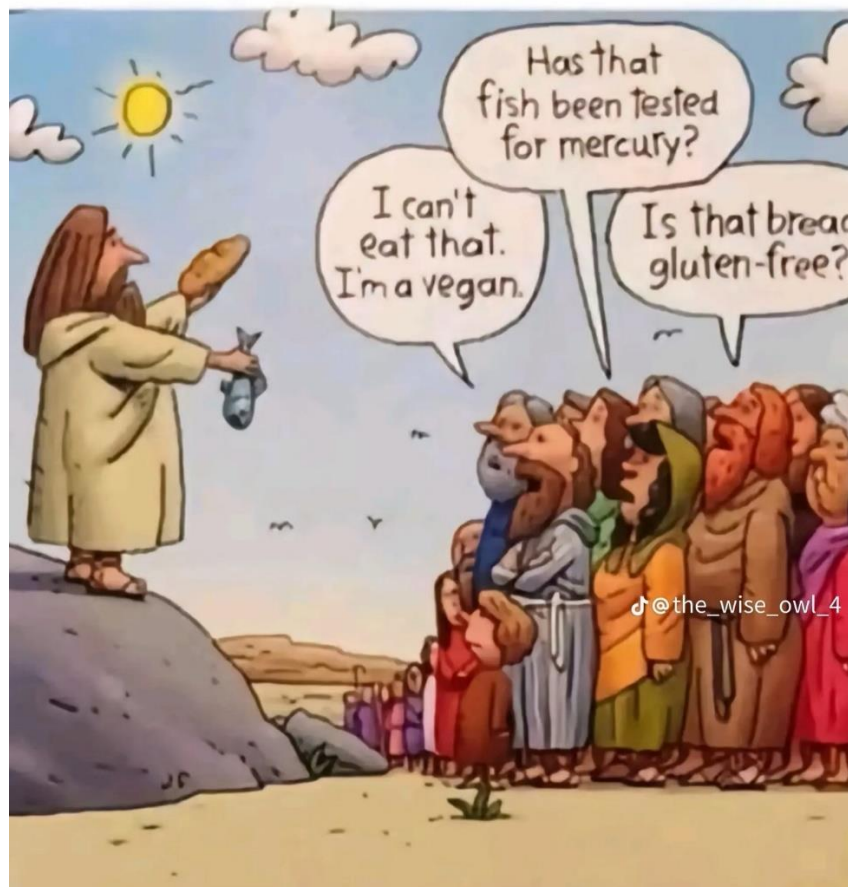


If Jesus tried to feed the 5000 today... 😊



A tribute to the Rev Don Cupitt (22.05.1934 – 18.01.2025)

Don Cupitt was initiator of the Sea of Faith Network in the UK, which led to similar networks in New Zealand and Australia. The phrase 'Sea of Faith', taken from a Matthew Arnold poem, was used for his 1984 BBC series and book. Six episodes focus on individual theologians from Pascal to Nietzsche and Cupitt explores the changing character and influence of Christianity. It remains a masterclass.

Born in Oldham, Lancashire, Cupitt studied Natural Sciences at Cambridge before pursuing studies in philosophy and religion. He attended the Anglican

training college, Westcott House, and was ordained in 1959. After his curacy, he returned to Westcott House as vice-principal, then to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he became dean and life fellow. His subsequent progressive direction as a philosopher of religion took him ever further beyond the acceptable boundaries of the Church of England.

During my own theological studies in Birmingham, I was aware of his contribution to *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), edited by John Hick (then Edward Cadbury Professor at Birmingham), with contributions from other Birmingham-based theologians, Michael Goulder and Frances Young (my professor in 1990). The book provoked controversy and revealed the huge gap between the theology pursued by many academics and that presented to people in the pews. It is perhaps this credibility gap that has led to the rapid decline in church attendance since the 1960s.

Significant publications which illustrate the progress of his developing thought are *Taking Leave of God* (1980), *The Long-legged Fly* (1987), *Solar Ethics* (1995), *After God* (1997), the trilogy of "Everyday Speech" books (1999-2000), *Theology's Strange Return* (2010), and *Ethics in the Last Days of Humanity* (2015).

After God is a logical and lucid presentation of the history of religion and its possible future. The trilogy written just before the turn of the millennium arose from the premise that what people really believe is encapsulated in the phrases of everyday speech – as Wittgenstein had suggested. Since at least *Taking leave of God*, Cupitt has regarded 'God' as a metaphor. And yet he continued to write wittily and cogently about religion. He retained an allegiance to the radical teaching of Jesus, but not to the Church. I remember being surprised to see him joining us in the chapel of my Birmingham theological college in 1990: he ceased officiating as an Anglican minister around that time and he effectively left the Church in 2008.

From a New Zealand perspective, it is remarkable that Lloyd Geering was writing books on similar themes with similar titles, unbeknown to both of them, long before they met. Their joint legacy is important as an attempt to provide a corrective to the disaster of the increasing narrowness of religion in this century.

Adrian Skelton
Napier

Editor's Comment

My thanks to Adrian for this excellent and succinct summary of Don Cupitt's life. He is indeed of enormous significance for us in SOFiA and could well be regarded as the founding father of the Sea of Faith, except that Don himself would probably regard such a description as irredeemably patriarchal!

The Christchurch group for a number of years began each year by listening to one of the BBC TV series on 'The Sea of Faith'. It was an excellent way of reminding us of what we stood for. (They are now all available on youtube.com) When I first watched the series, it was the undermining of traditional religion that dominated my impression. On re-watching it, I noticed that usually there were two representatives of the new thinking that followed such undermining, inviting further debate.

I have three of Don Cupitt's books and the one that made the biggest Impression was *Radical Christians and the Future of the Church*. His basic thesis is that the period of liberal thinking (beginning roughly with Schleiermacher at the beginning of the 19th Century) is now over and we are faced with a far more radical undermining of traditional religion. Liberals think that the existing church can be credibly modernised to bring it up to date but radicals like Cupitt find that modernity is much more deeply subversive of tradition. The church recognises this so has turned its back on the modernising project and radicals cannot expect to receive any sympathy.

The print media at work

Methodist Church President's Sermon highlighted at Waitangi 2025

Note: *Glenn McDonnell, a Stuff journalist, wrote this article that appeared in the Manawatu Standard, Friday February 7, the day after Waitangi Day. It is refreshing to see coverage for the challenge clearly given in Rev Aroha Rountree's sermon at the dawn service on Waitangi Day. When media cover church topics, it is either the antics of sects led by self-appointed gurus or charitable deeds by individuals and groups doing work that should be led by government policies addressing the Common Good.*

The following text is taken from Glenn's article highlighting Aroha's sermon:

'The tranquillity of the morning service was broken only by a few splatterings of applause. The loudest cheer was for Rev Aroha Rountree, the President of New Zealand Methodist Church.

Her sermon questioned Luxon's understanding of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and was scathing of the Treaty Principles Bill. She quoted Luxon's speech to Waitangi last year, where he said 'Part of the history of modern New Zealand has been our struggle to understand the intentions and expectations of those who signed the Treaty.'

Rountree said Maori clearly understood those intentions and expectations, as did the Christian churches. The churches, she said, had a duty to uphold Te Tiriti, as they had been so closely involved in its formation as missionaries in the 1800s.

Our tupuna do not struggle to understand the expectations of our tupuna, as our tupuna intended and expected for their partner, the Crown, to act in good faith in their dealings with Māori, she said. That good faith, she said, did not exist today.

Many of the prayers and karakia discussed the Māori-Crown relationship as something of a marriage. And if so, as Rountree, said, 'Our spouse, the Crown, has filed for divorce while we were blissfully unaware'.

She said changes to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its principles could only be made by mutual agreement from both sides of that relationship, and the Treaty Principles Bill did not have mutual agreement.

ACT leader David Seymour wasn't over-impressed with the speech. 'Everyone will be judged for what they say. Maybe if people wonder why church attendance is in freefall, and people turn away from Christianity, according to the latest census, it's because people try and politicise things like that,' he said after the ceremony.

But the crowds at the Treaty grounds applauded Rountree's speech, as they watched her on a big screen beside the navy's giant Waitangi flagpole.'

John Thornley

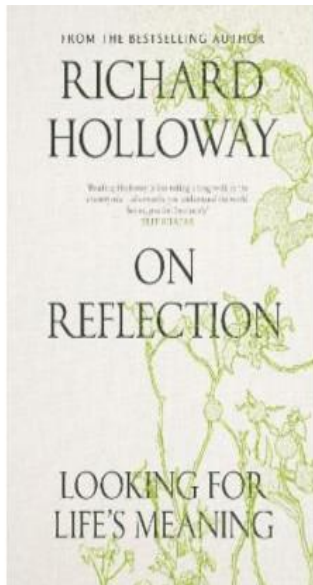
On Reflection: Looking for Life's Meanings

A review by Beverley Smith of Bishop Richard Holloway's book with this title. Retired Anglican Priest Stephen Mitchell, writing for the UK Sofia magazine, said 'this is a captivating book.' For this reader, who has read many of Bishop

Holloway's books, I found insights often missing from my reading on spiritual matters.

-Religion is basing its morality on two-thousand-year-old values.

For most of history, we thought it was moral to enslave other humans, which is why ten million Africans were put on states of the USA, till the slave trade was finally abolished in 1865.



-It was decided in Britain in the early part of the twentieth century that it was both absurd and immoral to deny women the right to vote in parliamentary elections, so they got the vote (in England) in 1918.

On reflection, the Church of England decided that it was both absurd and immoral to deny women entry into its priesthood, so it started ordaining them in 1994.

-The Bible is full of gladness when it describes nature, and it says that the hills themselves jump with joy. Wordsworth calls this feeling

'sublime'. Walking impels in us the mood of rejoicing- he writes 'I once stood by the Grand Canyon listening to a group of tourists ejaculate their compliments into the wind, and I longed for them to fall silent. Nature should deepen our thinking not prompt us to strike poses before it.'

-Religion, like art, he begins (to quote W.B.Yeats) abides 'in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart'. This is not to diminish its worth. We will value it in a different way 'less interested in the authority of its origins than in the gifts of interpretation it offers us for understanding our own lives'.

Holloway offers many more insights.

Beverley Smith

Maori Approaches to Death

Māui's Quest for Immortality

Māui, a legendary figure in Māori and Polynesian mythology, embarked on a daring quest to secure immortality for humanity. However, this endeavour

ultimately ended in failure, highlighting themes of human mortality and the limits of power.

1. **The Plan:** Māui believed he could conquer death by entering the body of **Hine-nui-te-pō**, the goddess of death, while she was asleep. He planned to pass through her body and exit through her mouth, thereby reversing death for all mankind.
2. **Execution:** Māui transformed into a small worm-like creature and began his journey into Hine-nui-te-pō. However, the birds accompanying him—specifically the fantail (pīwakawaka)—burst into laughter, waking the goddess.
3. **Consequence:** Upon waking, Hine-nui-te-pō crushed Māui with her body, ending his quest and ensuring that death would remain an inevitable part of human life.
4. **Moral Lesson:** Māui's quest is interpreted as a tale of bravery, hubris, and the acceptance of mortality. It serves as a reminder of the natural balance between life and death.

This is one version, there are others

Footnote: The story of Māui and Hine-nui-te-pō is a cornerstone of Polynesian mythology, appearing in variations across Māori, Hawaiian, and other Polynesian traditions (Orbell, 1995). The role of the fantail as both a helper and a trickster is also symbolic of nature's unpredictability.

Significance of Cape Reinga (Te Rerenga Wairua)

Cape Reinga, located at the northernmost tip of New Zealand, holds immense spiritual importance in Māori culture. It is considered the point where the spirits of the deceased embark on their journey to the afterlife, known as **Te Rerenga Wairua**, or "the leaping place of the spirits."

1. **Journey of the Wairua (Spirit):** According to Māori belief, when someone passes away, their wairua (spirit) travels up the west coast of New Zealand to Cape Reinga. There, it descends to the pōhutukawa tree clinging to the cliffside and leaps into the ocean to travel to the ancestral homeland, Hawaiki.
2. **Spiritual Threshold:** Cape Reinga symbolizes the transition between the physical world and the spiritual realm. The pōhutukawa tree, which is

said to be over 800 years old, is central to this belief, as it provides the gateway for spirits to begin their journey.

3. **Cultural Significance:** The surrounding area, including Te Ara Wairua (the pathway of spirits), is sacred and deeply respected. Visitors are often reminded to tread with reverence.
4. **Natural Elements:** At Cape Reinga, the meeting of the Tasman Sea and the Pacific Ocean symbolizes a blending of spiritual forces, further underscoring its importance as a place of endings and beginnings.

Footnote: The sacred nature of Cape Reinga is well-documented in oral traditions and Māori cosmology. The pōhutukawa tree as the leaping point is described in tribal narratives passed down through generations (Mead, 2003).

The Māori approach to death, or *mate*, is deeply rooted in their cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and connection to their ancestors and the land. Central to their practices is *tangihanga* or *tangi*, a traditional mourning ceremony that allows people to express grief, pay respects, and support the deceased's family. Tangihanga is a powerful cultural ritual, usually lasting three days, though it may extend depending on circumstances.

Key Aspects of Māori Death Customs:

1. **Spiritual Significance and Connection to Ancestry**

Māori believe in the concept of *wairua*, the spirit or soul, which lives on after death and journeys back to *Hawaiki*, the ancestral homeland. There is a sense that death is not an end but a transition to an ancestral realm, where the spirit will be reunited with loved ones who have passed.
2. **Tangihanga (Mourning Ceremony)**

The *tangi* is traditionally held on a marae, the community meeting place, where the body lies in state. Family, friends, and the community gather here to express love and grief, share memories, and participate in song, prayer, and speeches (*whakaaro*). During this time, the deceased's life is celebrated, and mourners have a chance to say their goodbyes.
3. **Gathering of Family and Community**

Whānau (family) and extended relatives play a central role in Māori death customs. All members are expected to be present and contribute. Support from the community is vital, and it's common for people to travel long distances to attend a tangi and show respect.
4. **Rituals of Care and Connection**

It is customary for the body to be kept in an open coffin, allowing loved ones to interact closely, touch, and embrace the deceased.

5. **Emphasis on *Whakawhanaungatanga* (Relationships)**

Relationships between people and with the deceased's spirit are honoured during the tangi. This period is one of healing and connection for both the living and the spirit of the departed, reinforcing communal bonds and cultural identity.

6. **The Journey to Final Resting Place**

Once the tangi is over, the body is taken to a burial ground, often in a place significant to the family or tribe. After burial, the family observes a cleansing ceremony to lift the tapu from themselves, allowing them to return to everyday life.

The Māori perspective on death emphasizes honouring the dead while supporting the living through communal grieving, connection, and continuity of the spirit. Tangihanga traditions are resilient, deeply cherished, and continue to adapt as part of Māori identity

Footnotes:"" *Te Ara – The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*. This is a highly respected resource detailing Māori traditions and customs, including the cultural practices surrounding death and mourning.

Moko Mead's *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori Values* provides an in-depth discussion of cultural protocols, including tangihanga.

Wairua and Spirituality in Māori culture, often highlighted in works by Māori scholars like Mason Durie, *Whaiora: Māori Health Development*.

Māori In Aotearoa New Zealand: Understanding the culture, protocols and customs, Buddy Mikaere 2013

Aroha Harris's work in *Tangata Whenua: An Illustrated History* by Atholl Anderson et al., which delves into tapu, noa, and their cultural application

Importance of Water

In Māori culture, water holds profound significance, particularly at cemeteries (*urupā*) where it serves as a powerful spiritual and cleansing element. After visiting a cemetery, Māori often wash their hands or sprinkle water on themselves. This ritual of water cleansing is known as *whakanoa*, which helps lift the *tapu* (sacred restriction) that surrounds the cemetery and the deceased. Here's a closer look at why water is so essential in this context:

1. **Spiritual Cleansing and Lifting of Tapu**

Cemeteries are considered places of high *tapu*, and visitors become *noa* (freed from sacredness) by cleansing with water afterward. The act of sprinkling water or washing hands as one leaves the urupā symbolically removes any spiritual heaviness, ensuring that they return to everyday life in a spiritually balanced state.

2. **Connection to Life and Ancestry**

Water symbolizes life and is seen as an essential link to ancestors. In this way, water at the cemetery not only purifies but also strengthens the connection with loved ones who have passed. Through the cleansing act, people honour the memory of their ancestors while also acknowledging life's continuity.

3. **Purification of Mind and Spirit**

Water is believed to cleanse negative energies or lingering sadness associated with the visit. This purification helps to balance grief with peace, allowing people to remember their loved ones in a positive, grounded way.

4. **Maintenance of Health and Well-being**

Māori customs hold that failing to perform the water-cleansing ritual after a cemetery visit can lead to spiritual or physical illness. By engaging in this practice, people are better protected from harm and maintain their spiritual well-being.

5. **Respect for the Sacredness of the Place**

The use of water to cleanse respects the sacredness of the cemetery as a resting place for ancestors. It also maintains the tapu of the site, recognizing its spiritual importance and the cultural belief that cemeteries are potent spiritual spaces.

Footnotes: "Tapu and Noa," *Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, explains the ritual use of water in Māori culture as a tool for lifting tapu and ensuring spiritual balance.

Mason Durie's *Nga Kahui Pou: Launching Māori Futures* discusses the integration of spiritual health in daily practices, including rituals like those involving water.

"Water in Māori Culture" by Ani Mikaere, often published in journals or anthologies on indigenous spiritual practices, underscores the symbolic role of water in Māori life.

This information was provided by *ChatGPT*, a large language model by *OpenAI*. Thanks to Laurie Chisholm and Eru Tahuri for their constructive comments and questions.

Mary Ellen Warren

‘Not Dark Yet’: a Non-church Song for the Easter Season

Some critics find this song an expression of the deepest despair, as if written from the depths of some private hell. Dylan refutes this. He writes on his own religious journey: ‘I try to live within that line between despondency and hope. I’m suited to walk that line right between the fire. I see it as right straight down the middle of the line really.’

Dylan’s journey can be described in the words of the 16th century mystic, St John of the Cross: His memorable phrase is: ‘The dark night of the soul’. In what others describe as the Way Negative (*Via negativa*), Dylan rejects human love, the arts, and physical well-being – none of these offer salvation. But in the three words of the title, ‘Not dark yet’, Dylan holds on to hope. There are still more dawns to come.

The Way Negative recognises the limitations of human language to describe the divine.

Not Dark Yet

Shadows are fallin’ and I’ve been here all day
Too hot to sleep and time is runnin’ away
Feel like my soul has turned into steel
I’ve still got the scars that the sun didn’t heal
There’s not even room enough to be anywhere
It’s not dark yet, but it’s gettin’ there.

Well, my sense of humanity has gone down the drain
Behind every beautiful thing there’s some kind of pain
She wrote me a letter and she wrote it so kind
She put down in writin’ what was in her mind
I just don’t see why I should even care
It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting’ there.

Well, I’ve been to London and I been to gay Paris
I’ve followed the river and I got to the sea
I’ve been down on the bottom of the world full of lies
I aint lookin’ for nothin’ in anyone’s eyes
Sometimes my burden is more than I can bear
It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting’ there.

I was born here and I'll die here against my will
It looks like I'm movin' but I'm standin' still
Every nerve in my body is so naked and numb
I can't even remember what it was I came here to get away from
Don't even hear the murmur of a prayer
It's not dark yet but it's getting there.

Bob Dylan

When words fail us, the sounds of music speak volumes. You can listen to Dylan give an awe-inspiring performance of this prayerful song online at Manawatu Peoples Radio (www.mpr.nz/show/wesley). Gillian and John Thornley are the hosts of 'Easter 25', one programme in a regular weekly series featuring NZ hymnwriters. They would welcome any feedback.

John and Gillian: johngill@inspire.net.nz

Don Cupitt on Life After Death

"On this [Richard Bentley's] view life after death, along with the fears of witchcraft, evil spirits, bad luck and so forth, is just another of those superstitious terrors from which modern science has mercifully delivered us. We can now follow Lucretius and say that death is nothing to us, no more to be feared than falling asleep, not an event in life that we will experience but simply life's horizon. Other people's deaths are indeed part of life and have to be coped with: hence the Importance of our funerary rites. But my own death is not part of my life and I can disregard it."

Only Human p 207-8

Going out with bang, not a whimper!

Hawke's Bay branch of Sea of Faith in Aotearoa Is in the process of wrapping up. There will be a luncheon meeting on May 18th, from 1.30 pm at the Taradale Club (55 Wharerangi Road, Napier). The Lunch will be subsidized. The current recipient of the **Sir Lloyd Geering Scholarship in Religion at Victoria University in Wellington** is developing a paper on "Religion Out of Bounds: How Gen Z are creating meaning in the face of existential crises beyond tradition". Please contact Mary Ellen Warren by May 14 if you are able to attend. mewarren1@gmail.com or 06 8454623. And if not, to share your thoughts.

About SOFiA

SOFiA (The Sea of Faith in Aotearoa) is a network of people interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of values, meaning and spirituality. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives. SOFiA is not a church: it is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and perspectives. SOFiA itself has no creed; its members come from many faiths and from those with no attachment to any religious institution. If you are in sympathy with our aims, you are most welcome to join us, receive our Newsletter, and/or attend a local group. We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from “Sea of Faith”, the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

Committee

Our national Committee oversees the work of SOFiA.

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Life Members: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Ian Harris, Suzi Thirwell, Yvonne Curtis, Laurie Chisholm, John Thornley and Peter Cowley. Also Fred Marshall, Noel Cheer and Norm Ely (all deceased).

Copy deadline for the next Newsletter is 1 June.