



Editorial

The role of the Editor

I was never trained to be an editor, I just fell into the role. Or, rather, in 1995 the then editor, Lloyd Geering just stepped to one side and let me fall in!

At first, I saw my role as providing a text layout that was aesthetically pleasing in the new proportionally-spaced typefaces that were then becoming more widely available and to which I had access through my job at IBM.

But soon after came the matter of finding short pieces to fill the columns — and then longer pieces to fill entire pages.

It is in the handling of submitted copy today that I meet my greatest challenge. I actively ask for submitted copy and I give space priority to New Zealand copy over overseas copy because this Newsletter does the work of both a newsletter and a discussion publication similar to the UK publication *Sofia*.

Whereas I can always select overseas copy whose arguments I agree with, I cannot depend on receiving copy that conforms to my opinions. And neither should I. "Truth", as Don Cupitt once observed (or, more probably, several times), "is the current state of the debate". This Newsletter aims, above almost all else, to be a forum for such debates.

So I don't reject copy that I don't agree with, nor do I decline copy that may go against the general grain of SoF thought. Remember the beneficial shakeup that we all got from atheist Ray Bradley's head-on confrontation at the 2007 Conference?

Fortunately it is rare that contributions come even close to being objectionable on grounds of intolerance or on what the author Anthony Weston referred to as "premature clarity, a seemingly unshakeable confidence that disputed matters can be readily settled by drawing a clear line in the sand or simply repeating conventional wisdom, though perhaps in an ever louder voice." Dealing with these requires considerable editorial tact.

But I do fix typos, improve punctuation and sometimes change the wording to enhance clarity.

I also regularly ask for contributions: essays (one page is ideal); book reviews and Letters to the Editor (half- to one-page each).

And I'm asking again now.

Noel Cheer, Editor

Contents

2. Is Anything Sacred?

Don Feist might be on the brink of using 'sacred' again

2. Media Publicity for Conference 2009

We fared well

3. Conferences in Australia:

Common Dreams 2

Global Atheists

3. All About Us

All you need to know

4. Spirituality > Mythology > Religion

Derek Pringle wants to set up a discussion group in Auckland

4. Resource Centre Update

An inflow of books by John Shelby Spong

4. Letter to the Editor

Applauding the 2009 Conference

5. A Place for Theism

Bill Robottom sets out his case

6. Judas Asparagus

Food for thought, with a serious question

7. The Seven Stages of Q

David Boulton traces development

7: The Great Debate

Bill Cooke has some poetic thoughts

9. Mythos and Logos

Karen Armstrong says that we need them both

9. Gilgamesh

An epic and a myth

11: The Network Name

What you said about it

12. From The Chair

Chairperson Natali Allen discusses the Charter for Compassion in which Karen Armstrong goes global



**The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Not all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.**

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam
Edward Fitzgerald translation

Is Anything Sacred ?

Don Feist of Dunedin sent this.

For a while now, I've been thinking that we don't need the word 'sacred' any more — that just as the distinction between 'natural' and 'supernatural' should be jettisoned, so too should the distinction between 'sacred' and 'secular'. But I've started reading *The Ethical Imagination*, the book of Margaret Somerville's Massey Lectures, broadcast in 2008 by Radio New Zealand Concert. Here's a passage I found interesting and thought-provoking:

"In talking about the secular sacred, I propose that the sacred is not only a concept that applies in a religious or ritualised context, but also one that operates at a general societal — or secular — level, I'm proposing it as a concept that encapsulates an experience that we might use to help people find their most authentic individual selves. This is not to endorse intense individualism; indeed, my intent is the opposite. I believe our most authentic selves are to be found in the complex interaction of knowing ourselves, relating to others, appreciating our place in the great web of all life, and seeing ourselves as part of the earth, the stars, the universe, and the cosmos.

Some scientists tell us that we came from stardust — that the earliest form of life on earth might have arrived in meteorites that crashed; to rephrase the Ash Wednesday liturgy: "Remember man thou art stardust and unto stardust thou shalt return". That fact, assuming that it will prove to be correct, and the idea that science can verify it, is astonishing and wondrous. The acute and continuous awareness of a mild-blowing web of relationships — that is what I call the human spirit. The sacred is rightly enlisted when it will protect and promote that spirit, and wrongly used when it will do it harm.

In promoting a concept of the secular sacred, we need to acknowledge that the concept of the *traditional sacred* has been abused and caused serious harm as a result. While it sometimes protected against certain practices in war, it has also been misused in the cause of war and violence, as in the Christian Crusades to protect certain sacred places and in the Islamic use of religious concepts such as holy jihad to justify terrorism. Like all powerful ideas, the sacred has the potential to be used for both good and evil."

Margaret Somerville,
The Ethical Imagination pp. 56-57

Media Publicity for Conference 2009

- David Boulton was interviewed by Maureen Garing on Radio New Zealand's *Spiritual Outlook* on November 15th.
- David Boulton was interviewed by Noel Cheer on Triangle/Stratos television on November 12th. It will be repeated on February 18th.
- The following was commissioned by Waikato Daily Times and was published on November 6th.

'Heretics' wade into sea of faith

Noel Cheer

Hamilton recently hosted 140 heretics at the annual conference of the Sea of Faith Network. A century ago a heretic would have found difficulty in getting a respectable job. Some centuries earlier she or he might have met a fiery death.

Even today, departure from dogmatic orthodoxy is sometimes met with severe punishment in some Middle East countries. But New Zealand is relatively kind to those who, while insisting a "religious" or "spiritual" outlook on life is important, declare they will decide what they take to be true and useful and not to feel bound to obediently follow what professional clergy tell them.

New Zealand's social climate is one of the world's most relaxed on matters of religion. Barely half the population declare allegiance to a Christian denomination. The largest three denominations — Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian — attract only about 15 per cent each. This is probably due to a mixture of tolerance and indifference on matters of religion. Those who declare "no religion" amount to almost 40 per cent of the census population.

The Sea of Faith Network — the name makes indirect reference to a phrase by 19th century poet Matthew Arnold — started in Britain in 1986 in response to a TV series by British author Don Cupitt. It is an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint. It's rather like starting at the human end and conscientiously applying values such as compassion and forgiveness, and then seeing what sort of religious expression arises.

The network itself has no creed.

It draws its members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions. Members meet throughout the year in house groups and about one-third attend the annual conference. Sir Lloyd Geering, himself accused of and acquitted of heresy in 1967, played a major part in founding the New Zealand chapter of the network in 1992 and still contributes to its conferences and newsletter.

The emergence of the network is both a symptom of the fading of Christianity in this century and part of a loosely co-ordinated movement to offer a "seedbed of faith" for those who reject the "no religion" adolescent rallying cry of the New Atheists led by Richard Dawkins. To most members of the network, "better religion" is needed more than ever in our age when vast systems of international capital and stateless globalised manufactured culture threaten to de-humanise us. Better religion is needed to also challenge the militant Christian fundamentalists who make mockeries of both science and theology with the suggestion of "intelligent design", while their brothers bomb abortion clinics.

Network members note with wry sadness the mainline denominations agonising, to the extent of schism, over gay clergy while missing the moral challenge to disperse their great wealth to benefit the poor. Outside of Christianity, those who yearn for better religion note with sadness and alarm the resurgent religion of the Islamic jihadists, who despise everything Western and who illicitly conscript the Qur'an in spurious justification. For more, see the website at www.sof.org.nz.

■ Noel Cheer is a committee member of the Sea of Faith Network NZ.

**Our scientific powers have outrun our spiritual powers;
we have guided missiles and mis-guided men.**

Martin Luther King Jr.

COMMON DREAMS

Common Dreams 2
“Living the Progressive Religion Dream”
MELBOURNE
15-18 APRIL 2010



The **Common Dreams 2 Conference** will draw together people from Australia, New Zealand and other parts of the world to explore ways that progressive religion, including progressive expressions of other religious traditions besides Christianity, can contribute positively to the common good, so that religion enhances human life rather than diminishes it.

To be held at St Kilda Town Hall, speakers include
Rev Greta Vosper (Canada), Rev Dr Margaret Mayman (NZ),
Hugh Mackay, Fr Peter Kennedy, Dr Val Webb,
Rev Dr Francis Macnab, Hon Michael Kirby AC, Rabbi Aviva Kipen,
& much more, including workshops & seminars .

To register online & for more information, including other guest
speakers and key event times, visit the website at

www.commondreams.org.au

For enquiries call (+613) 9571 0106 or email
info@commondreams.org.au

For NZers, the prices given in the publicity material are to be read as NZ dollars

Atheists

Global Atheist Convention

Melbourne, 12-14 March 2010

Speakers: Richard Dawkins, Peter Singer, Philip Adams, PZ Myers and
others. More: <http://www.atheistconvention.org.au>

The Bus Campaign

The **Humanist Society of NZ** is handling donations to fund a
campaign to put notices on buses like those on London buses which
read:

There's Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life

If SoF were to do something similar, what wording should we use?
The Editor welcomes Letters but makes no promises!

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 Newsletter six times per
year, maintains a website, assists in
setting up Local Groups, and organises
an annual Conference.

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

The **Chairperson** is Natali Allen, P.O.
Box 120, Rawene, Northland. Phone
(09) 405 7755

The **Secretary** is Alan Jackson, 55
Evans St, Opoho, Dunedin (03) 473
6947

Membership of the national
organisation costs \$20 per household
per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both
charges drop to \$15 if the Newsletter is
emailed.

Send remittance and details to The
Membership Secretary, PO Box 15-324,
Miramar, Wellington 6243 or Internet
bank to 38 9000 0807809 00 and tell
pcowley@paradise.net.nz.

Members may borrow books, tapes
etc. from the **Resource Centre**
managed by Suzi Thirlwall phone (07)
578-2775

See the website at **www.sof.org.nz**
for a catalogue and for further details
about us.

To offer a comment on 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

Spirituality >>> Mythology >>> Religion

- What is Spirituality?
- Is Spirituality the same as Religion?
- Is it possible to be a spiritual person without being religious?
- What are the connections between spirituality, mythology and religion?

If anyone [in the Auckland region] is interested in exploring these and similar questions, then Derek Pringle will arrange a monthly home discussion group to start in February 2010, at a time and place to suit participants. The format for the meetings, and what material might be used, would be agreed at the initial meeting.

If you are interested in attending such a group, then please contact Derek either by phone (09) 489 3589 or by email: annderek@actrix.co.nz



Resource Centre Update



We have large collection of books and audio tapes.

Currently we are looking at ways to improve the Centre and any ideas would be welcome.

A big thank you is long overdue to many people who have donated books and other items. This can happen when someone leaves the organisation or a donation is received after a member dies or it may simply be an act of generosity. Thank you everyone who is reading this who has sent me items.

My thanks to Philip, my husband, who covers for me when I escape the NZ winter which I do for health reasons. I am sorry to have missed a couple of Conferences but intend to be at the next one.

Latest book acquisitions (the full catalogue is on the website):

By Bishop John Spong: B185 *Living in Sin*, B186 *Liberating The Gospels*, B187 *Here I Stand*, B188 *Into The Whirlwind*, B189 *This Hebrew Lord*, B190 *Born of a Woman*, B191 *A New Christianity for a New World*

By Soren Kirkegaard: B192 *Fear and Trembling*

Suzi Thirlwall, SOFN Resources Curator, Phone (07) 578-2775

Letter to The Editor

I would like to congratulate the organisers of the 2009 SoF Conference on the quality of the speakers and the ideas they gave us to think about, which exceeded even the high standards of previous Conferences!

I would particularly like to comment on the inclusion of daily discussion - or 'break out' - groups as part of this year's programme. I found this an extremely valuable activity. The Conference addresses were so rich in ideas that the chance both to articulate my reactions and to hear the - often very different - reactions of others, greatly enhanced the experience. I was particularly pleased that time was set aside daily as, to be maximally successful, such groups need to be a central part of the programme.

I would like to suggest that such discussion groups be included in next year's Conference programme. I would, however, plead that the groups be smaller - preferably eight, with an absolute maximum of ten including the facilitator.

Also, if it is known ahead of time which addresses will be followed by a discussion session, then the speakers might be given the opportunity to pose a question which the groups might use as a starter for their discussion.

- Shirley Dixon, Porirua

Bill Robottom of W(h)anganui tells us that there is still

A Place for Theism

I would like to make some comments regarding *The Lloyd Geering Reader, Prophet of Modernity* published by Victoria University Press in 2007. It is an anthology of papers and minor works, edited by Paul Morris and Mike Grimshaw.

It would be fair to say that in religious knowledge, Lloyd Geering would have few peers. But is he correct when he says the following? "Christianity, understood as a broad cultural stream, can and will continue without theism. ... in modern times it is taking that radical departure to its logical end, which is the abolition of theism.

Is such nihilism a realistic option to theism? Such belief did find ground in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the advent of Darwin's theory of evolution, but the tide is turning. There is already good evidence to show that the universe is infinite; ideas that began with men such as Aristotle, Bruno and Spinoza. We can have confidence that not long into the twenty first century we will see that both creationist and evolutionist beliefs will fade away and that theism will flourish once more.

Theism will again become the norm because evolution cannot explain how natural selection could produce such things as: electronics; signals that our TV receives and then gives us images and sound on the screen; a voice on the phone or the ingenuity of how atoms work. It does not seem logical that thought could evolve by natural selection not even by quantum tunnelling, whatever that is supposed to be. How can nothing, without thought, decide to be something? John, in his Gospel, attempts to explain this by saying, "In the beginning was the Word." He was using the logic of the logos. When we think of the complexity of humanity and life in general, including plant life and the dependency each has on the other we see the logic in the singleness of each but also that all atoms are related giving rise that all things are the product of one source, such as a Pantheistic God. The question to ask is, where will evolutionists be when science proves that evolution is only a theory based on supposition the same as religion?

Lloyd spoke of the four "Proofs of the existence of God": The **cosmological** argument, the **teleological** argument, the **moral** argument and the **ontological** argument. He then suggests that, "It is generally agreed that none of these arguments prove the existence of God in any strict sense." That is debatable. You could also say that they don't prove creation as portrayed in the Bible. I believe it makes better sense to say that there is order and design inherent in the universe rather than that existence came about by natural selection. My studies point me to the conclusion that neither creation nor evolution as they are portrayed is realistic. I see an infinite and pantheist God. You cannot measure time; it just is. There is life or there is not.

If we were to have a revival in theism then what religion should we have? In the chapter, "The Global Christian" Lloyd asks what Christianity in a post-Christian, modern world Why a Global Christianity? What good would that do? My understanding of Christianity as we have it is the invention of Paul and of the Roman Church. The Church of Jesus led by Peter, James and John dispersed into the power houses of Judaism and the Roman Church. It is that religion that we need to rescue and place it alongside reason and our modern scientific world.

It is not theism which we need to discard but the religion the Church became. Lloyd is correct saying we must have a religion of this scientific age, but we must see the real God from the past. The true God is there. Humans need a God to believe in as it always has done. As big in religion as they are, we cannot have Lloyd Geering, Don Cupitt, John Shelby Spong and Karen Armstrong replacing God!

When I began reading the Bible I became very excited, though not at first. The miraculous God of Moses did not make sense to me, but when I studied the prophets and Jesus I saw the God of love, peace and social justice. That is the God a new global religion should have. Surely such a God would achieve the oneness in theology?

I can understand why some wish to discard theism because what I have seen and experienced in my religious life has disappointed me. God to me is still reality; we need to make our religion honest and real. We need to make it what the prophets and Jesus said it should be. I could worship a God like that, and I am sure a lot of people see it that way also. In the last New Zealand census it showed many people believe in God but without belonging to any religion. That should tell us something!

I would be delighted to get some feedback and I will surely continue to read Lloyd Geering's inspired work.

R.L. (Bill) Robottom, July 2009

Judas Asparagus

This *Children's Bible in a Nutshell* is said to have been written by a child. While cute, even to the extent of twee, it is fun to read. Daniel Phillips sent it in for the Newsletter. Read it and then the comment which follows.

The In the beginning, which occurred near the start, there was nothing but God, darkness, and some gas. The Bible says, 'The Lord thy God is one', but I think He must be a lot older than that.

Anyway, God said, 'Give me a light!' and someone did. Then God made the world.

He split the Adam and made Eve. Adam and Eve were naked, but they weren't embarrassed because mirrors hadn't been invented yet.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating one bad apple, so they were driven from the Garden of Eden.....Not sure what they were driven in though, because they didn't have cars.

Adam and Eve had a son, Cain, who hated his brother as long as he was Abel.

Pretty soon all of the early people died off, except for Methuselah, who lived to be like a million or something.

One of the next important people was Noah, who was a good guy, but one of his kids was kind of a Ham. Noah built a large boat and put his family and some animals on it. He asked some other people to join him, but they said they would have to take a rain check.

After Noah came Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob was more famous than his brother, Esau, because Esau sold Jacob his birthmark in exchange for some pot roast. Jacob had a son named Joseph who wore a really loud sports coat.

Another important Bible guy is Moses, whose real name was Charlton Heston. Moses led the Israel Lights out of Egypt and away from the evil Pharaoh after God sent ten plagues on Pharaoh's people. These plagues included frogs, mice, lice, bowels, and no cable.

God fed the Israel Lights every day with manicotti. Then he gave them His Top Ten Commandments. These include: don't lie, cheat, smoke, dance, or covet your neighbour's stuff.

Oh, yeah, I just thought of one more: Humour thy father and thy mother.

One of Moses' best helpers was Joshua who was the first Bible guy to use spies. Joshua fought the battle of Geritol and the fence fell over on the town.

After Joshua came David.. He got to be king by killing a giant with a slingshot. He had a son named Solomon who had about 300 wives and 500 porcupines. My teacher says he was wise, but that doesn't sound very wise to me.

After Solomon there were a bunch of major league prophets. One of these was Jonah, who was swallowed by a big whale and then barfed up on the shore.

There were also some minor league prophets, but I guess we don't have to worry about them.

After the Old Testament came the New Testament. Jesus is the star of The New. He was born in Bethlehem in a barn. (I wish I had been born in a barn too, because my mom is always saying to me, 'Close the door! Were you born in a barn?' It would be nice to say, 'As a matter of fact, I was.')

During His life, Jesus had many arguments with sinners like the Pharisees and the Democrats.

Jesus also had twelve opossums.

The worst one was Judas Asparagus. Judas was so evil that they named a terrible vegetable after him.

Jesus was a great man. He healed many leopards and even preached to some Germans on the Mount.

But the Democrats and all those guys put Jesus on trial before Pontius the Pilot. Pilot didn't stick up for Jesus. He just washed his hands instead.

Anyways, Jesus died for our sins, then came back to life again. He went up to Heaven but will be back at the end of the Aluminum. His return is foretold in the book of Revolution.



If an adult were to write a similar summary but with serious intent, would the effort be a) valuable, b) hopeless, c) futile, d) surplus to the requirements of modern children, or e) something else? Tell me Noel Cheerl ed



The Seven Stages of Q

David Boulton, author of *Who on Earth Was Jesus?*, spoke at Sea of Faith Conferences in Australia and New Zealand last September. The paper from which the following is an excerpt, drew on that book. It was previously published in the *Bulletin* of Sea of Faith In Australia.

"A more critical scholarship ... is open to the idea that ... it is likely that both oral repetition and written copies [of the reputed saying of Jesus] will have suffered ideological and editorial corruption in the long transmission process.

I am not qualified to adjudicate between these different scholarly opinions. Moreover, in the Quakerly spirit of conflict resolution, I suggest we don't need to do so! I'm going to invoke both an oral and a written tradition in support of the following sequence of events: seven stages in the birth, life and death of Q.

Stage 1. AD early 30s:

Jesus preaches the good news of the coming kingdom in parables and wisdom sayings. His followers begin to collect them, memorising them in Aramaic litanies patterned on those familiar to them in regular synagogue worship.

Stage 2. AD 30s and 40s:

As the Jesus movement spreads among the Galilean Jewish communities, these litanies become formalised as the orally transmitted gospel of the new Jesus sect.

Stage 3. In the late 40s or early 50s:

More or less parallel with the rise of Pauline Christianity around the Mediterranean, the increasingly isolated Galilean Jesus movement begins to commit its oral litanies to writing. This involves translating the sayings from spoken Aramaic to written Greek. The earliest written gospel takes shape. We call it Q1.

Stage 4. AD 60s and early 70s:

As a written document, Q1 is now copied and circulated, copied and circulated, copied and circulated... Copying often results in changes as the scribe, perhaps the leader of a particular community, reformulates one saying to conform to his own theological understanding, adds another, drops another. So Q1 grows, and becomes Q1, 2 and 3, probably in variant editions.

Stage 5. Meanwhile, beyond the boundaries of Galilee

The Jesus movement is attracting a mix of Hellenised Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. A new Christian literature is coming into being, focused not on the sayings of Jesus but on the claim of his divine status, on the meaning of his death as a sacrifice for human sin, and on his resurrection as a promise of eternal life to all believers. This is Pauline Christianity, and its earliest scriptures are Paul's letters. The Galilean Q community knows little or nothing of this; and the Pauline communities know little or nothing of Q.

Stage 6. After the catastrophe of the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in AD 70:

Jews, including Jesus-movement Jews, are scattered. Christian communities of Jews and Gentiles now look to Greek models of heroic story-telling to construct new narrative gospels, aiming to marry the human Jesus to Paul's divine saviour. Mark seems unaware of Q, but Matthew and Luke make use of it (and of Mark's gospel), interpreting and elaborating the text to fit their own agendas.

Stage 7. Henceforth it is the new narrative gospels that are endlessly copied and circulated. Q is no longer copied. Out of print and remaindered, it lingers for a while among isolated groups of Christians resisting Pauline theology before disappearing from sight, until it exists only as a ghost embedded in Matthew and Luke, to be disinterred nearly two thousand years later by historical Jesus detectives.

Is that going too far? After all, Q remains a hypothesis. No-one has found an original, or a copy of an original. But remember, no one has found an original, or a copy of an original, of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Thomas, or Paul's letters or, for that matter, of the works of Socrates and Aristotle! At best we have copies of copies of copies, made years after their composition. Once Q had been copied into Matthew and Luke, there was no point in continuing to copy and circulate it in its now redundant form. The Galilean Jesus movement was now effectively absorbed within the dominant Pauline tendency that was to solidify into catholic orthodoxy over the next two centuries.

I suggest that the seven-stage process I have tried to summarise offers the best explanation of how the sayings of Jesus were remembered and recorded over that half-century between his death and the writing of the Biblical gospels. And I further suggest that the work of the Q Project team and the Jesus Seminar scholars who worked with them offers our best hope of hearing again, across the centuries, if not the precise words of the historical Jesus, at least the core and gist of his vision. Or, as the late Bob Funk put it, "Together those fragments provide us with glimpses of the historical figure. Since his vision was neither more nor less than a glimpse, the best we can hope for is a glimpse of his glimpse."

THOUGHTS ON THE GREAT DEBATE

Some say He's the messiah,
They say that He's the king.
They say that He's our saviour
They say...most Everything.

Others say he's a glorious myth,
And though none of it is true,
It's the greatest tale ever told;
The metaphor is good for you.

All this while the planet's warming
And the weather runs to extremes
Heedless of each new warning
We pursue these idle dreams.

The scholastics, we're told, contested
About angels on the end of a pin.
Going on about Jesus this century
Seems the same, or a close run thing.

In the face of global pressures
Saviours take on an ugly hue,
An excuse for tribal thinking
And to deny the other's due.

Whether action man or allegory,
This 'great debate' provides
A pleasant escape from real issues.
Like fiddling while Rome dies.

Bill Cooke, Auckland.

Mythos and Logos

from Karen Armstrong: *The Case for God: What Religion Really Means* The Bodley Head 2009, pages 2-3

"In most pre-modern cultures, there were two recognised ways of thinking, speaking and acquiring knowledge. The Greeks called them *mythos* and *logos*. Both were essential and neither was considered superior to the other; they were not in conflict but complementary. Each had its own sphere of competence and it was considered unwise to mix the two. *Logos* ('reason') was the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled people to function effectively in the world. It had, therefore, to correspond accurately to external reality. People have always needed *logos* to make an efficient weapon, organise their societies or plan an expedition. *Logos* was forward-looking, continually on the lookout for new ways of controlling the environment, improving old insights or inventing something fresh. *Logos* was essential to the survival of our species. But it had its limitations: it could not assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life's struggles. For that, people turned to *mythos* or 'myth'.

Today we live in a society of scientific *logos* and myth has fallen into disrepute. In popular parlance, a 'myth' is something that is not true. But in the past, myth was not self-indulgent fantasy; rather, like *logos*, it helped people to live creatively in our confusing world, though in a different way. Myths may have told stories about the gods, but they were really focused on the more elusive, puzzling and tragic aspects of the human predicament that lay outside the remit of *logos*. Myth has been called a primitive form of psychology. When a myth described heroes threading their way through labyrinths, descending into the underworld or fighting monsters, these were not understood as primarily factual stories. They were designed to help people negotiate the obscure regions of the psyche, which are difficult to access but which profoundly influence our thought and behaviour. People had to enter the warren of their own minds and fight their personal demons. When Freud and Jung began to chart their scientific search for the soul, they instinctively turned to these ancient myths. A myth was never intended as an accurate account of a historical event; it was *something that had in some sense happened once but that also happens all the time*.

But a myth would not be effective if people simply 'believed' in it. It was essentially a programme of action. It could put you in the correct spiritual or psychological posture but it was up to you to take the next step and make the 'truth' of the myth a reality in your own life. The only way to assess the value and truth of any myth was to act upon it. The myth of the hero, for example, which takes the same form in nearly all cultural traditions, taught people how to unlock their own heroic potential. Later, the stories of historical figures such as the Buddha, Jesus or Muhammad were made to conform to this paradigm so that their followers could imitate them in the same way. Put into practice, a myth could tell us something profoundly true about our humanity. "

Gilgamesh

Contributed by Margaret Whitwell of Te Puke

Although it has some grim parts, the epic poem of Gilgamesh has all the content of a feisty legend: the hero's quest for immortality, perilous journeys, and feminine input, set in those ancient times when the natural and the supernatural co-existed on earth. And interestingly, there are aspects of thinking that endure as modified memes and mores through the centuries.

Gilgamesh of Uruk was a human-god-King, two thirds god and one third human. His story is among the oldest known Mesopotamian literary works, 2700 BCE. It is extant today on 12 clay tablets from the library collection of the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal, 7th century BCE.

At first Gilgamesh was a harsh ruler but he changed and became the one 'surpassing all other kings'. He had shared many exploits with his close friend Enkidu, and from this man had learned humility, mercy and courage; concepts which were adopted later by Christianity and other religions and are basic to humanism.

In September 2007 we heard, in a vignette at Sea of Faith Conference, that naked truth is more easily accepted when dressed in story. And recently Bill Cooke in an article in the magazine Open Society stated that accepting the tragic dimensions of life is the chief lesson of literature. Both these criteria are exemplified in the epic poem. When his friend died of an illness, the King was cast into deepest grief. Shadows from the underworld darkened his thoughts. He recited a sad lament for Enkidu; the forerunner of our eulogies perhaps which people today deliver unashamed of the tears in their voices.

Gilgamesh then resolved to find immortality for himself. After a long and dangerous journey he came at last to the Sumarian Noah, the mythical Utnapishtim, who had been granted immortality by the Gods for saving all life from the flood with his ark. The ageless one told his visitor crossly that this futile pursuit of longevity ruined the joy of life. (Nowadays we simply have a face-lift and tint our grey hair). The King failed the tests set for him. He wept in front of his guide and returned to Uruk. As he approached the city he praised the durability of the familiar walls with a very human home-coming joy.

Time gave immortality to Gilgamesh through story. More detailed versions of the legend and its characters are on the web.

Fear of the afterlife haunted a wide populace into the middle ages and beyond. Today when Lloyd Geering's famous simile likens fading belief to the disappearing Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland, that fear is but a pale fang in its remnant grin.

The world has come a long way since its ancient 'dreamtime'. As John Storey wrote in a Unitarian poem: "Art and science, faith and reason" may these continue to develop our race.

You Told Us What You Think About Our Network

Natali Allen reports back

At the 2007 Conference at Kings' College in Auckland, those who attended were asked to complete a questionnaire which stated that "Your National Steering Committee thinks it is important at this time that we discover what you think about your Sea of Faith Network, so we can better plan for the future." Following Conference, the questionnaire was also distributed to those in Local Groups who had not attended Conference. In all 238 questionnaires were returned.

The questionnaire included two types of questions; the first required answers along a given scale, and the second required open-ended responses. The summary of responses to the first group were presented by Ralph Pannett at the 2008 Conference at Blenheim and at that time Ralph made suggestions for consideration by the Steering Committee about the future activities of the Network. Some of that material will be referred to again to give a fuller account members thoughts and ideas.

Since then I have reviewed of the second group of questions and categorized the responses with a view to giving us a summary of members subjective opinions on the subjects which had been introduced.

The aim of this analysis has been to look at the range of opinion or ideas expressed, and rather than seeking a majority view (as did the first group of questions) to acknowledge all responses including diverse opinion, and recognise that often innovative ideas arise in a minority.

Although at times I have indicated the numbers who have made a particular response, they can only be indicative of a general opinion, as they are based on my interpretation of what individuals intended in what they wrote.

In summary the subjects explored were: Spirituality; Faith; Local Groups; Conference; Changes to the Network; Publicity. Summaries of each of these topics will appear in the next Newsletters — though not necessarily in that order. In this first paper, I include a summary of the responses to the question

Do you have a suggestion for a new name for the Network?

The responses were given on a scale of 1-5 (1 being "poor" and 5 representing those who felt the title was excellent) and resulted in the following almost normal distribution:

1 (poor)	2	3	4	5 (excellent)
15%	20%	22%	19%	18%

There were 109 fuller written responses to the request for suggestions which introduced a wide range with many respondents giving several alternatives. (The prize goes to the person who gave eleven alternative names.)

Respondents who offered choices and comments on the name fell into two groups: those who wished to retain the name and those who offered alternative titles.

For Retaining The Name

Thirty five respondents said they did not have a suggestion for a new name for the Network. Some of these went on to explain their reasons for retaining the present name or to offer an explanatory extension of the name, or make suggestions about enhancing the name.

Reasons for retaining the present title name were given by those who felt the name was positive both in terms of its "roots" and the opportunity for explaining it to others. To quote

"It is important to recognize and celebrate our 'roots'. Knowing the source and reason for the Network and being able to explain this, is positive and affirming."

"Some of the criticism of the title ... arises from a desire to be "all things to all people (which the network cannot be) or not having seen the series, or read the book which 'grounds' the network's existence."

(But no-one commented on links with international Sea of Faith Groups as a reason for retaining the title)

A second small group had introduced their own metaphor as an explanation for the title. For example

"The 'sea' metaphor depicts a journey, a faith journey for some, and cast as wide as the membership itself. I still like Cupitt's link with Mathew Arnold's poem. I am suggesting we retain the name "Sea of Faith"

Then there were respondents who offered an explanatory extension of the title:

"Sea of Faith Network – Exploring Beyond Religion. I think we risk too much loss of identity if we change our name at this stage, but an additional statement might help to clarify our vision for those who have difficulty with the current name".

“Sea of Faiths Network - Add an S to the word ‘Faith’. The dogmatic meaning of ‘faith’ isn’t necessarily dominant. There is faith in oneself, in one’s community in the reality of the seasons etc are all evoked by the word faith”

“Add a short explanation phase which could be changed periodically as the situation changes e.g. a Forum for exploring spirituality/ for discussion of human spirituality/ for religious discussion or a network for exploring spirituality etc”.

For Changing The Name

While there was enthusiasm for a change of name — 49 new alternative names were offered — it was apparent that the choice of a new title was more difficult and this was also influenced by a desire to retain the SOF initials. Some who considered a new name were also hesitant –

“We must be careful not to choose a name too similar to other groups which may be church or crank oriented. Changing the name is not as easy as it sounds”.

“The rub will come in an attempt to find a name which accurately meets everyone’s expectations. The name does not need to explain it all”.

Reasons for changing can be summarized in two quotes:

“It doesn’t accurately explain to outsiders what the network exists for. My friends and relations imagine it as a church based organisation – a long explanation is necessary to explain”.

“I think it does, or may arouse misleading expectations for people who don’t know the provenance”

In summary, only three suggested titles appeared more than twice and respondents indicated that these had arisen in the previous discussion at Conference.

The seven titles which were most acceptable, and the times they were suggested were

Forum of Seekers (6); Seekers Forum (6); Seedbed of Faith (5); Open Forum (2); Searchers for Truth (2); Seekers Open Forum (2); Faith at Sea (2) — in that it is still growing and learning.

In view of the wide range of suggested titles and some of the comments I then went on to look at the words used in these alternative titles.

The words introduced most often were: **Forum (24); Seekers (17); Faith (12); Open (9); and Spiritual/Spirituality (8)**

Clearly the discussion at Conference, and in particular the comments about the word ‘faith’ had stimulated interest and thought. Here the use of the word faith possibly indicated that, for many, it did not necessarily have negative connotations.

However, apart from positive comments about the word “forum”, comments about specific words used were without exception comments about the word “faith” and included:

“The word Faith could suggest that the Network has a particularly strong Faith i.e. Credo, which they would pre judge as something they didn’t want to become involved with.”

“The word faith has too much baggage for normal people.”

“If you incorporate the word “faith” you need to acknowledge “faith” across the spectrum of religion, including the fundamental Christians and not denigrate them.”

Summary

Over several Conferences the title ‘The Sea of Faith Network’ has been debated. Given the material obtained in the questionnaire it is clear that the membership has a range of responses to it, and reasons for changing or retaining it.

At the 2009 Conference in Hamilton the motion was moved and carried:

“That the name “Sea of Faith” be retained”.

For me, reading all the responses has given me a greater appreciation of the title and confidence in explaining it to others. Then last year our local group reviewed the book and the television series and I realised how apt the title is – with or without the poem.

In the next Newsletter I will continue with the exploration of the word “faith”

Natali Allen

From The Chair

Christmas has come and gone and, if we are to believe the media, it has done so in an even greater flurry of expenditure and materialism than previous years, promising greater prosperity in the year to come.

One might argue that a more significant event towards the end of 2009 was the launching of a Charter for Compassion on November 12th. The Charter web-site explains that this has resulted from the awarding of the TED¹ Prize to Karen Armstrong who wished for help in creating such a Charter. It was drafted by an international multi-faith council and seeks to have “compassion become a key word in public and private discourse, making it clear that any ideology that breeds hatred or contempt — be it religious or secular — has failed the test of our time. It is not simply a statement of principle; it is above all a summons to creative, practical and sustained action to meet the political, moral, religious, social and cultural problems of our time.”²

This event lead me to think about the meaning of the word compassion and what upholding such a charter might mean. Most definitions of the word I found, describe compassion as an **emotion** prompted by the **pain** of others and generally leading to a wish or action to alleviate suffering.

The Charter web-site introduces the “Golden Rule”³ and this is developed in Wikipedia as implying the principle of compassion – “an ethical code that states one has a right to just treatment, and a responsibility to ensure justice for others. It is also called the ethic of reciprocity. It is arguably the most essential basis for the modern concept of **human rights**. A key element of the golden rule is that a person attempting to live by this rule treats all people, not just members of his or her **in-group**, with consideration”. It “has its roots in a wide range of world cultures, and is a standard which different cultures use to resolve conflicts.”⁴

In a further exploration of how various religious traditions use this idea, various examples are given. Among them:

- Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan as the ideal of compassionate conduct.
- In the Muslim tradition foremost amongst God’s attributes are mercy and compassion, and the fasting of Ramadan is to enhance sensitivity to the suffering of others and develop compassion for the poor and destitute.
- In Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition one rabbi is quoted “Kindness gives to another. Compassion knows no other”.
- Compassion is at the heart of the Buddha’s teaching. It “is that which makes the heart of the good move at the pain of others” and a more contemporary statement – “Compassion arises by entering into the subjectivity of others, by sharing their interiority in a deep and total way”⁵

These examples make it clear that compassion is not merely the doing of good for another, but occurs within a relationship – a relationship within which there is equality and identification with an other - or in which, it seems to me, there is what Buber has called genuine dialogue – listening, attention and response. The good that is to be done is not defined by the doer, but is good as the recipient would wish, according to his or her tradition and position.

The Charter web site has many interesting video clips of related presentations, and currently lists 620 stories from those who report compassionate acts. However it seems to me that if the Charter “is above all a summons to creative, practical and sustained action to meet the political, moral, religious, social and cultural problems of our time.” it requires more than individual actions, valuable as these may be.

As yet I am not sure what this “more” may be but perhaps it is somewhere in Buber’s I -Thou relationship as a mode of existence, in relation others, communities and nature as a whole - much broader than an interpersonal relationship. And then there was Margaret Mayman’s quote which I used in the last Newsletter in which we see that “for Jesus, the application of compassion came with the pursuit of justice that sought to turn the established order upside down”⁶.

Thinking about this, over the holiday period I have read two passages, by two people who appear to me to be describing an attempt to develop just such a relationship in their life and work.

First Karen Armstrong: “Compassion does not, of course, mean to feel pity or to condescend, but to feel with. This was the method I had found to be essential while writing “Muhammad”. It demanded what St Paul had called a kenosis, an emptying of the self that would lead to enlargement and an enhanced perspective. And I liked Hodgson’s⁷ emphasis on the importance of feeling and emotion. It was not enough to understand other people’s beliefs, rituals and ethical practice intellectually, you had to feel them too and make an imaginative, though disciplined identification.

This became my own method of study. Henceforth I tried not to dismiss an idea that seemed initially alien, but to ask repeatedly “Why?” until, finally the doctrine, the idea, or the practice became transparent and I could see the living kernel of truth within – an insight that quickened my own pulse. I would not leave an idea until I could to some extent experience it myself, and understand why a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim felt in this way.”⁸

And Barrack Obama in his first job in 1983, as a community organizer in Chicago struggling to get a response from those with whom he hoped to work, said:

“That’s what the leadership was teaching me, day by day, that the self interest I was supposed to be looking for extended well beyond the immediacy of issues, that beneath the small talk and the sketchy biographies and received opinions, people carried with them some central explanation of themselves. Stories full of terror and wonder, studded with events that still haunted or inspired them. Sacred stories.”

“If the language, the humour, the stories of ordinary people were the stuff out of which families, communities, economies, would have to be built, then I couldn’t separate that strength from the hurt and distortions that lingered inside us.”⁹

So this has left me wondering whether others have been stimulated by the Conference papers and then the Charter to think about our understanding of compassion. I am interested to hear ideas that others may have.

With best wishes for all that each one looks forward to in 2010

Natali Allen, Chairperson 2009-2010



Karen Armstrong: A call to bring the world together...

The principle of compassion is at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion—to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate—to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures—to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity—to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

¹ TED stands for Technology, Entertainment, Design. It is an annual conference which brings together the world’s most fascinating thinkers and doers, who are challenged to give the talk of their lives (in 18 minutes). It is awarded annually to three exceptional individuals who each receive \$100,000 and, much more important, the granting of “One Wish to Change the World.”

² <http://charterforcompassion.org/about>

³ quoted as “Do to others what you would have them do to you”

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compassion>

⁵ <http://charterforcompassion.org/about>

⁶ Mayman, M. *Jesus, Justice and Community: A Progressive Christian Perspective*. SoF NZ Conference, September 2009

⁷ Hodgson, Marshall, G.S. (1974) *The Venture of Islam* Publisher not cited

⁸ Armstrong, K. (2004). *The Spiral Staircase*. Harper Collins, London

⁹ Obama, Barack. (1995) *Dreams From My Father*. Crown Publishers, New York