



Sea of Faith

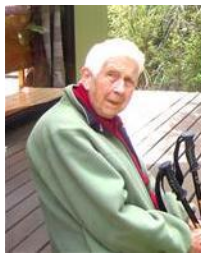
Exploring spirituality, religion and ethics

# NEWSletter

## Joy Lewis: A Tribute

It was with great sadness that we learnt of the death of Joy Lewis on October 9<sup>th</sup>. Joy and her husband Owen have been members of the SOF since its establishment in New Zealand, and have made a significant contribution to it. They have both been actively involved at local and national levels, having served on both the Steering Committee and the Auckland Group Committee. Both have held the position of chairperson of the Auckland Group and, under their leadership, the Group flourished.

Joy was a person who read deeply and widely, which gave her the ability to generate new ideas and different approaches to topics, and to organise such interesting discussions during her time as Chairperson of the Auckland Group. Joy and Owen also initiated, and were the principal organisers of, our annual Auckland conferences, which were successful in offering topics of



interest to the general public. They were a highly respected couple, who worked together so effectively to further the aims and objectives of our organisation.

I believe I speak for us all when I say how much we have appreciated Joy's intellect, her ability to offer

original and innovative ideas, her enthusiasm, her willingness to be involved, her friendliness, honesty and openness. She was positive in her attitude, and had a cheerful personality which was reflected in her preference for wearing bright and colourful clothes.

Joy's innovative and forward thinking approach to issues also characterised her working life as a teacher, and as an active member in the Federation of Graduate Women.

We will miss her greatly for her contribution to the SOF, but it is as a valued friend that we will miss her most. The interest she took in others, that ready smile and friendly approach – it has been a privilege for us all to have known her. We extend our deepest sympathy to Owen, and to their daughter Dorothea. Joy was 89.

Derek Pringle

## CONTENTS

Issue 97 November 2011

### 1. Joy Lewis: A Tribute

A sad loss to all of SoF.

### 2. Who Killed Jesus?

Two reviews of Bryan Bruce's TV documentary.

### 3. The Gap Between Academy and Pew

John Shelby Spong wants to reclaim the Bible for the non-religious world..

### 5. A Wealth of Insights

A review of Bill Cooke's massive survey of *Humanist Thought Since The Enlightenment*.

### 6. Letter To The Editor

Those dratted mobile phones!

### 2011 Conference Supplement

Four pages of highlights from Christchurch.

### 7. A Poetic Train of Thought

Review of Diana Livingstone's *Poetic Tales*.

### 8. The Ancient, Sacred Duty of Women

Review of *The League of Lilith*, by Sugrue and Sugrue.

### 9. Don Cupitt's Turns of Phrase

A bedside-table book in which post-Modern metaphysics meets and marries compassionate Solar Living.

### 9. More on "The Brink"

Can religion pull us back from it? Only if we go beyond mere compassion.

### 10. Jean Annie Walsh

The Waikato group has lost a loyal friend.

### 10. From Ego-centred to Eco-centred

Our Conference Scholarship guest reports in.

### 12. From The Chair

Natali Allen is back in the Chair and reflects on the recent Conference.

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# WHO KILLED JESUS?

## A comment by Norman Maclean of Gisborne

How astonishing to be offered a theological/ historical documentary in prime time rather than the standard fare of freak shows, cooking shows, game shows and mundane reality television masquerading as entertainment. Television New Zealand should probably be congratulated for its quality lapse that shot us back to the 70's and 80's when stimulating productions often kept us happily facing the screen of an evening.

If Bryan Bruce's *Cold Case* examining the circumstances surrounding the death of Jesus did one thing very well, it emphasized that the Jews had virtually nothing to do with that most significant of judicial deaths – a useful wake-up call for Christian conservatives who happily take on board every word of the Gospels and have never realized that the Gospel writers adopted a thoroughly anti-Semitic tone at all times.

It would have been satisfying to have seen this taken further. Despite the Vatican's exoneration, in recent times, of the Jews, the general public have yet to be told that search the Gospels as they will, not *one* bad Roman is to be found. All are portrayed as particularly sensitive, faithful, good-hearted and inspired, from the Capernaum centurion to Pilate and his dream-haunted wife. All of which underscores the fact that the Gospels were penned for citizens of that vast empire and others who were compelled to toe the Roman line in exchange for stability and order.

But what on earth was Bryan Bruce – a man who clearly lacked any background in this field and whose research was often painfully inadequate – doing behind such a documentary? And why did he have an agenda which showed itself in every way from his deliberate use of ludicrous movie clips culled from the early days of cinema (how to make the Gospels look absurd) to his complete reliance on the most liberal and skeptical of theological commentators?

Not that Lloyd Geering, John Spong, Dominic Crossan *et al* didn't cover the ground effectively: they gave the views we are familiar with in their books and they gave them well. Spong, for example, dealt effectively with the discrepancies in the dating of the Nativity stories. Crossan made that useful point about the tenor of Jesus' Kingdom discourses changing after the death of John the Baptist. And Geering took his usual line on the need to dismiss reference to angels as clear evidence of mythical thinking although it was difficult to take seriously his insistence that *all* of Jesus' followers fled at the time of

his death when the Gospels emphasize that the women were certainly in evidence as were his priestly admirers and the Beloved Disciple of John's Gospel.

One might assume from this that Geering would also agree with Dr Shimon Gibson who in the course of the programme, made the startling statement that "perhaps twenty" were with Jesus in Jerusalem. This, of course, disregards entirely Jesus' alternative Synhedrion of seventy followers, in addition to his inner circle of twelve. It is usual for the seventy to be conveniently overlooked by conservatives and liberals alike. The matter of eye-witnesses to the events of those days is not so easily dismissed.

Yet it was Bruce who consistently stumbled. For example, a little preliminary research on Bruce's part would have helped him over the hurdle presented by such apparent oddities as the small dimensions of the so-called Golgotha rock in Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It is well known that the original knoll or quarry edge was systematically chopped away from the time Constantine erected his first basilica over the site so of course the way it appears now, it could never have accommodated three crosses.

Bruce then pondered the problem of how holes to hold crosses could be dug in such a rock, ignoring a very likely explanation offered in the same programme: that tree trunks were often used as gibbets. He seemed intent on creating mysteries that often did not exist.

And his blunders were numerous: a short list follows:

"Luke claims three wise men were led by a star"

Wrong: Matthew gives that story with no number of Magi mentioned.

"Mark ... not the disciple of Jesus"

There was no disciple named Mark.

"Jesus stayed with relatives in the fishing business..."

No relatives ever mentioned.

"The first of his miracles was healing Peter's mother-in-law"

Not according to John's Gospel.

"Salome ... an erotic dance"

Neither are Gospel details: Salome's name comes from Josephus and erotic dancing comes from the Gospel according to Hollywood.

"The Gospels claim he turned water into wine."

They don't: John's Gospel alone gives that allegorical tale.

And there was that resounding blunder in which Bruce spoke as though some of Jesus' immediate followers thought he was the Son of God! Not so: a claim to the title of Messiah was far removed from such a concept which was completely at variance with mainstream Judaism.

Bruce even found it impossible to pronounce Sinai or Maxentius's name correctly – we got a strange mangling of both. And for some reason, he included a glimpse of the Arch of Septimus Severus despite his discussion of the reliefs on the Arch of Titus in Rome.

He floundered throughout. His carefully penned notes rather resembled a Year Nine student doing a research project entitled, "Living in the Days of Jesus". The man was embarrassing.

Much more effective were Elaine Pagels and Dr Helen Bond who thoughtfully commented on such aspects as the likelihood that Jesus was a disciple of John (no reference though to the endorsement of that in John's Gospel) and the fact that Pilate was ruthless enough to dispense with any form of trial.

It was puzzling to hear Crossan casting doubt on Jesus having uttered those apparently despairing words from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Apart from the fact that a dying Jew conventionally quoted Psalm 22 as Jesus may well have done, there is the matter of this being too negative a detail – like many others – to have been included in the Gospel. But the fact that it was, strongly suggests it was too well known to be omitted. A reading of Michael Grant's excellent biographical study, "Jesus" makes this abundantly clear.

**Yet we got something worth watching for all its errors and panderings to fashionable simplifications. How long will we wait for a similar documentary?**

## WHO KILLED JESUS?

**A comment by Margaret Whitwell of Tauranga**

A short poem by Phyllis McGinnley begins:

"Ah, snug lie those who slumber under conviction's roof..." and it ends thus:

"But... I was born to shiver in the draft from an open mind."

However, it was the staunchly convinced who would have felt the icy blast of controversy most keenly if they had watched the documentary "Jesus: The Cold Case" (TV1, 24<sup>th</sup> July). Many simply chose not to watch.

In the film, Bryan Bruce investigated the death of Jesus Christ, following the mode of his "Investigator" series about David and Robin Bain, the Lumly case, and others. He interviewed eminent historians and Biblical experts (who included Lloyd Geering and Don

Crossan), and he travelled to Israel; but he found no evidence that the Jews had killed Jesus. He came to the startling conclusion that a Roman order from Pontius Pilate was responsible. A covert anti-Semitism was revealed, could it have led, ultimately, to the horrors of later centuries. The anti-Jewish feeling probably stemmed from dissensions when the Christians were breaking from the Jews and becoming more friendly with the Romans. Christianity was the top religion by Constantine's day, as history records. The documentary was based on Bryan Bruce's 2010 book *Jesus the Cold Case*.

Other anomalies were given alternative perceptions in the film. For example, Bishop Spong, that doyen of early Jewish lore and memes, pointed out that Joseph went to

Bethlehem for the census, (Luke 4) as a descendant of King David who was born there. The King had 500 wives, so 25 generations later, a million descendants would be arriving in Bethlehem. "No wonder there was no room at the inn," Spong said.

Yet the sublime vigour of the Bible remains, and all the world loves the Christmas story. After the Virgin birth, angels sang in the sky, excited shepherds arrived at the stable, and wise men rode in on their camels. And no-one inside the inn turned a hair.

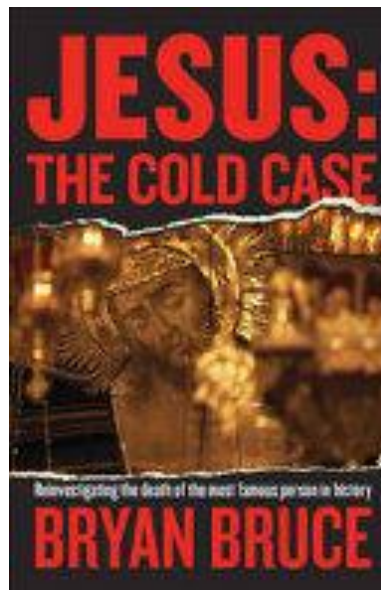
Spong thinks it is more likely that Jesus was born at Nazareth, a hamlet peopled also by his uncles, aunts and cousins, Jesus was known later as

"Jesus of Nazareth", the usual custom then.

The documentary postulates that some Bible stories grew to their dramatic versions during the word-of-mouth years and to comply with the ancient prophecies.

The film was well produced, but traditional Christians may be disturbed by the opinions expressed. Surely though, the logically put suggestions at least deserve to be thought about.

**Margaret Whitwell, Tauranga**



### STOP PRESS

This documentary has just won the prestigious "Best Popular Documentary or Documentary Series" category at the Aotearoa Film & Television Awards (AFTA).

These Awards recognise the best of the best in New Zealand's film and television programmes.



# THE GAP BETWEEN THE ACADEMY AND THE PEW

**John Shelby Spong** was the Episcopal Bishop Newark, New Jersey, for more than twenty years and is one of the leading spokespersons in the world for an open, scholarly, and progressive Christianity. He has taught at Harvard, and at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California and has also lectured at universities, conference centres, and churches in North America, Europe, Asia, and in the South Pacific.

Spong is the author of more than 15 books including the bestselling *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, *Living in Sin*, *Liberating the Gospels*, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, and his recent book *Eternal Life*.

History will recognize him as one of the major change agents in modern Christianity.

More recently he has published *Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World*. The following is an excerpt from his "Bishop Spong Letter" dated October 27, 2011 which he explains why he wrote it:

That experience [of appearing on a chat show with Christopher Hitchens and finding many points of agreement that were annoying to Hitchens] served as the background for writing my newest book, for it seemed to me to capture the problem facing institutional Christianity in our day. There is an enormous gap at present between the Christianity understood in the great academic centers of learning in the world and the Christianity understood by those who occupy the pews and, in some cases, the pulpits of our local congregations. Knowledge that is commonplace in the academies is frequently heard in the pews as profoundly controversial, probably heretical, and even as an attack on all that they hold sacred. This in turn causes critics like Christopher Hitchens to attack

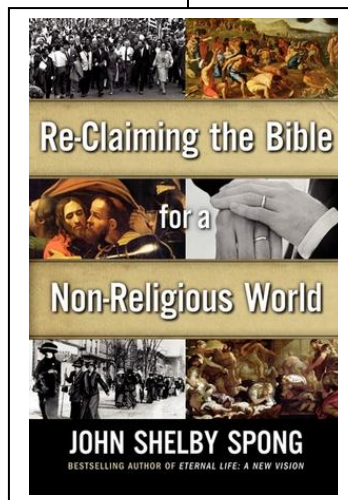
Christianity because they are unaware of any form of Christianity other than the literalized supernatural view that so frequently emerges in and from our churches.

This enormous gap between the academy and the pew is openly fed by ecclesiastical leaders from the Pope to the various denominational heads, who do not make it easy for the people in the pew to gain access to biblical scholarship. They instead create and participate in a conspiracy of silence. They fear that the people they serve will be scandalized if they

knew the truth. The fact remains, however, that both the common theistic definition of God as an "external, supernatural being, who does miracles and answers prayers" and the understanding of the Bible as a book of authoritative divine revelation of the "Word of God" are not now taken seriously in Christian academic circles and this has been the case for almost two hundred years! Church leaders seem to prefer for their Sunday worshippers to remain in the dark

... **I have two audiences in mind in the writing of this book.** One is a church

audience made up of people who appear to know that the old words no longer make sense, yet in the absence of an alternative still cling to the meaningless past. The second audience is made up of those who have abandoned traditional Christianity because for them it has become unbelievable. I want them to know that there is a view of Christianity beyond the one they have abandoned or the one that Christopher Hitchens attacks. It has just never been introduced in the pews. My goal in this book is to take people beneath both the literal and contradictory words of the Bible and the convoluted concepts of theology to explore realms of spiritual truth present but unseen.



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**Furthermore: Copies of *Eternal Life: A New Vision* and *Here I Stand*, Spong's autobiographical memoir are both available now at Sale Price of \$15 each inc. p&p.**

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# A WEALTH OF INSIGHTS

A review Peter Wishart, Librarian of The Sea Of Faith, Dunedin.

## *A Wealth of Insights – Humanist Thought Since The Enlightenment*

Bill Cooke

Published by Prometheus Books

This is a major book – dare I say it, of almost Biblical proportions, with 453 pages of text, 41 pages of notes, over 23 pages of bibliography. It is a big read – and at the outset a daunting one. However, this book is so well written that the reader is soon immersed in the gripping account of the history of the rise of humanism in the early 1800s, and how it diversified and spread during two centuries.

Humanism has several forms. On pages 234 & 235, Cooke outlines the insights of Jaap van Praag. “He discerned more clearly than anyone else had done to date, the various strands of humanistic discourse, which he called the reflective, the social and the scientific (or sometimes empirical) strands.....The single most important point about these strands, Van Praag was at pains to point out, is the absence of clear lines of distinction between them. They have intertwined and cross-fertilised through history in one long, rich, and deeply rewarding conversation. This book is built on this insight.”

The various types of humanism described in this book include secular humanism, religious humanism, ethical humanism, cultural humanism, environmental humanism and global humanism. Yet they are all connected by a common method of enquiry and some shared core values. These are summarised in the epilogue “The Main

Features of Twentieth Century Humanism.” They are that life is intrinsically worth living, that humanism is grounded in humility, that humanism is not against or beyond nature but is within it, that humanism learns from and values the past, that humanism is grounded in our culture yet beyond nations, and that places a high value of learning.

The sheer vastness of the volume of information that Cooke has packed into his book is awe-inspiring. He covers over two hundred years of intellectual ferment and modern thought, in Europe, Britain, the United States, the Muslim World, India, China and Africa. His index bristles with the names of

hundreds of writers. Towards the end of the book he has a note to his readers, presuming that we have stuck to our reading task up to this point. I did and loved it!! Every page was illuminating. All the information is backed up by literary references. This book is a major resource for people who wish to do further research.

This book explains why we have all been deeply influenced by humanism. At secondary school I was influenced by a teacher who was a humanist. He had masters degree in arts from Edinburgh university, and he was a brilliant and inspiring teacher. He kept on asking us leading questions so that we would develop the ability to analyse our assumptions and think freely for ourselves. He said that his allegiance was not “to some sort of God” but to the development of human beings – their happiness, freedom and well-being. He lived by high moral standards for which he accepted personal responsibility. He was against war and the arms race and nuclear testing. He was a man of letters, and introduced us to humanist writers like the Huxleys and H.G. Wells. He was keen on the arts – especially the theatre, and produced school plays with great flair.

Cooke has, in effect, put this teacher in the great context of European thought, and shown me that at the age of fifteen I was influenced by *bildung* – the humanist philosophy of education that began in Germany in 1808 with Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer. I found that profoundly illuminating.

“A Wealth of Insights” presents the thoughts of hundreds of thinkers and writers. I have complete confidence that Cooke gives accurate presentations of

their thought. I say that because he gives an accurate account of the thought of the humanist philosopher Anthony Flew. Cooke really does understand Flew. I have studied the thought of Anthony Flew very closely and read his books and articles. I met Flew when he came to Wellington in the mid 1960s, to lead philosophy seminars and to give lectures. What Cooke says

about Flew is for me a litmus test of what he says about all the other thinkers and writers he included in his book.

Cooke is also up to date in what is happening in philosophy in the present day. He states that the linguistic philosophy on which I was raised, has come to an end. It

**Cooke really does understand the struggles of liberal theologians. His theological analysis is penetrating and disturbing. He states that religious conservatives and fundamentalists are now controlling the major religious institutions. Liberals, radicals and progressives are on the outer. That is certainly true of my church, and it bothers me greatly.**

had petered out by the 1970s, and no one follows it today. I am confident that Bill Cooke has philosophical acumen. He can think philosophically, and he is aware the history of and current trends in philosophical thought. It was a delight to reacquaint myself with the people I had studied long ago, and whose thoughts have influenced me greatly. But it was a wake-up call to realise that I still rely on linguistic philosophy in my theological thinking. So I have a lot of rethinking and studying to do.

This book has really challenged my theological assumptions. I studied in the Theological Hall, Knox College in Dunedin from 1966 to 1968, when the Rev. Professor Lloyd Geering was Principal. He was a brilliant teacher and has greatly influenced my thinking. My theology is broadly liberal and progressive, and focuses on people and their relationships and struggles. **I believe that the Christian Faith is a lifestyle with certain values that are made real in personal relationships and in the fostering of community. I would want to argue that this is in line with religious humanism.**

In my favourite chapter in the book, Cooke outlines the thought of all the theologians who have influenced me, and shows that in liberal theology there is an uneasy meeting point where modern analysis ends, and dogmatic, non-rational faith takes over – with the danger that unhealthy and toxic contamination will seep through from supernaturalist thinking that limits human existence.

Cooke argues from Feuerbach that God is a human construct or projection that all too often creates the illusion of a supernatural world and an afterlife. These ideas can exploit and limit people. A branch of humanism, called demolitionist humanism wants to rid the world of religion and theology, to free people to accept responsibility for living in this one world. Demolition humanism clears the world of damaging dogmatism and supernaturalism. Cooke argues that liberal theology in the end depends on some degree of acceptance of dogmatic orthodoxy and creedal statements about God. I found his comments about this to be very challenging and bothering - do I want to keep the bits of theology I find congenial without facing up to the question of how I deal with the bits that I do not like? Do theological liberals want to have their cake and eat it too?

On page 275 Cooke says, "Christianity in the end is not a humanistic enterprise. It is about the conquest of the human, not its fulfilment. It is about finding oneself not through oneself and through others, but submission to a body of propositions about something called 'God.'

Cooke really does understand the struggles of liberal theologians. His theological analysis is penetrating and disturbing. He states that religious conservatives and fundamentalists are now controlling the major religious institutions. Liberals, radicals and progressives are on the

outer. That is certainly true of my church, and it bothers me greatly.

The author concludes his great work with the claim that humanism has the capacity to unite humanity on a global scale to deal with all the threats to human existence such as climate change and environmental exploitation. This he calls global humanism, and it is full of hope for the future.

Sea of Faith members would benefit greatly from reading this important book. And if every Sea of Faith library was limited to just two books, this would definitely have to be one of them. It is an encyclopedia of modern thought, yet it is enjoyable to read, because it is written in an engaging, lucid and clear style. Cooke reintroduces us to writers we have known before. And he also introduces us to a host of writers of whom only the most erudite will have known, yet who have played a vital part in the development and transmission of modern thought.

*Peter Wishart, Dunedin*

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Congratulations to the organisers - it was an enjoyable and thought provoking Conference in Christchurch. However I have to say that presentations were interrupted on two occasions by mobile phones. Surprising, in a group of seniors, and even more surprising that there was no request from the front to turn the damned things off. Divine intervention was not forthcoming and clearly faith alone won't do it either.

*Regards from the deep south,  
Daniel Phillips, Invercargill*

## MEMO FROM THE EDITOR

The "in tray" is so full that more than enough copy to fill the next Newsletter is already on hand. But keep sending contributions and I will fit them in when I can.

*Noel Cheer, Editor*

***'If you think you are too small to make a difference, you haven't been in bed with a mosquito.'***

**Anita Roddick**



# CONFERENCE SUPPLEMENT

Edited from Speakers' Papers by Ian Crumpton of Christchurch

**Our annual Conference was held this year in Christchurch. It addressed the theme:**

**“Pulling us back from the brink:  
Economics? Science? Religion?”**

Though the predominant mood was sombre, this Conference was not without notes of hope. Each of the four Keynote speakers described the ‘perfect storm’ of destructive change that is upon us, as climate change, species depletion, resource draw-down, pollution, habitat destruction, and over-population combine to threaten the whole planetary ecosystem, and each offered suggestions for the way ahead as well. Each address was followed by an apt response from Sir Lloyd Geering.

## **Humanity at the Brink: It's a question of values.**

Former co-leader of the Green Party, **Jeanette Fitzsimons**, spoke of the six interacting crises, all humanly generated, that are upon us:



1. Dependence on oil, now past peak production, so that increasing scarcity of oil (and indeed fresh water, and arable land) are now upon us.
2. Limited environmental capacity (pollution) of water, land and air. James Hansen's book *Storms of my Grandchildren* describes well the threat of global warming, the most urgent of these overuse problems. Sea level rise, violent weather, and a host of other problems result.
3. Species extinction, already well under way, could result in up to 40% of species becoming extinct.
4. Population increase, with the most prosperous placing the greatest pressure on resources. The global financial crisis has its roots in resource depletion. We do not recover and move on.
5. Inequality, exacerbated by economic growth, threatening resource wars (already begun in the Middle East).
6. The crisis of democracy. The erosion of democratic rights across the world, bringing political upheaval in the Middle East and

threatening it elsewhere.

Why do we not respond in a rational way? Corporate lobbying plays a huge role in maintaining the status quo. The media's love of contention makes climate change seem controversial. And we have evolved to deal only with dangers that are immediate and tangible. Further, the culture of consumerism largely defines who we are and “green consumerism” (or “green-washing”) feeds on this desire. Subsidising advertising, and commercially funded TV do not help if we want people to get their self-worth from relationships and worthwhile work.

Appealing to peoples' self-interest is no way to go. We need to challenge the values that underlie policies, and get them publicly discussed, demanding from our politicians and business leaders a commitment to the future and the common long term good. And we need to develop a participatory process for decision-making on these major issues.

**Lloyd Geering** pointed out that much religion had become superstition, which he defined as ideas grounded in a now obsolete world view. Our understanding of the world has changed. Relevant religion today must have a green consciousness. “You are a religious person today!”, he told Jeanette.



## **Is Economics still a branch of Moral Philosophy?**

**This address was subtitled ‘Reflections on the History of Economic Thought’ and was delivered by Dr. Geoff Bertram from Victoria University of Wellington.**

Yes, economics did begin within moral philosophy, Adam Smith was indeed a moral philosopher. But it has now largely lost its moral dimension. Current economists are repeating the same mistakes over and over again because they do not study the history of economic thought. Neo-liberal theory, emphasising the efficiency of markets, tolerates monopoly, speculation, and such policies abhorrent to earlier generations.

Adam Smith's observation (in his *The Wealth of Nations*) that the pursuit of selfish ends by

individuals brings general benefit to all, is well known. But in his earlier book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* he sets this comment in a wider moral context, where people are concerned for the well-being of others. Smith notes further the gap between the moral principles and the performance of governments, and their propensity of governments to be captured by the interests of the rich and powerful. Moral lapses begin among the powerful, and people who admire wealth and power find themselves admiring behaviour which is not always moral.

Smith's writings make clear the basic principles and problems that economists have wrestled with ever since. The market principle works surprisingly well in lifting productive capacity, and hence general wealth. It has some problems which can be corrected by good government and management, but the self-serving and ignorant people at the top levels of government and business leads them to hold the ethics and guiding morality in contempt and derision (Smith).

Smith's governmental charter goes well beyond neo-liberalism. Government should "...protect every member of society from the injustice and oppression of every other member..." This encompasses abolition of slavery, control of monopoly, rights of women, and redistribution of income and wealth.

There is another strand in economics which derives not from Smith's moral philosophy, but is 'Pre-Enlightenment', in that it adheres to a set of dogmas as a matter of faith, rather than on the basis of pragmatically evaluated evidence, and is strongly moralising. This strand derives from respect accorded to power and wealth rather than wisdom and virtue, and leads to a tendency for economists to become apologists for capitalism. Free markets become infallible arbiters of economic affairs, and the consequent acceptance as 'optimal' of whatever distribution of wealth and income the market throws up. Regulation and intervention is vilified:

**"Many of the leading lights of the economic profession are protagonists of what has become a sustained propaganda offensive against the welfare state, against Keynes, against government in general, and against the poor and the weak."**

But economists have no theoretical answers to moral questions – they are obliged to import the fruits of moral philosophy. Many are reluctant to do

so, and end up representing one or other vested interest instead.

In the 20th Century there was an attempt by economists to develop from within their discipline, a moral philosophy. Called 'Welfare Economics', it followed Bentham in seeking to mathematicise economics, calculating and aggregating individual utility, allocating scarce resources among competing ends. This was a different starting point from Smith, who began from a moral philosophy standpoint, seeking wisdom, virtue, and the general good. In the 1920s, Pigou pointed out that because a poor person gets more utility from an extra dollar than a rich person, maximum utility is reached in a society where all are equal. This theory was the ground of the welfare state, but was most unpopular among the rich! Lionel Robbins in the 1930s showed the impossibility of comparing one person's utility with another's. Thus welfare economics faded. Robbins and John Hicks showed that no policy-maker can redistribute income in the name of social welfare because there is no way of measuring, and hence proving, any such benefit.

The flip side of this is that you can't prove that the overthrow of an elite and seizure of wealth by the poor, involves any reduction in social welfare. It may well increase it.

Since World War II, the use of cost-benefit analysis has spread. Economists who felt they could not give full answers to cost/benefit questions because they couldn't compare one person's losses with another's gain tended to lose consultancy opportunities. Moral compass was no longer the measuring rod used by those who did offer their services. It was money.

**In conclusion: economists have no special advantages in forming moral judgements.**

Nevertheless they should be familiar with the history of their discipline, able to participate in moral discourse and to articulate the relevance of moral principles to their work. It is regrettable that so many today have a much narrower focus.

**In response, Lloyd Geering** pointed out that, before the Enlightenment, it was theologians who determined the course of society. Adam Smith stands at the boundary, where economists begin to take over that role. The theologians were driven by the will of God as they perceived it. Today's god is the market. The modern authorities – the economists – serve market principles as they understand them.



## The Growth Delusion

**Dr Bob Lloyd of The University of Otago** subtitled his address 'The role of faith in civilisation's lack of preparedness for the future'. He did say, however, that this faith was not 'religious faith' but rather 'faith in institutions'.



Today's predicament is that many resources, especially energy, are reaching limits; the biosphere is degrading, fresh water and arable land are in short supply as the population increases. Oil, coal, gas and nuclear fuel will all run out within a few decades. Renewables cannot meet our huge energy demands. Oil consumption is flat-lining, coal reserves data is old and dated. Recent research suggests 'peak coal' at 2027.

Climate change: The earth is warming, and the main culprit is CO<sub>2</sub>. James Hansen, in his *Storms of my Grandchildren*, suggests a safe level is 350ppm (we're at 393ppm now). To achieve it we must burn no coal after 2030, use no unconventional fuels (tar sands, lignite, methane hydrates), and use only conventional oil (no deep water or polar exploration). Tipping points and runaway warming will happen if the climate warms more than two degrees.

Nuclear power, presently 6% of energy supply, has serious hazards, and ore is a limited resource too. Renewables (wind, water, sun) have a vital role, but need to be developed rapidly, while we still have non-renewable energy to help the process.

Oil production and world GDP have risen together in a linked fashion. World debt and coal consumption are also rising together. Continuous growth at the current 2.3% is totally impossible. Why have we let things get so bad:

- *Corporate interests trump community interests*
- *Peak oil & climate change threaten economic growth, so get denied or ignored.*
- *Economic growth is an axiom of our economic system.*
- *Proponents of non-growth get ridiculed and marginalised.*
- *A new phrase for never-ending growth: 'Sustainable development' is an oxymoron.*

The concept of unlimited growth which began with the Industrial Revolution, is legitimised by free-market economies, and through the 'trickle-down' theory is expected to benefit all. "The social responsibility of business is to increase profits" (Milton Friedman).

In the developing world, growth is an ethical argument: the developed countries

have done it – now it's our turn. In poor countries, population growth means the economy must grow or people die.

Cheap oil has brought this fabulous growth. Its EROI (energy returned on energy invested) is around 35:1 across the current mix of world supply. But such growth cannot continue in a bounded system. And economic growth does not imply increased well-being (see *The Spirit Level*, etc).

How have we been seduced into something as irrational and dangerous as unlimited growth? Corporate marketing and vested interests play a part. But it is the way our human brain has evolved in a hunter/gatherer world that is the most important factor. 'Higher' thinking seems to be carried out in regions of the brain separate from those of survival functions. Neuro-marketing targets the latter — the basic 'reptilian' brain.

Faith is an essential quality in humanity. Scientists have faith in their theories until a 'paradigm shift' (Thomas Kuhn) forces revision. Karl Popper showed that scientific theories must, in principle, subject to falsification, but many religious beliefs cannot be falsified – they are ring-fenced in the brain and the believer will accept no alternative, despite the evidence.

But faith in the past may not be relevant to entirely new future scenarios.

These are the reasons why we want growth and are not ready for peak oil and climate change:

- *Advertising, marketing, propaganda.*
- *Corporate moves to ensure free market thinking is axiomatic.*
- *Evolutionary predisposition towards growth (a growth module, or bubble in the brain).*
- *A modular brain which allows a good deal of faith-based obsession.*

Do we have too much faith? Faith in governments, advertising, the war machine, the growth economy, the pursuit of wealth and that material goods will satisfy? Perhaps we need less faith and more scepticism!

**In response, Lloyd Geering** said that 'Growth' is the new dogma replacing God at the Enlightenment, when theologians were replaced by economists. Why have we all be so seduced? The world we live in is a world of thought (the software of the brain). Thus we have always lived in a world of culture. Tribal humanity lived in their own small mental world. At the enlightenment, we turned from one mental world to another, one delusion to another.

## **Crisis, Conflict, Creativity and Compassion**

**Dr Val Webb**, an Australian theologian and author, began as a microbiologist, but soon moved into art, then religious studies. Her books include *In Defence of Doubt*, *Like Water in a Net* and, her latest, *Stepping Out With The Sacred*.

Preliminary thoughts: **Religion**: the root of all evil or the ground of all hope? **Believers**: delusional or enlightened? **Belief**: The fuel of conflict, or the heart of compassion?



We need to focus on our humanity (a neglected focus in religion) and not on belief systems per se. Hitherto we have striven to be spiritual beings, not human beings. But hope resides in our human-ness: We came from earth, we remain creatures of the earth, and hope depends on our mystical reunion with the earth as in Lloyd Geering's *Coming Back to Earth: from God, to Gods, to Gaia*.

What do humans want? What are humans searching for? **Compassion**. That is a universal injunction, expressed in many faiths through the golden rule: "Treat others as you would be treated".

This might sound airy-fairy, but it engenders a heart response which is essential to motivate us to alleviate suffering and to treat all with respect and care. Karen Armstrong in her 2007 TED Award set out a **Charter for Compassion** which picks up this theme. Compassion is about true listening, not just through the filters of our own beliefs and values. "To know only one religion is to know none."

Compassionate listening leads to compassionate speaking.

Yet religion is dualistic. The Divine Warrior motif lies alongside that of the Prince of Peace. "The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug." (Chris Hedges).

"Once we embrace a belief system that defines itself as the embodiment of goodness and light, it is only a matter of **how** we will carry out murder." (Chris Hedges.)

September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 produced a change in this sinister direction among US leaders.

And controversy, not moderation, sells papers. Moderate Muslim articles submitted to Australian newspapers are rejected in favour of more

provocative or exclusivist ones. Thus the fear of the other is cultivated.

Compassion for the earth is a new experience for the West. Prof. Norman Habel has suggested a green reading of the grey passages on the Bible – so that as we read about floods, famines, plagues and the like, we should listen for the cry of the Earth through them. Can we see the Divine, not as sending floods on some and finding parking spots for others, but within everything in the universe? **We need new ways to think and talk about the sacred that don't ask us to leave our minds at the door.**

Perhaps the question should be, how can we pull religion back from the brink, whether that brink is extinction, fundamentalism, or irrelevance. Perhaps we need to begin with the human value of compassion, letting this message of Confucius, the Hebrew Prophets, the Greek philosophers, Jesus and Muhammad come fresh to us today as we, like them, strive to build the best possible world.

**In response Lloyd Geering** observed that a new, much broader kind of religion is emerging. A secular religion – as all religions once were (secular = relating to the society of which they were part). The gods were all part of ancient science (science = knowledge). Thus we may, and should, address ourselves to the questions of today.

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**All papers are available in full on the website and all are available for purchase on audio and mp3 CD. See [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)**

**Next year our Conference will be in Auckland – look in on the website from time-to-time for planning progress.**

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## **A NEW COMMANDMENT?**

**You shall LOVE the  
Earth, your home,  
with all your heart and mind and  
strength  
AND  
you shall LOVE  
your neighbour  
as yourself.**

## A POETIC TRAIN OF THOUGHT

### *Poetic Tales: Logosophia Down to Earth*

by Dinah Livingstone  
pub. Katabasis, London, 2010



Dinah Livingstone is an English poet, author and editor (including of the British Sea of Faith's *Sofia* magazine) who believes passionately in the power of words and especially of their expression in poetic form. She brings to her writing a background of wide reading and appreciation of the Bible, religious commentary, and poetry.

The term: 'Logosophia', meaning Word Wisdom, in the book's sub-title, is taken from an overarching work on poetry, philosophy and theology that William Taylor Coleridge mulled over for years, but never got around to writing; while the 'Down to Earth' of the sub-title is a statement of Livingstone's own, non-theistic, humanly-embodied religious position.

In her Introduction Livingstone asks, rhetorically, what value 'poetic tales' about "... God or gods, angels and demons as the rich product of the human imagination" can be in our contemporary, secular world. She answers her own question with "... as much as ever" giving the reason that these old tales "...contain treasures of wisdom" (p.3).

Livingstone also asks of the New Testament stories if "... they still work if we translate them into non-supernatural terms? Can these stories still inspire us without their supernatural guarantee?" and goes on to answer "... yes. I think they are still alive" (p.84).

The book is in two distinct parts: the first quarter is an extended essay on 'The Necessity of Poetry', and the following three quarters are evenly divided between three 'poetic tales' or theological themes: Mother and Father, 'Earthchild: The Making of Humanity', and 'Human Kindness'. In these essays, Livingstone quotes extensively from the New Testament and subsequent writers on Christian and religious themes.

However, *Poetic Tales* is a book that did not engage my attention, my head, or my heart.

Livingstone states, in her Introduction, that her work is, "... more a train of thought than a treatise" (p.3). This is both its strength and its weakness. If you are looking for a structured discussion of the topics at

issue, then *Poetic Tales* does not provide it. Nevertheless, if you are in the mood for a leisurely 'stream of consciousness' ramble through poetry and some theological themes, then *Poetic Tales* may well provide interest and points to ponder.

*Reviewed by Shirley Dixon, Titahi Bay*

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

I wonder if the desire of some to revise our name and clarify it with an explanatory subtitle may be a symptom of a more important need to tidy up the random and discursive nature of talk that passes for discussion with us at present? I am content with the ready-made phrase "Sea of Faith", with its origin in a concern for the decline of religion, and with the logo, "SoF", and some simple subtitle as "A Network for open and constructive discussion of religion in today's world".

We have heard a lot of what is wrong with the churches and with religious concepts inherited from them, and we have those who want to abolish religion in favour of a humanism, rationalism or atheism, which then becomes the 'religion' they advocate. What they say bears on our discussion, but that discussion, as I understand it, has as its object to discover the religious element in life and the universe and to formulate an intelligent and effective expression of it. To that end 'we' avoid dogmatisms and fundamentalisms, religious and antireligious, and explore any and every of the great religions of the world, in their past and present, identifying the universal wisdoms in them. And we need to know the roots and profundities of Christian religion, lost to sight for the most part now, and we need to be wise about cultural modes, semantics and mystical contemplation, without which religion is only a kind of mechanics. Myth, drama and formal belief all have a proper place in engaging all the faculties of the soul in that worship that recognizes the Mystery that gives rise to life and work in the mundane plane of existence.

I thought it was the object of Sea of Faith to pursue this vision and make it practical. It might be an idea to draw up a schema for discussions and let groups do a topic at a time and send in the results for compilation and arrangement.

It must be expected that religious or secular beliefs existing now from the past will continue in place, each on its own basis, but hopefully with a tendency that should be fostered, to discover within itself access to the universal spirituality and that that will bring them all towards a common understanding of the one objective. Any religion or cult that cannot do that is ipso facto ultimately inadequate or spurious. Notwithstanding that it may achieve some lesser but good objective in a regulation of behaviour, it will miss the full life. The proof of religious maturity will be seen in activity on a basis of stillness, a state of practical harmony pervading the world.

**Peter Land, Hokianga**

## OOOPS — CORRECTED BOX NUMBER

Lloyd Geering's four-part lecture series *Jung, the Unconscious and Us* on DVD can be ordered from

**St Andrew's Trust, Box 5203, Wellington 6145; \$41 posted.**



# THE ANCIENT, SACRED DUTY OF WOMEN

## *The League of Lilith*

by Troy and Rosalie Sugrue  
pub. by Oratia Media, Auckland, 2011



**I am not a great reader of fiction as I find it difficult to get into that frame of mind where I can suspend my disbelief and involve myself with a fictional story and characters.**

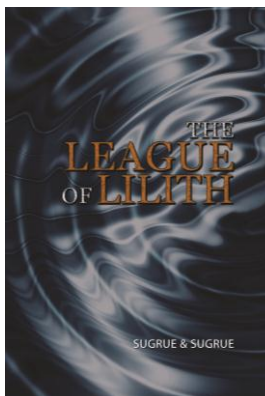
But now and again I find a book that really captures my interest and engages my head and my heart. Such a book is *The League of Lilith*.

*The League of Lilith* was written cooperatively by mother and son – Rosalie Sugrue of Raumati (Kapiti Coast) and Troy Sugrue of Auckland. Such a joint writing venture is quite unusual but the story flows seamlessly with no feeling of 'he wrote' / 'she wrote', though it is intriguing to speculate who wrote certain of the episodes!

This book is set in pre-earthquake Christchurch, and the story speaks with a voice that endears our identification with the Kiwi characters and setting.

Do you recognise Lilith of the title? In Jewish mythology she was Adam's first wife, having been created at the same time and from the same earth as Adam, but who left Eden because she refused to become subservient to him. Alternatively, she was regarded as a demon. Many of the writers who contributed to the development of modern-day Wicca express special reverence for Lilith, regarding her as the embodiment of the Goddess and protector of women, but who subsequently became demonised due to the rise of patriarchy.

**The League of Lilith interweaves themes of women, sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth with chauvinism, and contrasts contemporary attitudes to women with those of the Bible.** The story concerns the lives of women from very different backgrounds, and of their male partners, whose paths intersect in a suspenseful chronicle of relationships, and explores "... a world obsessed with power and control and the abandonment of the ancient, sacred duty of women" (book trailer).



The multi-layered, interwoven story is beautifully structured and maintains a cracking pace, with different strands of contemporaneous action intriguingly counterpointed, while passages of reminiscence inform the motivations of the characters.

**The contrasting of Christian, Biblical and Wiccan stories, liturgies and values draws on academic, Biblical and feminist research, but the authors neither preach nor denigrate, any particular faith message. They also indulge in an occasional bit of fantasy – this is, after all, a novel and not a lecture.** As they state, "... the scholarship is sound and we hope it gives people food for thought and leads some to realise there are enlightened ways of looking at Scripture, and of course, that caring relationships are the best of human values".

*The League of Lilith* is a 'ripping good yarn' but, at the same time, it can stand up proudly among the best of international fiction of relationships, religion and suspense.

This is a book to enjoy reading yourself, and which would also make an ideal Christmas gift for a Sea of Faith or questing Christian friend.

Copies are available for \$30 (incl. p&p) by emailing:  
[sugrue.rm@clear.net.nz](mailto:sugrue.rm@clear.net.nz)

*Shirley Dixon, Titahi Bay*

## Main characters in the book

*"We are bound by the secrets we share."*

**Sarai** was, in her youth, at the frontline of feminist radical action, and later became a university lecturer in religious studies. Late in life, she acquired a great and terrible knowledge, but someone younger must now be found to carry the knowledge forward. Or has Sarai been driven insane by this knowledge?

**Jen** married into the loving embrace of old Canterbury money. She is now aged 38 and, at the urging of her husband, Wilkin, has given up her career as a successful PR executive to try to begin a family. Meanwhile, as a distraction, she attends Sarai's lectures on Biblical women.

**Kat** never knew her father and grew up in poverty in rural Westland. She is now aged 22 and works as a prostitute in Christchurch. On a whim, she also attends Sarai's lectures. Kat and Jen become close, if unlikely, friends but neither knows they share another relationship.

**Pauline**, a self-proclaimed high priestess and friend of Sarai, seeing Jen and Kat as prospective members of her Wiccan coven, becomes enmeshed in their web of relationships

**Wilkin**, Jen's husband, is a successful businessman, a community leader and a devout Anglican. At home he wants to start a family, but he also has dark, sexual cravings.

*(The above Information comes from 'Book Trailer' item on YouTube. There are at least two other YouTube presentations about the book, Google "League of Lilith").*

## STROLLING THROUGH DON'S WORLD

*Turns of Phrase: Radical Theology from A to Z*

Don Cupitt

SCM Press 2011

Don Cupitt is a Life Fellow at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and the figurehead of the Sea of Faith Network. An item of promotional material for this book gave this information:

In 40 years of writing Don Cupitt has coined many new words and phrases to communicate his ideas, but he has written so much that critics have split him up into stages, and readers complain of obscurity. Piqued, he here presents an entertaining Devil's Dictionary of his own ideas, with cross-links from entry to entry guiding the reader around his system.

To call it a "Devil's Dictionary" is correct, but for the wrong reason. On page x Don says that Ambrose Bierce's title for his book, *The Devil's Dictionary* suits him (Don) because "I still occasionally meet people who really think I am the Devil." But Bierce's work (available at [www.alcyone.com/max/lit/devils/](http://www.alcyone.com/max/lit/devils/)) is satirical and irreverent, a sort of down-market Oscar Wilde. Don's work is anything but that.

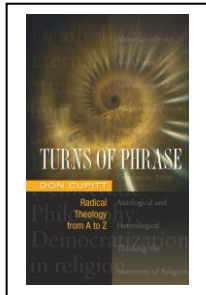
Cupitt's teaching is a form of religious naturalism based, not like Spinoza's on geometrical reasoning, but upon the more biological idea of an uprush of energies pouring out into symbolic expression. He points out that the non-arrival of the Kingdom left the early Christians looking up vigilantly towards a better world that was yet to come.

Today, people no longer expect any further world after this one, and Church-religion no longer works. It is too inhibited. Instead, we need to work out, and start living out, the philosophy and the ethic of the final world, now.

Don has been working out 'the philosophy and the ethic of the final world' for decades and, as he describes in the Introduction to this as his 48<sup>th</sup> book (the one after the 'last' one) he felt impelled to collect together the major themes that appear in his books and offer them in dictionary form. And so he did and *Turns of Phrase* is the result.

The book will reward the 'dipping in at random' approach but the reader will be lured by cross references onto unintended paths.

Don blends classic theological themes such as Anthropomorphism and Realism, and the *Summum Bonum* with his own neologisms: Solar Ethics, Outsidelessness, What's It All About?, to provide a map of the 'movement of Geist, the world of ideas'.



But this is not the static world addressed by ordinary dictionaries. It is Don's world after the end of Grand Narratives, after the death of classical Christianity ("our Old Testament"). It is the outsideless world of contingency, of syncretism, of 'using-up' oneself in the service of others — as does the sun.

Post-modern metaphysics meets and marries compassionate Solar Living.

As Don suggests, keep a copy of *Turns of Phrase* on the bedside table and take an occasional stroll through his world.

Noel Cheer, Titahi Bay

## CAN RELIGION HELP PULL US BACK FROM THE BRINK?

*Laurie Chisholm has reservations*

Can religion help pull us back from the brink? On the face of it, this sounds unlikely. 'Religion' makes many of us think first of the harm that has been done in the name of religion and of the many religious ideas that offend our rationality. Surely it would be better to concentrate on the practical actions needed? Jeanette Fitzsimons, in her address to Conference, referred to the actions James Hansen says are needed: get CO<sub>2</sub> levels down to 350 ppm, and leave tar sands and deep-water oil alone. We could add reducing the world population to (say) 5 billion.

Jeanette's conclusion is that none of this can happen without a change of values among the general population, which would then demand such actions of the politicians. But what are values, where do they come from and how do they change? If values are not to be arbitrary evaluations, changing with every change in the wind, they need to be underpinned by convictions of some sort. Actually, they are underpinned by convictions, whether consciously articulated or unconsciously assumed. Moreover, if our values differ from the dollar value assigned by the market, they run counter to empirical reality. They are not provable from the way the world is, but depend on our world view, fundamental convictions, or picture of what it is to be a human being. In that sense, our values are 'religious'. Jeanette Fitzsimons, as a professional politician is telling us that we humans need a change of values. This is an invitation and a challenge to us SoFers, saying, "This is where the domain of religion or spirituality, that you are concerned about, is needed." The discussion on pulling us back from the brink cannot take place exclusively in the "external" domain of facts and observations about the world. It also needs to encompass the personal, existential, subjective domain. **The brink is not just a problem 'out there' in the world, but also a problem 'in here', in us, in the way**

**we are in the world, in the attitude we have to ourselves.**

In our culture, many different world views are ‘in the air’. There’s an optimistic and uncritical assumption that science will somehow save us. (Perhaps nuclear fusion will succeed and give us virtually unlimited amounts of energy. If all else fails, we could colonise another planet and start again.) There’s an anthropocentrism that, contrary to the findings of science, regards the planet as primarily there for us humans and gives other living things a right to exist only to the extent that they are useful to us. There’s blind faith in the market, which has in the past created so much wealth, but is now rapidly coming up against the limits to growth.

Conference provided a few stimulating throwaway lines on the role of religion in the face of our crises. Lloyd Geering said that Richard Dawkins was 200 years too late with his book *The God Delusion* because it is **growth** that is the new god/delusion. Someone said that we adopt consumerism to fill the void; you could regard this as a religion substitute. But the only ‘religious’ theme that received sustained attention was compassion, leaving many areas unexplored. We didn’t explore the way that Christianity and the secularized world that emerged from it have in part caused the environmental crisis, by de-sacralising the world and concentrating all holiness in a transcendent god. This is what Lynne White argued in his famous article which is surprisingly brief, still well worth reading and accessible at [www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/lwhite.htm](http://www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/lwhite.htm).

We didn’t explore green spirituality or look at the tension between the scientific and metaphorical sides to talk of Gaia. Matthew Fox’s creation spirituality and his proposal to ditch the sin/salvation themes in Christianity and focus on original blessing instead didn’t get a mention. Although the theme of compassion has found a very positive response within the Sea of Faith and one cannot be against compassion, extracting the principle of compassion as the lowest common denominator of various religions necessarily detaches it from its religious roots and risks moralising it. Buddhist talk of compassion, for example, surely flows from Buddhist teaching and from Buddhist meditative practice. Finally, in our rejection of the old patriarchal God and our enthusiasm for Gaia and cosmic spirituality, are we throwing out valuable themes in our religious tradition? What role could the symbols of religion and in particular our God-image play in promoting trust, calming our fears and countering violence?

**We will do justice to our claim to be “the national religious discussion network” and “exploring spirituality, religion and ethics” only if we go beyond throwaway lines and focus more on articulating religion for our time.**

*Laurie Chisholm, Christchurch*

## JEAN ANNIE WALSH

**The Waikato Branch of the Sea of Faith has lost a faithful and long-standing member.**

Jean Walsh died on the 19th September aged 91, still in full possession of her wits but at the end of a long physical decline, which she handled with characteristic determination. Our family knew Jean in several different ways. For our children she was the Principal of their primary School, remembered with love and gratitude; when she was 60 she decided to go back to University to do a second degree in subjects she had not taken before. She chose to major in French, my department, among a group of oldies, an enthusiastic bunch it was a pleasure to teach, and took out her degree several years later.

Jean was a member of St Albans Cooperating Parish but pursued her faith with a sharp and enquiring mind, not hesitating, it appears from the comments at her funeral, to correct the preacher in the middle of his sermon, and those qualities led her into the Sea of Faith. She was a JP and sat on the bench in Hamilton for many years, in education she was first a Principal, then an Inspector, then a member of the Executive of the New Zealand Educational Institute; she was made a Fellow of the NZEI and was awarded an OBE for her services to education.

Jean joined the Waikato Branch of the Alliance Française and became its President, had a lifetime of service with the Guides and became the Commissioner.

Jean was a truly multi-tasking human being, forthright in her opinions, serving numerous causes with determination, distinction and exceptional generosity and with it all a loyal friend.

*Fred Marshall, Hamilton*

## FROM EGO-CENTRED TO ECO-CENTRED

Anna Clayton is a PhD student at the University of Canterbury whose thesis will examine opportunity for ‘post-Protestant’ Catholicism to downplay the Augustinian emphasis on obedience to authority and to pay attention to a primacy of the individual conscience which borrows from the thinking of Aquinas. Anna accepted the invitation from SoF to attend the Christchurch Conference as an observer. These are her observations of the Conference.

“Life rewards action” opines Dr Phil (McGraw, 1999, p.127) and there is something to be said for such a robust and archetypically masculine prescription for the problems of living. Jeanette Fitzsimons began the Conference with a complementary notion – that life can also reward **inaction**. This was a more complex challenge and, I would argue (in a way that offends Dr Phil’s much touted notion of ‘common



sense'), an archetypically feminine one – that of 'not buying' stuff. *I am because I do not do something*. The temptation, as she said, of buying 'green' is 'buying' into the same mindset that got us into our current brinksmanship to begin with.

Jeanette thereby opened the door to an existential dimension that Lloyd Geering, with his allusion to the 'software' of culture — and then Val Webb — went on to develop. And while reason was also an important part of Lloyd's solution, ably supported by the information contained in both Geoff Bertram's and Bob Lloyd's presentations, Val, on the Panel at the end of the Conference, also alluded to a difference that can be detected between conceptions of the human situation by **flesh-and-blood** men and women. I was interested in all these viewpoints because I am writing a thesis that centres on an examination of the totality of existence and what that might mean as a result of the evolution of feminist ideas among others (Clayton, in preparation). It was in that capacity – of being a PhD student at the University of Canterbury - that I was given the opportunity to attend the Conference.

The worth of a Conference lies in what it leads us to do afterwards, and while accepting Natali's request to write these words is one of those responses, I also emailed Val and got a copy of the paper she alluded to. Why? Because if we are to accept Jeanette's challenge of defining ourselves by what we don't do or have, a change needs to occur within the human psyche. **In my thesis I postulate that that change is from an ego-centred to an eco-centred viewpoint.** Given that in our western culture there is a simplistic, albeit understandable, identification of masculinity with the *ego* dimension and femininity with the *eco* dimension (to the point that we accept our own 'egoic' definition in those terms) I thought that Valerie Saiving's (1979) whose paper it was, would be worth examination.

Indeed, it **was** worth examination, and it also confirmed the reason why gender studies needs to enter the mainstream and why I am not doing my thesis within that particular gender studies framework, but within a philosophical and latterly a sociological one. 'Femininity' is not marginal to existence: it is existence. Just as 'masculinity' is existence. The problem arises when masculinity seeks to pronounce in *one size fits all* terms that 'Life [always] rewards action'. Because sometimes it doesn't. Because, 'Life sometimes rewards inaction'. The wisdom lies in knowing when it does and when it doesn't.

When asked to summarise my thesis, I often say that it is a series of footnotes to Iris Murdoch's injunction that the enemies of love are social convention and neurosis. Maria Antonaccio (2000) interprets that as saying that we are enclosed both in a social construction that determines our reactions and a self-absorbed world that inflates our own importance (p. 101). Both attitudes are of course two sides of the same human coinage: the more stuff I have, and the more experiences I can accumulate on my overseas trips, and so on and so forth, the more important I am – the more self-esteem I can muster – in society. I am a psychologist at heart and by training, but with a desired new **social** outcome as the *raison d'être* of that identity. While we accept the *egoic* and *ecoic* as dilutions of what they could be, rather than paradoxes that can co-exist as strong entities in themselves, we will continue to live in Iris Murdoch's unthinking social convention and

neurosis. Saiving at the end of her paper wrestles with these same ideas.

Ultimately, Mitroff (1998) believes there are four solutions to human problems, and wisdom decrees which one or ones are applicable in any particular situation. They are the *technological*, the *systemic*, the *inter-personal* and the *existential*. While not denigrating the *technological* and the *systemic* (I wouldn't be typing this on a computer if I eschewed them and the 'heroes' that developed and distributed them), I favour the *existential* solution to our current problems with a partiality also to the *inter-personal* because both of these lie in the *ecoic* realm. They represent *relationship* with others and with the deeper aspects of ourselves and, as such, they are highly problematic — because hell really can be 'other people' and, I would also add, 'I' can be too. The ideal product of this process of relationship however is that we bring ourselves to our inter-personal relationships. I bring a maturing ego in other words that does not rely on infantile identification with the group but knows that it has an authentic stance to give to the group should that group decide to see its value and engage with it.

And so I can end, as I always seem to (fittingly given that I was attending a Sea of Faith Conference) on that Protestant notion of the individual whereby I can also draw on the wisdom of a Hindu (who was in turn influenced by Christianity) and say, '**Be** the change you want to see in the world'. *Being* can include *doing* and **not doing**. And with that latter malnourished (in our current milieu) possibility of *not doing*, I'll leave the last word to Jeanette and a necessary repeat of her injunction, because we can never hear it enough:

It is interesting that citizens have understood and embraced recycling and efficient light bulbs. ... They can see immediate effects from what they do, they can understand cause and effect, and it gives them power. But more importantly it does not challenge who they are, their self-esteem, their identity, or their status. This is where I think the real issue lies. .... Consumerism is part of the cause of climate change, environmental pollution and resource depletion, not the solution. 'Green consumerism' tells people they can address these problems by buying stuff - it just must be the right stuff. It reinforces their identity as consumers rather than citizens. ... But environmental problems are not solved at all by what we buy - they are solved by what we therefore do NOT buy. We often measure progress by how much renewable electricity has been installed. That is actually irrelevant - what matters is how much fossil fuel is NOT being burned. The two may not always be related.

Thank you Jeanette, Lloyd, Geoff, Bob, and Val. You gave me plenty to think about – technologically, systemically, interpersonally **and** existentially.

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## FROM THE CHAIR

**Those who attended the 2011 Sea of Faith Conference in Christchurch will no doubt recall for some time yet the contrasting beauty of Christchurch in the spring and the devastation of the inner city and eastern suburbs, and at same time the friendship and stimulation of the weekend. Our thanks go to the Christchurch group for the planning and organisation of a most successful Conference.**

One hundred and ten Sea of Faith members and others were welcomed to Christchurch by Lianne Dalziel, MP for Christchurch East, who thanked us for visiting the city, and for our gesture of solidarity and support with our members and the people of Christchurch. Lianne's warm welcome and her being with us, introduced us to the strength and resilience of the people of Christchurch and a weekend of enjoying the warmth and hospitality of the local members.

In the following summary of the Conference, I have borrowed heavily from the Conference press release by Laurie Chisholm:

**Jeanette Fitzsimons**, introduced the Conference theme in telling us that climate change is the most urgent of six interacting crises that are propelling us towards 'the brink'. The other crises are: resource depletion; pollution; loss of biodiversity; the global financial crisis; growing inequality and frustrated demands for democracy.

"Is more science going to change this?" She questioned, and responded, "I think not."

"Is more economic growth? Certainly not".

"Better economic rules? That could certainly help..."

**But the main answer lies in a change of values among the general population, and thus the demand for action by the politicians.**

"Change has to come from the people, for governments can't act because the people are not demanding change strongly enough to counter the lobbying and financial pressure of the corporates."

Jeanette then issued an invitation and a challenge to us saying, "This is where the domain of religion or spirituality, that you are concerned about, is needed." The discussion on pulling us back from the brink cannot take place exclusively in the 'external' domain of facts and observations about the world. It also needs to encompass the personal, existential, subjective domain. The problem is us, our values, our attitudes to the world, and the way we are in it and with it.

**Geoff Bertram**, formerly lecturer in economics at Victoria University, blamed a large segment of the economics profession for giving bad advice in the current situation and accused them of a moral as well as an intellectual failure.

**Bob Lloyd**, Associate Professor at Otago University, lamented that we are not ready for peak oil and climate change but we still want growth.

Can religion help pull us back from the brink? **Val Webb**, an Australian theologian focussed on compassion as a virtue common to many religions and responded with the further question: "How can we pull **religion** back from the brink?"— whether the brink is extremism, fundamentalism or irrelevance. She then answers with a quote from Karen Armstrong: "**We do not need a new religion. We know what we have to do. We have a choice. We can either allow those aggressive doctrines and practices which exist in all faiths to come to the fore; or we choose to implement those that speak of justice, respect and human dignity, and peace to become a dynamic force for good in our troubled world.**"

**Lloyd Geering**, Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University, responded to the four papers and underlined what became one of the main threads of the Conference arguing that Richard Dawkins' polemic against the 'God delusion' has come 200 years too late. **The new God is Growth. The god-like status of 'growth' in the political mindset underpins all of these crises.**

For those unable to attend Conference, the papers are available on the website. For those wishing to purchase CDs of the presentations, the CD Purchase Form is also on the website.

The post-Conference Steering Committee meeting reviewed the weekend and proposed that the 2012 Conference build upon it by further exploring the challenges and themes introduced – particularly by Jeanette Fitzsimons – **values, motivation and change** in the context of religious themes and life today. It promises to be a stimulating weekend on the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> of October 2012 at St Cuthbert's College in Epsom, Auckland. Do plan to be there.

**Natali Allen,**  
**Chairperson 2011-12**



<sup>1</sup> Armstrong, K. (2011) "**Time For Religion to be a Force for Good**". Washington Post Sept. 8<sup>th</sup>