

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

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

Newsletter 131, July 2017

## Reformation Themes

# Progressive Christianity

*Could this be the reformation that is most appropriate to Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

*From Wikipedia: Progressive Christianity is a form of Christianity which is characterised by: a willingness to question tradition, acceptance of human diversity, a strong emphasis on social justice and care for the poor and the oppressed, and environmental stewardship of the earth. Progressive Christians have a deep belief in the centrality of the instruction to "love one another" (John 15:17) within the teachings of Jesus Christ. This leads to a focus on promoting values such as compassion, justice, mercy, and tolerance, often through political activism. Though prominent, the movement is by no means the only significant movement of progressive thought among Christians.*

*from [www.progressive.org](http://www.progressive.org):*

*By calling ourselves Progressive Christians, we mean that we 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.

### *Note:*

Although Sea of Faith is sympathetic to human-oriented expressions of faith, it is not itself part of Progressive Christianity.

It sees its role as increasing religious literacy by both tracing the decline of traditional Christian influence in the West in the past 250 years and by inviting readers to consider what might replace it.

Though most Sea of Faith members are aligned with a formal path of faith, the organisation itself is not. More about SoF (NZ) on page 3.

Progressive Christianity in New Zealand is described at <http://progressivespirituality.co.nz/>

And there are Progressive Buddhists – at <http://progressivebuddhism.blogspot.co.nz/>

# THE CANBERRA AFFIRMATION

Written by Rex A. E. Hunt and others in 2008.

**Rev. Rex A. E. Hunt** is a 'grass roots' religious naturalist, progressive liturgist, and social ecologist. Forty-five years ordained, first as a Presbyterian (1972), he is today a retired minister of the **Uniting Church in Australia** (formed in 1977), where his last placement was at the progressive **Church of St James** (2000-2009) in Canberra, ACT – centre of national political life.

*As progressive Christians in the 21st century, we are uncomfortable with rigid statements of belief, as we recognise our understandings are shaped by life experiences within.*

## *These we seek to affirm and celebrate*

- We **celebrate** that our lives are continually evolving in a web of relationships: continuous with historical humans and their societies; with other forms of life; and with the 'creativity' present at the origins of the universe. Over billions of years this 'creativity' - the coming into being of the new and the novel - has undergone countless transformations, and we and all other life forms are its emerging products. Thus we are called to live in community, respecting all human beings, all life forms, our planet and universe.
- We **affirm** there is a presentness in the midst of our lives, sensed as both within and beyond ourselves, which can transform our experiences of this earth and each other. Various imaginative ideas have been used to describe this presentness: 'God', 'sacred', 'love', 'Spirit of Life'. We recognise all attempts at understanding and attributing meaning are shaped by prevailing thoughts and culture. Ultimately our response can only be as awe-inspiring mystery beyond the limits of our ability to understand our world and ourselves.
- We **honour** the one called Jesus, a first century Galilean Jewish sage, nurtured by his religious tradition. A visionary and wisdom teacher, he invited others through distinctive oral sayings and parables about integrity, justice, and inclusiveness, and an open table fellowship, to adopt and trust a re-imagined vision of the 'sacred', of one's neighbour, of life. As we too share in this vision, we affirm the significance of his life and teachings, while claiming to be 'followers of Jesus'.
- We **receive** the Hebrew and Christian scriptures known as the Bible, as a collection of human documents rich in historical memory and religious interpretation, which describe attempts to address and respond to the 'sacred'. It forms an indispensable part of our tradition and personal journeys. We claim the right and responsibility

to question and interpret its texts, empowered by critical biblical scholarship as well as from our own life experiences. We accept that other sources – stories, poems and songs – imaginative pictures of human life both modern and ancient, can nurture us and others, in a celebration of the 'sacred' in life.

- We **recognise** there are many paths to the 'sacred'. We respect the diversity and pluralism of truth-claims, often in the midst of serious disagreement. In and with this diversity we honour the integrity and meaning of each religious tradition and the people who practice them. We reject all attempts to convert others to any fixed body of belief which they would not come to through their own open, free, and considered explorations.
- We **acknowledge** that a transformative path of inclusion and integrity involves living responsible and compassionate lives in community with others. Such a path asks us to adopt values supporting social equality and connectedness. It entails nonviolent peacemaking and considered forgiveness. It invites passion and action for social justice, and stewardship of the earth and all its life forms. It encourages humour, challenge, and acts of generosity. At its centre is an awareness of oneness: one with the 'sacred', with ourselves, with others, with the universe.

See also the book that Rex edited and co-authored, with the title *Why Weren't We Told?* Beware, several other books also use this title.

Contributors include: by Rex A. E. Hunt (Author, Editor), John W. H. Smith (Author, Editor), John Dominic Crossan (Author), Gary Bouma (Author), Jim Burklo (Author), Paul Alan Laughlin (Author), Nigel Leaves (Author), Margaret Mayman (Author)

# 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 via annual Conference and Newsletter, 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 four **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, and Ian Harris. . (The late Alan Goss, and the late Fred Marshall were, for a time, Life Members).

**Chairperson:** Gretchen Kivell

email [gretchen.kivell@xtra.co.nz](mailto:gretchen.kivell@xtra.co.nz)

phone (03) 473-0031 mobile 0274-473-0031

**Secretary:** Bruce and Lynne Tasker

email [landbtasker@gmail.com](mailto:landbtasker@gmail.com)

phone (09)827-0720 mobile 027-290-3056

**Treasurer:** Norm Ely

email [n.ely@xtra.co.nz](mailto:n.ely@xtra.co.nz) mobile 027-440-9267

**Membership Secretary:** Peter Cowley

email [pcowley@paradise.net.nz](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz)

1/30A Dunns St, Silverstream, Upper Hutt 5019

**Newsletter Editor and Webmaster:** Noel Cheer,

email [noel@cheer.org.nz](mailto:noel@cheer.org.nz)

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

**Steering Committee Members in General:** Adrian Skelton, Doug Sellman, Jan Calvert, Daniel Phillips, Ian Crumpton

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 remainder of 2017 are 21/6/17, 21/8/17, 21/10/17, 21/12/17.

**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 \$25 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both charges drop to \$20 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 extra charge*. Send an email requesting that to [pcowley@paradise.net.nz](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz)

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by Ian Crumpton of Christchurch

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## DO FUNDAMENTALISTS RECOVER?

Doug Sellman invites you to a discussion session during the SoF Conference "Electives" session on Tuesday afternoon. He describes his offering in these terms:

"For the first 20 years of my life I was immersed in a staunchly fundamentalist, yet loving, Christian family in which I absorbed and then committed myself to a set of conservative religious ideas on offer that became deeply embedded in my teenage psyche and which subsequently became very difficult to change my mind on.

I'm not sure whether fundamentalists do fully recover or not, (or whether they even want to!) but that probably depends on what we mean by 'fundamentalist' and 'recovery' - terms that we should attempt to clarify on the day."

**There will be provision on the Registration form to select this Elective event.**

# "I LOST FAITH IN FAITH BUT NOT IN HOPE"

Lewis Vaughn is a writer specializing in philosophy, ethics, critical thinking, and religion. He is also the former executive editor of [Free Inquiry](#) magazine and the co-founder and former editor of *Philo*, a philosophy journal.

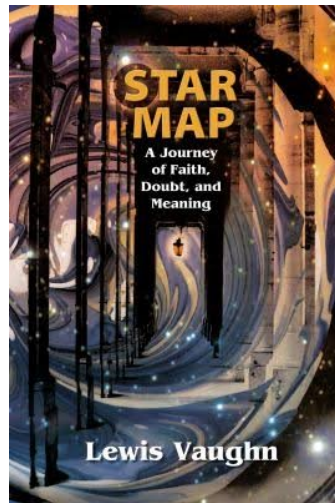
*A reflection by Noel Cheer based on a book review in Amazon.com*

***Star Map* is a touching and deeply personal philosophical memoir about a young man's wrenching struggle with fanatical faith and his frantic search for truth and meaning.**

**The author's journey transforms him from a young Christian fundamentalist to a disillusioned agnostic to an atheist seeker of meaning in a godless world.**

Along the way he stumbles on the strongest empirical argument against the reliability of faith as a source of knowledge, and sees that life does indeed have meaning without religion. In the end, he never regains the faith he lost, but finds something better.

*Star Map* is an engrossing read. It is the achingly honest story of a faith healer who finally becomes healed of his faith. Many of us can empathise with Vaughn means when he says "I lost faith in faith but not in hope." This warm but powerful memoir reveals that real meaning comes from this world, not from above.



**Dan Barker,  
Freedom From Religion Foundation,  
author of *Godless* and *Life Driven Purpose***

## ***Editorial Comment***

Lewis Vaughn's journey is not unlike those undertaken by many members of Sea of Faith and similar organisations. But SoFTies tend to retain the emotional orientation of 'faith' while redirecting it to progressive Christianity or something similar.

The terms used in Vaughn's book suffer, along with many in use in current discussions about religion, from a fuzziness of emphasis or meaning.

Many dictionaries define faith in these terms:

1. complete trust or confidence in someone or something.
2. strong belief in the doctrines of a religion or systems of thought such as Marxism, "the American way of life", "the scientific method" and countless others. These are not of themselves compulsory systems of thought but rather fashions in thinking. They are regarded as valuable without ever being called on to show any 'truth'. Their value lies in their ability to produce group bonding.
3. A system of religious beliefs, e.g. "the Protestant faith".

The forgoing definitions attempt to position and differentiate between common usages of 'faith'. But those such as Richard Dawkins whom we might call doctrinaire atheists, take faith to be "blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence".

But Dawkins is co-opting the words 'gullibility' and 'credulity' and renaming them 'faith' as a way of discrediting 'faith'. He has a large audience in this mission. His argument pivots on a religiously-fashionable requirement for 'unquestioning' faith to be seen as a 'pernicious' religious virtue – see his *The God Delusion* pp307-308.

The relationship between an article of faith and its worth is often made to depend on its status in regard to proof. The scientific method is probably the best tool that we have by which to examine an asserted fact. As the western scientific method slowly climbed out of the medieval proto-science with its mixture of Ptolemaic views of 'the heavens', Galen's emerging understanding of the human body, and the not-yet-understood



connections between plague and rats and scurvy and diet, the understandings that arose and which entered the canon of reliable knowledge were honed by disciplined experimentation and the replacement of explanations that were required to be loyal to the religious orthodoxies of the day. This was the process of the emergence of ‘science’ – of reliable knowledge – which slowly became accessible to all who had educational qualifications.

But ‘faith’ has a wider life – not in defiance of knowledge but as that which certified the sources of knowledge.

**The relationship between faith and knowledge became, as we know it today, one in which we had faith in the scientific method because of the quality of the knowledge that it revealed.**

There are circumstances where faith cannot yield knowledge but where it can operate as the only available alternative. You are about to embark on an international plane trip and the fact of your entering the plane is an expression of your trust (‘faith’) in the air crew. Many aspects of medicine require a similar surrender to faith.

The review of the book under consideration contains this passage:

“ ... he stumbles on the strongest empirical argument against the reliability of faith as a source of knowledge, and sees that life does indeed have meaning without religion. In the end, he never regains the faith he lost, but finds something better.”

If the above analysis has proved worthwhile then we should immediately note that “the reliability of faith as a source of knowledge” is asking something that faith – as understood above – does not seek to provide and nor can it.

In most contexts, it is a substitute for the knowledge that is, in any case, not available.

Faith is an attitude of trust, whereas knowledge is public knowledge forged in the furnace of reason.



## CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

### Monday November 6

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| 12:30 – 2:00 | Steering/Conference Committees meet over lunch |
| 1:00 – 2:45  | Registration Desk in operation                 |
| 3:00 – 3:30  | Conference Opening                             |
| 3:30 – 4:30  | <b>Keynote, Lloyd Geering</b>                  |
| 4:30 – 5:30  | Core Groups Meet                               |
| 5:30 – 6:00  | Happy (half) Hour in Pillars, Bookstall set up |
| 6:00 – 7:00  | Dinner   |
| 7:30 – 8:30  | AGM  |

### Tuesday November 7

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| 7:00 – 8:00   | Breakfast   |
| 8:30 – 9:30   | <b>Keynote Rachael Kohn</b>   |
| 9:30 – 10:30  | Core Groups meet  |
| 10:30 – 11:00 | Morning tea   |
| 11:00 – 12:00 | <b>Keynote, Sue Bradford</b>  |
| 12:00 – 1:00  | Core Groups meet  |
| 1:00 – 1:45   | Lunch + Bookstall   |
| 1:45 – 5:30   | Electives: Clay Nelson; Tom Hall; Doug Sellman  |
| 6:30 – 7:30   | Dinner  |
| 8:00 – 9:15   | Entertainment: Wellington City Chorus, Regional Champions in the Sweet Adeline contest. |

### Wednesday November 8

|               |                                       |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|
| 7:00 – 8:00   | Breakfast                             |
| 8:30 – 9:30   | <b>Keynote: Hal Taussig</b>           |
| 9:30 – 10:30  | Core Groups meet                      |
| 10:30 – 11:00 | Morning Tea                           |
| 11:00 – 12:30 | <b>Panel Discussion: all Keynotes</b> |
| 12:30 – 1:00  | Windup and Intro to 2018              |
| 1:00 –        | Lunch and Departure                   |
| 1:30 –        | New Steering Committee meets          |

## THE SOF STEERING COMMITTEE AND THE RESOURCE CENTRE

The SoF Steering Committee has a significant Resource Centre of books, DVDs, and CDs for members to use. Up to 10 years ago the books were in good demand, but more recently it is the CDs and DVDs that have become good resources for discussions within Local Groups and for individuals. The full list is at <http://www.sof.org.nz/resource.pdf>

**Suzi Thirlwell**, has managed this resource from Tauranga almost from the inception of NZ Sea of Faith. But now she must step down. We will suitably thank her for this work but, in the meantime, it is likely that the resources (seven boxes of books and some smaller ones for the electronic data) will come to Wellington and be significantly thinned down.

**If you are interested in assisting with this activity (and live in the Wellington region) please contact Noel (04 236 7533) or Gretchen (03 473 0031).**

Several other members of the Sea of Faith Steering Committee will step down this November. **Have you thought of joining the Steering Committee?** You can participate from anywhere in New Zealand for up to a maximum of four years. You would have an interesting and active collection of other SoFers as colleagues. We have one meeting in Wellington in January/February each year – we pay your travel costs. Then, monthly meetings are by Skype.

If you are interested, please contact me.

**Chairperson Gretchen Kivell**  
[gretchen.kivell@xtra.co.nz](mailto:gretchen.kivell@xtra.co.nz)

*Laurie Chisholm: Subversive Scripture 4*

## ORIGINAL SIN

There must be few SoFers who can find something positive to say about the doctrine of Original Sin. And yet, this has been fundamental teaching for traditional Christianity. It is the dark background to the doctrine of salvation. Through Eve's (and Adam's) arrogance and pride, which led them to disobey God's command, sin, evil and death came into the world, making the coming of Jesus necessary to bring about our salvation. How does an examination of the Garden of Eden story support such a teaching or is it subversive of it? I will argue that a loss of basic trust under the spell of fear is a much better interpretative concept than pride or disobedience.

### ADAM AND EVE ARE EVERYMAN AND EVERYWOMAN RATHER THAN FIRST PARENTS

Modern biology makes it clear that evil came into the world long before humans appeared. Pain began when living creatures came to have a nervous system and death began with multicellular organisms. Remember the amoeba from school biology? It just kept on dividing so existed in its offspring, barring a catastrophe in which all of them are exterminated. So you might be inclined to dismiss the Adam and Eve story as mythological nonsense. However, there are some good reasons for understanding this story as a symbolic description of what continually goes wrong in human existence. Scholars have argued that the Hebrew mindset has trouble distinguishing the historical origin from the fundamental principle. So "In the beginning" can be understood as meaning "fundamentally" rather than "first of all." The proverb "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" should not be interpreted to mean that as we become wiser, we go beyond "the fear of the Lord" to other, wiser things. Rather, it means that "the fear of the Lord" is the foundational principle that always underlies wisdom. So also the story of Adam and Eve. It is about what is typically human.

### THE STORY OF THE "FALL" IS PART OF A LARGER WHOLE

A second point is that modern biblical scholarship gives us a dramatically revised understanding of this passage. Traditional Christianity had no use for 99% of the Old Testament. It was only the story of the Fall and the prophets' prediction of the coming of the Messiah that were of interest theologically. We now understand

that the Old Testament began to be written down during the time of the kings, when a royal palace was able to support a team of literate scribes, who gathered stories from pre-monarchical times. A first grouping of such stories consisted of the adventures of the patriarchs, the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings. They formed a preface to the stories of the time of the kings and were about Israel's ancestors. Now that preface to the accounts of Israel as a nation was itself given a preface, a compilation of various ancient memories, stories, and myths that were about humanity as a whole and that included an account of creation. None of them are unique; they all have parallels from the cultures surrounding Israel. We refer to their author as the Yahwist, because he used the name Yahweh for God.

The story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden is one part of a whole, a whole that describes the inbreaking and spread of evil in the world. Although the Garden of Eden has played little part in Jewish thought, it can legitimately be seen as the contrasting background to the story of the people of Israel. As Claus Westermann has powerfully argued, you mustn't take a bible verse by itself and try to interpret it. Instead, you begin with the whole and only then interpret the parts. Of course, your picture of the whole is built up by examining the parts and a different conclusion about the whole will influence your interpretation of the parts.

This first preface begins with the garden of Eden and ends with the Tower of Babel, the confusion of languages and the scattering of peoples over all the earth. It is followed by the call to Abraham, the beginning of Israel's story, and the promise that in Israel all nations shall be blessed. The purpose of Israel's existence is not to be a privileged people, but to help bring about a counter-movement to the spread of evil that has just been described. So the Garden of Eden story is just one scene in a broad tapestry that includes Cain's murder of his brother Abel, Lamech's bullying promise of 7 times 70-fold vengeance, sons of God having sex with humans, a flood that reversed the process of creation, the discovery of wine and drunken immorality, and the Tower of Babel.

### INTERPRETING "ORIGINAL SIN"

Now many important thinkers have had a go at Original Sin. The story of the "fall" itself is only seven verses but has generated an enormous amount of theological reflection. Matthew Fox wants to replace it with Original Blessing, undermining the undoubtedly pessimistic view of the



former. Paul Tillich, following Hegel, sees the fall as a transition from dreaming innocence to the realities of actual existence. Knowing good and evil, finding ambiguity in life and inevitably taking guilt upon yourself are part of the reality of life. Gerhard von Rad sees the story as a catastrophic inbreaking and spread of evil. Claus Westermann aims to soften this, seeing a balance between negativities and the positive influence of the divine blessing in the Yahwist's stories, especially manifest in the genealogies that testify to human fertility. But it is Eugen Drewermann who to my mind most profoundly and accurately captures the meaning of these stories, in the course of researching how to integrate theology and psychotherapy. His research served initially as a PhD thesis and then, with the addition of an examination of depth-psychological perspectives on these stories and the various attempts of philosophers to transform the stories into philosophical concepts, as a post-doctoral thesis, which is required to gain a license to teach theology at a German university. As you can imagine, sales expectations for the publication of such a thesis were not high; its first printing in 1977 was only 360 copies. However, it was subsequently published in a special 3-volume paperback and by 1992, 28,700 copies had been printed, in spite of being written in German and having almost 2000 pages.

## THE LOSS OF TRUST AND THE EMERGENCE OF FEAR

His basic point is that these stories are about the loss of a fundamental trust and the emergence of anxiety or fear. It's not that he wants to abolish the distinction between good and evil, sin and virtue, but this distinction is not fundamental. The conventional view that the story is about pride and disobedience fits well with an authoritarian church, in which the faithful are to obediently follow the instructions of the divinely ordained authorities (priest, bishop, Pope). But Eve, although she does eat of the fruit, tries hard to defend God against the accusations of the snake. But already she does this under the spell of fear, as shown by the way that she unconsciously intensifies the command: not only should she not eat of the fruit, she shouldn't even touch the tree. We need to approach these stories in a non-moralistic way.

Life with a fundamental trust can be a paradise-like garden, where work is not a burden and there is no shame in nakedness. But with eating the fruit comes the knowledge of what it is like to lose that trust in God. The humans are ashamed of their nakedness and work becomes an oppressive burden. Love turns into an oppressive relationship – Adam lords it over Eve. Brother is pitted against brother in a competitive rivalry for divine approval and Cain ends up murdering Abel. Cain becomes a homeless wanderer. Five generations on and Lamech promises 70 x 70-fold revenge in a love-song to his wives. Humans end up countering their fears by means of scare campaigns and counter-terrorism.

Their attempts to counter the loss of trust by their own means only end up making things worse. Fear knows no limits and so the attempts to counter it become extreme. The provisional end of the stories is the story of the tower of Babel, in which humans try to counter their interpersonal conflicts by setting up a compulsive unification, one that tries by political means to replace the religious dimension. But this totalitarian collectivism cannot be permitted to succeed, for the sake of the humans themselves. The scene is set for the story of the people of Israel, and, for Christians, the gospel of Jesus.



## SOLARITY

### CREATIVE LIVING-BY-DYING

DON CUPITT

- 1. Life is a gift (with no giver) that is renewed every day, and true religion is expressive, 'solar' living.**  
By faith, and without any qualification or restriction, I should let life well up in me and pour itself out into symbolic expression through me. Thus I 'get myself together': we become ourselves by expressing ourselves.
- 2. Solarity is creative living-by-dying.**  
In solar living I live by dying because I am passing away all the time. In my symbolic expression I get myself together, but as I do so I must instantly pass on and leave that self behind. I must not be attached to my own life, nor to my own products, or expressed selves. My self, and all my loves, must be continuously let go of and continuously renewed. Dying therefore no longer has any terrors for me, because I have made a way of life out of it.
- 3. Solar living creates great joy and happiness**  
My symbolic expression may take various forms, as it pours out in my quest for selfhood, in my loves or my work. In all these areas, continuous letting-go and renewal creates joy, which on occasion rises and spills over into cosmic happiness. This 'cosmic' happiness is the modern equivalent of the traditional *Summum Bonum*, the 'chief end' of life.
- 4. Even the Supreme Good must be left behind**  
I, all my expressions, and even the *Summum Bonum*, the supreme Good itself, are all of them transient. Eternal happiness may be great enough to make one feel that one's whole life has been worthwhile, but it is utterly transient. Let it go!

*The above is from Don Cupitt: The Religion of Ordinary Life. Found on the website of SoF (UK):*

<http://www.sofn.org.uk/solaritylearningresources/index.html>





# THE INTERNET CORNER

## UPDATING THE FORMER COLUMN

### "FAITH IN CYBERSPACE"

*Laurie Chisholm has suggested that we become more systematic at recommending helpful websites. Below is his first submission. You, dear reader, are urged to follow Laurie by sending similar copy to [noel@cheer.org.nz](mailto:noel@cheer.org.nz)*

*Laurie wrote:* This year we celebrate 500 years since the beginning of the Reformation. A major factor in this great upheaval in Christendom was the invention of printing. Martin Luther made good use of it to publicise his cause, engage in polemic, not to mention translating the bible into the vernacular and making it available for everyman to read.

Today we are in the midst of a revolution of probably even greater scope and impact: the Internet. First came personal computers, which obsoleted the typewriter. Then came the ability to interconnect innumerable devices to enable internetworking. Nowadays these devices can be cellphones, PCs, or banks of dedicated servers containing huge databases or providing cloud storage for your photos. A third stage involved web browsers that allow us to access text, audio and video from any of these computers.

The Internet has no corners – you can access any computer from almost anywhere on earth. But our Newsletter does have corners, so the plan is to set aside a corner of it to point you to interesting and useful websites that focus on values, spirituality and meaning. There's so much stuff out there that it can be difficult to find good material on these themes.

*Laurie's first offering is:*

<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/default.htm>

*If your computer is appropriately set-up it should be necessary for you only to ctrl-click on links like this in order to go directly there. If you have difficulties, check with your nine-year-old granddaughter!*

This is the gateway page for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's programmes on religion. Australia has a much richer offering in this area than New Zealand, no doubt because it has more of a public service ethos. Links take you to a variety of programmes, including "The Spirit of Things" compered by Keynote Speaker 2013 and 2017, Rachael Kohn. While she has a Jewish background, her programmes cover a wide range of topics. You can listen to or download podcasts of past programmes and search them by date or topic. There are also links to interesting articles on the wider web. You can subscribe to the website so that you receive updates.

Noel, as Editor, adds this:

Our own website is chocker full of information. At this pre-Conference season you might go there and view articles relating to the Conference theme: Try this ....

<http://sof.org.nz/2017studyguides.htm>

***Happy surfing .....!***



Islamic Reformation?

# HOW DID WESTERN ENLIGHTENMENT COME TO BE SEEN AS AN INFIDEL IMPOSITION?

*A collection of points of view collated by Noel Cheer*

Because 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation of Christianity as precipitated by Martin Luther, is seemed to me, as editor, that I might widen the subject at the edges, as it were, by touching on “Reformation Outside Christianity” as introduced in Newsletter 130 of May 2017.

There I used a brief excerpt from the Newsletter item which was originally written by Don Cupitt and published in *Guardian*, **Saturday October 27, 2001**. It reads:

“[Attempted modernisations of Islam] have all failed because they did not tackle the underlying question: **how can something analogous to the Protestant Reformation come about within Islam?** Perhaps it cannot. Even in the west, doctrine remains unreformed and religious thinking is not yet free.

[Christian] Protestantism has largely decayed into fundamentalism. If we are still not able fully to accept our own principles, we can scarcely expect Islam to embrace them. Perhaps none of us yet understands the magnitude of the religious and cultural revolution the world now needs.”

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In that Newsletter I went on to ask “Is this an over-critical assessment of Islam? Or are there multiple renderings of Islam?” Furthermore I invited readers to “Send Letters to the Editor”.

Tom Hall, who will speak at this year’s Conference and who is also a member of SoF (NZ) living in the United States, responded by providing these excerpts from Chapter 10 of Dominic Kirkham’s new book – as yet untitled – which Polebridge Press will publish this northern hemisphere autumn:

If the Enlightenment was to be so problematic for the churches of the West, it is hardly surprising that it should be even more so for the Islamic world. For Muslims, such concepts of inherent human rights, freedom of thought, critical thinking, and a religiously neutral civil order did not arise within the matrix of their faith, but had been thrust upon them by an oppressive imperialism. Democracy and all else

that came with modernity represented a *kufir* (infidel) imposition.

Indeed, this is exactly what was said by the radical Wahhabi *ulema* of Saudi Arabia in echo of the eighteenth century founder of the movement, Abd al-Wahhab.

Even if some ‘things’—such as indispensable modern technological wonders as automobiles and computers—have since slipped through the net of prohibition, the fact remains that ever since the origins of the *Scienza Nuova* of sixteenth century, such European imports as empiricism and rational thinking, new inventions and ideas, and unsettling investigations in physics and metaphysics have been inextricably linked in the Muslim mind. So it remains. And the increasing flow of technological innovation results in an ever-rising tide of new things that in turn spread new thinking. Modern autocrats and theocracies must now fear those who have learned to tweet on mobile phones.

An interesting modern development of this theme is that a number of writers have expressed Islam’s need for reformation, most notably Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the prominent and provocative Somali refugee-cum-political activist. The thesis of her book [with the title *Heretic* which is noted on page 2 of Newsletter 128] is that the monolithic world of Islam, immune to historical change and critical reflection, needs a Reformation like that which took place in Europe. Instead of Luther’s 95 theses she proposes a modest five: reassessing the semi-divine status of Muhammad and the Koran, challenging the cult of life after death, ending the obsession with Sharia law, softening the requirement of individuals to enforce it, and abandoning the imperative to wage jihad.

The background of Ayaan’s presentation is her division of Muslims into three broad categories; she calls them *Meccan Muslims* (the overwhelming majority who practice their faith peaceably, as did Muhammad in his early days of revelation at Mecca); *Medina Muslims* (who enforce their beliefs more violently, as did

Muhammad at Medina and in the later years of his life); and the modern *Reformers* (a small number of marginal dissident voices – ‘heretics’ – arguing for change in response to the challenges of modernity). [For an elaboration, see the box at the end of this article with the title “Updating the Qur’an”.] Her thesis is that the Medina Muslims create the headlines to the exclusion, but with the connivance, of the passive majority; and that in order to promote constructive change, the West must offer greater support to the minority of oppressed voices who are calling for freedom from intimidation and the recognition of universal human rights.

In a review of Dominic Kirkham’s earlier book *From Monk to Modernity: The Challenge of Modern Thinking*, in Newsletter 122, Beverley Smith also of SoF (NZ), wrote the following: “Dominic Kirkham belongs to the Sea of Faith Network, UK. After spending years in a religious order, he describes how he was driven to meet the challenge of modern thinking, an exercise which has proved both freeing and frightening. The book offers a broad historical sweep outlining the human quest for meaning and a good life, then and today.

## MUGGED BY REALITY

Sea of Faith New Zealand is an organisation of religious literacy and tolerance and of religious liberality. Many of our members feel challenged by people who visit terror on people in the name of a religious faith or, as is appropriate to this item, by invoking the tenets of a religious path of faith. From at least the Christian Crusades of the Middle Ages to ISIS today, they exercise a murderous revenge on innocent followers of other paths of faith and claim justification for doing so.

**“Terror will continue until Islam is reformed.”**

**“The ancient faith that inspired the London Bridge killers must face up to its responsibilities.”**

The author of the above statements and of the following letter to *The Times*, **Melanie Phillips**, is a British journalist, author, and public commentator. She started on the left of the political spectrum, writing for *The Guardian* and *New Statesman*. During the 1990s she came to identify with more right-wing ideas and currently writes for *The Times*, *The Jerusalem Post* and *The Jewish Chronicle*, covering political and social issues from a social conservative perspective. Phillips defines herself as a liberal who has “been mugged by reality.”

She takes issue with what she sees as tolerant religious liberals seeking to deflect criticism from the

Muslim faith, and to show that those who murder in the name of Islam are not representative Muslims. Many critics of ISIS counter this explanation by referring to quotations from Islamic scriptures – the Qur’an and the Hadiths – which seem, at least, to recommend violence:

### **From the Letter by Melanie Phillips to *The Times*, Letters, 14 June 2017**

The elephant is still in the room. Even now, with Theresa May saying “enough is enough” after the London Bridge atrocities, we are still refusing to identify correctly the threat that has already claimed so many lives.

These attackers are not “evil losers”. They are not “sick cowards”. They are not nihilists or psychiatric cases or lone wolves. They are devout and ecstatic Muslim fanatics who are waging a war of religion against us.

Mrs May correctly referred to “Islamist” terrorism. Yet she also said this was a “perversion of Islam”. How can it be a “perversion” when it is solidly rooted in religious texts and theological doctrine validated and endorsed by the world’s most powerful Islamic authorities? In his article in *The Times* yesterday, the communities’ secretary Sajid Javid tied himself up in knots. He rightly said it wasn’t enough for Muslims merely to condemn terror attacks; they must ask themselves “searching questions”, and issue challenges.

Yet he also said the perpetrators were not “true Muslims” and that it was right to say the attacks were “nothing to do with Islam”. Well if that’s so, why should Muslims need to do anything at all? The West views Islam through its own cultural prism, which equates religion with spirituality. The problem is that Islam is as much a political ideology as a source of spiritual guidance.

In 2010 a German study, which involved intensive questioning of 45,000 Muslim teenagers from sixty-one towns and regions across the country, found that the more religious they were the more likely they were to become violent.

Sheikh Mohammad Tawhidi, a Shia cleric in Australia who campaigns against Sunni extremism, has said: “The scriptures are exactly what is pushing these people to behead the infidel. Our books teach the beheading of people.”

Of course, millions of Muslims don’t subscribe to any of this. Some are merely cultural Muslims who observe no religious practices. Some, such as the Sufis or the Ahmadiyya sect, are pious Muslims who are truly peaceful (and are themselves victims of the Islamists).

But political, aggressive, jihadist Islam, constrained for so long by both the Ottoman empire and western colonialism, is now dominant once again

in the Muslim world. Which is why in 2015 Egypt's President Sisi remarkably told the imams of Al-Azhar university in Cairo—the epicentre of Islamic doctrinal edicts—that Islam's corpus of sacred texts was "antagonising the entire world", that it was "impossible" for 1.6 billion Muslims to "want to kill the rest of the world's inhabitants", and so Islam had to have a "religious revolution".

We should be promoting and defending such Muslim reformers in the desperate hope that they succeed. Instead we knock the ground from under their feet by saying Islamist attacks have nothing to do with Islam. Until and unless Islam is reformed, we need to treat its practices on a scale ranging from extreme caution to outlawing some of them altogether.

Mrs May said we need to make people understand that our "pluralistic British values" were "superior to anything offered by the preachers and supporters of hatred".

The problem is, though, that Islamists believe their values represent the literal word of God. So to them, no other values can possibly be superior. As a result, you can no more deradicalise them than you could have deradicalised the priests of the Inquisition.

We must require Muslims to take responsibility for the actions of all in their community. An ICM poll of British Muslims two years ago found that nearly a quarter wanted Sharia to replace British law in areas with large Muslim populations.

Four per cent – equivalent to more than 100,000 British Muslims – said they were sympathetic to suicide bombers fighting "injustice".

In other words, we must see jihadist Islam as at the extreme end of a continuum of beliefs which are themselves incompatible with British society.

So we shouldn't just be stopping people coming back to Britain from Syria or Libya, or detaining terrorist suspects through control orders. We should also be closing down radical mosques, deporting those born in other countries who are involved in extremism, stopping foreign funding for Muslim institutions and banning the Muslim Brotherhood.

We should also outlaw Sharia courts because, since Sharia does not accept the superior authority of secular legislation, it inescapably undermines the core British value of one law for all.

The message should be that British Muslims are welcome citizens but on the same basis as everyone else: that they subscribe to the binding nature of foundational British laws and values. If not, they will be treated as subversives.

The chances of any of these measures being taken, though, are slim. There will be inevitable claims that judge-made human rights law, which has often protected the "rights" of extremists rather than their victims, cannot be set aside without "destroying British values".

Jihadist terrorists, however, are not trying to divide us, destroy our values or stop the general election. They are trying to kill us and conquer us.

If it is to defend itself, a liberal society may need to adopt illiberal measures. If we don't do so now, we'll be forced to eventually. The only question is how many will have to die before that happens.

#### Disclaimer

**Melanie Phillips expresses herself forcefully and she is not alone in doing so. We re-published her letter to *The Times* as part of our desire to improve religious literacy among our readers. This does not imply that Sea of Faith either gives or withholds editorial endorsement.**

## UPDATING THE QUR'AN?

**Naskh** is an Arabic word usually translated as "abrogation". It is a term used in Islamic legal exegesis for the way in which seemingly contradictory material within, or between, the two primary sources of Islamic law: the Quran and the Sunna, is handled. Several Qur'anic verses [especially Quran 2:106 and Quran 16:101] state that some revelations have been abrogated and superseded by later revelations, which are understood by many Muslim scholars as pertaining to the verses of the Quran itself.

Some commentators (see Ayaan Hirsi Ali on page 9 of this Newsletter) even suggest that the Prophet was more peace-loving in his early days in Mecca and more militaristic in his days in Medina. The revelations experienced by him changed accordingly.

The most wide-ranging abrogating verse is called the **Verse of The Sword** (9:5) which, in the standard understanding, abrogates 113 others. This is written up in detail at

[https://wikiislam.net/wiki/List\\_of\\_Abrogations\\_in\\_the\\_Qur%27an](https://wikiislam.net/wiki/List_of_Abrogations_in_the_Qur%27an)

[note: the apparent gaps between the words are in fact underscores " \_ "]

Another issue which can make analysis difficult is that the verses (**surah**) in the Qur'an are not presented in chronological order, making it difficult to establish which verse can override, abrogate, another.

We can observe that the Qur'an is believed to be a book of divine revelation and not one open to scholarly debate as is the Christian Bible. Moreover, in the West, the secular Law is subject to (often) orderly revision, in a way not open to custodians of the Qur'an

# LAST WORD, JULY 2017

## TWO-WAY STRETCH

By Guest Correspondent Ian Crumpton, Steering Committee Member

I entered Knox Theological Hall in 1965. Imagine my surprise when I discovered the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek! Theology was a steep learning curve, with half the student body taking a conservative and largely literal approach to scripture, and the staff and remaining half a more liberal understanding. Knowing nothing of this dichotomy, I was naturally drawn to the careful scholarship of the teaching staff. In my final year, heresy charges were brought against the principal, Lloyd Geering, by churchmen of a conservative bent, making clear to me the depth of division that had developed in Christianity since the Enlightenment.

This division I found to be far less acute in the parish. Nevertheless it was usually still there, with some parishioners demanding a stronger and more literal expression of the miraculous and supernatural elements of scripture, and others open to a deeper understanding of the mythology, symbolism, and different world view of the ancients. Does our spiritual heritage amount to a set of eternal verities, or is it our forbears' attempt to make their inherited faith relevant in their setting? – a setting which is radically different from ours.

This is a fundamental tension that underlies all human culture. The internet exacerbates it, as research shows that people gravitate to those websites that support their views. The internet simply offers a much larger group of like thinkers to network with, and the more extreme views attract disproportionate attention. Wild views and wild behaviour get millions of hits.

Parish ministry in the traditional denominational model reminds me of the Punch Cartoon of the 1900s, when electric trams were first making their appearance. An elderly lady asked the Cockney conductor "Oh conductor, if I put my foot on the rail will I get an electric shock?" His reply: "Naw lady, not unless you got the other foot on the overhead wire." The impossible two way stretch. This is one among a number of factors leading many people to abandon institutional religion in our time. Yet many retain a sense of the spiritual dimension. Religion has become privatised. This is a most acceptable trend in our neo-liberal culture, where

privatisation is an ideology driving so much of what happens.

Soren Kirkegaard developed the idea of faith as a subjective, private element in a person's life: Notably, he wrote (in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*):

"Science and scholarship want to teach that becoming objective is the way. Christianity teaches that the way is to become subjective, to become a subject." While scientists can learn about the world by observation, Kirkegaard emphatically denied that observation could reveal the inner workings of the world of the spirit. He was savagely critical of established church hierarchy in his native Denmark.

Yet a shortcoming of this approach is that it may amount to a cold scanning of what's on offer ("What's in it for me?") as people no longer move into long term commitment, but instead seek self-fulfilment wherever they can find it. Without a degree of commitment, community building and networking, how can the spiritual life grow? How can it develop purpose and direction? And a related question: In nurturing people – especially young people – in faith and life, do we want to build well rounded people, or people with abrasive edges? Do we need critics of society, or adjusters to it? In our fast changing world, I believe we need the critics. Bertrand Russell pointed out that we need to live without certainty, and yet without being paralyzed with hesitation. Fundamental certainty leads nowhere. Catatonic paralysis is favoured by the powerful, who like to run the show in their interests, keeping us out of contention by the use of sport and infotainment. Democracy is weakening under corporate advertising's agenda, as well as the likes of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and now also the robotic computerisation of more and more of the decision making process.

I think we need the abrasive edges more than ever.

**Ian Crumpton**  
**Steering Committee Member**

