

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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

Newsletter 124, May 2016



## "GOD HAPPENS IN OUR HEADS..."

### Summary of a Theological Debate in the Otago Daily Times

Alan Jackson, Newsletter Editor of the SoF Dunedin group, wrote this in their March Newsletter: "Bless that paper [the ODT] and its editors for including the *Faith and Reason* feature on a regular basis." He went on to note that readers of the ODT used to have one of its contributors, SoF Life Member Ian Harris of Wellington, as a lone voice but recently they have witnessed a lively debate as the paper called in theological muscle from a variety of quarters.

What follows is a summary of one such recent debate. It started with Ian Harris' column in the issue of 12 February 2016 under the title *God happens in our heads, or not, as the case may be*. Ian started with the comparative positioning of several academic disciplines as they grapple with the old puzzle: "Philosophy ... is looking in a dark room for a black cat [while] Metaphysics is looking in a dark room for a black cat that isn't there [and] Theology is looking in a dark room for a black cat that isn't there and shouting 'I've found it!'. [But] Science ... is looking in a dark room for a black cat using a flashlight." Does Science win? Can we exclaim "Ah science ... The shining path to enlightenment! The hope of misguided humanity! Rational, methodical, our only chance of finding that black cat!" Alas, "But the room is still dark. Maybe that elusive cat isn't there to be found after all. "Ian declares his position: "Maybe — and this is what I think — it's the wrong search in the wrong place." He summarises his position as "Trying to prove [that] God is real in a physical sense is a waste of time. ... So is trying to disprove it, for ideas of God don't depend on [the] physical world [but are] generated in the world of human thought — the same world that gives rise to language and the creativity of the novelist, dramatist, composer, artist."

Ian differentiates between the world of Science — of physical realities — and what he brings together as the 'thought world' and, even more relevantly 'our' or 'your' thought world. It is a different order of reality from what the scientist, as scientist, can deal with. It is, as Ian notes, the "order of reality to which God-talk belongs." God does not 'exist', but rather God is 'experienced'. Then Ian wraps the ideas into one bundle with the statement "The question is not whether God exists, but how the idea of God functions in that thought-world" and "God is also the supreme symbol of connection between ourselves and all humanity, all planetary life, the universe itself." Black cats have become irrelevant.

A week later, Prof. Murray Rae, professor of theology at the University of Otago, took issue with Ian's analysis largely by challenging Ian's re-characterisation of God as a product of the 'thought world'. He started with a few 'pawn sacrifices': "God does not exist in the same order of being as everything else." "It makes no sense to suppose the physical sciences can either prove or disprove the existence of God." He concedes that, up to this point, "this makes good theological sense."

It is at this point that your editor would like to challenge Prof. Rae in asking: "Suppose that all human beings were to be annihilated, what then would happen to God?". The answer would depend on the faith position of the person responding to the question: the theologically conservative monotheist would say that God would continue in existence, perhaps a bit lonely, but otherwise still there. Those for whom God is a human mental construct would conclude that, since those who constructed God have gone, so too has the construction.

Although the options have here been reduced to only two and those strongly contrasted, they serve to position Prof. Rae in the first group and Ian in the second.

Prof. Rae, understandably, sums up Ian's position as classifying God as "the same kind of thing as these other products of human thought and creativity" and that "that God has no reality apart from these ideas."

An example of this distinction can be seen in the contrast between Alexander Pope's "An honest man is the noblest work of God" and the witty response "An honest God is the noblest work of Man".

To chase the accusation by Prof. Rae, that Ian "fails ... to uphold the principle with which he began, the principle of God's ontological otherness", would take more space here than its value to the discussion, but the reader is recommended to the notion of 'worlds' suggested by Karl Popper and the implication that God can be thought of as a 'world 3' product generated by the 'world 2' capabilities of the human mind. All considerations of ontology remain earthbound.

And, of course "Here he [Ian] parts company with the Christian tradition." Coincidentally, next year we will be reviewing Luther's re-shaping of that tradition. Time may honour tradition, or it may ossify it.

Prof. Rae finishes with "A 'God' who is the product of our own thought, even our most noble thought, is frail in comparison." But your editor contends that we, our species, have always done that.

In the following edition of the ODT – 26 February – Sir Lloyd Geering added his voice. He found Prof. Rae to be inconsistent and he observed with astonishment, "Prof. Rae's appeal to the traditional understanding of God as the Creator of all things', without acknowledging that this idea is not a scientific one but one found only in the very world of human thought referred to by Mr Harris." The *bete noir* of science is surely the winner in the debate over human origins. It is the Kantian distinction between "the physical world and our perception of it [that is] our thought world" that tells

**"An honest God is the noblest work of Man"**

the greater truth here. Indeed, it is this distinction that runs through this whole debate.

Lloyd wrote: "Contrary to Prof Rae's judgement that any idea created by the human mind must of necessity 'be frail', human history shows that ideas do have power, as the rise and fall of past ideologies clearly demonstrates. The idea of God was so powerful that it eventually gave rise to the three great monotheistic cultures—Jewish, Christian and Islamic.

"By enabling our Christian (and Muslim) forebears to see the world as a unity that operates in a rational way, monotheism provided the seedbed for the rise of empirical science, as the philosopher Alfred Whitehead pointed out.

"The early scientists, being monotheists, sought to understand 'the ways of God'" and, in doing so, gradually uncovered the laws of nature.

"Kaufman wrote in 1993: **'To believe in God is to commit oneself to a particular way of ordering one's life and action. It is to devote oneself to working towards a fully humane world within the ecological restraints here on planet Earth, while standing in piety and awe before the profound mysteries of existence.'**"

Alan Jackson, with whom we started this account, finished with this hope: "It surely should be possible to say 'Well this is where I am up to in my thinking and understanding, and as a fellow member of the human race I can accept that you believe differently from me'.

By the way, you can get on the mailing list for Ian's column: send him an email asking that to [ianharris@xtra.co.nz](mailto:ianharris@xtra.co.nz)



Ian Harris



Prof Murray Rae



Sir Lloyd Geering

*Reported by Noel Cheer*

# 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).

**Chairperson: Laurie Chisholm**, 117 Collins Rd, RD4, Christchurch 7674, (03) 325-2141, 021-201-0302, [laurie.chisholm@ihug.co.nz](mailto:laurie.chisholm@ihug.co.nz)

**Secretary: Jock Crawford**, 279 Bankwood Road, Hamilton. (07) 854-7553 [jockcrawford@actrix.co.nz](mailto:jockcrawford@actrix.co.nz)

**Treasurer: Norm Ely**, 2/15 View Road, Titahi Bay [n.ely@xtra.co.nz](mailto:n.ely@xtra.co.nz)

**Membership Secretary: Peter Cowley**, 1/30A Dunns St., Silverstream, Upper Hutt 5019 [pcowley@paradise.net.nz](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz)

**Newsletter Editor and Webmaster** is Noel Cheer, the **Copy Editor** is Shirley Dixon and **Newsletter Distribution** is by Yvonne Curtis (paper copies) and Peter Cowley (emailed copies).

To offer a comment on material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact **The Editor, 26 Clipper St., Titahi Bay, Porirua 5022**, (04) 236-7533 or 0274-483-805 or email to [noel@cheer.org.nz](mailto:noel@cheer.org.nz)

Publication deadlines for submitted Newsletter copy for the rest of 2016 are: 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](mailto:susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz) Refer to the catalogue on the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://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](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz)

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Volume 2 is available.

## NOTICES

### ANNUAL CONFERENCE: OCT 7-9

We plan for the full Conference Programme and Subscription forms to accompany the next (July) Newsletter. Meanwhile, details are accumulating at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)

### SUBSCRIPTIONS

The subscription year ends on June 30. We need your subscription in order to keep afloat in the Sea of Faith. Cost is \$20 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both charges drop to \$15 if the Newsletter is emailed and not on paper. Preferably before July 1, please either

- pay online to A/C Number: 38 9000 0807809 00 putting your name in the ‘Particulars’ box. If too long, overflow to the ‘Reference’ box.
- post your cheque and name-and-address to Treasurer Norm Ely, 2/15 View Road, Titahi Bay, Porirua 5022

### INVITATION

We need to bring some new members into the SoF Steering Committee to, as it were, keep the show on the road (or the ship in the Sea). This need for four new members is as a result of a provision of our Constitution which restricts membership to a term of four year, subject to annual re-election. If you would like to help in keeping SoF NZ vibrant, then send an email to our Secretary, Jock Crawford at [jockcrawford@actrix.co.nz](mailto:jockcrawford@actrix.co.nz). He'll send you the paperwork.

### PROVOCATION BY THE EDITOR

It has recently occurred to me that I should stir up your thinking by publishing articles that you might agree with and others that you won't – in the hope that you will be provoked into writing Letters to the Editor. See examples elsewhere in this edition.

*Noel Cheer*

# INTERESTING TIMES?

Fragments to prepare our thoughts for this year's Conference

- ✓ **One of our Keynote Speakers will be Gretta Vosper from Canada.** She was ordained in 1993 and joined her Westhill (Toronto) congregation in 1997. She has, for years, made no bones about her beliefs, which include rejecting the notion of an interventionist, supernatural God on which much church doctrine is based.

- ✓ **In early May we saw many SoF members at the Progressive Spirituality Conference in Napier.** Its theme was "Faith as Resistance to Ego, Orthodoxy and Empire". Keynote speaker was Rev. Dr. Robin Meyers from the US – a Fellow of The Jesus Seminar. Other speakers were Jo Randerson, playwright and performer, lecturers Dr Robert Myles from Auckland University and Jim McAloon from Victoria University of Wellington.

**Those who call themselves Progressive Christians mean that they are Christians who...**

1. Believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life;
2. Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey;
3. Seek community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to:
  - Conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,
  - Believers and agnostics,
  - Women and men,
  - Those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
  - Those of all classes and abilities;
4. Know that the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe;
5. Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than in absolutes;
6. Strive for peace and justice among all people;
7. Strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth;
8. Commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.

More at <http://progressivespirituality.co.nz/>

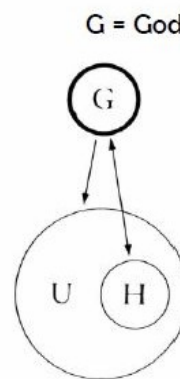
- ✓ **Theopraxy = Making God** is the theme of another Keynote Speaker, Michael Benedikt. In his *God is the Good We Do*, p.193, he wrote: "God is constituted by *praxis* by carrying out moral, ethical, life-promoting and life-saving actions – not in principle, not in the abstract, not in memory, not in visions, not in prayer, and not in plan, but in moment-to-moment activity."

**This describes a new set of the interrelations between God, Universe and Humans:**

From *God Is The Good We Do* pp32-34

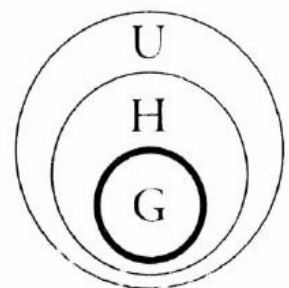
## Theism

"God is Personal"



## Theopraxy

"God-Making"



- ✓ **"State of the Union":** Excerpts from a sermon by Jim Burklo, Associate Dean of Religious Life, University of Southern California. See the full address at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-burklo/state-of-the-union-progre\\_b\\_9143464.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-burklo/state-of-the-union-progre_b_9143464.html)
  - ☑ **Progressive Christians keep the faith and drop the dogma.**
  - ☑ **Since God and Nature are one, science is a way to learn about God.**
  - ☑ **Faith is about deeds, not creeds.**
  - ☑ **We take the Bible seriously because we don't have to take it literally.**
  - ☑ **Spiritual questions are more important to us than religious answers.**
  - ☑ **The morality of what happens in the war-room and the board-room matters more to us than what happens in the bedroom.**



# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the Editor reflect the opinion of the writer. The Editor might edit for clarity but not to take issue.

## The Virgin Birth

In response to Laurie Chisholm's article 'Born of a Virgin' I would like to point out that both Matthew and Luke wrote of the virgin birth and the associated stories in their gospel accounts as real events which took place.

When modern scholars try and suggest Christianity has stolen virgin-birth ideas from Egyptian, Roman and Persian traditions I wonder what planet these guys are on sometimes. It is highly unlikely that Matthew or Luke cared a fig about these pagan deities and these scholars are guilty of putting up straw men arguments. Matthew wrote his gospel account for Jews who would have been fiercely resistant to such ideas, and he only references Old Testament verses like Isaiah 7:14 to enforce the point he is trying to make that Mary was a virgin.

Laurie rightly points out that Matthew [1:18-25] and Luke's [1:26-38] accounts of the events which took place as well as the genealogies are significantly different, which to me indicates there was no collusion between these two writers, and they were probably unaware of each others gospel account. Matthew uniquely has the story of Joseph wanting to secretly divorce Mary as he knows his bride to be is pregnant but not with his child until he has an angelic dream telling him Mary's baby is conceived by the Holy Spirit. Matthew also tells us the unique story of the Magi and Herod's ordering of the killing of babies around Bethlehem. Modern scholars protest that no other

ancient writer such as Josephus records this slaughter of children, and therefore conclude it did not occur. However if Matthew did write his gospel for Jews as is commonly thought, this event is likely to have occurred as it would have been able to be verified or dismissed by the Jewish audience he was writing to at the time. Because Josephus or other first century historians make no mention of it does not mean these events did not occur. It should also be remembered that Josephus wasn't born until after Jesus died.



Reputed self-portrait of the Virgin Mary given to Saint Juan Diego. This comes from the Roman Catholic tradition which is contested by our correspondent.

In Luke's gospel we have an extensive dialogue of Mary's angelic visitation and also the interactions between Mary and Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, as well as the nativity events which Luke records how 'Mary treasured up all of these things and pondered them in her heart' (Luke 2:19). Because of the minute details found in Luke's gospel revolved around Mary, it is highly possible Luke got all of this information first hand from Mary herself who according to Christian tradition lived to a ripe old age and we know Luke was a Christian convert associated with Paul time during the AD50's, so she was probably alive at the time Luke wrote his gospel account.

Whether we believe the virgin birth, the many miracles Jesus performed or his resurrection actually happened comes down to personal faith or disbelief. However there is no doubt the gospel writers wrote with the conviction that these events actually occurred. When it comes down to the church doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, this is contrary to the gospel records. Matthew records 'But he (Joseph) had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.' (Matthew 1:25). This would suggest that Joseph had no sexual union with Mary until after Jesus birth, and we read elsewhere in the gospels of Jesus having other brothers — James, Simeon and Judas as well as sisters. Luke also records 'And she (Mary) gave birth to her firstborn, a son.' (Luke 2:7). If Jesus was her firstborn, this suggests she gave birth to other children also. The perpetual virginity doctrine of the Catholic Church is sheer fabrication and certainly has no scriptural foundation to it, but quite the opposite.

**Robin Boom, Hamilton**

## From "Me" to "Us" to "?"

I read with interest David Kitchingman 42 quotes in Newsletter 123. It challenged me to come up with one for myself:

A personal "meaning of life" evolves during the journey from "me" to "us". It deepens as "me" fades and "us" grows into something inclusive, maybe even global.

Now, decades on, with most of the dots joined, I have a real sense of being at one with what I can only call "?".

**Daniel Phillips, Invercargill**

# SILVERSTREAM RETREAT

## OUR 2016 CONFERENCE VENUE

**Silverstream Retreat is a beautifully renovated facility which dates back to its original use as an American military hospital during WWII.**

### Construction and Maintenance

The construction of the rehabilitation centre and hospital was authorised in early 1941. The initial plans of the buildings had a total floor area of 66,500 square feet, and provided accommodation for 450 patients.

The construction of the hospital commenced in September 1941 and was completed in May 1942. The original intention was that it would serve the large concentration of New Zealand troops at nearby Trentham Military Camp. In May 1942, however, as construction was nearing completion, the decision was made to increase its size and hand it over to the recently arrived US Navy instead. The US Navy occupied the site from August 1942 and used it to treat malarial victims and wounded from the War in the Pacific. In August 1943 it was visited by Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of the US President.

For short periods the accommodation was taxed to such an extent that the gymnasium, part of the staff quarters and even part of the theatre block were used as wards.

During occupation by the US Navy all maintenance work and operation of services at the hospital was carried out by the New Zealand Public Works Department. The institution was later taken over by the Wellington Hospital Board (later the Wellington Area Health Board) and used for the accommodation of long-term patients. An article of March 11, 1986 listed 168 continuing-care beds, four beds for intermittent care, and 14 for rehabilitation; there were also outpatient rehabilitation services. The article proposed relocation of continuing-care to the empty St Helen's Hospital. Another article on June 24 described meetings in which the Board outlined its reasons for closure; the audiences were generally opposed. The final decision to close was made at the end of November 1988. The hospital closed on June 9, 1989.

### Re-Purposed

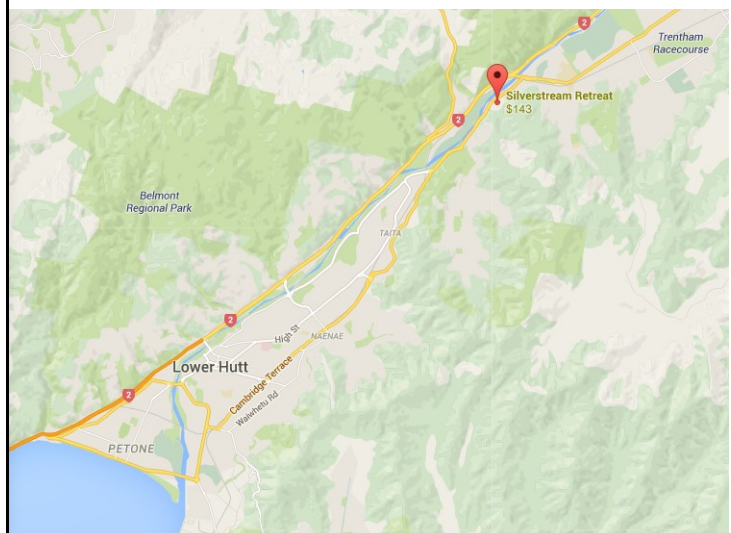
Silverstream Retreat was purchased by a local Christian businessman in 1990 and vested into a charitable trust. The name of the trust is Silverstream Park Christian Centre which is administered by Christian people (Brethren) who are committed to upholding the Christian faith and to supporting the wider community.



### Location

**Silverstream Retreat**  
**3 Reynolds Bach Drive, Silverstream, Lower Hutt**  
**Phone: 04 562 9080 or 0800 800 499**  
**Fax: 04 563-5284**

**Email: [info@staywithus.co.nz](mailto:info@staywithus.co.nz)**  
**Website: [www.staywithus.co.nz](http://www.staywithus.co.nz)**  
**Manager: George Ross**



# DIARY OF A CHURCH CRAWL

Pub crawls are for the reckless young,  
so why not a church crawl for those of more mature years?

Laurie Chisholm

In 1999, the late Val Grant, an Auckland SoFer, did what you might call a church crawl, publishing an account of worship in 25 central Auckland churches under the title “What goes on in there?” It would be interesting to read this and compare with the situation today, but I have been unable to locate a copy and it seems to have disappeared almost without trace. Anyway, my interest in doing a church crawl began with a desire to find out something about The Sunday Assembly, which claims to be something like church but without God, and extended to two other churches. I wouldn’t have the energy to deal with 25.

## THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY

We meet in a special room designed for meetings that is attached to a public library. A small committee is organising the meetings and one of them introduces himself and explains what the Sunday Assembly is and how it came into being. We sing a few songs, including Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World.” The guest speaker was Melanie Mayell, an artist who founded The Thankyou Project. She has been looking for ways to make saying thank you more explicit in our community. She printed postcards which you can send to say thank you to someone, but found that this was too much trouble, so now has little credit-card sized cards which you can carry in your wallet and give to someone as a way of saying thank you. These actions seem a little artificial, but her conviction that more thankfulness is needed is genuine and heart-felt.

The Sunday Assembly has only existed since 2013. Thanks to the Internet, it has spread rapidly and its whole modus operandi seems more attuned to modernity. It has a triangular logo, on signposts that help you to find where the meeting is. It has a motto, like any well-advertised modern product: “Live better, help often and wonder more.” Just to show that these are not empty words, there are monthly Help Often events where you can do something practical alongside other Sunday Assembly people. Invitations are via a Facebook page and a tablet was passed around during the meeting, with which you could record your details for their database.

Following the meeting, there was the usual tea, coffee and finger-food. But the people are young and the conversation seems more easily to cover subjects of

substance. I meet a young man who has attended Bible College but concluded that there is no divine being out there. He is interested in Chet Raymo, a religious naturalist with a built-in science-based scepticism. I would like to talk more with him.

## BAPTIST CHURCH

Having attended the Sunday Assembly, my thoughts turn to traditional churches. Before deciding to regularly attend the Sunday Assembly, I should at least look around and see what is on offer elsewhere. I light upon a Baptist Church, outside my residential area. I turn up to the service on Father’s Day. The church building is new, and I enter a spacious ante-room, with various groups of people standing or sitting, talking, drinking coffee. I’ve made my way almost to the doors of the worship area, when someone comes up to me, apologising that I managed to get past her, and thrusting the church newsletter into my hand. When she finds out that I am new here, she announces that new people get chocolate and a bar of chocolate is quickly found and handed over.

People are signalling that it is time for the service to begin, so I go in and sit down, rather too close to the front.

The service begins with several songs, mainly with the theme “be happy.” We are all exhorted to be happy. They are action songs and the congregation seems to know the moves, but I don’t. Children are up front and now they are asked to look around for someone who is not happy or not joining in and bring them on stage. At this point I’m feeling manipulated – I feel neutral or bored rather than happy, and I’m reluctant to be cajoled into being happy. One of the boys at the front looks daggers straight at me and gestures, but stops short of dragging me up on stage.

Those with something to celebrate are invited to come forward and tell us about it. Each receives a chocolate. The offering is taken up and a child reads the offertory prayer.

Children’s church has been looking at armour, and posters showing various types of armour are displayed at the front, off to one side. A leader now begins to talk about different types of armour, following Ephesians 6, explaining their meaning: Helmet of salvation, belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shield of faith and the

sword of the spirit. Then an adult is invited to come forward and is equipped with realistic examples of this armour. Then we sing a song “We’re in the army of God now... we’re going to change the world.” Finally, pairs of dads are invited to charge from the back of the church and compete to be the first to find a bible verse and read it out. I have always been turned off by military images of the faith such as in the hymn “Stand up stand up for Jesus,” but I do not detect any militarism here.

It now dawns on me that I’m in the middle of what we would have called a “Family Service.” The children normally go out to Children’s Church, but today are staying in for the whole service. The “sermon” follows, and it is in praise of fathers. The preacher laments that fatherhood has been degraded in the modern world, and he wants to return fatherhood to its rightful place. God has a design for fathers and fathers are a reflection of the father heart of God. He articulates a 7-point plan for realising that design. One of the worship leaders points out that there are only boys along the front of the church (where the girls went, she does not know) and that these are the fathers of the future. She invites us to pray for them, and I am deeply touched by the spontaneous response to the nature of the moment and the supportive concern for fathers.

At the end, we are invited to find a suitable place and are led through a “love letter from God,” a video presentation of how God loves us as a father, consisting exclusively of bible verses.

After a brief blessing, we are invited to morning tea. Delicious food was brought out of well-equipped ovens. The lady who welcomed me brought someone over to introduce me. I feel warmly welcomed and not pressured into anything. The Church AGM is due to start after morning tea, so I go quickly to the preacher and say that I appreciated his talking up of fatherhood, but thought it should be balanced by an awareness that fathers have abused their power. He quickly defended the omission, conceded that he would include this in a full sermon, and thanked me for my feedback.

It’s a strange experience, coming back to congregational worship after 20 years of almost complete absence. I’m impressed by how well organised it is, how there are many opportunities for active involvement. I’m also struck by the simple, repetitive message. I think I would quickly miss any intellectual stimulus and any dealing with deeper questions. God as father, yes, but what about the numerous religious traditions that symbolise God as the great mother? Armour of faith, yes, but the author of Ephesians thought we were fighting invisible spiritual powers. Is that a hopelessly mythological concept, or can we demythologise it for today? . The service was not

concrete at all concerning what it was that we are battling against, and, as usual in evangelical circles, made no effort to understand the meaning of any text in the context of its time. And what about feminism and the revolution in gender roles that we have been through over the last few decades. The preacher was just non-specifically against the world’s conception of fatherhood and in favour of godly men and a biblical concept of fatherhood. I was reminded of Susan Faludi’s book *Stiffed*, where she talked of visiting the Promise Keepers movement. The leadership was quite aggressively anti-feminist, but the rank and file told a different story. They were struggling to cope with partners who went to work and who no longer needed them as breadwinners. They were bewildered about their role as husbands, now that a leader and provider was no longer needed.

Overall, though, I was not too unhappy about this message and thought it very appropriate to Father’s Day to be underlining the importance of fathers. However, thanks to the wonders of the Internet, I was able to listen to the sermon again and some things that were background at the time took on a new importance. One I appreciated greatly: the worship leader addressed us as “church,” something I had never heard before. In Germany, sermons begin with the pastor addressing the congregation with “Liebe Gemeinde”; dear community/parish/congregation. Others gave me cause for concern; the father as head of the family and channel of the gospel to it. The immanent return of Christ was briefly referred to. Almost nothing on the surface led me to think “fundamentalist nonsense,” but I worry that probing would expose rigid ideas that must not be questioned.

I attended another service and received a similar friendly greeting from those on the door. The congregant alongside me engaged me in conversation and was keen to find out all about me. Once again, there was nice food on offer after the service, but I didn’t stay. This time the theme was “Sound of Silence” – not the song by Simon and Garfunkel, but the story of Elijah, the contest with the priests of Baal on Mt Carmel and the journey to Mt Sinai, where Elijah encountered God, not in wind, earthquake or fire, but in the sound of silence (alternative translation: the sound of a gentle breeze). (Incidentally, this is one of my favourite stories from the Hebrew bible.) The preacher retold the story vividly, not as something that simply took place in the past, but as something with a multi-layered relevance to us now. Untroubled by historical-critical doubts, the preacher is able to present the message of this old story to us. It’s as if there is an unbroken connection between the author and the contemporary world. So the slaughter of 400 priests is acceptable, because the land needs to be



purified and there can be no uncertainty about the fact that there is evil there in the worship of other gods. God's miraculous sending of lightning to burn the offering does not result in a change of heart for Jezebel – but this only means that there is a lesson for us that facts alone don't change people's hearts and that reason alone is not enough. The whole drama of the journey to Mt Sinai is understood as a plan on God's part to meet Elijah and results in an appeal to us to realise that we too might be in a cave and that we need to listen for what God is saying to us now.

A modern understanding of the bible undermines the preacher's ability to make such a direct connection. We are appalled at the murder of 400 priests (even though the number is probably exaggerated). We would not put God to an empirical test of His efficacy the way Elijah did. We don't accept the assumption underlying the story that the drought is the result of God's judgement against the Israelites for going after other gods. We can understand that cultures back then were collectivist and so could only have one system of divine authority, but we have to recognise that today we accept a pluralism in which the worship of Yahweh and the Baal of Phoenician Tyre have to co-exist. We don't view the story of the journey to Mt Sinai from God's perspective, as an elaborate divine plan to deepen Elijah's faith and lift him from his suicidal depression. Rather, we view it from a human perspective, as a desperate attempt to reassure himself of the reality of God by going to the place where He had most powerfully revealed himself, namely Mount Sinai, where Moses received the law. But God did not reveal himself in any of the powerful phenomena that surrounded the giving of the law back then. Elijah was left with just the sound of a gentle breeze and the taunting question, "What are you doing here?"

While I was impressed by the well-crafted sermon, I understand better why liberal preaching tends to be "wishy-washy;" that direct connection is broken, so the message in the story is not so clear and black and white. But I am also suspicious of the psychological significance of this emphasis on listening for what God has to say to us. We are all too likely to project onto this god the views of our parents or of the authorities. We are listening for an external voice rather than for the truth that is in us.

The Sunday Assembly is consciously non-religious and non-theistic, while this service was largely God-centred. The aim is to praise God, to get out of yourself and become God-centred. Our problems can be solved if only we learn to trust God and put our faith in Him.

## PROGRESSIVE PRESBYTERIAN

Next week, I attended a liberal/progressive Presbyterian Church service. It was also a baptism, and I had the impression that the attendees other than friends and relatives of the baptism were my age or older. The welcome was cool, but not unfriendly. Notices were given at the beginning, before an organ piece at the start of the service. It was easy to allow my own thoughts to emerge in the silence, but more difficult to socialise. Most prayers were written out on the order of service and there were many congregational responses. I find that being able to follow the words of prayers on an order of service detracts from their immediacy and emotional impact and I have lost all energy for joining in congregational responses other than basic repetitive ones, such as Lord have mercy.

The minister introduced the readings by explaining the historical context in which they arose – something I appreciated, and that was completely missing from the Baptist church service. The "sermon" was in the form of a letter to the baptised person, which I thought was a nice idea. Presumably the infant can read the letter when they are older. Having just read Gretta Vosper's book *Amen*, I was particularly alert to the possibility that liberal congregations still have archaic left-overs of the interventionist, supernatural God, even as they try to modernise. So I was glad that the minister explicitly said that God does not dwell in the clouds and is not a being. God is like a spirit of life that flows through everything, like a creative tune that plays underneath the life of the whole world. We can learn to listen to God's tune.

Many of the elements of this service are familiar to me. The baptismal vows, which strike me as somewhat moralistic. The Uniting Church of Canada confession of faith, Psalm 8, read responsively. The hymns are not familiar, though I knew of them and they were written by my all-time favourite authors: John Ylvisaker and Colin Gibson. There was also a modern version of St. Patrick's breastplate, which seems to have completely changed the meaning, at least of the Victorian paraphrase by Cecil Alexander. No longer is it about invoking the name of the triune God, which bestows power on us, and about being surrounded and protected by Christ.

This may be partly me, but I find in liberal churches that the concepts and images come at me much too fast. I hardly begin reflecting on the meaning of one, and I am distracted by the arrival of another and yet another. There often isn't a strong connection between the image and the emotion that goes with it. We addressed God as mother, but quickly moved on to God as living water, river of mercy, source of life and asked this One to be a

fountain of life and a river of hope for the whole world. Conceptual overload and emotional drought!

The people that attend them are lovely, but they are almost all over 65 except for Pacific Islanders or other newer arrivals to New Zealand, who probably outnumber those of European origin. In comparison with the worship services I remember, there has been progress in the use of multi-media. A data projector displays the words of the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, and helpfully also the text of the Bible readings. Songs can even be pre-recorded and accompanied by a multi-media presentation. A cup of tea is invariably offered, but it is hard to get beyond superficial conversations about the weather.

But what is my conclusion? Not very positive, I'm afraid. I am motivated to "keep in touch," to attend occasionally, but not regularly or out of commitment. The Sunday Assembly is my first choice, but I'm worried that it has to try hard to make something work that should just come naturally. It is an uphill struggle in today's world to build any sort of community. The Baptist church is attractive and appealing in terms of human contact and emotional expressiveness, but alienating intellectually. The liberal Protestant church seems lacking in energy and without a definite reason for being. It's no easy business competing in the religious supermarket these days, and the challenge of presenting a relevant, biblically anchored worship experience is a big one.



## "PROGRESSIVE", YES "CHRISTIANITY", MAYBE?

*A Provocation by the Editor*

When I first heard of Progressive Christianity I was impressed, and to a large extent I still am. In recent years I have come to the view that the most valuable part of Christianity is the example of Jesus and his advocacy of a human-oriented way of living. We might even refer to that as 'religiously secular' or even 'humanistic'.

But I can see no earthly (not a pun) use for the Christ status given to him, nor (in any literal way), the God entity that underwrites it.

Covering ground that I have ploughed before I distinguish between a word that functions as a *descriptor* and one that is merely a *name*. "Wellington Railway Station", though a name is also a descriptive phrase. The phrase describes the building – it is a railway station in Wellington. But, not so for "McDonalds" which, though a familiar name is no more than that. It only *names* but does not *describe*.

Try as I might I can't see how Progressive Christians can use the word 'Christian' as a descriptor rather than as a name with nostalgic connections.

I would like to see more clarity from Progressively-inclined clergy in the handling of especially two cardinal terms.

How 'real' is God to a Progressive? Does God do things or is such activity merely symbolic? My own opinion is that 'God-as-metaphor' is entirely plausible – the sum of his attributes – but is much less so when credited with having created everything and being aware of the fall of a sparrow. His attention seems to wander when the well-being of helpless babies in the depths of Africa is concerned – and of the plight of Syrian refugees.

In either the OT earthly sense or the NT cosmic sense, Christ (equivalent to the Jewish 'Messiah') depends for its basis on a God who will endorse or support. This is more weight than can be carried by a metaphorical God.

Then there is our Saviour Christ Jesus. Take a look at this attempt at proof-of-argument in language that ignores the principal of falsifiability and the basic precepts of proof.

[http://www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/magazine/document/s/ju\\_mag\\_01101998\\_p-18\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/document/s/ju_mag_01101998_p-18_en.html)

We have all seen magnificent video footage of icepacks splitting because of climate change. In that we have a symbolic parallel of the splitting of Christianity into various flavours of Conservative and various flavours of Progressive.

But, if my descriptor/name distinction which I dealt with earlier has any merit, then the Progressives might consider either relegating the term 'Christianity' to a mere name that does not claim to describe its nature or its function – or abandon it altogether in favour of, for example, 'Progressive Spirituality' or 'The Way of Jesus'.

***What do you think? Letters to the Editor, please. Copy deadlines are 21<sup>st</sup> of June, August, October and December.***

*Noel Cheer*

## LAURIE'S LAST WORD FOR MAY 2016

For many years, I have been a fan of the Alaskan singer-songwriter Jewel Kilcher. I don't remember how I became acquainted with her music; perhaps it was her very first song "Who will save your soul?" It's a continuing and perhaps unfortunate legacy of my theological training that I can't help pricking up my ears whenever I hear a song with religious words, such as Joan Osborne's "One of Us," Joan Baez's "God is God," John Lennon's "Imagine", or Tom Waite's dry satire "Chocolate Jesus." Early on, I heard her interviewed by Brian Edwards and realised that this was no ordinary pop singer but an independent thinker with an impressive mind.

So for a time I bought each new CD as it came out. I was particularly impressed by two songs on her Spirit CD: "Hands" and "Life Uncommon." Then it seemed that she faded from the limelight and I lost track of her development. More recently, I have learnt something of her personal story from Youtube videos and from two books; "Chasing Down the Dawn: Stories from the Road" and "Never Broken: Songs are Only Half the Story." This has only deepened and enhanced my appreciation of her.

Like very few people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, her childhood was spent in a pioneering environment; living in a log cabin, eating only what could be killed or canned, and without running water. In winter, her father would bring her to the end of the road in a sleigh with jingle bells, so that she could catch the school bus. In spite of her backwoods origins, her provenance is impressive. Her paternal grandmother was an aspiring opera singer, who gave up her career so as to bring up children in a free land. Her paternal grandfather was the scout, sent out to explore the pioneering land; a very intelligent man fluent in eight languages. Her father sang and entertained in local pubs, and from the age of five she joined him on the stage, working hard at learning to sing and yodel to his strict standards. When she was eight, her mother left the family home, so Jewel was left to cope as best she could in pubs and bars while her father sang. In this environment, she early developed a heightened sense of whether someone could be trusted.

During the off-season, she accompanied her father in a three week tour of remote Inuit settlements, where she learnt to appreciate the sacredness of performance. Performing in a bar is largely a one-way communication, but the Inuit responded with performances of their own and an exchange of gifts.

At fifteen, she left home, went to a private school and at around sixteen, became homeless, living out of a car, after she was unable to pay the rent; she had lost her job because she turned down her boss's sexual advances. Subject to periodic kidney infections and with no health insurance, she almost died in a hospital car park, were it not for a kindly doctor who provided her with antibiotics. During this time she was managing to perform in a local café and her success was such that at nineteen she had

multiple record companies vying to offer multi-million dollar contracts, not knowing that she was homeless.

It impresses me that she makes a real effort to be open and honest, something that is palpable in her interviews. You might think that Jewel is just a marketing name, but no, it's her real name. She is also thankfully free of that exaggerated sexual display that characterises so many female pop singers. She knows how to tell a good story, part of her early training as an entertainer. But she is also honest about her life, which has included episodes of shoplifting, early struggles to get out of poverty, a problematic relationship with her mother, the difficulties her father had as a sole parent, and the failure of her marriage. Many of her songs are crystallisations of her personal life experience. Through her books, I now know some of their background. "Hands" goes back to her shoplifting days, when she traced back from the hands that were shoplifting to the brain and the thinking that underlies them, realising that she had to acknowledge them as her own actions. "Who will save your soul" reflects her reaction to experiencing a big city (Chicago) for the first time.

I want to articulate something of her convictions, which have emerged out of life experience and been crystallised into wonderful songs. I do this, fully aware that I can only touch the surface and that it is a bit like dissecting an animal; something living dies as a result.

From the beginning, Jewel kept a journal and vowed to be strictly honest with it, even when she was lying and stealing in the outside world. She looked after that journal, even when all her possessions had to fit into her backpack. Burdened by a problematic childhood, she knew that she was at risk, but worked hard at introspection, digging down the core of her true self. Her songs emerge from this journaling practice. She learnt that things that don't bend break. Safety is not in strength and rigidity, but in vulnerability, sensitivity and honesty. Hard wood grows slowly. She developed the conviction that there is an unbreakable core to each person: "we are never broken."

"An artist's most valuable asset is individuality. You can't learn it from a teacher. It has to be sussed out and nurtured. Wrestled out of the silence within you."

She saw much drunkenness in bars and learnt that you don't outrun pain, just like a saying that I learnt in Germany, "the only way out is through." Being drunk did not help, it only locked in the pain and made it more long-term. Accordingly, she vowed to keep away from alcohol and drugs.

She was brought up a Mormon, and attended church as a child, but has evidently made up her own mind, speaking out of individual conviction. She learnt to meditate, she prays before her concerts, and says, for





example, “I can’t believe God cares for rules. Only for the sacred, which is known intrinsically by each heart.”

From an early age, nature became her church as she struggled with the emotions of her parents’ breakup and an abusive father. She would escape from the house and flee into its wide expanse, sitting under a giant spruce tree, visualising love pouring out from its every leaf.

The churches talk of love, but this is often abstract and bordering on the moralistic. Jewel sings very specifically of love’s joy and pain out of her personal experience (for example, in “Foolish Games”), making her talk of love real. It takes courage to stand up before a crowd and sing of your deepest, most personal convictions. Perhaps now you see why Jewel impresses me so. She noticed that most pop singers do their best work when young, while novelists do it in later life. She continues to produce wonderful, thought-provoking songs, like “I am my father’s daughter,” testimony to the healing of childhood wounds.

#### Links

Jewel testimony at House Ways and Means Committee:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8ThWLwXMaE>

Jewel hilarious story. Joining a drug bust and being offered Cannabis by police:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hBXcpGHPVA>

Jewel interview with Howard Stern:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d04jAKhyT7c>

## THE EPHEsus LITURGIES ...

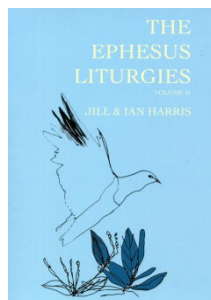
... grew out of the life of Ephesus, a group of about thirty people (including Jill and Ian Harris) who have been meeting in Wellington, since 1990 – to explore new ways of understanding and expressing Christian faith in a secular world.

Taking the original concept of ‘liturgy’ as meaning ‘the work of the people’, the Ephesus community has worked to develop a form of worship that seeks to make sense of contemporary human experience while drawing on shared traditions of faith and worship.

We lost Jill on Christmas Day, 2014 ... but her liturgies continue. The Ephesus Liturgies, Volume 2 is now on sale: go to

[www.makaropress.co.nz](http://www.makaropress.co.nz)  
and look for “Buy Online”.

Get a copy of Jill’s young adult novel *The Red Suitcase*, while you’re there.



### A Provocation by the Editor

## YOU CAN’T GET RID OF GOD

When we think about the dimension of human thought labelled ‘religion’, we are confronted by the starkest of all choices:

Did the need to recognise God produce religion in human beings OR did the felt need for a religious orientation create God or the Gods?

We touched on that choice on page 1 of this Newsletter. Throughout current religious literature there seems to me to be three basic ways in which God gets mentioned.

The first is the *theist* position (at least the Judeo-Christian-Muslim version) which acknowledges a supreme being who was involved in our creation and who promulgated laws by which we live our lives. Mainstream Christianity promotes this opinion.

The second is the *a-theist* (commonly spelled atheist) version which denies the existence of such a being and therefore all that is said to emanate from him (usually Him.)

The third logically tenable position, which we might call *aspirational*, is that God has existence in a metaphorical sense which sets out our spiritual ambitions as a set of human yearnings. You read this on page 1, remember? I explain this position in this way: If you were invited to take a basket and place in it all that makes life coherent and valuable, that which ‘holds your conscience captive’, then you might (but it is your choice) include love, justice, peace, creativity and a lot else in similar vein. Asked to give a name to that basket you might borrow an old title, ‘God’, which, though still in use in that ancient sense, now-a-days can be used in a modern metaphorical sense. It can still operate in the lives of users with the sort of commanding power that the theistic version once had. Because the aspirational understanding of God is a human construct *it is not credible to say that it does not exist*. Speaker Michael Benedikt’s book *God is the Good We Do* is in this mode.

Nevertheless, many people who do not subscribe to theism are living lives of moral integrity, lives which include love, justice, peace, creativity and a lot else in similar vein. To say that you *need* old-time-religion to be decently human is just plain wrong.

So, let’s do away with the worn-out “God doesn’t exist” because in the aspirational sense, he/she/it does.

Because we say so.

What do you think? Letters to the Editor, please. Copy deadlines are 21<sup>st</sup> of June, August, October and December.

Noel Cheer