



Sea of Faith NETWORK N.Z.

NEWSletter

Conference 2006



Another, but not just another, Conference

Your Steering Committee has been successful in attracting top notch speakers to the Conference to be held in Marton at the end of September. There will be full information with the next Newsletter, but you will find advance information in this one.

I imagine you will be attending because of the theme, **“After Religion, What? Is Nothing Sacred Anymore?”** and to catch up with old friends and make new ones – as I’ve suggested before. But I want to say a little more about the venue and environs.

Marton sees itself as the hub of the Rangitikei. It is the centre for a farming community, but has been touched by a global economy that

has moved on. It is a town in which you greet anyone passed on the footpath, and in which some of the former New Zealand can still be found. Do not walk at the faster pace found in the big smoke! The Rangitikei has created spectacular cliffs and the district is cut by surprising chasms, such as that 100m. from Highway 1 on Gorge Road north of Utiku (the road to bungy jumping over the Rangitikei River). The cropping and husbandry country of the vicinity remind me of my childhood. Ratana is just down the road and the museum at Ohakea nearby.

Details of trips offered the Saturday afternoon of the Conference will be in the next Newsletter. Explore the district with aerial photos and maps on this website:

www.zoomin.co.nz/nz/rangitikei

Our work with Nga Tawa, the Conference venue, continues, and while there are now more volunteers on the Arrangements Committee than we expected, we find after responsibilities are clear that there is a lot to do to meet your expectations. At the top of this page is a picture of the main block at Nga Tawa in which there are meeting rooms, modern bedrooms for couples, and the dining hall overlooking the garden. You may just make out the chapel to the

right. The main meeting hall is part of the rear of the complex shown.

You can follow the development of the Conference on our website, and full programme details will appear in the Registration Forms which will accompany the next mailing.

We hope you will participate in the conference. See you in Marton.

*Larry Haist
Arrangements Committee
Chairperson 2006*

Conference Keynote Speakers

- Don Cupitt
- David Tacey
- Bill Cooke

Conference Elective Lecturers

- Lloyd Geering
- Ian Harris
- Roger Hanson

Details are being posted to the website as they become available. They will appear also in the Registration Pack which will accompany the July Newsletter.

Number 66 May 2006

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WHERE TO, AFTER THE GODS HAVE GONE?

asks Fred Marshall of Waikato

[This version has been edited slightly, it can be found in full on the website]

"I triumph, I triumph, I triumph, the last word is spoken. Farewell to my sighs, farewell to my tears, At last I have broken the bondage of years!"

THE SEA OF FAITH IS FULL OF CLERGY

who go with a great fuss, trumpeting their new-found liberty like Schubert's lover in *Die schöne Müllerin*, and with about as much ultimate conviction. The latest of these is John Patrick, author of "The Gods Have to Go" in the November SoF (NZ) Newsletter and I should like to take issue with the group in answering him. These prophets of the humdrum seem to overlook two principal issues:

The transforming force of religion on the human psyche over the ages has changed lives and been a major factor for good (and also evil) in the evolution of social attitudes and the interaction of humanity and nature. The fundamentalist extremists which John Patrick condemns (and fears) represent only a fraction of religious activities – Christian, Islamic and Jewish are the ones I know something about – and their social reality is much more complex than his superficial generalizations allow for. For example the schismatics of Africa led by Akinola of Nigeria are splitting the Anglican Church by their bigoted attitude to homosexuality [and was recently denounced by the A of C, Rowan Williams - ed], the priesthood of women and the literalist approach to the Bible, but they are also transforming African society by their fight against poverty, AIDS and the abuse of women, and supplying martyrs to those causes.

The gods which the Noisy Leavers want to banish are all man-made. The attribute 'man' is deliberate; the deities of Israel, Islam and Christianity have a lot of testosterone in their make-up. They are only human artifacts. To wheel them off to the dump does nothing to validate or invalidate a divine ambience about us. Since the beginning of human awareness, humankind has felt the presence of the divine. Rather indecorously Noel refers to it as an "itch" and our response as a "scratch". John Patrick's unsubstantiated assertions – "The current answers given to the oft-repeated dogma 'there must be something' seem mostly fatuous, and indicate we have learned nothing in the past 300 years" – are not arguments. Given that Jesus built a model life on conformity with the divine will, which he pictured as a father figure, it seems to me as presumptuous and arrogant simply to dismiss the divine presence without argument as it is to discount the comments of serious modern scholars with a disdainful *et al.* The accusation of "a total lack of knowledge" on the part of the press is equally groundless. The daily papers publish a wide spectrum of views.

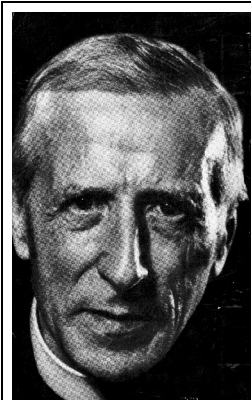
The anthropomorphic deities of the past are, for many of us, an error which the "past three hundred years" (more like 500 if we count the Reformation as the starting point) have led us to see. Teilhard de Chardin points the way to a new concept of the divine which explains the human *itch* and the ways in which we *scratch* it in a more acceptable way.

An expert paleontologist, Teilhard, in *Le Phénomène Humain (The Phenomenon of Man)* traces the patterns of evolution from the mega-molecules of primaeval slime to the

emergence of humankind. He describes the processes by which a phylum (evolutionary phase) matures into a multiplicity of competing options and generates increasing intensity between them until one bursts through into a new level of complexity and leads evolution into a new stage.

In the realm of matter, gravity forms a mesh, attracting particles to each other and "holding the stars in their courses". Teilhard proposes an additional principle of a different kind, as pervasive through the whole cosmos as gravity, which he identifies as *conscience* – awareness at sub-human levels of evolution, self-awareness and moral consciousness in *homo sapiens*. What lies beyond human awareness we cannot know. *Conscience* inheres in every atom of the cosmos but just as infrared light or the passage of the hour hand round the dial or the bullet in flight are not perceptible to our senses, being too slow or too fast to be seen, so *conscience* only becomes perceptible to our awareness with the turning of the heliotrope to face the sun or the curling of the bean around the nearest pole, and, within that part of the cosmos we can know, reaches self-awareness only in humankind. In our limited perception it is associated with Life. This concept leads Teilhard to propose that for the first time in evolutionary history, subjects can understand the processes of evolution and collaborate with them, creating, as it were, their own developmental destiny, converting what was previously a morphological process into a psycho-social one. The mammalian phylum has been transcended by the human; a new order of nature has emerged, replacing the physical advantages which longer necks, or powerful jaws or speedy flight conferred, with mental skill, with wider and wider patterns of collaboration and the use of more and more competent tools.

Teilhard describes two characteristics which mark the maturity of a phylum and signal its readiness to accede to a higher order of being: the individual strands which make it up proliferate and diversify, and the competition between them creates the tension which will in due course precipitate the transforming crisis. The human phylum is already manifesting the characteristics of this maturity within the complex of social, economic, political, ideological, philosophical and religious spheres, by the multiplicity of competing models: – national sovereignties *v* international corporates, capitalism *v* social justice and environmental protection, democracy (so-called!) *v* theocracy and despotism, *this* religion *v* *that* religion *v* secularism and so on – accompanied by a growing tension between them. The crisis is heightened by the pressures of human population on the natural order. If that is not enough, there is always the possibility of a devastating pandemic, a large meteor strike like the one that destroyed the dinosaurs or the eruption of a super-volcano capable of destroying crops globally and disrupting travel for years. There is one of those just 200km south of Hamilton – lake Taupo – which devastated the world 30,000 years ago and which is due for another cataclysm any time now.



Teilhard de Chardin

The more sanguine among us hope that whatever the cataclysm, a remnant will remain to lead the evolution of awareness into the new stage, *homo animalis* becoming *homo spiritualis*.

Teilhard proposes that the moment of transcendence produces a leading shoot around which the new creature coalesces and that the leading shoot to the new stage is already there in the model of Jesus.

Scientists have given us a picture of a cosmos which is becoming on a scale which overwhelms our imagination and denies our attempts to answer the question “becoming what?”. We cannot attribute purpose to God. The presence and action of another universal principle, *conscience*, which Teilhard demonstrates, gives the possibility of self-determination to the cosmos by way of directed coincidence, (those ratios at the Big Bang without which, if they had not been what they are, matter could not exist, the anomalous expansion of water as ice is formed etc) and establishes an affective link between the whole cosmos and evolving humanity. Where gravity can be measured, *conscience* must be experienced; it is primarily subjective, embracing the whole gamut of the emotions as well as rational discourse. Where gravity promotes physical affinities, *conscience* promotes affective affinities, in a word, Love. This principle is so much a factor in our daily lives that we take it for granted like gravity or the air we breathe. Although it seems at first sight impossible to credit, **the universe is constituted in such a way that an individual human awareness can establish a personal bonding with the divinity that permeates us all**, enter into a harmony which is signaled by “that peace which the world cannot give”, which opens channels of capacity like those which amazed the participants at Pentecost and it manifests itself in an impulse to love.

Conscience is not God, any more than energy is, or the strong and weak forces which hold matter together. The divine is coterminous with the cosmos; implicit in every atom, it expresses itself in the operations of the universe of which the exercise of the human will in everyday activities has its part. And it is totally self-aware. Jesus appears to suggest this when, to reassure his followers of their significance in the terrors of the apocalypse to come, he says (Matt 10:29) “No sparrow falls to the ground without your Father knowing.”

The gods which John Patrick wants, rightly, to abolish, have become stumbling blocks to our understanding of what total awareness means. We have a big word for it – omniscience – which serves to insulate us from its implications, lest we be overwhelmed. We personify our gods for the same reason, to keep them within the compass of our understanding. He is right; they must go, leaving the awareness in us that at this moment in time and space and in that unknown that lies beyond them, divinity is closer for each of us than breathing, the sacred participates in our thoughts and actions, indeed the Sacred is evolving as a consequence of what we think and do.

The call of the divine in us, Noel’s “itch”, is to establish that bond which Jesus calls “the kingdom of heaven” and to increase the loving affinities which bind us to each other and to nature. To this end beliefs, credos, are totally irrelevant except as a means for each individual to achieve union with the cosmos. The Greek philosophers sought peace of mind in renunciations of one sort or another. The Neo-Platonists saw life as a moving upwards towards the divine in love sparked by one of the four frenzies, physical love, prophecy, madness and wine. I am told Buddhists seek their way in meditation, Muslims in orthopraxis, Jews in the observance of the law. To each their own path. Christianity, for all the warping of Jesus’ teaching and example it has generated, is, at its best, a good passage to the affinity which the divine

seeks to establish in us. Churches are, despite their differing creeds, societies bound together in the bond of love. The communion they share in the body and blood of Christ is a realisation, however imperfect, of the divine affinity.

Those who storm out, shouting that they cannot accept the parcel of creeds and rituals that make up worship, like those who, within the Church, adopt narrow sectarian views, are abandoning the substance for the shadow. Credos are relevant, not for salvation, but only as a path for people to find unity with others. Where they create separation and division they condemn themselves.

Jesus the Leading Shoot shows us the way. “Unless you trust as a little child you may in no way enter the Kingdom”. That is the only attitude which leaves the mind open to the omniscience and omnipresence of the divine and the astounding consequences of love. Trust and love negate the judgementalism and consequent prejudice which fission and destroy our relations with each other. Jesus said “Don’t judge”.

His predictions in Matthew 26 tally with the predictions of our scientists. There may well be an apocalypse in one form or another. Very many may well die and with them the divine suffers and dies as well. The lesson of Jesus is simple. Whatever the apocalyptic trigger which opens the way to the evolution of *homo spiritualis*, and whatever we try to do to avert it, our true calling is to collaborate with the divine by loving each other. This is the only answer to apocalypse and foreshadows the nature of the new society which hopefully will follow it. The evolution of this part of the universe depends on our success.

As a postscript the implications of this shift of perspective are vast. If the divine is implicit in every grain of us, salvation becomes the successful transition from animal to human in each of us and in humanity as a whole; incarnation takes on a different meaning, raising issues of Jesus’ role and our own, the nature of evil and its relationship to the divine, the nature of evolution and our willing or unwilling participation in it, i.e. the question of freewill; openness to the divine enables capacities which may change our view of miracles, and the implications of total awareness within and outside space/time raise interesting speculations about life after death. (cf the Neo-platonic hope of union with and reunion within the divine.) There is however a caveat attached to the hope of a new world where the lion will lie down with the lamb. Of the twelve million sperm in a male ejaculation one, just one, may just possibly unite with an ovum to make a new life. The cosmos is extravagantly prodigal in its becoming. The new evolutionary shift on the threshold of which we seem to be standing, may not succeed. It depends on us.

Fred Marshall

YOU ARE NOT HERE TO VERIFY

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

T.S. Eliot “Little Gidding”

[500 words on “Prayer Without Supernaturalism” by June 5, please! - ed]

In Brief

Auckland Conference

The Auckland Sea of Faith Network will hold a one-day Conference on Saturday 29 July at St Lukes, 130 Remuera Road, Remuera from 9.30 to 3.30. Lloyd Geering will speak on **The Greening of Christianity**. Charge is \$15. No booking is needed.

Your Network Needs You!

Our Rules require that Steering Committee members may serve only four consecutive years. In obedience to that, the following members will step down at this year's AGM: Don Feist, Ian Crumpton and myself. (If invited I will continue with the Newsletter and the Website).

The Steering Committee needs replacements — preferably people who understand the SoF ethos and who have management and/or creative skills. **You** know who they are and **you** can name names!

Heresy By Any Other Name?

The invitation in Newsletter 65 to suggest a new name for the Sea of Faith Network drew a small response.

George Ridley of Christchurch offered "**Sea of Life**".

Louise Elvey of Napier wrote: "In line with other groups we are associated with, Westar and Snowstar, I think it would be appropriate for this group to be called **Southstar**. Or considering our position in the Pacific, maybe **Pacstar** or **Paxtar**, especially with the implication of Peace."

But she wanted more: "However these do not clearly stand for our aspirations or beliefs. My mind goes towards titles using Humanism, Truths, Seeking — I hope some clear-thinking person can offer a name that would include these without sounding trite."

Daniel Phillips of Invercargill doesn't like "faith". To him (and to many others) it smacks of credulity. He prefers "wisdom" as a destination: "The people I have talked to in the SOF all seem to be in search of wisdom. Can I suggest "**Destination Wisdom**" as an alternative to "Sea of Faith". Destination, in this context, implies a journey. This captures the ongoing, dynamic and evolving beliefs of members of the SOF

Copy Deadlines

These are the dates by which I will need copy for the Newsletter for this year.

| Issue | Deadline |
|-----------|-------------|
| July | 5 June |
| September | 16 August |
| December | 15 November |

It is easiest for me if you can send the copy either as part of an email or as a Word document attached to an email. The next easiest is copy neatly typed so that I can scan it. But, even if you need to handwrite it, I can still use it — provided that I can read it!

Noel Cheer, Editor (addresses on Page 10)



OOps — I missed out the name of Norm Ely from the class photo. Sorry - ed

as perspectives and understanding expand and change."

Margaret Whitwell of Te Puke suggested that we keep the name but look for a poem which expresses "the fact that we are all afloat together on this fragile ark (earth)".

There are no current plans to change the name.

Noel Cheer

**We need Conference Workshop volunteers NOW! How about YOU?
Phone Norm Ely 04-236-5749
URGENTLY**

To Help People Transcend Boundaries

THERE IS AN IMPORTANT STRUGGLE GOING ON for the soul of Christianity, which should be of concern to everyone, Christian or not. The debate is not just at the level of arguments over whether, for example, certain Old Testament passages should be interpreted to condemn homosexuality. The deeper struggle is over whether Christianity is to be understood as a closed set of answers that leads to the intensification of these boundaries, or as an invitation to explore questions that help people transcend boundaries. Such a struggle is going on not only within Christianity, but in all the major world religions.

Robert Jensen

*journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin
<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~rjensen/freelance/whiyiamachristian.htm>*



“Thy life’s a miracle”

King Lear IV, vi, 55 and on the title page of Don Cupitt’s *Life, Life* Polebridge Press 2003

Don Cupitt, *The Great Questions of Life*, Polebridge Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Lloyd Geering.

It is sometimes said that religion constitutes our answer to the great questions of life. But what are these questions? Do the traditional religions answer questions that people no longer ask? Have we entered a period of such radical cultural change that even the great questions are being expressed differently?

Don collects into groups the questions he hears people asking. The first group look for a cosmic moral purpose into which we can fit our own life. (Why are we here? What is the meaning of life?).

The second group deals with speculative questions. (Is there a God? Is death the end? How did it all begin?)

A third group asks about chance and contingency. (Why is there anything at all and not nothing? What does it all mean?)

Then he deals with questions that ‘arise around the margins of the modern worldview’. (What is ultimately real? Who am I? Is that all?)

In less than 100 pages Don invites us to ponder the most basic questions of human existence and come to our own conclusions. While he provides many fascinating insights he offers no final answers, for the time for dogmatic answers, as given in the past, has come to an end. We must live with the questions and the way we live our lives constitutes our answer.

‘Religion has to change sharply’, says Don, ‘Instead of being a way of escaping from time, chance and death, it will have to become a way of accepting and affirming this life, with all its limits, as a package deal.’

This is a book that a discussion group would find very profitable to work its way through and, short though it is, many weeks could be spent in the process.

Lloyd Geering

Julian Baggini, *What’s it all about? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* Granta, London, 2005 *Reviewed by Bill Cooke*

Julian Baggini is an important new voice for twenty-first century humanism. He has a skill which should be more highly prized than it is: the ability to write with clarity and brevity. And he has resisted being swallowed up in the academic ghetto, making it his task to bring philosophy out into the public forum. Along with Jeremy Stangroom, Baggini edits *The Philosopher’s Magazine*, one of the few commercially viable magazines of philosophy operating.

As well as his journalistic work, Baggini has edited or written a number of books, which also manage to be short, clear, accessible to non-specialists and authoritative, without being condescending, all at the same time. His latest book, *What’s it all about?* is an attempt to answer what for many is the holy grail of philosophical questions: the meaning of life.

Baggini describes his approach as rationalist-humanist: ‘rationalist in the sense that it is guided by reasoned argument and not by intuition, revelation, appeals to authority or superstition. It is humanistic in that it claims human life contains the source and measure of its own value.’ (p 174) This book stands in the tradition of good short, non-specialist works by humanist thinkers; books like *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930) by Bertrand Russell, *What are we to do with our lives?* (1931) by H. G. Wells, *Ethics for Unbelievers* (1948) by Amber Blanco White, *How are we to live?* (1993) by Peter Singer and *The Courage to Become* (1997) by Paul Kurtz. More than these books, Baggini balances commentary on mainstream philosophers with references to films, popular culture, and other examples of what gets called real life.

Each chapter deals methodically with one of the main approaches to the question of life’s meaning. Searching for meaning by going back to root causes, to origins, is examined, and found wanting. So is projecting meaning into the future. Faith is shown to be risky as well as faulty. These are all relatively well-worn paths. Where Baggini embarks on newer territory is when he examines notions such as finding meaning in service to others. The apparently uncomplicated goodness of that ideal is shown to be built on sand. Other ideas, often expressed, like “it doesn’t matter, so long as you’re happy,” or “to hell with the questions, just live for the day,” are also exposed to scrutiny.

Baggini resists two temptations which often mar the pop-psychology type of self-help book. He offers no list of commandments or maxims for the prosecution of a better life. All that can properly be given is a framework rather than a complete instruction manual. Neither does he contrive some dramatic breakthrough to a new level of understanding. He reminds us, wisely, that if there was a single, big secret to the meaning of life, we would probably have heard about it by now. (pp 2-3) What we get is a sensible, entertaining and sound discussion of most of the arguments for this or that view of the meaning of life. The spirit of this book is best exemplified when he says that it ‘does not require a belief in God to feel thankful to be alive or to appreciate that not everything in life is for us to determine.’ (p 180) *What’s it all about?* is well worth reading.

Bill Cooke

Bill Cooke is Senior Lecturer, School of Visual Arts, University of Auckland at Manukau; author of *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism and Humanism* (reviewed on page 8); editor of *The Open Society*; convenor of the Auckland branch of Sea of Faith; and will be a Keynote Speaker at the 2006 Conference.

You can read a column by Julian Baggini at <http://butterfliesandwheels.com> and an article by him in the next Newsletter in which he suggests that “the attractions of religion has nothing to do with its truth as mythos or logos, but for the attitudes towards the world, life and others [which] it fosters



Calvin and Hobbes: Bill Watterson



The New Believers: Re-Imagining God

by Rachael Kohn; Harper-Collins; 2003
Reviewed by Ian Crumpton of Christchurch

RACHAEL KOHN, A KEYNOTE SPEAKER at the 2005 conference, is a religious journalist with a strong academic background. Her book is a survey of contemporary developments across the world's major faiths and across the world.

She begins with the **"re-invention of the self"** exemplified by Frank Baum – writer of *"The Wizard of Oz"* – and his theosophical views, typical of New Age religions, which see themselves as more evolved than traditional believers; not religious, but searchers after truth, seeking, not God, but the essence of God. She contrasts Carlyle's interest in the heroic figure with Mill's emphasis on the moral and legal justice underpinning social change.

The chapter on **"Re-writing the Bible"** describes the work of Robert Funk and the Westar Institute, continuing the Enlightenment questioning of much of the traditional interpretation of Scripture. Such doctrines as the Virgin Birth, the bodily resurrection, indeed all supernaturalism and divinisation of Jesus are stripped away, as accretions of tradition. The heading **"Re-writing"** the Bible is misleading. It is more a re-interpreting, an application of critical historical method to the text. The work of Geza Vermes, Rudolph Bultman, John Dominic Crossan, and the popularising work of John Spong are all evaluated. Spong's *"New Christianity,"* she claims, bears little relationship to the faith of the New Testament. In Kohn's view, Spong's *"God beyond theism"* amounts to little more than a radical call to love.

"Returning to the mother" begins by describing the work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton: *"The Women's Bible"* of 1895. Twenty-three women scholars contributed articles. The work was linked to women's current political aspirations. Kohn then traces the slow progress of women in social, political and religious life. She notes the distinctive nature of female ministry.

"Restoring the Earth" describes the powerful *"eco-theology"* development, including attempts to re-interpret the Bible in the light of an ecological concern, and the work of people like David Suzuki, Thomas Berry, and Matthew Fox. Kohn sees value in their work as *"providing an opening to environmentalism through the back door of the church"* (p.67). She regards scientists like James Lovelock, with his *"Gaia"* hypothesis, as the movement's most authentic spiritual innovators.

New trends in **Judaism and Buddhism** are discussed, showing how each has developed to meet the spiritual needs of the west. People like Stephen Batchelor re-package the faith for western consumption.

The kabbalistic mystical tradition of Judaism has been important (p.112): we are immersed in a *"sea of miracles."*

"Re-souling Psychology" begins with analysis of Freud's rejection of religion as *"obsessional neurosis"*; by contrast, Jung valued the mythical *"collective unconscious"*, while rejecting with Freud, religion that trades on fear and guilt. *"Spiritual psychology"* was developed by Robert Sardello and others, some like Thomas Moore (p.132), blending Buddhism and psychology. *"Removing Morality"* discusses Neale Donald Walsch's popular series: *"Conversations with God"* They might be summed up in one phrase: *"Go with the flow."* His is a doctrineless, freewheeling approach to being who you are. Don Cupitt, Kohn claims, casts faith in the same vein, but employs a more academic style. There is not one true morality, but many ethical systems. *"Life-style rules."* In Nietzsche's terms, morality is dead: nihilism is the permanent human

condition (p.143). Zen Buddhism has honed this way of living to a fine art: *"Living with the nothing."*

"Re-claiming Moral Sense" Looks at the changing attitudes towards animals in the light of modern behavioural studies. We see ourselves much more as part of the animal kingdom, not over-against it. Our perceptions, attitudes, morality, and complex relationships are evolving. The rise of science over the last two hundred years has dampened belief in the supernatural. J.B. Haldane, for example grasped the fact that the miraculous accompanies many religions, but does not constitute them. Religion's real power is in the persuasion of its ethic, for which it does not need recourse to miracle or supernaturalism. It is the stronger when grounded in contemporary understanding.

If the bulk of this book is analytical, detached, and journalistic, it is in the last two chapters that Rachael summarises and comments on contemporary trends in religion.

"Redeeming Religion from Itself (cults don't think)" Religiously inspired terrorism, Kohn says, shows just how important and precious are the religious reforms secured in the West over hundreds of years. Critical scrutiny must be applied to religions, as to other areas of life. Education and the cultivation of the mind is vital. If this is to happen. The movement that formed to promote *"The Fundamentals"* of faith tried to return to what was seen as the essentials of faith. Modernists were re-formulating faith in the light of modern scientific and philosophical understanding. Schweitzer saw faith residing in human understanding; saw the danger of the dead hand of bureaucracy in religion: *"Christianity cannot take the place of thinking, but must be founded on it."* A combination of rational thought and faith was essential, he thought. *"Reverence for life"* was the hallmark of his faith – as indeed it is of Cupitt's. Hans Kung picked up the task of articulating a religious agenda for our time: In 1993 he launched his *"New World Ethic for Global Responsibility."* He was seeking to express something all could agree to. He came up with: autonomy of the person; self criticism as necessary for religious dialogue; and a theology of peace... in short, a humanistic advocacy.

But the modern religious scene, Kohn points out, is dominated by a spirit of sectarian hatred, currently spreading most strongly through the Islamic world. It is similar to the spirit which underlay Nazi attitudes. What Kohn fails to point out is that this attitude should be no surprise. It clearly results from decades of colonial exploitation and playing off factions against each other. Religious life is always in danger of descending into an anti-human system which it insulates itself from thinking and progress. And in the West, Kohn points to such moral collapses as that of Enron and World.com; the moral lapses of some religious leaders, and the double standards that hold up certain ideals of business or family life, when the reality is something else. There is considerable dissention within many religions today. And groups will use interfaith events as a stage on which to present a sanitised face to gain more broad acceptance.

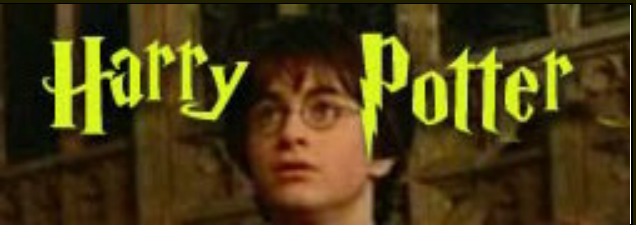
Despite all these weaknesses, Kohn sees religious faith as a vital part of the human scene, of most value when accountability, mutual respect, sacrifice and courage are all part of its expression.

Ian Crumpton

The Magical World of

Some Observations by
Laurie Chisholm of Christchurch

Harry Potter



As a father of eight-year-old twin boys, I've had quite a bit of exposure to Harry Potter.

I've read the books to them, gone with them to the movies, and bought them the video or DVD. From the start, I was captivated by the beginning of the story. As almost everyone knows, Harry has an unhappy life in an awful family, but it turns out that he is in fact a magician with special gifts, and in spite of everything that the family does to keep him in his place, he is whisked away to a different world, the Hogwarts School of Magic. This is the beginning of the hero's journey, a central religious concept for Joseph Campbell.

At first, I found the magic dominating, and it rather put me off. However, as time went on, I came to view it simply as a literary device that helps to make the stories entertaining and interesting. What is basically a story of life in a British boarding school is made more interesting and entertaining by its transformation into a magical world of Quidditch instead of rugby, of Potions instead of Chemistry, of Fizzing Whizzbees instead of peppermints.

Really, it's not the magic that attracts me in Rowling's writing, its her portrayal of what's involved in being human. Harry Potter must deal with the many challenges of life - suffering injustices from teachers, taunting by fellow-students, and, later, the mysterious phenomenon of girls and their attraction. His development is central to the series, but there are many interesting side-shows as well. Hermione Granger, the girly swot, Ron Weasley, the loyal friend, Rita Skeeter, the unscrupulous journalist, Cornelius Fudge, the politician in denial, Sirius Black, Harry's father-substitute, and, most importantly, Albus Dumbledore the headmaster, a wonderfully warm, supportive and benevolent grandfather figure. It is in the rich interactions with these and many more, that Harry grows and matures.

Some conservative Christians respond to this magical world with fear. Maybe our young people will be led into witchcraft by these books. Doesn't the bible condemn the practice of magic? Isn't it safest to have nothing to do with them? I'm struck by the way this reveals a fearfulness in those who declare that faith is so important to them. Far from trusting in God, they turn out to be afraid of all sorts of dark powers whose reality is for most of us at best doubtful. The simple fact that J K Rowling herself does not believe in magic should help to calm them down. There's no plot to turn our youngsters over to the dark side! Admittedly, it's true that Harry Potter has influenced the imaginative world of my boys. As well as shooting with guns and fighting with light sabres, they point wands while issuing incantations. But I see this as an expansion of their imaginative world, not as something sinister.

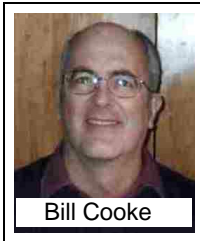
However, the controversy they have stirred up about the Harry Potter novels does raise questions about magic and its relation to religion. I happened upon a description of Nietzsche's concept of the will to power. He sees the will to power as something that science, religion, and magic have in common. Religion pictures the world as in control of a personal God or gods who can be influenced by prayers. Magic pictures the world as the domain of impersonal forces (some good and some evil) that can be harnessed by spells and incantations. In both, the will to power was focussed on dealing with the enormous complex of arbitrary occurrences that is nature. But the advent and triumph of science means that nature does not hold the same anxiety-producing unpredictability for us. Nature is now something regular and understood and we no longer see the point in either religion (in this sense) or in magic. In order to get what they want, people have recited magical formulae, petitioned the Lord of the universe, and conducted experiments to determine the scientific laws that underly what happens. The last of these three has undoubtedly been the most effective and it fundamentally challenges both religion and magic. Instead of being upset over Harry Potter, conservative Christians would do better to engage in the issues that modern science raises in relation to their faith. Instead of a fundamentalist clinging to old world views we need a courageous re-thinking of religion in response to modernity, which of course is what Sea of Faith is all about.

If there's anything that gives me cause for concern, its the division into good and evil, light and dark. Harry is engaged in a struggle to the death with the evil Lord Voldemort. His whole world is divided into those who are in his service and those who aren't. The rivalry and conflict between Harry Potter and his friends and Draco Malfoy and his friends are not seen as a natural 'us and them' phenomenon with good and bad on both sides but as a reflection of a cosmic struggle between absolute good and absolute evil. Of course, this is not unique to Harry Potter - it is axiomatic to Star Wars and Lord of the Rings and innumerable other stories. But there is a real danger when this mythological dualism is projected onto actual people.

My desire would be to see a Harry Potter who instead of triumphing over the evil ones engages with them and 'redeems' them by enabling their true person to emerge from the distortions brought about by fear and hatred and the misuse of power.

Laurie Chisholm





Bill Cooke

Atheism, Skepticism & Humanism

Bill Cooke, *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism & Humanism*, Prometheus Books, 2006. Reviewed by Lloyd Geering

Most dictionaries of this kind are compiled by an editor, who having decided on the entries to be included then parcels them out to a team of experts to write the articles.

Bill Cooke has carried through this immense task by himself, writing all but one entry. Since it runs to 606 pages and there are two to three entries to a page there must be about 1,500 entries in all. One can only marvel at the industry behind this production; not surprisingly it results from ‘thirty years of eclectic reading’.

Bill says the dictionary is not intended to convert readers to atheism or humanism but to show how freethinkers of every persuasion have valuable things to say about a whole host of issues. To this end he offers ‘a quick thumbnail sketch on many phrases, ideas, topics or persons’. The reader is alerted to useful cross-references by words in bold type and entries often end with titles of books for further reading. The dictionary concludes with an interesting calendar of important dates.

How well has Bill achieved his project? I have sampled many entries with great interest. What to select and what to ignore is, of course, always a problem with a dictionary of this kind. I wondered, for example, why he included entries on ‘Mathematics’, ‘Arms Trade’, Hitler, and Michael Savage, and did not include articles on Roger Bacon, Francis Bacon, John Toland, and Matthew Tindal. Why is there a full entry on Maurice Gee? But only a brief reference in it to his grandfather, James Chapple (immortalised as Plumb), when for this dictionary the emphasis could well have been reversed. Perhaps more serious is the omission of Auguste Comte, whose positivist philosophy is often said to be ‘Catholicism minus Christianity’.

Most that I read (and I chose those I know something about) were clear and informative. But, in spite of not intending to convert readers to scepticism, Bill nevertheless makes quite clear, from time to time, what his own views are. For example, in the entry on ‘reincarnation’ Bill not only describes what the word means but goes on to explain why the belief is faulty. He is understandably critical of the New Age Movement but is overcritical in asserting that the Gaia hypothesis of the scientist James Lovelock has ‘quickly degenerated into a New Age hodgepodge’.

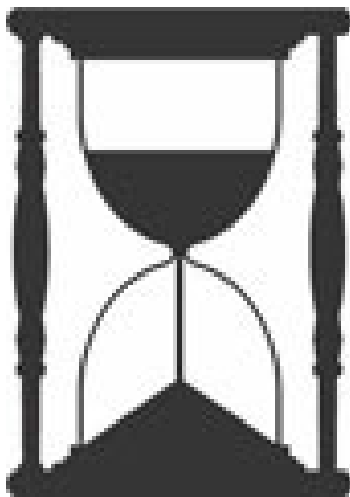
But it is also easy for a reviewer to be too critical and not appreciate what an enormous task Bill set himself. So, in spite of what I have said, I believe Bill’s Dictionary fills a real gap and I shall value it as a useful companion to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church and my other dictionaries on religion.

Lloyd Geering.

In Brief

The early bird catches the worm. The second mouse gets the cheese.

Street Blackboard Sign, Wellington April 2006



**2006 Subs are due
by July 1**

Next Newsletter: July 2006
It will include a Conference
Registration document
If you want to write something for
this Newsletter then please be aware
that copy deadline is 5 June 2006

“God: Creator or Created?”

**Sea of Faith In Australia
Second National Conference**

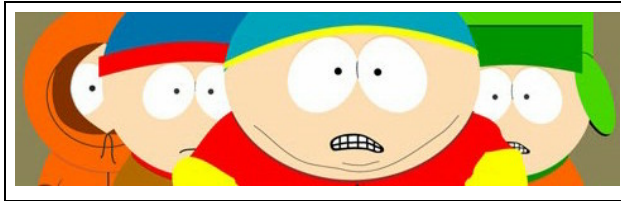
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**“The great
question ...
which I have
not been
able to
answer,
despite my
thirty years
of research
into the
female soul,
is “What
does a
woman
want?”**

*Sigmund Freud
whose 150th
birthday is
on May 6.*



The Episode of “Bloody Mary”

When Canwest brought forward the screening date of the “Bloody Mary” episode of the comedy-satire cartoon *Southpark* from May to late February, they must have been aware that the sooner they got it over with the better. And there was a lot to get over.

Most reviewers of the programme and most correspondents have gagged on the ‘yuckie’ bits and failed to acknowledge a better-than-average satire. In the opinion of this viewer the programme was, at the same time, both very bad and quite good.

First, the bad. By showing a statue of the Virgin Mary menstruating they crossed a line of the general public perception of what may decently be depicted. There may be an additional problem for devotees of the Virgin Mary in that it depicts her doing a very human thing which reduces the distance between her and us, in that vertical scale often applied in spiritual matters.

Now for the good — some of which might, paradoxically, have been additional grounds for disagreeing with the programme. In order to show some of the considerable strengths possessed by the programme, I need to precis the plot line.

A thirty-something male, gets convicted for drink-driving and is ordered by the court to attend meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. There he is required to affirm a creed which asserts that not only does he have a ‘disease’ but that he can handle it only with the help of a ‘higher power’. He has an eight-year old son who is wise beyond his years and the voice of Reason in the programme. The son tells his father that he does not have a ‘disease’ and that he should, in effect, take charge of his life.

A statue of the Virgin Mary, in the grounds of a church, begins to ooze blood. At this point in the story the blood is assumed to be coming “out of her arse”. This proves later to be an important detail.

Many people regard this blood as a miracle and some queue up to file past the statue and have some of the blood smeared on themselves in order to be cured. Many immediately leap for joy (some shout “praise Jesus”, which is unusual in a Roman Catholic context) and feel that they are cured. Our sobered-up hero too does that.

Enter Pope Benedict who, on inspecting the statue declares that it is in fact menstrual bleeding and that since “chicks bleed from their vaginas all the time” it is not a miracle. One might have thought that a statue bleeding at all was at least somewhat unusual, but that is overlooked in favour of the plotline which now speaks of a discredited miracle.

When those who believe that they have been cured hear this they feel that their cure could not be sustained and, as in the case of our hero, revert to their former condition.

There are at least three ‘institutions’ portrayed in the programme which are criticised by being lampooned.

First there is the ‘manhood’ motif which shows the drunken father instructing the son how to “pee in a bottle” while driving drunk. I think that it is important to acknowledge that, given the low prestige attached to the father, such practices are not being recommended by the programme.

The next to be criticised is Alcoholics Anonymous. The requirement to confess helplessness in the face of a problem and the surrender to the help of an otherwise un-named ‘higher power’ might strike many readers as an invitation to disown important elements of one’s life. At

least, that’s how the programme sees it.

The third criticism is not so much of religion or Christianity or even the Roman Catholic church. What attracts disapproval is the gullibility of those who flocked to the statue for a cure. That they should do that in the first place was, in the eyes of the programme, foolish enough but what really gets lampooned is the reversion to former behaviour after the ‘miracle’ is formally discredited by the Pope.

The depiction of menstrual blood is likely to offend most viewers, men and women. The cavalier remark by the Pope — “chicks do it all the time” — is likely to switch off most Catholics and most women. The graphic depiction of the ‘miracle’ and its subsequent discrediting would further upset Catholics as would the implied criticism of AA upset their followers. Viewers need to choose for themselves whether the ‘yuckie’ bits are so bad that they obscure the critical observations made about male behaviour, engineered dependency and religious gullibility.

Surely it would have been possible to use the discrediting of a different ‘miracle’ to support the otherwise acceptable plot line. Like the earlier, ‘Virgin-In-A-Condom’ controversy, the programme makers knew the shock value of inharmoniously juxtaposing strongly iconic images. But, given the strength of the plot and that it could have used less inflammatory images, we must assume that the use of blood, from either supposed source, in connection with the central iconic figure of Roman Catholicism, was a gratuitous move by the programme makers.

In summary, a strange case of ‘very bad’ existing alongside ‘quite good’.

Noel Cheer

All About Us

The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) is an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression

from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.

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 regular Newsletter, maintains a website, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

We have two **Life Members**:

Lloyd Geering (since 2001) and Don Cupitt (since 2002).

The **Chairperson** is Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay, phone 04-236-7533

The **Secretary** is Mary Boekman, 138 Rata St, Inglewood, phone 06-756-7644

Membership of the national organisation costs \$15 per household per year (\$22 if outside NZ). Write your cheque to “SoF (NZ)” and mail to:

The Membership Secretary,

P.O. Box 35651, Browns Bay, Auckland. (Phone 09-478-2490).

Members may borrow tapes, books etc from the **SoF Resource Centre** at 34 Briarley St, Tauranga. It is maintained by Suzi Thirlwall (07)578-2775

Further details can be found on our website at www.sof.org.nz

To offer a comment on any material appearing in the Newsletter or to submit copy for publication, contact the **Editor**:

Noel Cheer, 26 Clipper Street, Titahi Bay, Phone 04-236-7533, Fax 04-236-7534, email: noel@cheer.org.nz

The only copy appearing in this Newsletter that may be construed as reflecting SoF policy is that which is accompanied by a by-line of a member of the Steering Committee.

Optional Extras ...

“sofia” is 28 page A4, 6-times-a-year magazine produced by the UK SoF Network. To start your subscription, send \$53 to our Membership Secretary (address above). Renewal rates will be advised from the UK. Note that this is an option, additional to membership of Sea of Faith (NZ).

Many of the study booklets referred to in this Newsletter are available from The St Andrew’s Trust for the Study of Religion and Society www.standrews.org.nz/satrs/

Last Word

FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

PEOPLE OF FAITH

The textbook that we used in RELI101 had the title “Paths of Faith”. This name draws attention to the process of individual persons exercising personal faith, the definition of ‘religion’ favoured by Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

If it really is the case that “paths are made by walking”, then religious institutions and scriptures must be seen as historical accumulations of memoirs.

While it is not the case that the formal structures of these institutions — dogmatic, scriptural and architectural — lack value, it is rather that they lack the substance that they frequently claim for themselves. It is more the case that they, like we who are their subscribers (or un-subscribers, or non-subscribers), are creatures of time and place and accumulations of historical processes.

The Sea of Faith Network in New Zealand recently declined a suggestion that we offer our Network as a sponsor of marriage celebrants. Many organisations which consider themselves to be thoroughly non-religious do so, often as a way to show that they are an alternative to the dreaded ‘religion’. But we declined on the simpler grounds that such behaviour, again however valuable it is in itself, is typical of the degree of institutionalism that we want to avoid for SoF.

We are not a “path of faith”. When we meet, whether it is at Conference, or in our Local Groups or in the rag-tag Internet discussion list that all financial members are entitled* to participate in, we do so as individuals in terms of our faith and often as the closest of friends in the terms of our meeting. As “people of faith” we define each for our own selves what it is that is most important to us in shaping us, guiding us and explaining our lives to ourselves. Then we swap notes.

Like other, perhaps lesser, treasures in one’s life — books, food, sex and so on — religious faith is personal to one’s self and is expressed in personal terms. And sometimes also in good company!

Noel Cheer

Steering Committee Chairperson, 2005-2006

* send me an email: noel@cheer.org.nz

