbolically rather than literally, or better still inwardly, as crystallising experiences with the person of Jesus, rather than externally, as biological or historical information about his origin.

We can approach these stories from various different angles, to help unlock their meaning. It is most helpful to begin with the background in ancient Egypt. The Pharaoh, too, was born of a virgin, but this was not understood in a literalist fashion. The Egyptologist E. Brunner-Traut writes:

Taking scripture seriously is not the same as taking it literally.

So long as the later Pharaoh is a crown prince, he is considered the son of his earthly father. Only when he ascends the throne, which reveals his election by heaven, is he called 'son of God.' Only then is his birth reported as miraculous.

The Pharaoh's brothers and sisters could be running around at the very moment when he is declared to be "born of a virgin, son of Amun, the wind God." Psalm 2:7 is a distant echo of this Egyptian "son of God" theology; "I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you.'" The whole virgin birth tradition makes sense in the light of the religion of ancient Egypt, but makes no sense at all from the perspective of Jewish monotheism, where the transcendent divine can have no direct contact with humans.

The early psychoanalysts were interested in symbolic language, and the Virgin Birth tradition was something that attracted them. They saw in it an excellent illustration of the Oedipal theme. Son and father are rivals for the affection of the mother; the son eliminates the father from the story, so as to have an exclusive claim on the attention of the mother. Drewermann is sympathetic, but points out that Oedipal themes belong to a patriarchal society, where the father figure is dominant or domineering, whereas ancient Egypt is more matriarchal. From this perspective, the Virgin Birth makes better sense as reflecting the mother's dissatisfaction with the performance of her husband, so divinises the son. Interestingly, Freud came to the conclusion that many of the stories patients told of their childhood were not true historically, so he coined the term "screen memories" (*Deckerinnerungen*) to describe what his patients remembered, and what actually covered over the real history. Although historically inaccurate, these "memories" nevertheless summed up what childhood meant for the patient, and so had an important existential truth. Similarly, the Virgin Birth tradition does not need to be historically true to contain existential truth.

In the ancient world, origin stories were less about the historical beginning and more about the essential meaning of a person's existence. (I can give two biblical examples to support this meaning of 'beginning.' "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" doesn't mean that we leave behind the fear of the Lord as we become more wise. It means that the fear of the Lord is the foundation of all wisdom. Psalm 51 "behold I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me" does not mean that his mother was particularly sinful, but that his sinfulness is there in his very nature, present from the beginning.

The Virgin Birth story is a symbolic description of the essence of Jesus of Nazareth. It is saying in mythological language that Jesus is not explainable as the son of Mary and Joseph. The way Jesus was could not be predicted from the nature of his parents. It needs an explanation as it were 'from above' rather than 'from below' (from the divine Spirit rather than through genes and environmental influence). John puts it like this, "born not out of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself."

According to later Catholic theology, Mary was able to give birth to the saviour because she was not defiled by nasty, earthy sexuality but kept herself pure, just as all good priests and nuns are supposed to. She was thus free of Original Sin. Her virginity was seen as an ideal of sexual innocence. There is no hint of this in the Egyptian virgin birth myths; on the contrary, the encounter with the divine father-to-be is quite steamy and the biblical story has presumably deliberately become quite vague at this point, to protect the divine transcendence.

Concepts such as "Son of God" and "incarnation" are theological abstractions, derived from these mythological stories. According to popular theology, the claim that Jesus is the 'son of God' is uniquely Christian. In fact, the concept 'Son of God' was quite widespread in the ancient world, goes back to ancient Egypt, and was applied among others, to the Roman Caesars and Alexander the Great. Drewermann writes:

*It is the great achievement of Christianity to have grasped the central symbolism of ancient Egypt in its intellectual content and to have elevated it **in pure inwardness** to the central expression of its own faith.*

Theologians often abstract doctrines from these mythical stories and then act as if the doctrines were no longer mythical. In fact, we can only understand such theological concepts if we translate them back into the symbolic world of myth that they originally came from.

The Virgin Birth is a mythical symbol, with a rich background in ancient Egypt, used to articulate the importance of the divine king (the Pharaoh) as the corporate person representing and summing up the people as a whole, and applied in a democratising move to Jesus, who was without royal power. There are two lines that radiate from ancient Egypt and its Pharaohs. One goes to the Caesars and serves to legitimate absolute political power and awesome military might, the other goes to Jesus.

Laurie Chisholm

Illustration: *Annunciation*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1855



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ABOUT MYTH

Need New Myths

I read with great interest the latest Newsletter and have a few comments to make.

When the word religion is used nowadays it appears to refer to *particular* beliefs in the meaning and purpose in life, but I believe that there is a *general* need for meaning and purpose in life which I refer to as Religion. When this need is not met life becomes a pointless “go with the flow”.

To counter this we are now told that we should have clear aims and ambitions and plan to achieve them; one can aim to get rich, become a gold medallist, lose weight, get fit, become a celebrity, etc, etc.

The trouble with this is that there is no ethical basis for it. One can compete, destroy others, cheat, lie, etc. on the way to achieving the goal (though you should be careful that you are not seen to be breaking the law). Science and logic are gods here. It is a way to gain power over *outer* reality.

Needed also are ambitions concerning *inner* reality. The desire to master the harmful vulnerabilities of being human and reinforcing the natural desires to co-operate and act with compassionate, caring concern (love).

Without these one can never gain inner peace as one's potential can never be satisfactorily reached (or, if they are, new aims have to be set to fill the void left). And without inner peace there will never be peace on earth – which I feel is the basis of Jesus' teaching.

As for Kirkegaard, I thought his aim was for each person to make authentic choices based on ethic rather than logic.

So what we now need are new myths that address this need for inner peace gained through ethical norms.

As for whether the SoF should as a body recommend actions, I believe that is up to individuals to make their choices – they are the ones who do the actions.

I do not believe in life after death. What lives on is the influence we have had during our lives. This entails great responsibility in the way in which we act. Our choices affect the creation of an evolving world.

Don Morrison, Alexandra, 26/1/2016

“ .. simplistic vistas of good and evil ..”

In SoF Newsletter 122, Shirley Dixon reported on analyses by several commentators of the powerful *Star Wars* mythology. These pointed out *Star Wars*' links to traditional mythologies and to religious traditions. Shirley quoted the comment in the *Economist* of 19 December 2015 which stated that they are “pushing the same old buttons in stone-age brains”, and that they have a power to unify people across generations, social groups and cultures, creating frameworks of shared references. She also referred to Joseph Campbell's contention that myths are necessary for society to function well.

Sadly lacking is any critical analysis of what these buttons and frameworks are, and what sort of functioning they are promoting. Could it be that the modern mythologies are promoting grand but simplistic vistas of good and evil, where friends and enemies are fairly easily identifiable and where problems are solved largely through violent conflict? Is the functioning being promoted mainly in terms of the health of the military-industrial complex, and do the mythologies promote world views in which military conflict is seen as far more credible than the nascent global democracy that we desperately need?

We are now in a situation where, on the one hand we have *Star Wars* and the horrific abuses of ISIS and other extremist forces, and on the other hand, two historic global agreements¹ by virtually all governments charting ambitious paths to a more peaceful equitable and sustainable world. Which of these frameworks – violent conflict or peaceful agreements – gets the attention?

I suggest that these mythologies are an important part of a larger cultural milieu that is exploiting the human infatuation with conflict and violence to undermine the very principles of international democracy and cooperation which are essential for our continuing existence on this planet.

Gray Southon, Tauranga

Note: 1. The two historic agreements, are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed at the UN General Assembly in September last year and the Paris Climate Agreement approved during the Paris Climate Conference in December.

FAREWELL TO MARJORIE COX OF AUCKLAND

There were so many dimensions to Marj Cox's life. She was like her garden, which she loved: colourful, productive, diverse, and vibrant. She had so many connections with a wide variety of different groups; she was involved in at least sixteen organisations, and was so much a part of them. She was a trusted and much loved neighbour. In her own quiet way she became a part of people's lives as a friend, a confidant

Marj loved her family and was loved by them. Her seven nieces and two nephews, her thirty-five great nieces and nephews and eleven great great

nieces and nephews were an important part of her life. The tributes given at her funeral reflected an aunt who was an encourager, challenging her nephews and nieces to live boldly and being willing to explore life; she often showed them how to do this.

As a young adult she made her first overseas trip to Europe, working in the Netherlands, touring around France on a scooter, dealing with an accident in

Spain, helping make bricks by hand to build a church in Iceland. After returning to New Zealand she had a variety of jobs. During this time she was involved in helping found the Citizen's Advice Bureau in Ponsonby, the first in the country.

Marj pioneered social work at the Renal Unit at Auckland Hospital (1972-78). She then took a few years out working at a restaurant in Ponsonby and undertaking further travel overseas. She resumed employment as a social worker at North Shore Hospital in 1987. Along the way she studied in evening classes for a formal qualification,

graduating with an Advanced Diploma in Social Work.

After she retired in 2006, Marj was involved in giving family support at the Devonport Naval Base, then as a social worker at West Auckland Hospice, and latterly as a support worker with the Grief Support Centre. Marj complemented her experience of working with people facing the end of life and dealing with grief with her wonderfully caring and compassionate personality.

Marj had various links with Christianity, the study of religion and the exploration of faith.

Throughout her life she was on a personal spiritual journey, but also one that engaged with others as she rejoiced in the wonder of creation and the discovery of new ways of believing and being. In later years she enjoyed time at the Mana Retreat Centre and as part of a Meditation Group. Marj gained a great deal from the Sea of Faith Network, participating in local groups and nationally, serving for a time on the Steering Committee. She approached faith with an open mind and gained a great deal from insights of people



Marjorie Cox
18 December 1939 – 14 January 2016

like Lloyd Geering, Don Cupitt and Karen Armstrong. In her work and travel she came into contact with a wide range of people; this enriched her appreciation for different cultures and faiths.

As one of the early members of the St Luke's Tramping Club, which has been going now for nearly forty years, she participated in many of the monthly tramping outings and the annual camps at various locations throughout the country. At the annual camp she was usually a team leader, taking responsibility for one of the evening meals. She was a great cook! With her social work background and

her caring personality Marj was the kind of person who would see a need and quietly, often behind the scenes, without any fuss, make sure it was dealt with. She was due to go to the Tramping Club camp at Ohakune which began the day after her funeral. Her sudden death was a huge shock to all her family and friends.

We can take comfort that Marj led a rich and full life till her last day, without having to face the journey of slow dying which she helped others navigate. While we will feel deeply her absence from our lives, there is a profound sense of thanks which we share for having known her and having been part of her life. She will live on in our memories and in our lives.

At Marj's funeral, Beverley Smith shared the following poem, (words which Marj appreciated):

**You can shed tears that she is gone
Or you can smile because she has lived.
You can close your eyes and pray that she will come
back
Or you can open your eyes and see all that she has
left.**

**Your heart can be empty because you can't see her
Or you can be full of the love that you shared.
You can turn your back on tomorrow and live
yesterday
Or you can be happy for tomorrow because of
yesterday.**

**You can remember her and only that she is gone
Or you can cherish her memory and let it live on.
You can cry and close your mind, be empty and
turn your back
Or you can do what she'd want; smile, open your
eyes, love and go on. (Anon.)**

One of Marj's favourite sayings which she shared with many came from Julian of Norwich:

**'All shall be well,
and all shall be well,
and all manner of thing shall be well.'**

Rev. Dr. Allan Davidson

As this Newsletter was in the final stage of typesetting, we heard the sad news of the death, in Christchurch, of Janet Lambie. Her funeral is scheduled for March 11th. Messages may be sent to "The Family of the late Janet Lambie, c/- P.O. Box 39001, Christchurch 8545".

WHAT IS GOOD ABOUT THE GOOD NEWS?

Easter in today's world

There can be little doubt that the Christian narrative has flowed like a collection of braided streams (Lloyd Geering's image) for the past twenty centuries. Much of the shape of the narrative was conditioned by the terrain through which it flowed ('land' as metaphor for 'history') and much of what came to be regarded as important has changed from one century to another. It is possible to see historical Christianity as a mutating collection of exotic and aging metaphors that are, at many points, inconsistent with the knowledge that we have gained about the natural order and human nature. In the kind of theological circles visited by Sea of Faith members, we can observe the need for renovations that severely challenge the notion that "old time religion is good enough for me".

Here are three thoughts that you might grapple with.

The first comes from a Fellow of the Westar Institute, John D. Caputo. At about the time you read the mailed copy of this Newsletter, Jack will be delivering a seminar paper with the title "**Does the Kingdom of God Need God?**". Westar promotional material contains the following: "The name of God is not that of a supreme being. It is instead the name of something unconditional without power, of a powerless power—a weak force with no army to back it up, like a kiss of peace rather than a sword. The kingdom of God is a kingdom without a royal monarch. Thus, the image of the Son of Man coming to judge the nations is, in theologian Paul Tillich's words, half-blasphemous. The kingdom of God does not need God, but, according to Jack Caputo, this theological atheism does not spell the end of God's kingdom; rather it dispels the misunderstanding of the gospel and preserves what is good about the good news. It opens the door to understanding the coming of the kingdom of God in terms other than power, and to understanding power—God's power or anyone else's—differently."

The second thought comes from a keynote speaker for this year's Conference, Michael Benedikt. He too talks about God in terms other than magisterial power. John Spong wrote that Benedikt's book *God is the Good We*

Do is a profound attempt to develop a new God language with which to define the human experience. He takes God out of the sky of theological debate and places this God in the depths of life. He empowers self-conscious human beings to embrace the power they have to bring God into human awareness.... I welcome this book and this author as my ally in the struggle to bring about a New Religious Reformation that is rooted in the ethics of life-affirming Goodness and that sees every religious system finally as an attempt to make us all more fully human." Put simplistically, traditional Christianity asserts that God made the Universe, including human beings, while Benedikt suggests that **we** make God ("theopraxy") by doing good.

The third is from another Keynote speaker, Gretta Vosper who promotes "Progressive Christianity". The Amazon book blurb for *With or Without God* includes these words: "Vosper addresses the issues of spiritual fulfillment, comfort and connection in the modern world through a thoughtful and passionate discourse. She urges a renewal of old doctrines but does so with dignity and respect. Offering difficult but penetrating insights into a new generation of spiritually aware – and spiritually open – people, *With or Without God* offers a startling model for a renewed church as a leader in ethics, fostering relationships, meaning and values that are solidly rooted in our own selves".

Perhaps we could adopt an Easter motif and talk about the death of institutionalised Christianity and the rebirth of where **Jesus** was. Let us salute, in the words of William Blake: "Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love".

Noel Cheer, Easter 2016

THE CHURCH THAT BECAME A SUBMARINE

A Clipping from David Simmers, Wellington

Once upon a time in the twentieth century, there was a church that became a submarine. It wasn't as difficult as it might seem. One day it just clanged shut the hatch on the outside world and submerged into its own. Occasionally it ran up the periscope to see where it was going. (Of course, it only allowed one person at a time to look, and since the perspective was a bit limited, it

never really found a reason to change course.) Once, the captain got a real vision through the periscope, and when he demanded that they get back to the surface and fast, the crew quickly developed the bends and the sub stayed down.

While submerged there was a lot for the group to do. In fact, they were kept on alert and asked to make maximum efforts. They tinkered with the machinery constantly, they overhauled their kitchen (the mess, that is), they inventoried their ammunition at least once a week (but never used it), paid salaries to the officers and went through endless drills occasionally interrupted by prayers that no depth charge would disturb their isolation.

Because they were always under water, there were continual reasons for taking emergency measures. They could not afford to surface until they were better drilled, anyway. Some thought they had to pay for the submarine first or the bank would foreclose on them



when they surfaced for air. The air did get stale, too – as did the routine, but they put up with it because the alternatives were too tricky. Several committees even decided the stale air was good for them.

One crew member, who had sneaked a look through the periscope, suggested a change in course, and the giving away of their surplus supplies. He was immediately eliminated for mutiny.

The last entry in the captain's log book read: "Have proudly set a new record for being submerged and maintaining predetermined course. See no reason why we should change directions. Crew continues to give maximum effort. We did sight an enemy (we think). Appointed three committees to study situation."

Hilbert Berger

Retired pastor and teacher in the United Methodist Church, Fort Wayne, Texas

Bishop Richard Randerson used a similar nautical parable in a 1999 sermon which was subsequently published in his 2015 book *Slipping The Moorings*. – Ed

THE MEANING OF LIFE

Collected by David Kitchingman of Dunedin

David wrote: “Here are responses from some famous and not so famous people to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything in 42 quotes (many much abbreviated).”

1. I don't know the meaning of life... And I do not want to be the one who tries to tell somebody else what life is all about. To me it's a complete mystery. - *Charles M. Schulz*.
2. God is the only one who can give real meaning to life. - *Anon*.
3. Life has to be given a meaning because of the obvious fact that it has no meaning. - *Henry Miller*.
4. What is the meaning of life? To be happy and useful. - *Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama*.
5. 'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless. - *Ecclesiastes 1:2. NIV*.
6. I was "far and away"-riding my motorcycle along an american back road, ...the theme i was grappling with was nothing less than the Meaning of Life, and i was pretty sure i had defined it: love and respect – and neither is any good without the other.- *Neil Peart*.
7. To live is to experience things, not sit around pondering the meaning of life. - *Paulo Coelho*.
8. I am the way, the truth and the life. - *Jesus*.
9. INTERVIEWER: Tell us a joke. WHEDON: Your life has meaning. INTERVIEWER: Tell us a secret. WHEDON: Your life has meaning. - *Joss Whedon*.
10. There are many ways to find meaning in life, one of them is the love of art. - *Ndiritu Wahome*.
11. One of the greatest gifts that God gives to each of us is the love we share with our family, friends, and fellowmen. It is this divine gift of love that...gives meaning and purpose to life - *Mike Ramsdell*.
12. One cannot ignore half of life for the purposes of science, and then claim that the results of science give a full and adequate picture of the meaning of life. - *Colin Wilson*.
13. One day, I'm going to find a man who thinks /m the meaning of life." - *Amy Brenneman*.
14. In the end, people don't view their life as merely the average of all of its moments. For human beings, life is meaningful because it is a story. A story has a sense of a whole. And in stories, endings matter... The peaks are important, and so is the ending... The sick and the aged ... have priorities beyond merely being safe and living longer... The chance to shape one's story is essential to sustaining meaning in life. - *Atul Gawande*.
15. Life is without meaning. You bring the meaning to it. Being alive is the meaning. It is a waste to be asking the question when you are the answer. - *Joseph Campbell*.
16. We could choose to live as though the best meaning and purpose we can find for our own lives is the very meaning and purpose of the universe itself ... as though its purpose were love. And if the universe, in the end, were to prove us wrong ... our lives, then, would have been an act of defiance of indifferent power.- *Richard Holloway*.
17. A life that partakes even a little of friendship, love, irony, humour, parenthood, literature, and music, and the chance to take part in battles for the liberation of others cannot be called 'meaningless' - *Christopher Hitchens*.
18. Philosophers can debate the meaning of life, but you need a Lord who can declare the meaning of life. - *Max Lucado*.
19. The meaning of your life is to help others find the meaning of their's. - *Viktor E. Frankl*.
20. To me living is Christ. - *St Paul*.
21. You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life. - *Albert Camus*.
22. God is the inevitability of humanity's search for true meaning. - *Jared Brock*.
23. There are some ten thousand religious sects ... each with its own cosmology, each with its own answer for the meaning of life and death. - *Jon Krakauer*.
24. If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be meaning in suffering. - *Viktor E. Frankl*.
25. To believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life. To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. - *Ludwig Wittgenstein*.
26. There is not one big cosmic meaning for all; there is only the meaning we each give to our life, an individual meaning, an individual plot, like an individual novel. - *Anais Nin*.

27. Word-work is sublime... It makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference... We do language. That may be the measure of our lives. - [*Toni Morrison*](#).
28. What is the meaning of human life? To answer this question at all implies a religion. - [*Albert Einstein*](#).
29. If you were to ask what provides some meaning in life nowadays for a great many people, especially men, you could do worse than reply ... sport. - *Terry Eagleton*.
30. To live with faith — any old faith, perhaps — is to infuse one's life with significance. On this view, the meaning of life is a question of the style in which you live it, not in its actual content. - *Terry Eagleton*.
31. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning. - *C.S. Lewis*.
32. The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away. - *Pablo Picasso*.
33. The meaning of life is love, work, and play... People's lives have meaning to the extent that love, work, and play provide coherent and valuable goals that they can strive for and at least partially accomplish. - *Paul Thagan*.
34. The meaning of life is basically to be the kind of person you would want to be around. - *Alexei Maxim Russell*.
35. Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is ...questioned by life. - *Viktor E. Frankl*.
36. To be fully in the moment. Because that's all life is, really, a string of moments... *Life* gives meaning to life. The answer to the meaning of life is hidden right there inside the question. - [*Wendy Mass*](#).
37. No doubt our continuing wrangles over the meaning of life will prove to be fertile and productive. But in a world where we live in overwhelming danger, our failure to find common meanings is as alarming as it is invigorating. - *Terry Eagleton*.
38. The resurrection gives my life meaning and direction and the opportunity to start over no matter what my circumstances. - *Robert Flatt*.
39. The sole meaning of life is to serve humanity. - *Leo Tolstoy*.
40. The meaning of life is that it stops. - *Franz Kafka*.
41. There is no one simple and absolute answer to the quest for meaning; there are many answers. We may judge some to be better than others, but when we make that judgement we are doing so from the point where we stand... It is dangerous to assume that our own standpoint is the one and only Archimedean point. - *Lloyd Geering*.

42. 'Forty-two!' yelled Loonquawl. 'Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?' 'I checked it very thoroughly,' said the computer, 'and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is.' - *Douglas Adams*.

David Kitchingman

From the Editor:

The iconic "42" from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is brought into play in the last paragraph.

Why not send to me *your* favourite?

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WAR JUST DOESN'T WORK!

While acknowledging the non-partisan and non-dogmatic position of the Sea of Faith, we need to acknowledge that this blogger has a point:

"You'd need to start with a persuasive review of what hasn't worked over the past 14-plus years. American actions against terrorism — the Islamic State being just the latest flavour — have flopped on a remarkable scale, yet remain remarkably attractive to our present crew of [Presidential] candidates. The sum of all this [military] activity, 14-plus years of it, has been ever more failed states and ungoverned spaces."

Peter van Buren at <http://www.salon.com>

He also wrote: **"If we want lasting peace, we must practice it ourselves"**.

Could there be some value in the old adage "when you are in a hole, stop digging?"

The above came via Archie Kerr and Lionel Sharman.

LAST WORD

MARCH 2016

Laurie is on holiday – Ed

THE CONFERENCE: OCTOBER 7 TO 9, SILVERSTREAM (NEAR WELLINGTON)

"WITH OR WITHOUT GOD: COMMUNITY IN A POST-THEISTIC AGE"

For up-to-date information go to the website at www.sof.org.nz

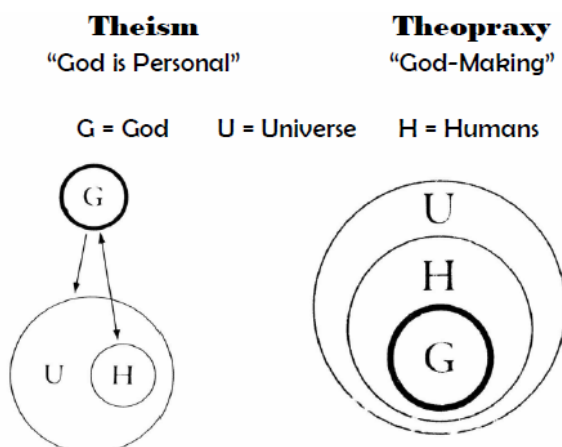
Speakers

- **Sir Lloyd Geering** - confirmed.
- **Gretta Vosper** - confirmed. Advocate of Progressive Christianity, author of *With or Without God: Why The Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe*.
- **Michael Benedikt** (author of *God is the Good We Do*). Owing to a clash of engagements, we will use a video lecture provided by Michael and follow it with one (or two) live Skype audience interactions.
- A **fourth speaker** is yet to be confirmed.

Books by Keynote Speakers

In her recent book, *Amen*, Gretta Vosper, author of the controversial bestseller *With or Without God*, offers us her deeply felt examination of worship beyond conventional prayer, a new tradition built on love and respect rather than on the rituals of ancient beliefs.

In his book, *God is the Good We Do*, Michael Benedikt suggests these relationships:



From the Steering Committee

The Steering Committee held its annual face-to-face meeting at St. Andrews on the Terrace in Wellington on 27 February.

The following outlines some of what it did at the meeting:

- Went through a 'values clarification exercise' exploring attitudes to current political issues, the role of SoF, and the nature of religion.
- Heard from several committee members who had visited the Conference venue the previous day.
- Decided (at last!) on the title of Conference 2016: "With or Without God. Community in a Post-Theistic Age."
- Decided on Gretta Vosper's itinerary for her New Zealand visit and decided on a New Zealand keynote speaker to complete our line-up.
- Explored the idea of having Conference at one central location year on year, rather than moving it around the country. [More of this later].
- Brainstormed ideas for the Conference 2017 theme and assigned pairs of committee members to explore each theme idea in more detail.

Laurie Chisholm, Chairperson 2016