

Number 77, July 2008

## Conference 2008 Ready To Roll!

**The structure of the Conference, the speakers and themes are now set in place.**

Given the current emphasis on ecological issues — with increasing disturbances in our daily lives from food, fuel and weather — we are set for some very timely discussions on our Conference theme **"The Ecological Imperative"**.

The shape and ethics of our lifestyles, how we might assist in the necessary adaptations and the spiritual resilience required are all likely to feature.

One organisational detail that I'd appreciate your cooperation in this. Would those of you who are coming to the Saturday night dinner please indicate in the Registration Form whether or not you want to use the complementary buses for the 7 km journey — or travel independently. We plan to have enough buses for those who want that option leaving from the Combined Clubs and returning there — but we need to know the numbers beforehand. Nobilo's Dryland Winery is located on Hammerich's Road.

The Conference is now in your hands and we look forward to welcoming you to Marlborough.

**Just fill-in and mail-in the attached Registration Form!**

**John Craighead,**  
**Chairperson, 2008 Arrangements**  
**Committee**



### Notice of The Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting of the Sea of Faith Network (NZ) (Inc) will be held at 4.00pm on Saturday 27th of September 2008, at this year's Annual Conference Venue: The Clubs of Marlborough, Blenheim.

Remits for the AGM should be sent to the secretary by September 14th. They will then be circulated in the Conference packs.

Please note that only financial members may submit a remit, or vote during the AGM.

Mary Boekman, Secretary, 138 Rata St, Inglewood, Taranaki, 4330  
 e-mail: bboekman@clear.net.nz

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# Book Reviews

*A Review by Lloyd Geering*

## On Looking for Jesus

David Boulton

*Who on EARTH was JESUS?*

*The Modern Quest for the Jesus of History.*

O Books 2008

Distributed in New Zealand by Peaceful Living

books@peaceful-living.co.nz

phone (09) 921 6222

**This is not a life of Jesus but the story of how scholars, particularly in the 20th century, have been trying to construct from the extant evidence a reliable picture of the original historical figure.**

The story began in the 18th century when Reimarus showed that the Gospels could not be taken as reliable history. Then in 1835 David Strauss, after demonstrating that the Gospels are a blend of history, legend and myth, drew a sharp distinction between the 'Jesus of history' and 'the Christ of faith'. The search for the 'Jesus of history' then began in earnest. In 1906 Albert Schweitzer surveyed that search to date in his *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, concluding that the original figure of Jesus has mostly been lost forever.

Only slowly did a second search begin in the 20th century. It is this story that David Boulton tells, doing for the 20th century what Schweitzer did for the 19th century. Boulton has a long association with the Sea of Faith, having been the first editor of the Journal of the UK SoF and coming from a Quaker and humanist background. His last book was *The Trouble with God*. He is not a New Testament scholar and describes himself as 'an investigative journalist': in fact he is a skilful and lucid writer who already has a number of books to his credit. This book, written in a conversational style and with some humour, is much more readable than that of Schweitzer and eminently suitable for the general reader.

The 20th century brought a

number of important discoveries, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi documents. The latter led to the acceptance of the Gospel of Thomas as a source to be taken seriously. So the second search has cast its net much wider than the Gospels; it has paid more attention to the world in which Jesus lived and in which Christianity came to birth. In his Part I, therefore, Boulton surveys all of the sources now used by scholars in the search for Jesus.

In Part II (the major section of the book) Boulton sketches the wide spectrum of interpretations of Jesus that are all based on these sources. Just because Boulton makes no pretence to be a scholar and because there is such a variety of views on the subject of Jesus in the academic world, he does not espouse any particular one, but presents them all as clearly as he can, leaving readers to come to their own conclusions.

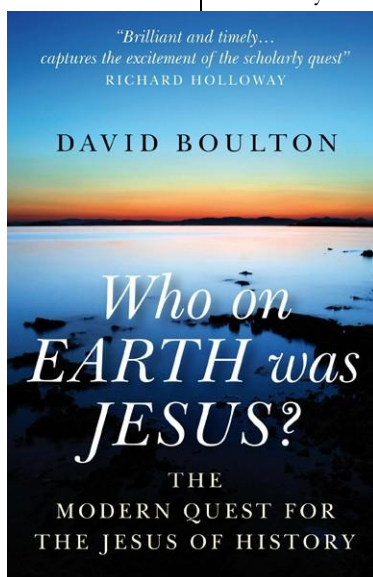
Not surprisingly the Jesus Seminar and its scholars are deservedly given a good deal of prominence. Even though it claims to have uncovered no more than 'the voice-prints and footprints of Jesus' it concludes that Jesus was a Jewish sage, rather than a divine figure and worker of miracles. But Boulton also presents, and very fairly, the views of many others — conservative scholars like N.T.Wright and the Pope, Jewish scholars such as Geza Vermes and Hyam Maccoby and, at the other extreme, G.A.Wells, who has long contended that Jesus was not a historical figure at all but a fictional invention of the church.

Boulton has been working on this project for over ten years and has performed a great service for

the general reader who has neither the time nor the energy to read all the books now available on the topic. It thoroughly deserves the warm commendation of such an able and well-known scholar as Marcus Borg, who described it as 'The best and most thorough account of the breadth and variety of historical Jesus scholarship'.

*Lloyd Geering*

[In Newsletter 75 we featured a review by Richard Holloway. Given the quality of this book we felt that it deserved another exposure - ed]





## *A review by Shirley Dixon* **Of Babies and Bathwater**

### ***Preaching Post-Theism***

written and published by David Simmers  
Available from 140 Cecil Rd, Wadestown, Wellington  
April 2008, \$14 + \$1 p&P  
ISBN 978-0-473-13407-5

**Recent books such as Bishop John Shelby Spong's *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, which aims to 'recover the divine at the heart of the human', do an excellent task of deconstructing Christianity in light of a contemporary world view and of religious and Biblical scholarship of the past century and a half.**

But there is little discussion of the shape that a Christian life might take – if it is to be maintained within the church – as a consequence of adopting such a non-theistic approach. Whether such a new form is even possible is still open for speculation, and only time will tell if the Christian church – or perhaps a part of it – may eventually reform itself to embrace a non-theistic view of the teachings of Jesus and the wisdom of the Bible.

David Simmers' *Preaching Post-Theism* suggests what some aspects of such a reformed christian life might be. (He always uses a small 'c'.) David does not specifically define the term 'post-theism', but he makes several indicative comments: the "approach of a number of contemporary theologians", "these 'radical' ideas", "the new, more 'secular' approach". Nor does David state why he prefers to prefix 'theism' with 'post-' rather than the more usual 'non', but my reading of his book would suggest that it is because he does not want to throw God out, as it were, with the bath water, but rather to work from the human end and to determine what can be found out about God, the divine and the purposes and meanings of our lives when approaching from that direction.

David is a New Zealander who was a Rhodes Scholar and then a Presbyterian minister, but when he grappled with the ideas of Lloyd Geering and Don Cupitt he realised that if he took these ideas seriously, he would have to completely revise his approach to christianity. However, he – like so many others – had little idea of how to do this. Out of conscience, David resigned from his parish and took a secular job, but over the years he continued to preach occasionally, and each chapter of *Preaching Post-Theism* is a sermon from these later years.

As a non-church attender I do not make a habit of listening to or reading sermons, but I found David's short, thoughtful homilies, which are written in a most accessible style, both uplifting and thought-provoking.

David is a thinking and compassionate man who struggles both mentally and practically to find a way in which to daily live his life in light of the precepts of Jesus. His book is a meditation on and a reflection of his beliefs and faith. Rather than preaching an official line, he is open about his struggles with his faith as a christian. He does not try to resolve every inconsistency, and accepts that some things in the gospels and christian tradition are just plain wrong. And here I found David's references to books that have influenced him particularly helpful. David looks for the essential messages that are able to act as pointers as to how one might live daily as a christian in the contemporary world and create meaning and purpose in one's life while doing so.

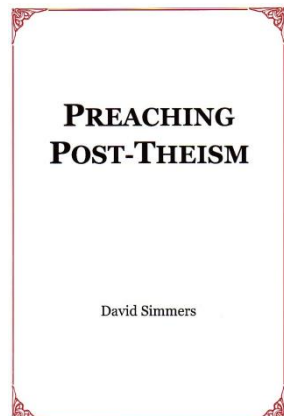
*Shirley Dixon, Titahi Bay*

### ***Some excerpts:***

"Most sermons start with the Bible text and then move on to its relevance for us today – starting from the top as it were, from the revelation of God in the Bible, and working down to our experience here and now. But it is also possible to work the other way, from the bottom up, starting with everyday experience, and pondering it until it reveals something of its inner meaning, something about God."

"And then there is love, the greatest of the three. It is the option our faith decides for, the good our hope strives for. Such a little word, such a hackneyed word – but so inexhaustible in the possible ways it may be expressed."

"I still felt (and feel) that christian faith can be expressed in a way that takes account of the new age in which we live; but it is a very difficult and challenging task, especially if you want to do it within the ordinary life of an ordinary congregation and take people with you rather than create havoc."







A review by Noel Cheer

## The Human Origins of Standards of Behaviour

**From Morality to MetaEthics**

**F. N. Fastier**

**Amidine Publications**

**Dunedin**

ISBN 978-0-473-12513-4

**Emeritus Professor Fred Fastier** was the inaugural Professor of Pharmacy at the University of Otago and served the Medical School for forty years from 1939, winning international recognition for a long list of academic publications. After retiring from teaching, Fred became a full-time student again, gaining an M.A. in philosophy. In this book he explains that he became increasingly interested in ethics and especially in the classical expositions of the subject. He was greatly influenced by the 19th Century American pragmatist, C.P. Peirce.

This reviewer's heart leapt for joy when he read that the author did not causally equate morals and ethics as seems to have become the mode. 'Ethics' is the theoretical consideration of how we *ought* to act, while 'morals' is the quality of the behaviour of what we *actually* do. Fred sets this out (on page 7) by allowing that a person could profess 'high ethical standards' while exhibiting 'loose morals'.

While ethics prescribes specific behaviours as appropriate to our moral activity, meta-ethics takes us up one level of investigation and asks what is there about a particular behaviour that would qualify it to be ethically desirable. Ethics is normative ('do this') — while meta-ethics is analytical ('why you should do this.').

The book is just on 100 pages long with the last thirty given over to Appendices and Index. The first thirty pages consist of prefatory pieces including 'The Impact of Science' — a set of lush mini-essays which deliver us to the door of meta-physics, a sort of top-down view of scientific knowledge.

The stepping-stone through this door is the notion of freewill. A purely mechanistic

(reductionist, materialist) view of the brain and mind (Fred comes uncomfortable close to eliding these) would deprive us of freewill and render any notion of ethics untenable. I think that that is why a large number of pages is given over to scientific facts — to show that either there *is* room for freewill within scientific knowledge (for example through emergent properties) or that scientific knowledge will always be incomplete. I suspect that that is one of the reasons why, in the author's scheme of things we need to take on the history of science in such detail — to show that science, though very powerful, is an empirical regime that cannot provide all the answers. But see also the longish article on page 8 of this Newsletter. (The other reason, I suspect in this word-processing world in which I too, move, is that he had a lot of good material already on hand!)

In the chapter 'Justification of Sanctions' (which, like all chapters, is given a number only in the Contents!) Fred takes us through the development of the various bases for ethics — natural law,

positive law, social contract, criminal law, civil law and ends with three curios 'vice', 'harm' and 'hazard'.

The next chapter comments on Hume's ruminations on the confusion so often made between 'ought' and 'is' — you can't, says Hume, automatically know *what to do* just because you know *some facts* about the world. Its

then an easy road to asking where in fact we get our ethical values from — and the SoF audience which Fred justifiably reckons will like this book will delight in his distinction between fideists (obedient to doctrine), humanists (values are natural) and pragmatists (hey, stop arguing and just get on with it — my characterisation, not Fred's!). Tertullian's 'I believe in order that I might understand' gets short shrift — its 'the work of a dimwit'.

Other sources of ethical values are surveyed and evaluated. In the end we are left with a set of opinions that suggest, to this reviewer, that we humans just muddle on and get it about right — most of the time

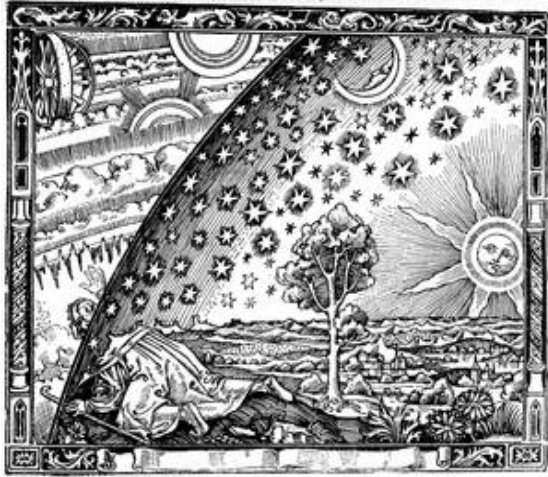
**Noel Cheer, Titahi Bay**

### FROM MORALITY TO METAETHICS



## Is There An Outside?

The “**Flammarion Woodcut**” is an anonymous wood engraving (once thought to be a woodcut), so named because its first documented appearance is in Camille Flammarion's 1888 book *L'atmosphère: Météorologie Populaire* ("The Atmosphere: Popular Meteorology").



Un missionnaire du moyen âge raconte qu'il avait trouvé le point où le ciel et la Terre se touchent...

The print depicts a man, dressed as a medieval pilgrim and carrying a pilgrim's staff, peering through the sky as if it were a curtain, to look at the hidden workings of the universe.

One writer who disputes this approach is Don Cupitt with his concept of “Outsidelessness”. The following excerpts are from chapter 10 of his book *The Great Questions of Life* (Polebridge Press 2005).

“The idea that life is outsideless may be compared with the idea in modern physical cosmology that the universe is finite but unbounded. ... We are quite clear that Earth is a sphere and that the surface of a sphere is a finite area without any boundaries, we can easily see that Earth doesn't literally have any corners or ends or edges at all. ... [so that] ... if you set off in a straight line around the world in any direction, you will after only about 25,000 miles find yourself back at your starting point.

Modern physical cosmology simply presents us with a three-dimensional version of the same idea. Three-dimensional space is, as it were, curved in such a way that again, if you set off in a straight line you will eventually return to your starting point. It is finite but unbounded: you never come to an edge, and it has no outside. ...

[T]his analogy shows how one may claim that the human lifeworld is finite but unbounded. You shouldn't think of needing to go outside it to explain its endless variety, and you shouldn't even try. **Life is such that we are always in the midst of it, and never on the rim — a consideration that makes any idea of a super- natural order redundant.** Finite but unbounded, all-inclusive, baggy and shapeless, including all the opposites of happiness and misery, good and ill-fortune, and including all the faiths, all the philosophies, and all the political ideologies, life is everything. It just goes on endlessly in all directions. Like marriage but even more so, it has to be accepted as a package deal. You can't pick and choose. What life is, is best reflected in our modern totalizing art forms — the novel, the feature film, the soap opera, the Sunday newspaper. ... There are no secret doorways: life is a continuum.”

## A PostModern Creed

This the concluding chapter of *Postmodernism* by Kevin O'Donnell, published by Lion Publishing. While postmodernism is not approved of (by all SoF members) or even understood (by anybody), the following ideas are worth considering.

### **Be open.**

Be open to life. Be open to ideas. Be open to love.

### **Be open to the call and presence of the other.**

You are not alone, sealed up, a living prison cell. You are open at the edges to other people. We find ourselves in giving up something to the other. This is true freedom.

### **Appreciate the gift.**

The life that flows through you and that you flow within is a gift. Be thankful for what is given to you. This world is not a consumer paradise, a green and blue shopping mall, that we can rape and pillage as we wish. Life is more than commodities. The illusion of control is always with us. We are not in command of our destiny, or this planet. Not really. It happens to us. Flow.

### **Be tolerant of others and their views.**

Feel free to disagree, but always let them have space to be. Avoid doctrinaire, totalitarian systems. They hurt people. That does not mean that you cannot hold strong views, deeply valued principles and ideas. By all means do so. Feel them, from the heart. Just allow others space to be too.

### **What we think there is might not always be the case.**

Sometimes our glasses have misted over and the lenses distort reality. Always be open, never think it is all sewn up. You have not and cannot have all the answers. Do not try to catch the universe in your mind. It is like the boy who thought he could put the sea in a bucket! There is always more. Always.

### **Do not be afraid of Big Things.**

When challenged and engulfed by a 'big system', take out your deconstruction tools and see it fall apart like unscrewed Meccano. Recognize the cultural influences, the power plays. Spot the slippages.

### **Love is.**

Do not doubt that we run on that. It is soul-forming. Love is prior to language and all belief systems. Love is. It draws us out, on, beyond. It turns the head of Narcissus if received rightly.

### **Feel the mystery blowing in your face.**

It is all right to be perplexed and awestruck. Be open to the unknown. There is that which we cannot represent adequately. Feel free to call that 'God' if you wish. You can believe if you want. Face the void. What is life, what are our fleeting selves, what is meaning? It is bigger than we are.

### **Life is not a random free-for-all.**

This is so, even though there are many theories and viewpoints. What we do to others matters to them and to us. Kill a man and you kill yourself, within. We are all connected. Existence is societal. Respecting the other, the gift, involves ethics. How we act matters.

### **Look into your soul, into your secret place.**

Feel the *chora* within, that deep, dark mystery self, full of drives and playfulness.

Recognize yourself.

Seek light.

Connect.

# Ideas from “The Last Western Heretic”

**"We need to go beyond the boundaries to see what is beyond the boundaries."**

**"We are all heretics, we are free to think for ourselves."**

Nine "Ideas" were presented in the TVNZ documentary of that title which featured Lloyd Geering. Alan Goss of Napier made this summary in which there is some re-wording and additions intended to facilitate discussion.

## **Idea 1: God is a symbol, not a Being. God has no body, is not a thing.**

- God cannot be defined, the question "Is there or is there not a God?" is therefore meaningless.
- Human culture has evolved and changed over time especially through language. Ideas about God have also changed. Once regarded as a class of human being God can now be understood as the total process of creativity (from the Big Bang to the present age). God is also a symbol for our highest human values and aspirations, e.g. God is love.

**Both point to a transforming Presence or power at work in the universe.**

## **Idea 2: Jesus was not divine.**

- Jesus was a human person, a man of wisdom, a sage.
- The divinity of Jesus is an invention of the Church.
- The first followers of Jesus never regarded him as divine
- Paul described Jesus as divine. This resulted in tension between the Jews and the Gentiles. Orthodox Christianity is a Gentile distortion of the original Jesus.
- Jesus' parables are at the centre of the Christian tradition. The parables encourage us to think for ourselves, to find our own solutions to life's problems and challenges.

**We should question our religious traditions.**

## **Idea 3: The resurrection is symbolic, not an actual historical event.**

- Jesus is pictured as being raised from the underworld of God to the overworld of God.
- The resurrection story is not to be taken literally.
- The heavenly places have disappeared from reality.
- Re the 1967 "Heresy Trial": The real issues, e.g. whether man has or does not have an immortal soul, were never debated. The Church had no organ to disseminate theological questions. The chief concern of the Assembly was that the controversy might "disturb the peace and unity of the Church". The "sleepiness" of the Church was really of much greater concern.

## **Idea 4: There is no life after death.**

- Death is the end of our existence here on earth.
- The Bible maintains that when we're dead, we're dead.
- The Pharisees revived the idea of Judgment, the end of the world is nigh. People will be rewarded or punished in the future life according to their behaviour in this present age.
- The idea of life after death reached its apex in medieval times. In the modern era this idea has collapsed, — e.g. funeral services are now celebrations of the life of the deceased.

## **Idea 5: The Bible is not divinely inspired.**

- Most people, including Christians, do not see things in black and white. We are aware of the vast complexity of life and of human nature.
- The Bible was once appealed to as an absolute guide on moral and ethical issues. This can no longer be justified. "There are good and bad things in the Bible ... there is indeed a great deal of violence in the Bible — far more than there is in the Koran." [*On the Bible*, by Karen Armstrong].
- Science (= Knowledge) and the whole scientific enterprise is a new form of revelation.
- It is no longer possible to defend ancient scientific viewpoints (e.g. Genesis Ch.I) about the creation of the world which have proved inadequate for modern times. We need to give new meaning(s) to God to fit changed views of the world and the universe.
- The Bible is a very important book. It is a record of the beginnings of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and contains a record of the teaching of Jesus, especially in the parables.

## **Idea 6: Fundamentalism is a danger to the world, it is one of the great enemies of the future.**

- World cultures are changing rapidly and people feel more insecure. So fundamentalists fight against any attempts to secure a viable human future. They resist change.
- Fundamentalists have little or no concern for this world or for the preservation of the environment. They look forward to the End Times and to the Second Coming. They distort their very own religious traditions, viz. Christianity, Judaism, Islam and give them a bad name.
- The world situation is very fluid, very competitive. Global conflict is a real possibility. The human species is dominating the earth, it could explode and self-destruct.



**Idea 7: Religious belief evolved over time.**

- Our beliefs depend upon the century in which we live.
- We need to distinguish the difference between faith and belief. Beliefs have changed over time. Faith means trust - in one's fellows, in family, in friends, in humanity, in society, in the world.
- There is much superstition in traditional Christianity, e.g. individual prayers to a heavenly deity soliciting divine favour. This is now a superstition, i.e. a belief once held that is no longer tenable. Corporate prayer, which is a vehicle for meditation, is more realistic; people are called to think things through together with others.

**Idea 8: We need a new ethic and new rituals.**

- Christendom no longer exists. The hope that the Church would renew itself has proved a vain hope. The movements for reform are now taking place outside the institutional churches, often in smaller less structured groupings.
- The Christian Year provided opportunity for people to experience elements of the Christian tradition. However,
  - Easter: is now a secular holiday
  - Christmas: customs are changing, fewer celebrate it as an historic event. It is now a family festival where relationships can be renewed.
  - Funeral Services: have become secularised. What was formerly a send-off to another world is now a celebration of a person's life.
- In a global culture we need appropriate rituals to express our togetherness. These rituals will revolve around the world of nature, its acts and its creativity. The Feast of Holy Communion will be celebrated to express the sacred character of human relationships. This is how it began.

**Idea 9: The new God is our Planet Earth.**

- The importance of myth is being recovered. Myth is a story or framework of thought used to express our togetherness and to help us determine reality in a positive way.
- The new myth focuses on the responsibility given to us to preserve life on earth.
- The new myth focuses on the greening of the earth and putting our faith in the world (Note: The world is bigger than the human species. It is possible that other life forms might take the place of the human species.)
- The 21st Century will be a century of crisis and judgment. We humans can destroy life on earth, e.g. war, pollution, over-population. We need to perpetuate life in all its forms.

**CONCLUSION Life is all about love.**

Love has to do with relationships, our togetherness with one another and our togetherness in the world.

**God is love.**

**Love is God.**

**"Love makes the world go round" (popular song).**

## Letter ...

The Chairperson, SoF, The Editor, Newsletter,  
The Steering Committee.

Dear Friends,

The documentary on "The Great Global Warming Swindle", screened on Prime TV (1st June 2008) has caused quite a stir in thinking circles.

These alternative scientists deserve some recognition in view of the almost religious fear of CO<sub>2</sub> that is rife at present.

Could something of it be included at conference or in the Newsletter? This need not negate in any way the need for care of the ecology and sustaining resources.

Best wishes, Hoping you will view this favourably  
Yours sincerely

**Margaret Whitwell**

## ... Response

Margaret,

Thank you for your letter to us.

The Ecological and associated Global Warming issues are highly topical in most forums at the present time. These issues are important to us as SoF members and as a Nation. The response to the Ecological and Global Warming issues by various groups to this debate is critical to us all, but none more so than the Political response to them.

Conference 2008 will address some of the Ecological debate from the Sea of Faith perspective in many guises albeit not so directly as the TV documentary or Al Gore's film.

We are unable to put the issue of the "Great Global Warming Debate" on the Conference 2008 Agenda as a separate item owing to the fact that the theme and outline of speakers for Conference 2008 has been finalised for some time — as you will see in the Conference 2008 Programme.

I would welcome further debate between members, local groups and other interested parties via newsletter and the website if members wish to pursue that.

It is important to us all and needs more intensive discussion. However that is probably beyond the remit of Sea of Faith as an organisation.

Please do continue to seek forums to expand knowledge on the Ecological Issues and keep this debate hot in election year.

Sincerely

**Norm Ely**

*[see also the article on page 8 of this Newsletter - ed]*

## FAITH IN CYBERSPACE

### The Gospel of Judas ...

... was made available with a flourish by The National Geographic Society in April 2006. Since then, controversy has erupted about the quality of translation and the inferences drawn. This is written up in an article at ChronicleReview.com at

<http://chronicle.com/free/v54/i38/38b00601.htm>

More background can be found at

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel\\_of\\_Judas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Judas)

### Short Video Talks

The website ted.com features short (10 minute to 30 minute) video talks by a variety of people on interesting subjects. There is an 18 minute talk by Karen Armstrong — an appeal for a world-wide movement in support of compassion.

[www.ted.com/speakers/view/id/208](http://www.ted.com/speakers/view/id/208)

### What Is Enlightenment?

A website called 'What Is Enlightenment?' contains articles on consciousness, evolution, environmentalism, feminism — all in a religion/spirituality context. One of the best of its kind. Its at [www.wie.org/](http://www.wie.org/) Read on ....

### Science as Faith

*The evolutionary theologian, John F. Haught was interviewed by WIE. Here are excerpts:*

“[T]he way we become aware of the infinite is not so much by knowing it as by allowing ourselves to be grasped by it. This often happens without people realizing it. For example, even a scientist is grasped by the value of the truth and surrenders his or her life to the pursuit of that truth. Whether they say so explicitly or not, I think many scientists, if not most, have made a commitment to something much larger than themselves that is inexhaustible. They realize that no matter how much they probe, the horizons will keep on receding. I associate that very closely with what theology refers to as religious experience. So we come in contact with this infinite horizon — which Augustine referred to as God — in very subtle ways that oftentimes we are

not aware of. Religion simply tries to make us more explicitly aware of, and especially grateful to, that horizon of depth, that horizon of an infinite future, a horizon of infinite beauty and truth that keeps calling us, that keeps addressing us, that keeps summoning us. And in doing so, it gives us vitality, life, and meaning.

So something religious is going on even in scientific work, not in the scientific information itself but in the commitment to the idea that the universe is intelligible and truth is worth seeking. Those are religious convictions. You can't prove scientifically that truth is worth seeking, but it's the conviction that it is worth seeking that underlies all good science. Religion lifts this up and makes it more explicit. It symbolically names that depth, that truth, that meaning, and refers to it in Western theology as God or Allah, or in Eastern thought as Brahman or Tao. People have always had different names in different cultures for this sense of an absolute that gives significance to their lives. The evidence for this dimension is not the same as scientific evidence, but I would not say that religion is simply a leap into the dark. Something tangibly and palpably grabs hold of religious people. We can call it “mystery” just to give it a general name.”

### The Great Global Warming Swindle

This is the name of a controversial documentary film which argues against the scientific consensus that human activity is the main cause of global warming. The film, made by British television producer Martin Durkin, showcases scientists, economists, politicians, writers, and others who are sceptical of the scientific consensus on anthropogenic global warming. The programme's publicity materials say that man-made global warming is "a lie" and "the biggest scam of modern times."

It played on New Zealand on Prime Television on June 1st and was followed by a panel discussion involving New Zealand protagonists.

An extensive article, including arguments from that panel discussion appear on Wikipedia at:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Great\\_Global\\_Warming\\_Swindle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Global_Warming_Swindle)

### New In The Resource Centre

*See page 12 for details of the Resource Centre*

- **B181:** *Falling for Science - Asking the Big Questions* by Bernard Beckett
- **B182:** *Preaching Post-Theism* - by David Simmers (see p3 for a review)



## IN MY VIEW

### NORM ELY, CHAIRPERSON 2007–2008

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#### The Sea of Faith

**Before we discuss who we are and where we are going, perhaps we need a reminder of where we have come from.**

At the Sea of Faith Conference 2007 we raised the issue of “Who Are We?”. By inference and in part in the Questionnaire we asked the question “Where Do We Want To Go”? The Conference 2008 programme will have a session on the Friday evening where we will discuss the results of the Conference 2007 Questionnaire.

I thought it timely to look back to the poem **Dover Beach**, by Matthew Arnold, from which Don Cupitt used a phrase to name a TV series — and its book —

#### DOVER BEACH by Matthew Arnold

The sea is calm tonight,  
The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light  
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
Come to the window, sweet is the night air!

Only, from the long line of spray  
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago  
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
Of human misery; we  
Find also in the sound a thought,  
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

and from which the name of our network came.

The poem was published in 1867 and was considered by many as a lament at the loss of religious faith throughout the world by a man who was an agnostic.

It is regarded as one of the great poems of the 19th century and was first published in the collection of “New Poems” in which there is an in-depth commentary and study of the poem and speculation as to where Arnold got his inspiration from. I have selectively taken some of this commentary for this brief discussion.

#### Analysis

##### First Stanza: “The sea is calm tonight”

The speaker stands at a window looking out at the sea. He seems to address a beloved, whom he entreats to “Come to the window, sweet is the night air!” Such an invitation might be a romantic gesture to share the lovely scene: “The sea is calm tonight / The tide is full, the moon lies fair.” But that is not the case, as the reader discovers later in the poem.

##### Second Stanza: “Only, from the long line of spray”

In the second stanza, the speaker dramatizes the crashing waves upon the beach: “Listen! you hear the grating roar / Of pebbles which the waves draw back.” He notes how one can hear the roar “begin, and cease, and then again begin.” As they repeat this sound, they “bring / The eternal note of sadness in.”

Instead of enjoying the lovely, calm scene, this speaker's mind turns to universal sadness. The crashing waves beginning and ceasing remind him primarily of negativity.

##### Third Stanza: “Sophocles long ago”

The speaker then supports his mournful view by alluding to Sophocles' hearing the “ebb and flow” long ago “on the Aegean.” He turns to allusion, saying, “we / Find also in the sound a thought, / Hearing it by this distant northern sea.” Similar to Sophocles' remark about the ups and downs of “human misery,” the speaker has an additional thought, which he will elucidate in the fourth stanza.

##### Fourth Stanza: “The Sea of Faith”

The speaker breaks forth his lament: it used to be that humanity was imbedded in faith, which “Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.” Notice that the speaker does not identify faith as a protector, nor does he mention the Deity. He merely mentions “faith” and metaphorically compares it to the sea “at the full, and round earth's shore.”

Now things have changed, however, and he hears only “Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.” As it roars, it is “Retreating, to the breath / Of the night wind.” Faith is then likened to a sea that has only the negative aspect of the roar as it is retreating. He further

negates the act by stating that faith's retreat runs "down the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the world."

#### **Fifth Stanza: "Ah, love, let us be true"**

The speaker then seems to offer the only available remedy for this loss of faith — indeed if the loss requires a remedy. He seems to address the beloved, whom he invited to join him at the window when he says, "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!" The world which sometimes seems "so beautiful, so new" in reality "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain."

However, if he is suggesting a vow of truth between himself and his beloved, he should have said, "let us be true / To each other!" To "one another" indicates more than two people are involved. If the speaker is limiting being true *only* to himself and a beloved, he is seeking isolation from the world and just how would that improve anything?

On the other hand, if the speaker is really imploring all humanity to take this vow of truth, his musings have a far greater universal appeal. The invitation then would indicate that he is asking all humanity to notice the negatives and the positives of human activity, and then take being true to "one another" to be a restorative virtue.

#### **Further Reflections and Alternative Viewpoints**

Another similar but expanded view of the third and fourth stanzas (which with the scene having been set in stanzas one and two, is the most important for us in Sea of Faith), is as follows.

In the fourth stanza, the sea is turned into the "Sea of Faith", which is a metaphor for a time (probably in the Middle Ages) when religion could still be experienced without the doubt that the modern (viz. Victorian) age brought about through Darwinism, the Industrial Revolution, Imperialism, a crisis in religion, etc.). Arnold illustrates this by using an image of clothes — 'Kleidervergleich'. When religion was still intact, the world was dressed "like the folds of a bright girdle furled". But now that this faith is gone, the world lies there stripped naked and bleak — "the vast edges drear/ And naked shingles of the world".

An alternative reading of the final stanza begins with a dramatic pledge by the lyrical self. He asks his love to be "true", meaning faithful, to him. ("Ah, love, let us be true /to one another!"). For the beautiful scenery that presents itself to them ("for the world, which seems/ To lie before us like a land of dreams,/ So various, so beautiful, so new") is really not what it seems to be. On the contrary, as he accentuates with a series of denials, this world does not contain any basic human values. These have disappeared, along with the light and religion, leaving humanity in darkness. 'We' could just refer to the lyrical self and his love, but it could also be interpreted as the lyrical self addressing humanity. The pleasant scenery, "So various, so beautiful, so new",

turns into a "darkling plain", where only hostile, frightening sounds of fighting armies can be heard:

And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night."

It is thought that these lines refer to a passage in Thucydides' *The Battle of Epipolae* (144-45) where, in a night encounter, "the two sides could not distinguish friend from foe."

\* \* \* \*

It seems to me that as members of the Sea of Faith and while most of us have not 'Lost our Faith' as described in stanza four, we are certainly in a very similar position to that of the followers and/or believers in Victorian Darwinism. Having left behind our 'Traditional Faith Group', be it a Christian Church or other group, because we see the contradictions; the cynicism, the dogmatism; the polarisation and persecution of minority groups of the traditional faith groups or for whatever other reason, we are faced with the question of where to go to explore and seek a better way.

Furthermore I cannot side with the agnostic view of Arnold as set out at the end of the fifth stanza. I believe that there is more to be had than:

... neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

It seems to me that the beginning of the fifth stanza,

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new ...

needs to have a more forward, positive, far reaching view of our future world in it's last lines.

These new last lines still have to be written for the present and future Sea of Faith members. In doing so these lines need to accommodate new members disaffected from traditional faith groups as they seek a new and better way of life and faith.

**Does any reader have a set of improved last lines to put to a newer modern *Dover Beach* to take us on into the future and to help us as we seek the answers, as we seek the path and as we seek to provide a better world for those following on after us?**

#### **Norm**

Sources: Wikipedia;  
Victorian Web;  
Suite 101 – Linda Sue Grimes;  
Harvard Edu;  
et al



# GOD MAY BE DEAD, BUT RELIGION ISN'T

Standpoint.com is a new religion/culture comment website. Alain Botton — he of popular philosophy fame — contributed an article titled “A Religion for Atheists”. Excerpts are printed here. The full article is at [www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/77/full](http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/77/full)

**The most boring question to ask about religion is whether or not the whole thing is “true”.**

It's a measure of the banality of recent discussions on theological matters that it is precisely this matter which has hogged the limelight, pitting a hardcore group of fanatical believers against an equally small band of fanatical atheists.

We'd be wiser to start with the common-sense observation that, of course, no part of religion is true in the sense of being God-given. There is naturally no holy ghost, spirit, Geist or divine emanation. ... The tragedy of modern atheism is to have ignored just how many aspects of religion continue to be interesting even when the central tenets of the great faiths are discovered to be entirely implausible. Indeed, it's precisely when we stop believing in the idea that gods made religions that things become interesting, for it is then that we can focus on the human imagination which dreamt these creeds up. We can recognise that the needs which led people to do so must still in some way be active, albeit dormant, in modern secular man.

**God may be dead, but the bit of us that made God continues to stir.**

It was our 18th-century forebears who, wiser than us in this regard, early on in the period which led to “the death of God” began to consider what human beings would miss out on once religion faded away. They recognised that religion was not just a matter of belief, but that it sat upon a welter of concerns that touched on architecture, art, nature, marriage, death, ritual, time — and that by getting rid of God, one would also be dispensing with a whole raft of very useful, if often peculiar and sometimes retrograde, notions that had held societies together since the beginning of time. So the more fanciful and imaginative of thinkers began to do two things: firstly, they started comparing the world's religions with a view to arriving at certain insights that transcended time and place, and secondly, they began to imagine what a religion might look like if it didn't have a god in it.

In the early, euphoric days of the French Revolution, the painter Jacques-Louis David unveiled what he termed “A Religion of Mankind”, a secularised version of Christianity which aimed to build upon the best aspects of the old, discredited tenets. ...

Unfortunately, David's experiment never gathered force and was quietly ditched, but it remains a striking moment in history: a naive yet intelligent attempt to confront the thought that there are certain needs in us that can never be satisfied by art, family, work or the state alone. In the light of this, it seems evident that what we now need is not a choice between atheism and religion, but a new secular religion: a religion for atheists.

What would such a peculiar idea involve? For a start, lots of new buildings akin to churches, temples and cathedrals.

**We are the only society in history to have nothing transcendent at our centre, nothing which is greater than ourselves.**

In so far as we feel awe, we do so in relation to supercomputers, rockets and particle accelerators. The pre-scientific age, whatever its deficiencies, had at least offered its denizens the peace of mind that follows from knowing all man-made achievements to be inconsequential next to the spectacle of the universe. We, more blessed in our gadgetry but less humble in our outlook, have been left to wrestle with feelings of envy, anxiety and arrogance that follow from having no more compelling repository of our veneration than our brilliant and morally troubling fellow human beings.

A secular religion would hence begin by putting man into context and would do so through works of art, landscape gardening and architecture. Imagine a network of secular churches, vast high spaces in which to escape from the hubbub of modern society and in which to focus on all that is beyond us.

**It isn't surprising that secular people continue to be interested in cathedrals. Their architecture performs the very clever and eternally useful function of relativising those who walk inside them.**

We begin to feel small inside a cathedral and recognise the debt that sanity owes to such a feeling.

In addition, a secular religion would use all the tools of art in order to create an effective kind of propaganda in the name of kindness and virtue. Rather than seeing art as a tool that can shock and surprise us (the two great emotions promoted by most contemporary works), a secular religion would return to an earlier view that art should improve us. It should be a form of propaganda for a better, nobler life ...

A third aspect of secular religion would be to offer us lessons in pessimism. The new religion would try to counter the optimistic tenor of modern society and return us to the great pessimistic undercurrents found in traditional faiths.

**It would teach us to see the unthinking cruelty discreetly coiled within the magnanimous secular assurance that everyone can discover happiness through work and love.**

It isn't that these two activities are invariably incapable of delivering fulfilment, only that they almost never do so...

In denying the natural place reserved for longing and incompleteness in the human lot, our modern secular ideology denies us the possibility of collective consolation for our fractious marriages and our unexploited ambitions, condemning us instead to solitary feelings of shame and persecution. ...

A secular religion would deeply challenge liberal ideology. Most contemporary governments and even private bodies are devoted to a liberal conception of help; they have no “content” — they want to help people to stay alive and yet they make no suggestions about what these people might do with their lives.

**This is the opposite of what religions have traditionally done, which is to teach people about how to live, about good (or not so good) ways of imagining the human condition, and about what to strive for and to esteem.**



## Aubade

Philip Larkin

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.  
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
Till then I see what's really always there:  
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
Making all thought impossible but how  
And where and when I shall myself die.  
Arid interrogation: yet the dread  
Of dying, and being dead,  
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.  
The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse –  
The good not done, the love not given, time  
Torn off unused - nor wretchedly because  
An only life can take so long to climb  
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;  
But at the total emptiness for ever,  
The sure extinction that we travel to  
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,  
Not to be anywhere,  
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.  
This is a special way of being afraid  
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade  
Created to pretend we never die,  
And specious stuff that says No rational being  
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing  
That this is what we fear - no sight, no sound,  
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
Nothing to love or link with,  
The anaesthetic from which none come round.  
And so it stays just on the edge of vision,  
A small, unfocused blur, a standing chill  
That slows each impulse down to indecision.  
Most things may never happen: this one will,  
And realisation of it rages out  
In furnace-fear when we are caught without  
People or drink. Courage is no good:  
It means not scaring others. Being brave  
Lets no one off the grave.  
Death is no different whined at than withstood.  
Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.  
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,  
Have always known, know that we can't escape,  
Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.  
Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring  
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring  
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.  
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.  
Work has to be done.  
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

An aubade is a song greeting the dawn usually by lovers regretting that they must part.

The British poet Philip Larkin died in 1985 at the age of 63. This poem was published in 1977.

## 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 three **Life Members**: Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK) and Noel Cheer.

The **Chairperson** is Norm Ely, 16B Mawhare Street, Titahi Bay, (04) 236-6026

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

**Membership** of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$27 if outside NZ). Write your cheque to "SoF (NZ)" and mail to: **The Membership Secretary**, PO Box 15-324, Miramar, Wellington 6243

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. There is a catalogue on the website.

Further details can be found on our **website** at [www.sof.org.nz](http://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 email: [noel@cheer.org.nz](mailto: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.**

## The Sands of Time...

**At least two things expire at the end of June:**

1. **Your membership of SoF (NZ), if it says so on the envelope. (We'll tell pdf people separately).**
2. **The offer of CDs from the 2007 Conference.**

