



AGENDA

**Annual General Meeting of Sea of Faith Network (Inc)
to be held at St. Patrick's College, Silverstream
on Saturday 2nd October 2010 at 1:30pm**

1. Welcome
2. Apologies
3. Minutes of the 2009 AGM
4. Matters Arising
5. Chairman's Report – Natali Allen
6. Financial Report – Peter Cowley
7. Other Reports:
 - Archivist - Alison Eng
 - Resource Officer – Suzi Thirlwall
 - Webmaster/Newsletter Editor – Noel Cheer
 - Local Groups – Bev. Smith
8. Election of Officers (minimum of 8 required)
9. Other Business

Remit: 'That clause 7c. be amended to read:

"Steering Committee members may serve for no more than four years consecutively, except that the person appointed by Steering Committee as Treasurer may serve for no more than eight years consecutively.'

Please forward in writing:

Nominations for the Steering Committee or further remits to the Chairperson: Natali Allen at natali@actrix.co.nz or P.O. Box 120 Rawene, Northland, 0443 before 18th September 2010.

**Natali Allen
Chairperson 2009-2010**

Pre-Conference Issue Contents

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Letter From The Editor

From time to time the question of ritual and liturgy arises in respect of the Conference. It would be fair to say that there is a wide range of opinion. My personal take is that the annual Conference itself – in its entirety – is an annual ritual that I look forward to. The people not seen for a year, the stimulating papers and discussions, the sheer joy of religious exploration and speculation unhindered by dogma.

See you there!

Noel Cheer, Editor

Where the Shoe Pinches

Waikato Branch Report May 2010

In 2010 the Waikato branch has adopted a single theme for the year: "**Where the shoe pinches; the encounter between secular humanism and the divine**".

In March Stephen Warnes opened the series with the view that there is no incompatibility between secular humanism and Christianity, defined as the practice of Jesus' teaching. Where the shoe pinches is between Christianity and what he called Christendom, the historical church which had, over the centuries, become too big for its boots.

In April Fred Marshall followed up that distinction, setting the frame for a discussion on "What is wrong/right with the Church?" – in its doctrines, its structure and its practice. The web of misrepresentation of the divine which arises from the doctrine of penal substitution is offset by the injunction to "love one another"; the pernicious sin/guilt complex is fostered by the traditional church which nevertheless puts in place well-trodden pathways to forgiveness and reconciliation; when the cannibalistic overtones of the banquet of lamb are removed and the rite of the common meal in memory of Jesus is a valued component of Christian practice; the hierarchy and authority of the priesthood with the exercise of thought control that goes with it are matched by the pastoral responsibility of the priest for those who are lost and forgotten and the organisation provides practical avenues for the flow of charity to the needy. The discussion which followed included a number of moving stories of encounters with the Church.

Fred Marshall

Engagement 21

A Wake-up Call to the 21st Century Church in Mission

Bishop Richard Randerson

The book, *Engagement 21*, challenges the Church to radically review its mission strategy if it seeks to gain traction in today's world. A mission-focused theology, a deeper understanding of modern society and more effective skills in ministry are central to the task.

Based on a survey of 96 clergy and laity in New Zealand and Australia, *Engagement 21* reports a widespread grass-roots desire for change. But it also documents 126 creative ministry projects that are signs of a new mission paradigm. Designed for individual or group reading, the book is priced to facilitate local study and mission planning.

There is a Gospel to proclaim, its truth crucial to life in this post-modern age. New vessels are essential to convey this treasure.

Topics include:

- Statistics of church participation rates 1945-2006
- Results of the mission survey with 16 graphs documenting the extent of theological and ministry training, perceptions of parish ministries, chaplaincies and lay vocation, and attitudes re the need for new models of ministry and less institutional focus
- A three-part biblical study on mission based on the redemption of all Creation
- 126 innovative ministry projects that span the range from spirituality, worship and theological education to community outreach, social justice and environmental stewardship
- Foreword by Bishop Philip Richardson.

Note: while the data contained in *Engagement 21* is drawn mainly from Anglican circles, it is relevant to all denominations, and suitable for ecumenical, inter-tikanga and church/community partnerships.

E-mail Bishop Randerson at randersonjr@paradise.net.nz

Separate Truths

It is misleading - and dangerous - to think that religions are different paths to the same wisdom.

The following are extracts from an article with the title "Separate Truths" in the Boston Globe of 25 April, 2010. It is by Stephen Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University, whose new book is: *God is Not One: The eight rival religions that run the world – And why their differences matter.*

At least since the 1960s, it has been fashionable to affirm that all religions are, by some miracle of the imagination, both essentially the same and basically good. To claim that all religions are basically the same . . . is not to deny the differences [but] it is to deny that those differences matter.

For most of world history, human beings have seen religious rivals as inferior to themselves. This way of seeing has given us religious violence [and] in response to such violence, the Age of Enlightenment popularized the ideal of religious tolerance, and we are doubtless better for it.

What the world's religions share is not so much a finish line as a starting point. And where they begin is with this simple observation: Something is wrong with the world. They part company, however, when it comes to stating just what has gone wrong, and they diverge even more sharply when they move from diagnosing the human problem to prescribing how to solve it.

Christians see sin as the human problem, and salvation from sin as the religious goal. Buddhists see suffering as the problem, and liberation from suffering as the goal. Confucians see social disorder as the problem, and social harmony as the goal. And so it goes from tradition to tradition, with Hindus seeking release from the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, and Muslims seeking paradise via submission to Allah.

Experience is central in Daoism and Buddhism. Hinduism and Judaism emphasize the narrative dimension. The ethical dimension is crucial in Confucianism. The Islamic tradition is to a great extent about ritual. And doctrine is particularly important to Christians.

There is a long tradition of Christian thinkers who assume that salvation is the goal of all religions and then argue that only Christians can achieve this goal. Salvation is a Christian goal, and when Christians speak of it, they are speaking of being saved from sin. But Confucians and Buddhists do not believe in sin, so it makes no sense for them to try to be saved from it. And while Muslims and Jews do speak of sin of a sort, neither Islam nor Judaism describes salvation from sin as its aim.

When a jailer asks the apostle Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30), he is asking not a generic human question but a specifically Christian one.

A sports analogy may be in order here. Which of the following — baseball, basketball, tennis or golf — is best at scoring runs? The answer of course is baseball, because runs is a term foreign to basketball, tennis, and golf alike. Different sports have different goal. To criticize a basketball team for failing to score runs is not to besmirch them. It is simply to misunderstand the game of basketball.

So here is another problem with the pretend pluralism of the perennial philosophy sort: Just as hitting home runs is the monopoly of one sport, salvation is the monopoly of one religion. If you see sin as the human predicament and salvation as the solution, then it makes sense to come to Christ. But that will not settle as much as you might think, because the real question is not which religion is best at carrying us into the end zone of salvation but which of the many religious goals on offer we should be seeking.

We pretend that religious differences are trivial because it makes us feel safer, or more moral. But pretending that the world's religions are the same does not make our world safer. Like all forms of ignorance, it makes our world more dangerous, and more deadly. What we need is a realistic view of where religious rivals clash and where they can cooperate. The world is what it is. And both tolerance and respect are empty virtues until we actually know whatever it is we are supposed to be tolerating or respecting.

Summary by Shirley Dixon, Titahi Bay

Living the Questions 2

This is a sequel to LTQ 1 which was well received by SoF members. It consists of three DVDs entitled *Invitation to Journey*, *Reclaiming the World* and *Call to Covenant*. Each contains seven programmes of approximately 20 minutes with a folksy introduction by Ted Semple. The programmes move on to discussions and opinions presented by well-established authorities such as Spong, Borg and our own Lloyd Geering. It describes itself as an exploration of progressive Christianity.

Invitation to Journey explores a faith re-visioning of core values, a journey with no destination in which adherents are comfortable with notions of the unknowable and unanswerable. “The ones that think they have answers get us into trouble”. So should we take the Bible seriously? To one it’s an “act of imagination” to another it is a “lens through which we see good”. We can hear stories in such a way that we know their truth does not depend on factuality. “I don’t know if it happened this way but I know this story is true”. “The great concern in life should be to discover which are the right questions”. Answers may be less important. At times “life can take us to places that are shattering” when our inner strength may be all there is: “our imaginations about who we can be are just too small”.

Reclaiming the World opens with the theme of our relationship to others. What responsibilities do we have and where do they take us? “The prophetic Jesus spoke plainly. “When he told us to love our enemies I think he meant it”. Why is the despised Samaritan the one who offers succour? What is being said about prejudice? Is it the outward face of our own insecurities? “Prejudice kills the humanity of the person with prejudice”. The corollary is suggested “Something happens that ennobles you when you do justice for those who are oppressed”. What is a just society? “Look at results in society to see if it is just”. In worldly politics “governments organise things for those with power”.

Will we find answers in ‘Evil, Suffering and a God of Love’? But how about Job? “The book of Job provides no answer to the question of suffering”. What should we be making of the voice of his friends who are the voice of conventional wisdom? Does suffering come of God? “God does not rule the world” He is no “royal model” as seen in a common model of prayer – a ‘tow truck’ thinking (“Get me out of this”) or bountiful provider on request or in exchange for behaviour. In fact to claim “the luck of the world – wealth, prosperity, comfort power as a sign of God’s love is profoundly heretical”. Should we pray? Is it the same as meditation? Are there practices we can do to call us to attention and mindfulness? What are we to make of the Korean concept ‘Han’ – a relief of suffering through beauty and poetry? Does the Biblical death and resurrection mean anything? Revelations? What of Apocalypticism and notions of a “Kingdom of God”? What might that be? Is it just for the elect and achieved after devastation, violence and vengeance? What of the earth itself? Whose responsibility is its health and well-being?

Call to Covenant returns to the notion of relationships and prejudice. Who is a stranger? Do we cling to those like us to the exclusion of others? Are ‘religious people’ “territorial, cliquish, exclusive, not hospitable”? The world and religions are riddled with differences of language, actions, expectations, style, music ... To what degree are these walls and barriers to an encompassing hospitality? Can we rise above them? And so the discourse moves to closure inviting people to be chary of definitive answers which popular scientific method strives for. In a world of expanding universes, black holes, missing links can we be certain of anything? A modern faith adherent need not fear uncertainty but be hopeful and comfortable in the depth and breadth of mystery.

I found the intelligence, sincerity and integrity of the presenters warming. It was interesting and stimulating. The material sits well with much of what we encounter via SoF. Whether a churchgoer, agnostic or atheist there is much here that deserves respect and repays consideration.

Suzi Thirlwall, Tauranga 2010

Suzi is the Curator of the Resource Centre from which financial members may borrow material. There is a catalogue on the Web Site. If you cannot access it, then write to Noel Cheer at 26 Clipper St, Titahi Bay to request a paper version.

Human IQ and Religion

What supreme attribute shows most clearly that our human intelligence quotient is higher than that of any other animal on earth? Once, I asked a young man this question; he was studying IQ tests as the thesis for a psychology degree. And his answer surprised me. It was not academic prowess or genius at harnessing technology. Nor was it intelligent design -- discrepancies elsewhere lead to some doubts here. The answer was our ability to use symbols. "With imagination", I would add now.

Humans invented symbols. Children learn letters, numbers and scientific formulae, at school. But it takes a forward-thinking reasoned imagination to turn, for instance, a geometric equation into a space craft visiting its target planet or moon.

And that brings us to the crux of this discourse, that theist religion comes steeped in symbolism (accompanied by a rich choice of theology books to explain it).

However, the evolution of thought can change even the most traditional symbols. Beautiful cathedral spires point to a remote heaven; modern churches reach out in this-world with a sprawl of meeting rooms and drop-in centres attached.

Moreover, aeons ago the practice of human sacrifice gave way to animal offerings. Today, Christian worshippers partake of a morsel of bread and a sip of wine representing the body and blood of the most sacred sacrifice - Jesus Christ who died on the cross.

At times the ritualistic symbol itself becomes paramount and its origins blurred. But this was not the case for a friend who, when asked after a service why she had not taken communion, replied quietly and truly: "I'm a vegetarian."

A few evangelists may have an overactive imagination telling their glib dramas to sway their listeners with their charlatanry.

Other people automatically say "no" to mooted change, but if given time for the cell connections of lateral thinking to be made, will often acquiesce. Governments know this too. A radical proposal might be floated on television then put on hold until after the furore and media-munching subside and a modicum of acceptance pervades the nation.

"Deliver us from sullen saints", says the old adage. Ivan Picken is a contemporary expert interested in brain function; he has written a paper about bio-chemistry as the elementary base of behaviour. He maintains that whatever our faith level or our, IQ, we feel happy only if indigenous opiates, endorphins, are present in the grey matter, triggered in complex ways when our basic needs are met and successful outcomes follow our actions.

Through future research even more will be understood about the workings of the human brain. There is no great mystery in the universe, just things we have yet to find the reasons for. And we will.

Margaret Whitwell, Te Puke, February 2010

Random Paragraphs

Old fashioned New Atheists? "As a rule, the New Atheists' concept of God is simply that of some very immense and powerful being among other beings, who serves as the first cause of all other things only in the sense that he is prior to and larger than all other causes. That is, the New Atheists are concerned with the sort of God believed in by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Deists.

For Nietzsche ... the future that lies before us must be decided, and decided between only two possible paths: a final nihilism, which aspires to nothing beyond the momentary consolations of material contentment, or some great feat of creative will, inspired by a new and truly worldly mythos powerful enough to replace the old and discredited mythos of the Christian revolution"

David Hart's most recent book is "Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies".

www.firstthings.com/article/2010/04/believe-it-or-not

Poisons: “The 'poisons' of the mind (delusion, greed and hatred) to be uprooted through Buddhist practice have become institutionalized [in the West] in the forms of the multinational corporations, consumerism, and the arms industry that increasingly dominate life on earth.”

Stephen Batchelor The Awakening of The West Parallax Press, USA 1994 p361-362

Dark Thoughts: Sometimes I lie awake at night, and I ask, "Where have I gone wrong?"

Then a voice says to me, "This is going to take more than one night." Peanuts *by Charles Schulz*

A New Age ‘Lord’s Prayer’ and ‘Creed’

Let us centre our thoughts on the spirit of love - the essence of wisdom and the source of all that is good.

If we put our faith in the power of love we can have hope that there may be peace, harmony and goodwill in the world.

We will show our love by seeking to provide, for others as well as ourselves and those dear to us, our daily needs of food, clothing and shelter.

If we can succeed in loving not only our families and friends but also our enemies, they may be able to forgive us and that may in turn enable us to forgive ourselves.

We will do our utmost to avoid situations that might tempt us to do what the spirit of love tells us is wrong; and when we are faced with temptation we will use all our willpower to keep us from wrongdoing.

We believe that the power of love can make ‘heaven’ on earth and so we will revere the spirit of love as our god – our ultimate value and the hope of the world.

We believe that we must have faith to give us hope - and that love can fulfil them.

Ian leC. Harvey, June 2004

Faith in Cyberspace

- **From our Website:** Information about the Conference at <http://sof.org.nz/2010conf.htm>
- There are Books, DVDs and CDs for members to borrow from **The Resource Centre** : <http://sof.org.nz/resource.pdf>
- Most of us like to believe that **our opinions** have been formed over time by careful, rational consideration of facts and ideas, and that the decisions based on those opinions, therefore, have the ring of soundness and intelligence. In reality, we often base our opinions on our beliefs, which can have an uneasy relationship with facts. And rather than facts driving beliefs, *our beliefs can dictate the facts we chose to accept.*
www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/07/11/how_facts_backfire?mode=PF
- **Rights for Whales:** This declaration is now open for individuals to join. See <http://cetaceanconservation.com.au/cetaceanrights/>
- **Religion and Ethics with an Australian emphasis:** www.abc.net.au/religion/
- **Deepak Chopra tries being a monk:** to read of his experiences and conclusions see www.chopra.com/agni/aug10/deepak
- **Deepak Chopra's God 2.0:** Skeptic Michael Shermer doesn't mince words but accuses Deepak Chopra of doing so: “The "quantum flapdoodle" of the New Age author is a failed effort to update medieval theology”. www.bigquestiononline.com/columns/michael-shermer/deepak-chopras-god-20



60's Nostalgia

Remembering the Early Music of John Ylvisaker

The younger generation could be forgiven for thinking that “Christian music” is exclusively evangelical or charismatic.

However, back in the 60s, when guitars and drums began to make their appearance in Church, there were musicians such as the English Quaker Sydney Carter, the Australian Anglican Jim Minchin, the German Roman Catholic Peter Janssens, and the American Lutheran John Ylvisaker, who had a liberal, provocative and questioning approach to religion. It was 1970 or 1971 when I first heard Ylvisaker's music. I became an instant fan and paid the license fee to have his songs copied onto reel-to-reel tapes by the Christian Audio-Visual Society of New Zealand. For years he was an inspiration, but then my reel-to-reel tape recorder gave up the ghost, so for decades, I was unable to play his music. Recently, I searched for him on the Internet, discovered that there are some of the younger generation who love his music. Through them, I was able to download some of his songs. I was surprised not only by how strongly they evoked the feelings from so long ago, but also by how interesting and often profound their lyrics are.

In 2000, the music magazine Mojo carried an article on religious music in the psychedelic 60's, under the title “Jesus Christ! What were they on?” It had this to say about Ylvisaker:

Meanwhile, in America the Dylan of the Bible scene, John Ylvisaker, was “gently rocking the American churches from coast to coast with some new electric sounds”. Albums like Cool Livin' (1967) and Follow Me (1968) swapped unquestioning praise for Lutheran folk songs and sardonic Dylanesque lyrics, and Ylvisaker became a hero to young 60's Christians who wanted to be hip and praise God.

Here are some of the songs that appeal to me, both for their music and their words.

Noise of Solemn Assemblies is a heavy rock attack on religious observance, taken straight from the prophet Amos: “Take away from me the noise of your hymns, to the sound of your harps I will not listen. I take no delight in the noise of your solemn assemblies.” At the end, the song changes from angry confrontation to warm invitation, to present the prophet's appeal: “But let justice roll down and righteousness an ever-flowing stream.” A similar but less confrontational song pokes ironic fun at our trappings of affluence (“we look so fine in our magazine cars”) and our church culture (“with our Sunday smiles and uptight clothes, our sermon ears and twinkle toes”) and has an inspired refrain:

Hey let loose, let loose your love, hey let loose the love of God in you.

The Old Man and the New presents the message of Ecclesiastes, that there is nothing new under the sun. The chorus goes like this:

The old is really not so old,
The new really not so new.
The longer I live in this crazy old world,
The more I think it must be true.

The examples he gives in support of this are astonishing. Trips on drugs seem so new and unique, but are no different from what the mystics of old achieved through beating and fasting... Christians think that the biblical stories of creation and flood are so new and great, but need to realize that the Genesis creation story “was borrowed right and left” and that “Noah's flood was swiped from Babylon.” The conclusion is:

The good old days were really not so good
And the present not so bad
And the future will look a whole lot like the past
So we don't have to get so mad

Two songs about Jesus present contrasting moods. In *The Camel Swallowers*, Ylvisaker has Jesus rail against the religious leaders:

Shame on you, people, you that lead and all you who teach
You load up men's backs but you do not practice what you preach

In *Desolation*, Ylvisaker presents Jesus lamenting his failure to win over the people of Jerusalem to his cause.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
Killing the prophets, slaying those who are sent to you
How oft would I have gathered your children
As a hen gathers her brood, but you would not!

The text for both songs comes from Matthew 23, but where else do you find songs or hymns in which Jesus attacks the religious authorities or where he expresses failure in his mission?

Ylvisaker engaged with the theology of the time. In 1965, Harvey Cox wrote *The Secular City* and already in 1967, Ylvisaker's music reflected Cox's themes of secularization and the positive potential of the city, which were explicitly intended as a counter to the Church's general bemoaning of the mobility and urbanization of modern life.

My City is a poem in praise of the city and an expression of hope in its future.

My city stands in the four free winds,
Her airways leap where the jets fly high
And in the night when the winds go down
Her glow is a heartbeat against the sky.

Mass for the Secular City ingeniously wove together the traditional sung parts of the Eucharistic liturgy and a paradigmatic story of a young man who went to the city but became lost and lonely, but found new life - not in a church but in a coffee-house.

We came to the city, big time in the city
Lord, have mercy
It's the city that caught us, the city that taught us
To hide from the hope of the world.

Lord, have mercy
Christ, have mercy
Lord, have mercy on us only you do we trust
Help us live for the life of the world.

In 1967, Ylvisaker performed this work at Carnegie Hall, perhaps the high point of his musical career. He has continued as a church musician and composer, but his later work sounds much more middle-of-the-road. The only clue I have found to the reasons for the change was in an article he wrote in 1985:

Imaginative Use of the Arts: Music and Audio: Ten Steps Toward Responsible Innovation. There he writes:

One of the chief problems of any reform movement is the privatizing of the religious experience, the cultifying of groups of "followers," etc. Our task in the '80s is to take the best of this drift toward closer cultural identity while maintaining our historical, stabilizing rituals. So, the final step in this process is to preserve the rituals we have inherited lest our innovation cut us off and we find ourselves adrift in a sea of options. This is very difficult to do, as many of us have discovered, but it is vital to the growth and nurture of Christian congregations everywhere.

It looks like he concluded that the very attributes which endear him to me were divisive in the Church community, adjusting his music and lyrics accordingly.

For me, it is a delight to be able to hear these songs again and a comfort to know that, however banal or off-putting the music of Christian radio stations and evangelical/charismatic congregations may be today, there was a time when good quality Christian music stimulated and challenged.

Laurie Chisholm, Christchurch

See also www.ylvisaker.com; <http://heavenly-grooves.blogspot.com>; www.youtube.co/watch?v=06f4OppoRnc

Soul Talk

Excerpts from an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education Review* of 2 May, 2010 by Stephen T. Asma

No self-respecting professor of philosophy wants to discuss the soul in class.

It reeks of old-time theology, or, worse, New Age quantum treacle. The soul has been a dead end in philosophy ever since the positivists unmasked its empty referential center. Scientific philosophy has shown us that there's no there there.

But make no mistake, our students are very interested in the soul. In fact, that is the main reason many of us won't raise the soul issue in our classes: The bizarre, speculative, spooky metaphysics that pours out of students, once the box has been opened, is truly chaotic and depressing. The class is a tinderbox of weird pet theories—divine vapors, God particles, reincarnation, astral projections, auras, ghosts—and mere mention of the soul is like a spark that sets off dozens of combustions. Trying to put out all these fires with calm, cool rationality is exhausting and unsuccessful.

Since the early 1900s, a handful of marginal experimenters have tried to weigh the soul—by arranging dying people on scales and taking their weight before and after the moment of death. Nothing even vaguely suggestive was discovered by that experimental approach, except a very high degree of wishful thinking.

Even if we could show that some energy was leaving our bodies at the moment of death, it can't really be a surprise, since thermodynamics tells us that energy is always being exchanged through physical systems. When I die, the slowing of my thermodynamic processes will become irreversible; my local entropy will increase. When I die, my energy will go on. But, of course, we can't get too excited by that fact, since we're talking only about heat and the chemical transformation of my decaying flesh, taken up and conserved in new organisms and physical systems. The conservation of energy doesn't give us any conservation of consciousness or any continuation of personal identity. And personal continuity is the hope for most soul proponents.



Instead of asking whether we can verify the soul's existence—find some empirical evidence for it—I suggest a Wittgensteinian approach. Following the Austrian philosopher, I ask: How do people actually talk about the soul? How is soul talk used in ordinary language? And here we find that the soul is alive and well in certain kinds of expressive language. When you look at actual soul talk, you find the following kinds of expressions: "He is my soul mate," or "She really sold her soul," or "That's good soul food," or "This nature hike is good for my soul," or "She is an old soul," or "James Brown has soul," or "The soul reincarnates," or "Her soul is in heaven now."

Those expressions share little similarity. Like Wittgenstein's famous example of diverse 'games', they probably represent a family resemblance of meanings rather than a common essential definition. Notice, for example, that only the last two expressions have any metaphysical connotations.

But more important, the expressions are not really propositions about the world. They express emotional attitudes and resemble other kinds of imperative or aspirational speech, like, "You go, girl!," or "Don't do that," or "Have a nice trip," or "I got soul, and I'm superb." When I say "You've got soul," it's not a description of some factual state of affairs; rather it is an evaluation. It expresses as much about the subject as the object referenced. We cannot expunge the subjective

expressive/evaluative properties from the sentence and arrive at some testable proposition (as in science). Saying "James Brown has soul" is nothing like saying "The cat is on the mat" or "Water freezes at zero degrees".

Soul talk is expressive in the same way as other nondescriptive utterances, like "Oh my God" or "Ouch". There is no clear referent for those. They don't seem to refer to or represent anything—they seem somehow pre-representational (or presentational). Soul talk, like other emotive talk, bears little relation to the goals of scientific language, and probably can't be assessed with that language. In the same way that a poem is not trying to explain a phenomenon, soul talk is equally uninterested in induction, hypothesis, prediction, and corroboration. Instead, soul talk tries to express our hopes and aspirations ("I hope I see my family again in the afterlife") or to identify inspiration ("This song really speaks to my soul"), or to express feelings deeper than friendship ("I've finally found my soul mate"), or to scare people into doing something ("Your soul will burn in hellfire"), and so on.

So why is soul talk still meaningful, and why can't it be replaced?

If we think about the human being, we can analyze ourselves into various parts and functions: the body, cognition, emotions, memory, perception, and so on. And we can make many impressive scientific claims about those parts and functions. Modern medicine is a testament to the genius of methodological materialism and a mechanical approach to the human being.

But in this matrix of human thoughts, feelings, and experiences, we also find forms of awareness and activity that call out for a different language. The kinds of awareness I'm thinking of might be described as aesthetic—feelings of ecstasy, feelings for the beautiful or the sublime, poignant stirrings that might be labeled transcendent—or, negatively, feelings of horror or dread. And the kinds of activities I'm trying to isolate might be creative acts (playing music, writing poetry, handcrafting furniture, serving tea while a Zen master whacks you with a stick) as well as ethical activities (acts of altruism, self-sacrifice). It's hard to see how a purely descriptive scientific language can find good traction in those domains, but an alternative language exists and has existed for a long time. Soul talk is a part of that successful expressive language.

Philosophers like Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Kenneth Burke even went so far as to suggest that language is originally expressive, rhetorical, and dramatic, and only derivatively descriptive, scientific, and explanatory. If that is true, then soul talk is a part of that primordial language.

Our tendency to turn this soul language into metaphysics is strong—Wittgenstein said that sometimes "language goes on holiday," and that we have to coax it back to its useful, functional meaning. Just as I don't hear a smell or taste a color, I also don't literally "live after death," or have a "soul mate." Those are perfectly good metaphorical uses of language, but they shouldn't be confused with literal descriptive uses of language. When I say, for example, "My soul will go on," I'm probably really saying, "I hope I live more." And when we've arrived at that naked expression of subjective yearning, then we've probably reached the end of our analysis. We're done understanding it.

The problem with some religious and New Age soul talk is that it exports the soul concept from the domain of subjective expression to the domain of objective fact, where it can have no empirical corroboration. That is the main category mistake.

The full article can be found at <http://chronicle.com/article/Soul-Talk/65278/>

Stephen T. Asma is a professor of philosophy, and a fellow in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences Research Group in Mind, Science, and Culture, at Columbia College, Chicago. His books include *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and *Why I Am a Buddhist* (Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2010)

Two Letters to The Editor **from Robin Boom, Hamilton**

Dear Editor

I write in support of Bill Robottom's critique of Richard Dawkins (SoF Newsletter 89). Bill's statement that he "can make a good case which would make Dawkins look like a school boy in the corner with a dunce cap on" is an interesting claim. Although Dawkins is a brilliant man and extremely well read, I agree with Bill that Dawkins is dishonest, such as his denial of knowing any serious biologist who embraces intelligent design. A few years ago there was an article in *Time* magazine where Dawkins and geneticist Francis Collins debated this very subject. Francis Collins led the Human Genome project and with several other top ranking scientists has recently established Biologos (www.biologos.org) as a website for defending both science and faith in God, especially the Christian faith. Dawkins dismisses any concept of God or creationism, claiming that natural selection and Darwinian evolution alone explain the mystery of life. I struggle to accept that we or any complex creature is the ultimate product of a huge series of unguided random chemical flukes.

What defines a species is its unique microscopic strip of DNA which in essence is an information code. Our own human DNA is made up of some 13 million genes that contain information formed by some three billion letters, which self-replicate with procreation. Physicist Paul Davies candidly put it this way: "We now know that the secret of life lies not with the chemical ingredients as such, but with the logical structure and organisational arrangement of the molecules ... Like a supercomputer, life is an information processing system ... It is the software of the living cell that is the real mystery, not the hardware ... How did the stupid atoms spontaneously write their own software?"

DNA contains information. Information is an ordered sequence of letters, like the letters in this sentence that you are reading. If I were to randomly put a series of letters together such as f, kwld k, wkd mrek w cnde, mdsnghdmc it means nothing as it is random. The arguments of the evangelical apostle of atheism, Dawkins, fail to explain how information got there in the first place. As Paul Davies tacitly admitted, "There is no law of physics able to create information from nothing".

There is so much more I could elaborate on, but space prohibits me. If 'seeing is believing', then I see in living creatures, incredible design, beauty and architecture at the micro and macro level which infer a designer, beautician and architect. Unlike Dawkins, I do not have enough faith to be an atheist, but like Bill Robottom, find many of the arguments for Intelligent Design much more compelling.

Yours sincerely,

Robin Boom, Hamilton

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Dear Editor

Alan Goss' article 'God-Talk in the Gun' (SoF Newsletter 89) concludes that God is not a being, because only beings (like humans) can create, love, care, etc; and that God is merely an idea or concept and the "supreme creation of the human imagination". This is just atheist dogma, insisting that God is not. If this is one's opinion of God, then I agree that God-talk is redundant.

In the New Testament, John writes that God is love (1 John 4:8), and also that God through his Word creates (John 1:3), and Peter wrote that God cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). These two former fishermen could write these through their experience of Jesus and inspiration and interaction with what they understood to be the Holy Spirit. Two thousand years later we might write their words off as 'Christian dogma', but who is being the dogmatic one? Today's atheist for claiming God is not because their experience of God is zilch, or the countless millions who through the ages claim to have encountered God in some kind of spiritual dynamic? If God is just a concept or idea, how boring is that?

Yours sincerely,

Robin Boom, Hamilton

From The Chair

By now members of the national Network will have received the Conference programme.

It also appears on the Web site at: www.sof.org.nz

- Preparations for Conference are well underway and here is some advice to help with your preparation.
- Please be sure to get your registration in by the 1st September, not only to avoid the \$25 surcharge but to assist us with last minute planning.
- For those coming by car, there is parking in the grounds and this will be signposted from the gate on Fergusson Drive.
- Please remember to bring your own towel and note that the St. Patrick's College campus is smoke free in all areas.
- The venue itself is virtually all under cover and distances between the accommodation and areas we use is generally no more than a few yards. However wet weather gear could be useful, despite our anticipating fine weather for the visits.

This year each presentation and the Compassion Panel is followed by a core group meeting to offer Conference participants the opportunity to further explore and critique the ideas presented and to identify the potential for compassion in today's world. The purpose of the core groups is to share and expand our thoughts. In preparation for these discussions there are many areas we can think about. Apart from the effectiveness of the 'Charter for Compassion', we can consider the possibility of compassion as an approach to population, politics, economy and food supply, climate change, the environment, other species; the list is possibly endless. What would the world look like if compassion were the prevailing ethos?

However, Micklethwait and Wooldridge in their book *God is Back*¹ subtitled *How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World*, suggest that competition, markets and quantity rather than traditional tenets, now drive the world's religions – Has the Golden Rule and practice of compassion lost its central place ?

As usual the AGM will be held on the Saturday afternoon of Conference. The Agenda appears in this edition of the Newsletter and if you have nominations or other matters for discussion please let me know. Please also think about the Resource Centre and how it may be more fully used by you and by Local Groups, as we hope to have some discussion about this at the AGM.

It is planned that at Conference there will be opportunity to purchase new books from the Unity Book stall on Saturday and the St. Andrew's collection throughout the Conference. At the same time we plan a table for exchange of relevant books and material from the Resource Centre and members. If you have anything you would like to donate to, or exchange with, the Resource centre or others, please bring it with you.

Looking forward to seeing you there.

Natali Allen, Chairperson 2009-2010

¹ Micklethwait, J & Wooldridge A, (2009), *God Is Back*, Penguin Books N.Y

