



Hugh Aiken

13.10.1931 – 11.10.2010

The Tauranga SOF group were shocked and saddened at the sudden death of Hugh Aiken, host, co-ordinator and friend, while walking home on 11th October. Members reflections include words like “deep thinker”, “brave”, “private but interested in people’s lives”, “integrity”, “modesty”, “one of nature’s gentlemen”. More than one commented on his determination to uphold his late wife’s standards exemplified in the use of their lovely china at group meetings at his home.

Hugh was born in Frankton, educated in Rotorua studying Civil Engineering at Auckland University. His career saw him in various places. In one of these, Wellington, he met Joan Farquhar via their church, St Andrews. They married and were loving, life-long family-oriented partners until Joan’s death in 2001.

Hugh described himself as being for three quarters of his life “a believer in a Christian God.” They were regular churchgoers deeply involved in its life. In Tauranga he was an elder in the Presbyterian church but found it “very narrow.” They moved to the more liberal Methodist church where Hugh taught Sunday School, but their thinking was changing. After a period in Hamilton they resettled in Tauranga among Sea of Faith explorers.

After his family, Hugh’s passion was sailing and his other interests were music and SOF. Via our group he made probably his closest friend of recent years, Howard Zingel, with whom he sailed and traveled to conferences. All enriched his years as a widower.

Among his papers these reflections were found:

Hugh Aiken
1931-2010



“I no longer believe in divine intervention in either one’s life or for the world ... I believe that the world will only be a better place for everyone as we individually and collectively work to make it so.

That love and compassion for others is the essential factor.”

compiled by Suzi Thirlwall

Post-Conference Issue CONTENTS

1. Hugh Aiken

Tauranga loses a loved and respected member

2. Life Memberships

Ian Harris and Alan Goss are honoured – and so are we

2. New Books in the Resource Centre

The library continues to grow

3. Letters to The Editor

Keeping up the dialogue

4. A Close Encounter with Humanism

Bill Cooke shakes hands with Ecclesiastes

5. Watch Out – God is Back!

Bringing bad things and good

6. Our Changed World View

“Once upon a time there were two worlds ...” says storyteller Alan Goss

7. Faith in Cyberspace

It’s just a click away

8. John Spong’s New Vision

A detailed review by Don Grant

10. Just When We Decided to Keep the Name the Same

Doug Sellman suggests a way out of the impasse

12. From The Chair

Natali reviews the 2010 Conference



Together with this Newsletter you should have received a Conference Supplement which contains excerpts from the Keynote Speeches, a sheet of Conference photographs, and an Order Form for you to use should you want to order any CDs of the Conference.



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

See the website at **www.sof.org.nz** for further details.

LIFE MEMBERSHIPS

At the Annual General meeting of The Sea of Faith Conference this year, those who attended had the pleasure of participating in the award of Life Memberships to Ian Harris and Alan Goss. Both Ian and Alan attended the first Conference in Hamilton in 1994, and were foundation members of the Sea of Faith Network in New Zealand.

More than this, Ian was one of three who had formed the ad hoc steering group that planned that first Conference from which the more permanent Steering Committee was established. He then became the first Chairman and thus saw the Network through the establishment of the Constitution and the development of the firm foundation upon which it was established and has continued.

Ian, as a journalist and commentator has, for many years, contributed to and stimulated religious discussion throughout New Zealand in his well known columns in the Dominion Post and the Otago Daily Times. In these he has explored the experience of religion with a wide audience. His book *Creating God, Recreating Christ*, and his formation of the Ephesus group in Wellington (which preceded that of the Sea of Faith) have also encouraged others to participate in this on-going discussion.

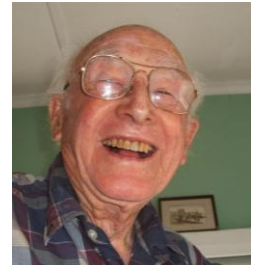
Following the 1994 Conference, Alan Goss began a small group meeting in the Napier Public Library, and from this the local Sea of Faith group was formed. In Napier Alan is well known through his earlier work in the formation of family church meetings and discussion groups, and as a thoughtful and willing contributor to the local Sea of Faith group programme, both as speaker and in well reasoned discussion.

Alan was the initial coordinator of the Napier Local Group, and later served on the National Steering Committee. He has a long history of encouraging the sharing of liberal, even radical, theological ideas, and within the National Network he has revealed his wide reading and understanding through prolific contributions and book reviews to this Newsletter since its beginning.

These Life Memberships come as a small appreciation of the ongoing support and contribution that both these men have given in the development and support of the Sea of Faith Network and its membership. We are strengthened and honoured by their presence with us.



Ian Harris



Alan Goss

Natali Allen, Chairperson 2010-2011



NEW BOOKS IN THE RESOURCE CENTRE

Members may borrow books, tapes etc. from the **Resource Centre** which is managed by Suzi Thirlwall susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz, phone (07) 578-2775

A complete catalogue appears on the website www.sof.org.nz

B207	Jack Somerville: <i>Jack in the Pulpit</i>
B208	R.M. Ogilvie: <i>The Romans and Their Gods</i>
B209	James P. Mackey: <i>Jesus: The Man & The Myth</i>
B210	Richard Bauckham: <i>Jesus and The Eyewitnesses</i>
B211	Baron-Cohen: <i>The Essential Difference: The Truth about the Male and Female Brain</i>
B212	Shelley E. Taylor: <i>The Tending Instinct</i> [biology of relationships]
B213	Karen Armstrong: <i>The Spiral Staircase</i>
B214	John Gribbin: <i>In Search of Schrodinger's Cat</i>
B215	Stephen Hawking: <i>A Brief History of Time</i>
B216	Nel Noddings: <i>Women and Evil</i>
B217	Rupert Sheldrake: <i>A New Science of Life</i>
B218	Danah Zohar & Ian Marshall: <i>The Quantum Society</i>
B219	Kevin Clements: <i>Honouring Each Other</i>

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

Robin Boom of Hamilton has written to you about creation and has talked about an intelligent designer. He favours this rather than evolution.

There are some snags, however, about the intelligent designer. Does he realise that the nervous system for humans is that of a quadruped – not erect and two-legged? A medical training would put him [the designer] right. Of course if he was planning to construct a four-limbed quadruped then that's OK.

Why does he have to put a pelvis in an animal that swims in the sea? – a dolphin that gives birth at sea and who has to breathe air right away? It has no use for a pelvis. Not very sensible. Why does he make germs like the staphylococcus that are difficult to get rid of and can close a hospital ward for a week or so? Or why does he make the malarial parasite that kills millions?

The intelligent designer needs theodicy in the same way as the creator does too. THEODICY: a defense for things that are awkward or wrong: like earthquakes, floods, climate warming etc. The defense is our free will in most cases, but this does not completely get him off the hook.

Yours sincerely, George Boston, New Plymouth

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Dear Editor: Three tips for 'I hate Dawkins' warriors

Has anyone noticed that the more incensed people get about Richard Dawkins, the more they sound like him? We've had clear evidence of this in the last two issues: from Bill Robottom and Robin Boom.

Here are three tips for 'I hate Dawkins' warriors.

Tip one: if you insist on attacking Dawkins, try doing so without indulging in personal abuse and making absurd claims to being so much more intelligent than he is. After all, aren't those some of the mistakes Dawkins is supposed to be guilty of?

Tip two (this is a harder one): get past the language Dawkins uses, which is unhelpfully combative, and actually give some thought to the substance of what he says. You'll find this helpful, because then you'll read some very important points both about evolution and about religion. And at this point you'll discover that a large number of prominent Christians agree with him. Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, is one example among many. That's because these intelligent Christians realise, as Dawkins does, how damaging 'intelligent' design is to the intellectual credibility of theism in general and to Christianity in particular.

Tip three: if you can't manage tip one or two, then don't read Dawkins. Go on to any of the other new atheists or even some of the older atheists. That way you can read about atheism with an open mind. This tip will help you avoid indulging in much-loved but incoherent put-downs like 'I don't have enough faith to be an atheist'. Come to think of it, better read something about faith as well while you're at it.

Bill Cooke, Auckland

## A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH HUMANISM

A Review by Bill Cooke of Auckland

*Such is Life! A Close Encounter with Ecclesiastes*

Lloyd Geering

Steele Roberts

Wellington, 2010

**Imagine a scenario where a prominent theologian, writing about one of the books of the Bible, discusses, defines and defends humanism intelligently.**

Doesn't happen often, but it does in *Such is Life! A Close Encounter with Ecclesiastes*. Lloyd Geering's latest book is an interesting departure for him. Most of his recent work has involved essay-length studies on big-picture issues like secularism, fundamentalism or the state of Jesus scholarship. And, of course, he's written an autobiography. The autobiography I found a little flat; it seemed to round off and soften some of the sharper

edges of controversies which have defined his public life. His essay-length studies remain as clearly-written, informative and partisan as they have always been. Of particular interest is *In Praise of the Secular* (St Andrew's Trust, 2007). Incidentally, this work has been included with two other of his monographs into the book-length study entitled *Coming Back to Earth* (Polebridge Press, 2009).

Hearing informed praise for secularism is as rare as hearing informed praise for humanism. Geering embeds the secular impulse in the Christian tradition more deeply than secular humanists would feel comfortable with but, these details aside, he is an important supporter of secular society. His work on secularism is a timely reminder to secular humanists to seek out allies from across the spectrum to defend the open society. Secularism suffers when it is defended in a sectarian way, and diminishes our understanding of what secularism is really about.

In *Such is Life?* Geering does for humanism what he has recently done for secularism, and by an interesting path. He goes back to the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible (what Christians rudely call the Old Testament) and outlines its continued freshness, simplicity and wisdom for contemporary readers. The Wisdom literature comprises books like Proverbs, some of Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon. Geering calls the Wisdom literature the Cinderella of ancient Hebrew literature, by which he means it has been marginalised in the shadowy periphery of Jewish thinking and culture, not least because its emphases were distinctly this-worldly. All the grand themes in the other books of the Hebrew Bible; Israel's destiny, the Exodus, the line of David and so on, hardly rate a mention in the Wisdom literature. Indeed, Ecclesiastes almost thumbs its nose at these conceits, seeing them as part of the vanity of the world that he so eloquently condemns.

Another departure from Geering's recent writing is his use of the dialogue style to tease out the points he wants to make. The questioner, who we can take to be Geering himself, lives in our time and is familiar with our vocabulary, and the interviewee is, in this case, the author of Ecclesiastes. Dialogues are not easy to write. The questioner is so often reduced to the role of supplier of opportunities for the interviewee to expound at length, at which point the questioner gasps in admiration at the eloquence just displayed. Geering has managed to balance the intellectual roles of the person asking the questions and of the person answering them. Not an easy thing to do, especially when we remember that the dialogue spans two thousand years, back to when the book of Ecclesiastes was written. This two-millennia gap involves serious challenges. The questioner has to explain a whole vocabulary that the author of Ecclesiastes was unaware of; nature, evolution, democracy, social justice, industrial revolution, and more. And yet Ecclesiastes needs to retain the wisdom that Geering is crediting him with, despite this crash-course in modernity.

In the main, Geering succeeds in this difficult task. But the very success in bridging this gulf in time can't help but undermine Ecclesiastes' wisdom somewhat, or at least the relevance of his wisdom to us today. And if Ecclesiastes, the biblical writer who speaks to us the most clearly and yet who needs this level of translation and assistance into modern forms of thought, imagine how foreign and distant the other biblical writers are! Geering skilfully shepherds Ecclesiastes to our understanding of 'nature' as opposed to 'God' and Ecclesiastes is very quick to follow his lead, perhaps too quick to be convincing. Geering also deals very delicately with Ecclesiastes' utterly outmoded understanding of nature as fixed and immutable. And every now and then he admits frankly that Ecclesiastes' attitudes are incapable of reworking into acceptability to contemporary tastes. This happens with regard to gender equality for instance. It is good to see this happening, because it means we're not reading a work of apologetics. What this candid dialogue provides is a renewed appreciation of the Hebrew Bible's foray into existential humanism.

And then, of course, there is Geering's intelligent assessment of humanism that I mentioned at the beginning of this review. His seven-point understanding of humanism is as good as anything I've read, and is a strong highlight of this book. And Geering's attempt to deposit Ecclesiastes squarely in the humanist intellectual tradition – something I had not given serious consideration to before reading *Such is Life!* – is an exciting enlargement of what being humanist means.

**Bill Cooke is an Auckland member of the Sea of Faith. His latest book, *A Wealth of Insights: Humanist Thought Since the Enlightenment* is due out early next year.**



# WATCH OUT — GOD IS BACK!

## ***God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing The World***

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge  
405 pp. The Penguin Press. \$27.95

### **Excerpts from multiple reviews**

NYT: Hanna Rosin in the *New York Times*.

WP: Diana Butler Bass in the *Washington Post*.

TEL: Michael Burleigh in *The Telegraph*

NS: John Gray in *The New Statesman*.

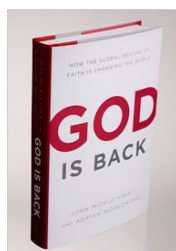
NYT: "The very things that were supposed to destroy religion — democracy and markets, technology and reason — are combining to make it stronger," write Micklethwait, editor in chief of *The Economist*, and Wooldridge, the magazine's Washington bureau chief, who together have written previous books about globalization and American conservatism, two similarly sweeping topics.

WP: At first glance, the title gives the impression that [they] are arguing for an international faith-based political agenda. But this is a cool-headed book, more analytical than partisan, marked by crisp prose and well-formed insights into politics and policy. Although the authors are sympathetic to religion, they recognize its limits and problems, especially the tensions between fundamentalist forms of Christianity and Islam. While explaining the worldwide renewal of faith, they also examine the flash points of religion and politics. In the end, they criticize both secularists and believers. They argue that the main fault lies not with religion but with the "union of religion and power," used coercively. They urge their readers to move beyond a good/bad view of religion toward a more thoughtful approach that considers the role of churches in strengthening economies, providing meaningful work and reducing poverty.

TEL: In 1968 the sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, assured *The New York Times* that 'by the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture'.

NS: Whether Marxian or Millian, socialist or liberal, secular rationalists have held one tenet in common: religion belongs to the infancy of the species; the more modern a society becomes, the less room there is for religious belief and practice. Never questioned, this is what lies behind the hot-gospel sermons of evangelical atheists: if you want to be modern, say goodbye to God.

NS: At bottom, the assertion that religion is destined to die out is a confession of faith. No amount of evidence will persuade secular believers that they are on the wrong side of history, but one of the achievements of *God Is Back* is to show how implausible, if not ridiculous, their view of history actually is.



NYT: Modernity arrived and improvised new starring roles for God. The Americans led the way by becoming both "the quintessentially modern country" and a very devout one ... and most of the world has followed that model. In rich countries and poorer ones, democratic and undemocratic, primarily Islamic and primarily Christian — everywhere, basically, except Europe — devotion to God has remained surprisingly robust.

WP: "God is Back" is an intelligent account of contemporary religion and the role it might play in making the modern world more open, tolerant and peaceful. In the end, the authors confess that their basic message "is a profoundly liberal one." Complete religious freedom -- including the freedom to reject religion -- is the best human path to the future

NYT: While fundamentalists of all kinds get most of the attention, the authors zero in on another phenomenon: the growth and global spread of the American megachurch. With no state-sanctioned religion, American churches began to operate like multinational corporations; pastors became "pastorpreneurs," endlessly branding and expanding, treating the flock like customers and seeding franchises all over the world. The surge of religion was "driven by the same forces driving the success of market capitalism: competition and choice."

NYT: All the while, religion began shedding its association with anti-intellectualism, and became the province of the upwardly mobile middle class. Evangelicals began graduating from college in record numbers, and Christian philanthropists began building an "intellectual infrastructure," including programs and endowed chairs in the Ivy League. A new class of thinkers emerged representing what some have called "the opening of the evangelical mind," and a solid religious left began to take shape, symbolized most powerfully by Barack Obama. Obama beat Hillary Clinton for many reasons, but one was his ability to "out-God" her, they write.

NYT: Despite the dark side, the authors ultimately conclude that "God is back, for better." By this they mean that religion is now a matter of choice for most people, and not a forced or inherited identity. But if that choice can lead you to either buy a sweatshirt or blow up a building, the conclusion itself seems a little forced. The reality is that God is back, for better or worse.

TEL: Their conclusion, which echoes Benjamin Franklin, that religion thrives when it is protected from the contaminant of civil power, seems sensible, and they explicitly recommend the disestablishment of the Church of England.

Assembled by Noel Cheer

**"... once religion is part of a conflict, it must also be part of the solution." page 364**

# ONCE THERE WERE TWO, NOW THERE IS ONE

## Our Changed World-View

A paper written by Alan Goss for his university-aged grandson.

Once upon a time there were two worlds ... the heavenly one above and the earthly one below. (Hell has gone out of fashion.) Now there is only one world, the one we share with all other creatures. It is possible that in the future we could migrate to another planet; but for now this world is our only hope. There is no place like home.

This change to a realisation that there is only one world is illustrated below:

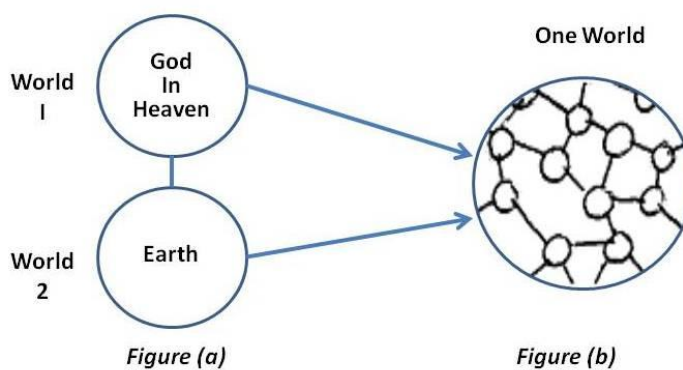


Figure (a) indicates a great gulf existing between God in heaven above and the world below. God is a supreme personal Being, male, who from time to time visits the world to ensure that his will is being obeyed and his purposes going to plan. "He's got the whole world in his hands." The world below is lost and sinful, we are like miners trapped in an underground prison waiting for rescue from above. And rescue there will be! The religious authorities had all the apparatus necessary to do the job - sacred scripture, the sacraments, creeds, the law, and the authority.<sup>(1)</sup> For millions living harsh, subservient, and often brief lives, the promise of eternal bliss after death was not a pipe-dream, it was a reality. It was a vision that stirred the mind but more importantly it captured the imagination. This is no longer the case. Belief in a Personal, Supernatural Being operating from the heavens above is now a superstition. It has lost its power and is in recession. There has been an explosion of modern knowledge, our world is now global and secular, our culture has changed. As Don Cupitt reminds us, the old view of life was long-termist, a drawn out time consuming preparation for a better life in a better world above. In contrast life today is short-termist, immediate, it is now. This world is our only world, we have only one life and one body, we are all in the same waka, we are one great bundle of life.

### Connections, Connections

Our planet is like a living organism, it is humming and bustling with life. It is an intricate web of connections like Spaghetti Junction or the London Underground although on a vastly grander scale. (Figure (b)). The two worlds in Figure (a) have been compressed into one world (Figure (b)). Everything is connected. We humans are connected not only to one another but to all other living creatures. We are connected to our environment. Cosmologists tell us that we are connected to the distant world of stars and galaxies, "we are the same stuff as the stars." Each human being is not an isolated individual but a tangled skein of relationships - with family, friends, workmates, the environment, with the world. "No man is an island...."

Unless we connect we cannot love. Twitter, Facebook, texting, talk-back radio - in times of crisis these systems enable us to connect. God becomes a symbol for that activity and energy which flows through the whole created universe and which makes connections. Love is about making connections, forming relationships. God is love.<sup>(2)</sup>

## "From the old I travel to the new, keep me travelling along with you."

The change from the two world to a one world view means changes in the way we look at life:

We will have a sense of awe and wonder for the whole created universe. Our primary concern will be "for the welfare of one another, for the future of the human species, and for the health of the planet."<sup>(3)</sup>

Most people don't want to be labelled religious. They don't want to be called Holy Joes. But they do want to live as fully, as intensely, and as wholesomely as they can. By plunging into life, by living a compassionate life-style in faith, hope and love, they can experience the happiness they long for.

We will help people to become more biblically literate and more theologically aware. Idolatry, the chief enemy of the biblical prophets, is still a threat. Idolatry occurs whenever we make God into an object (e.g. the "Man Upstairs", the "Guy in the Sky") or a Thing. It occurs whenever we make God into a blown-up, idealized version of ourselves. It occurs whenever natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis are attributed to a vengeful God. We need sound scholarship, clearly and imaginatively presented, to counter these fantasies but more importantly to help us "view the very ground on which the prophets and Jesus walked which can kindle a warm glow" (Robert Funk). And we need places where people can share their views and express their doubts without fear or favour.

We will acknowledge that the Christian era has come to an end. Not Christianity but what was known as the Age of Christendom. Orthodox Christianity is dying, it has lost its nerve. We now live the global secular age. The secular age is a continuation of the Judaeo-Christian path of faith. With poetic genius the gospel writers brought Jesus down to earth, God became human, "in the flesh" (The Incarnation). God is with us in the hurly-burly of life. For all its weaknesses and frailties the secular world has given us many freedoms, especially the freedom to think for ourselves. There is no going back. God-values, like faith, hope and love, remain. In his sayings and parables Jesus gives us clues as to how these values may be expressed in our contemporary situation. There are no pat answers, it's over to us.

## "Ah, sweet mystery of life ..."

God is Mystery. God is the Great Hunch. Scientists like Stephen Hawking tell us that other universes may well exist different to our own. Theories come and go but mystery remains. An American lyricist Jeff Beck, reflecting upon God, was not being altogether flippant when he wrote: "You're everywhere and you're nowhere, Baby, that's where you're at."

## Closing thought:

"All religions will pass, but this will remain:

Simply sitting in a chair and looking in the distance."

Vasilii Rozanov

Alan Goss October 2010

(1) Don Cupitt: article on Spirituality in *Sofia* the Sea of Faith magazine (U.K.) 1998.

(2) See *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian* by Paul F. Knitter, (One World) for a development of the connections theme.

Also by Martin Buber in his classic *I and Thou*.

(3) *Coming Back to Earth*, by Lloyd Geering. An excellent summary account of how the modern global and secular world has emerged out of Western Christendom.

# FAITH IN CYBERSPACE

**UN Wire:** We are grateful to Mary Boekman of Inglewood for alerting us to a free email service which sends information about the United Nations and the World. The UN bills it as "News from hundreds of top international sources", "It's what informed citizens need to know". You can sign up by going to [http://www.smartbrief.com/un\\_wire/](http://www.smartbrief.com/un_wire/)

**Golden Rule Curriculum for schools and youth groups:** here is what is claimed as "the most comprehensive Golden Rule curriculum ever produced in history. Using the logic of circles, rules, moral modeling and the Golden Rule, this curriculum unit inspires and supports young people to become global citizens rooted in the Golden Rule." Its at [www.scarboromissions.ca/Golden\\_rule/made\\_of\\_gold.php](http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Golden_rule/made_of_gold.php)

# ETERNAL LIFE: JOHN SHELBY SPONG'S NEW VISION

*A review by Don Grant of Nelson who describes himself as “now retired from the workforce but for most of my life I was a research biochemist at Cawthron Institute, here in Nelson”.*

**Over the past three decades, Bishop John Spong has consistently succeeded in bringing modern theological insights to ordinary Christians, though having often to withstand vigorous criticism from within the Church for doing so.**

In this, his latest book, *Eternal Life: A New Vision* (New York: Harper One, 2009), Spong claims that he was unable to write satisfactorily about the meaning of eternal life other than by weaving the story of his own religious journey into his account. At times, this can be enlightening, moving, and sometimes inspiring, especially in his thoughtful epilogue on euthanasia. He writes well about his own experiences. Regrettably, however, this autobiographical approach often leads him into sentimentality, and, more seriously, the frequent intrusion of his ego into his narrative is irritating. His reputation as a populariser of scholarship is undeniable; it is sad that he finds it necessary to tell us how clever and outspoken he is.

It is a surprise to find that the themes we might expect in the first part of the book are present only in brief or not at all. The development of the concept of eternal life in different cultures and religions is alluded to, but not discussed in any depth. The idea of the afterlife as a form of cosmic justice to balance out tragedy, injustice and unfairness in millions of lives is given minimal coverage, and previous works on the Christian belief of life after death are summarily dismissed. **“I read the work about life after death of every major western theologian of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I found most of it totally unhelpful.”** (p.11)

After a preface and introduction giving some of his own experiences with death and dying (which he expands considerably in a later chapter), he moves to the discoveries of modern science and demonstrates that everything about life is, at base, unpredictable; it is all subject to chance, randomness. He emphasises what he calls the ‘accidental’ nature of life, an example being the planetary catastrophe which probably brought about the end of the dinosaurs and thereby the rise of the mammals, including, eventually, humans. He concludes: **“Can a creature who so clearly comes into being as a product of the accidental forces of nature ever seriously entertain the possibility that there is something inherently eternal about him or her?”** (p.24). He goes on to discuss evolution and finally focuses on the emergence of self-consciousness in human beings. He is fascinated by our awareness of being aware, and the consequences of this awareness, especially of the threats that newly self-conscious beings faced: “Humans could now remember the fears and the predators of yesterday and make those memories part of their present, and they could embrace mortality and know that it was their inescapable destiny” (p.31). For Spong, the question is, how could self-conscious beings cope with this awareness of their predicament, and especially of their mortality? His answer is simply that they invented religion. **“One of the ways we learnt to cope, indeed I would say the primary coping device that we developed was religion. The pattern of turning to religion in order to deal with the anxiety of death ...[is]an all but universal human practice, it appears to have been born with the moment of self-consciousness itself.”** (pp.62-3).

Now, as well as not being exactly new (Hume, for instance: “The primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear of future events”), this simplistic picture poses some significant problems, the most obvious one being his repeated use of the term moment of self-consciousness for a process that was almost certainly extremely gradual and quite complex. Although Spong acknowledges this at one point, he continues to refer to the moment, as if it had been almost instantaneous. The origins of self-consciousness and of religion have been widely researched, and there are conflicting opinions, but most authorities would agree that these events were neither simple nor sudden, nor were they necessarily coincident. In particular, theologians such as John Hick and Hans Kung, writing on the subject of eternal life, discuss the often prolonged stages of the development of religion and especially of the concept of immortality in early humans. Also, and contrary to Spong’s hypothesis, death was not necessarily seen as an overwhelming threat simply because humans were aware of its reality. Spong also concentrates on humans as if self-consciousness were totally restricted to our own species, whereas many examples of some degrees of self-awareness are now known in the animal world, and certainly an awareness of the reality of death is well documented. But, most of all, his simple hypothesis leaves so much out. Where is the awe, where is the wonder that must have come with self-awareness? Where is the increased degree of caring for others that gradually emerged with emerging self-consciousness – the sort of thing that Margaret Mead has characterised by the discovery of a healed femur? The origin of religion was a much richer process than Spong allows. He knows all this of course, and although he might claim that such oversimplification is simply for emphasis, it won’t do. Dread of mortality might have contributed to the development of religion, but it is a distortion to claim that it was paramount.

Nevertheless, armed with the conviction that religion is humankind’s security blanket, Spong embarks on a six chapter crusade to denounce, debunk, jettison and even ridicule the beliefs, rituals and doctrines of religion, especially those associated with death, resurrection and eternal life (and in fact continues this in a later chapter of the book as well). As he goes, he threads in the stories of



his own gradual discarding of the traditional Christian beliefs. He has dealt with many of these issues in several of his previous books, so it is curious that he chooses to reiterate them all at such length and so vigorously here. The content is very familiar – it is not surprising that he has been compared to Richard Dawkins by one reviewer (who also accused him of not being willing to state honestly that he has simply lost his faith). What needed to be said could easily have been covered in, at most, one or two chapters, and arguably with less vehemence.

Having disposed of the traditional beliefs, Spong finally reveals his ‘new vision’ in Chapter 13, which is entitled “Who am I? What is God?” He begins with a brief return to describing the wonders revealed to us by modern science, then extrapolates from these and his theme of self-consciousness to propose a kind of universal consciousness that envelops humanity and God in a combined cosmic entity. That is my potted version of his vision, but perhaps it will help to quote one of his own expressions of it. (There are plenty of examples to choose from; he reiterates it in one way or another more than twenty times in the last five chapters of the book):

**“It appears increasingly clear that we are now awakening to a sense of oneness with all that is; indeed we are more connected than our minds can yet embrace. Self-consciousness begins to look like just one more stage in our development that will finally bring us to an awareness of our essential oneness with the universe, a oneness that binds together the material and immaterial things, and even our bodies and our minds, perhaps as a universal consciousness.”** (p.134)

There is more than an echo of the mystics in here, and in fact Spong does identify with the mystics, Meister Eckhart in particular, in the following chapter, before going on to introduce a mystical interpretation of the Gospel of John. But surely, it is not just the mystics who have had this sort of vision that we and God and the universe are somehow all interlinked. As a friend of mine remarked, “So, we are or will be all part of the cosmic soup?...Well, we knew that!” The idea of a universal mind has been with us for a very long time. Anaxagoras’ ‘cosmic Mind’ in the fifth Century B.C.E.; the mystics in the middle ages and later; Hegel’s *Geist* and Ultimate Reality in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (“Spirit is ... none other than self-consciousness – consciousness of one’s own being”); and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the works of Teilhard de Chardin, Martin Buber and Paul Tillich, among others. Today, this panentheism is a belief held by many thoughtful and sincere religious people, (as well as by some quite odd ones, as a Google search will immediately show.) But it is most definitely not *new*. Of course, Spong knows all this too, but, other than a brief nod to Tillich and Buber, he effectively claims it as his own.

What is new, perhaps, is the way that Spong uses the findings of science as a major support for his thesis. There is much of interest in his discourse on science in his early chapters, but in Chapter 13 he strays into speculation by presenting a collection of pseudo-scientific statements which are as imprecise, unproven and obscure as is the god-talk of the conservatives which he scorns so vigorously. After an exceedingly shaky paragraph in which he concludes that **“a deep interrelated unity is the law of the universe”** (my emphasis), he goes on to say, **“is it not possible to postulate that consciousness is also a single whole, which emerged within the universe, and which can be accessed on a variety of levels by creatures of varying capacities?”** (p.129). He thus begins his argument with what he considers to be a scientific introduction, but does not engage at all with the ongoing debates about the nature of consciousness, one of the great puzzles facing science and philosophy today. Yet he goes on to propose a *universal consciousness* as a new way of understanding what is meant by ‘God’. It is the God of the Gaps in its most extreme version. Instead of just attributing an otherwise unexplained phenomenon to an *action* of God, Spong goes one further and presents an as yet unexplained phenomenon, consciousness, as the *nature* of God. What is ironic is that on p.133, in referring to the mystery of the origin of life and consciousness, he claims: **“I do not want or intend to fall back into that old religious trick and offer the supernatural, external deity as the only possible answer to this mystery.”**

With this so-called ‘new vision’ now revealed, most of the remainder of the book reiterates the message that we are now part of God, not separate from him, and therefore that death is no longer important; what is important is how we live this life as part of being God. Fine, we can think about that. But the continued repetition of this mantra would become boring if it weren’t for the remarkable variety of ways in which he tries to express it. Many are, quite simply, waffle, and he comes close to admitting this: “We stretch and groan against the limitations of language. We run the risk of having our words sound like nonsensical gobbledegook to some.” (p. 137)

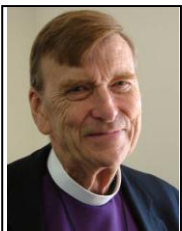
Finally, in the last chapter of the book, Spong reiterates his position. Religion, he says, is just a stage through which we have to pass, and “the hope of something beyond the grave is only the pious hope of the childhood of our humanity, a dream that we now must abandon in our new maturity” (p.181). After enlarging on this theme once again, he draws the book to a close with rather unsatisfactory answers to commonly asked questions about eternal life. One of his answers, in fact, borders on the offensive. The question concerns his universal consciousness concept: **“Is this vision of our participation in eternity assuring enough to free those people who live with the vicissitudes and the tragedies of existence to trust the journey?”** He answers, **“I believe it is – at least it is for me”**. Well, sorry John. After such a long and fulfilling life, full of opportunities, deep relationships, academic and priestly accomplishments and world-wide fame, it’s not surprising that you would say that. Many others, not so richly blessed, might beg to differ.

The belief in an afterlife has been held by vast numbers of people over the centuries, and it is still important in the folk religion that permeates our society today, as a glance at the memorial notices in any daily newspaper will show. So, perhaps not surprisingly, Spong himself seems to need to believe in some kind of life eternal. He is apparently unable to let go totally of this dream, in contrast to the

way in which he has rejected so many other traditional Christian beliefs. Despite his claim to having walked **“through religion and then beyond it”** (p.127) his God is still very real to him, and he protests earlier in the book that **“I cannot and will not deny my God-experience”** (p.107).

**In the finish he seems to want it both ways, and ends the book with his answer, “yes, yes, yes!” to Job’s question “If a man [or a woman] dies, will he [or she] live again?”**

*Don Grant 2010*



# JUST WHEN WE DECIDED TO KEEP THE NAME THE SAME

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**At the 2009 Conference of the “Sea of Faith Network (NZ)” a decision was taken at the AGM to retain the name (and objects) in the absence of any better alternatives achieving majority favour.**

The current objects are:

- a. To facilitate the exploration of religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.**
- b. To provide encouragement, stimulation and support in fellowship with all persons engaged in this exploration.**

However, a number of problems with the name (and objects) remain. My aim in writing this short piece is to renew discussion about these and to make new suggestions.

My own discomfort with the name became magnified following being invited to give a plenary address at the 2009 Hamilton conference. I found myself becoming rather defensive when talking about this invitation to friends and colleagues, and feeling the need to quickly explain that this was not a ‘faith group’ in the ordinary traditional sense, that it didn’t have any specific set beliefs, and was essentially a national discussion group about spirituality and religion.

“National religious discussion group” went down well and I’ve used these words quite often since, including on the plane immediately following this year’s conference. I was seated next to a straight thinking, typical New Zealander, a nurse, married with two children, and we got talking about where we had both just come from. She became distinctly interested in the “national religious discussion group”. I was distinctly cautious not to mention “Sea of Faith”.

Within the Network, especially amongst those who were there at the beginning nearly 20 years ago, there is a definite attachment to the name “Sea of Faith” through Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach”, used in the inaugural TV series and book by Don Cupitt. This attachment to the founding activity and experiences remains strong and is important to retain in some way to provide the Network with ongoing solidity and a sense of history.

However, fundamentally, the name does not immediately evoke what the Network actually is, what it does, or what it could do in the future. The name requires a lot of explanation. Some think this is a positive thing, in that it opens up discussion with people who we can get into deeper conversation with. However, an organisation with a name that doesn’t describe what it actually is, is constantly going to struggle to explain and publicise itself, except through long conversations, person to person.

Further, although the word ‘faith’ is understood well and valued by those who have it in its various forms, nevertheless most of us have experienced at first hand how the word ‘faith’ can be a serious put-off to people because of its dogmatic baggage, and these include people who could very well appreciate being part of the Network.

I would suggest that exploration through ‘religious discussion’ is the key activity of the Network, with multiple opportunities occurring as part of the conference, newsletter and local groups, and could involve new venues and other modes in the future such as email discussion groups.

‘Religious discussion’ is a well-known and commonly used phrase (as opposed to ‘religious exploration’ for instance). By adding ‘discussion’ to ‘religious’, the term ‘religious’ is immediately saved from a dogmatic interpretation. Religious ideas and precepts are not up for discussion to the dogmatist. Saying up front that we are a ‘talk-shop’ as one of our leaders, Noel Cheer, keeps reminding us, does a great job of humanising the whole enterprise of thinking about God, gods, spirituality and religion and keeps us all down to earth, where our founder Lloyd Geering has been pointing for decades.

It would be useful to have the word ‘national’ in the name to give the Network authority in terms of the public and the media. Why should we not be the place to come for considered and credible comment on religious and spiritual matters?

Although we deliberately don’t have a set of beliefs but rather focus on a process of religious inclusivity and remain open to new spiritual insights through the full range of scientific and artistic endeavour, nevertheless we do have a range of working hypotheses, which Lloyd and our other leaders, especially our life members, are impressively articulate about.

If we value religious exploration and experience and consider our working hypotheses to be of use, surely we would want these to be easily accessible to others. This would include those who are having religious struggles and who could find the writings of Lloyd and the activities of the Sea of Faith a great comfort and inspiration, like many of us have experienced. It would also include those who have no particular religious baggage but are simply curious about this fascinating field.

For all of these reasons, I suggest: adding to the name four words, “The national religious discussion”; maintaining the first object intact, alter the second object a little; and add a new third object, as follows:

## SEA OF FAITH

### THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS DISCUSSION NETWORK

#### Objects of the Network:

1. To facilitate the exploration of religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint;
2. To provide supportive, encouraging and stimulating opportunities to explore and discuss religious ideas, spirituality and ethical issues;
3. To promote these activities and their outcomes as a contribution to the good of Aotearoa-New Zealand, within the global world.

The full name, **Sea of Faith: The National Religious Discussion Network**, could be used for written documents related to the Network. **Sea of Faith** could be used internally when we’re not having to explain what we are to anyone and we’re just relaxing in our own existence. **The National Religious Discussion Network** could be used alone at times, perhaps particularly when promoting the Network and its activities in certain public forums.

Finally, since the 2010 Conference I have had the opportunity of presenting these ideas to the Christchurch Sea of Faith group who support the suggestions and have now added to the current working draft above. The group is also keen to work on a remit in consultation with the Steering Committee for the Christchurch Conference in a year’s time, taking into account further considerations and suggestions that might arise from responses to this article.

[Note: this issue was formally canvassed in the Questionnaire given out at the 2007 Conference. Responses to the Questionnaire can be read on the website. At the Main Menu, select “What Our Members Think”. As usual, Letters to The Editor are welcome – ed]

## FROM THE CHAIR

One hundred and ten people attended this year’s conference – “Compassion and Crisis” at St Patrick’s College in Silverstream. Of those who responded to the feedback questionnaire, the greatest number reported that the presentations by the three guest speakers, were the highlights of the Conference. This year all the speakers were from within New Zealand and comments about the quality, and the local content and application to the New Zealand situation were all very positive.

The Friday afternoon multifaith panel was of particular interest, and recordings of this could introduce stimulating discussions in local group meetings. However, in this comment I have chosen to concentrate on the three Keynote papers, to encourage all those who were unable to attend the Conference to obtain copies from friends or the web-site or to buy the CD versions.

**Valerie Grant** summarized the origins of altruism in human behaviour, as in the need for survival and reproduction, and the roles that males (hunting) and females (defence of the home) played. She outlined how such behaviours are not necessarily moral, but under extreme conditions have the potential to introduce conflict. Acknowledging this offers us an understanding of the problems of individuals, and a robust way of dealing with them. We learn that altruism through evolution has been reciprocal – encompassing immediate kin or ‘neighbourhood’. However in answer to the question “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus offers the story of the Good Samaritan and suggests an extension of this altruism.

Today encouragement can be for altruism beyond kin to other ethnic or religious groups, nations, or humanity as a whole. A further question arises - “Is there an adaptive advantage in religion? In response, Val suggested that religion has provided an incentive to tilt reciprocal altruism towards pure altruism, but that in practice we may recognise the limits of the later in a “kind but stern form of altruism”. Her conclusion was that we need to consider the relationship between altruism and compassion, and find a way of motivating people to behave in ways that we ‘believe’ are beneficial. She added that while science, philosophy, spirituality and religion will all help us towards a new, more sustainable form of altruism - in this, the one that needs some catch up work is religion.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Grant, V. (2010). “The Is/Ought Argument: Evolutionary Origins of Human Behaviour”. Paper presented at Sea of Faith Conference 1-3<sup>rd</sup> Oct

**Kevin Clements** discussed compassion as a human imperative<sup>2</sup> – in that we are ‘hard wired’ for compassion and empathy, with brains developed primarily to generate social rather than independent individuals. He suggested that co-operation is at the heart of what it is to be human, and crucial to the building of strong resilient and caring communities. Thus, religious and philosophical traditions provide a rationale for behaviour that already ensures the continuity of the human race.

The wisdom of Martin Buber, Albert Schweitzer and Emmanuel Levinas extends the discussion beyond co-operation into Schweitzer’s reverence for all life. This recognizes that “I am a life that wills to live, in the midst of life that wills to live” and seeks to “Preserve life, promote life, and help life to achieve its highest destiny”<sup>3</sup> This promotes all life within the natural as well as the social world, and anticipates an environmental movement.

Kevin then introduced the Lithuanian/French Philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas - addressing Levinas’s view that fear and anxiety lead to the marginalisation of others, and developing the idea that each, as the Other’s ‘Other’, constitutes a threat. The only response to this threat becomes “to overcome myself as a threat and the only way to do that, is to accept unconditional responsibility for the Other”. Again though, there is recognition that this ethic is based on a degree of equality of power, privilege and opportunity, and that peaceful well integrated societies are likely to be those that make a commitment to equality. As primary to this relationship, Levinas advocates a deep and radical attention to the concrete and particular features of the ‘Face’ in encounters between the self and the Other, for there we can discover “the wisdom of love rather than the love of wisdom” and establish a solid base for ethical encounter. In completing the paper Kevin asks “To what extent can Aotearoa- New Zealand in 2010 claim to be a place that honours the Other, and promote equality and justice?”

On Sunday morning we heard **Ian Pool** address ‘Population, Development and Quality of Life: Sustainability and the Role of Compassion’. He examined demographic changes since 1950 and how these are addressed by policy planning and programmes. He then developed a “sort of manifesto for civil society faced with a global population which is increasingly unequal”.

In his paper Ian took us on a fascinating journey through a variety of meetings, goals, strategies and programmes directed towards changing demographic trends and behaviours, generally in order to ensure that the population trends enhance, or do not constrain development. Thus ethical issues are introduced, for such programmes “can easily become social engineering, even when well intentioned and driven by compassionate people”.

Ian’s examination of population trends indicates that there is an increasing emphasis on development policy from growth to composition of populations, while recognizing that composition differs in the most and least developed countries. We learn that:

- Population growth is slowing for the world as a whole, while most population growth is in the least developed countries.
- As pointed out by the World Bank, improved education, especially of women, and the survivorship of children were keynote factors in the development of 1950-80.
- Growth (fertility) slowed only as life expectation, most importantly infant and childhood survivorship improved. Currently the world’s reproductive capacity is increasingly vested in the poor, while global mobility is increasing and is from the Third World to the First.
- Changes in current population structures mean that population problems will become more complex and severe.
- Total world dependency will decrease as it shifts from child to aged dependency. However it remains a moot point as to whether a young or an old person costs more, as childhood dependence can now extend into the 20’s.
- There is a window of opportunity when child population in a country dips below 30% while the aged remains below 15%. This allows governments to shift expenditure from meeting current costs (e.g. education and health) to savings and investment in productive sectors. This – historically and currently – is the most important explanation for economic development. (It seems New Zealand has passed this point).
- The future depends on children who are in the poorer countries. Half the world’s elderly, yet only one third of total population are in the most developed countries, so long-term global interests would be best served in making sure that all children have a decent quality of life, as they will be the future producers, tax payers and carers.

Ian summarises with his view that the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015, United Nations) have been seen (though not necessarily implemented) as representing a consensus of the world’s nations, offering an opportunity to develop “strategies that have a compassionate heart”. He then goes on to outline a schema for this.

No doubt, there is much more of Conference to be discussed in local group meetings and, as members note, it is in such discussion that the value of belonging to the Network lies.

**Natali Allen, Chairperson 2010-2011**



<sup>2</sup> Clements, K. (2010). “Honouring the Other: The Quest for Respect, Equality and Small Goodnesses In Aotearoa-New Zealand”. Paper presented at Sea of Faith Conference 1-3<sup>rd</sup> Oct

<sup>3</sup> Schweitzer, A (1966) “The Teaching of Reverence for Life”. Peter Owen, London p.26 quoted in Clements