

Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

www.sof.org.nz

Newsletter 111, April 2014

Conference Backgrounder

Exploring Inner Space

Psychology, Spirituality and Consciousness

Inner space is, in many ways, bigger than outer space. Each of Earth's 5 billion inhabitants has an unbelievably complex inner space which even top research scientists barely understand.

This year's Conference invites the keynote speakers to map out a future world in which we will have considerably more knowledge of Spirituality, Psychology and Consciousness than we presently have. The expectation is that **psychology** and emerging **neuroscience** (often called "consciousness studies") will be the paths to new knowledge about our humanness.

Psychology is more than a century old and has proved both hostile to and supportive of religious perceptions, as the respective examples of Freud and Jung demonstrate.

That elusive word 'spirituality' is used in a wide variety of ways and is overdue for a stable definition. At the 1994 Conference, Lloyd Geering said, "[Spirit] ... has no substance. It is a purely abstract term which has no literal meaning. It is a frozen metaphor from a now obsolete world-view and the only meaning it can have is a metaphorical or symbolic one." If that is so, then can any of the implicit or explicit claims made by the world's great paths of faith stand scrutiny? I surmise that neuroscience will result in an upset larger than that caused by Darwin.

Until recently, consciousness was not considered a fit topic of research – scientists were recommended to "get tenure first". But the last twenty years have seen a flood of research which may well bring new knowledge that will radically change our whole way of looking at ourselves. Refer to Laurie's review on page 6. Refer to the bibliography on page 12 for books on Consciousness, Neuroscience and related matters. The TED talk by John Searle is especially delightful.

There are basically two ways of looking at the relationship between mind and body. The traditional or 'dualist' view is that the body is a container of the mind/soul which enters before birth and leaves at the time of death. Look at the illustration on the right of this page. Or think of a car containing a driver.

The emerging or 'causation' view is that the brain is a physical organ, with the mind as an *activity* or *function* of that organ. As Searle puts it – what the mind is to the brain, digestion is to the stomach.

Modern scientific research favours this latter model. But it brings with it enormous challenges which range from accountability before the law to traditional religious views.

Noel Cheer, Editor



FRIENDS WE HAVE LOST

Owen Lewis

Remembered by
Marjorie Cox of Auckland

Owen and Joy were founding members of New Zealand Sea of Faith Network.

Sir Lloyd Geering, who initiated the Network, was their contemporary and they remained friends.

I have known Owen and Joy for over twenty years. It was always 'Owen and Joy'.

Through all these years, Owen and Joy played active parts at National level and in our local, Auckland, branch. For many years they were involved in committees in leadership, and they initiated our annual, local, One Day Conference.

Whether it be on committees, in leadership or in group discussion, their contribution was always well-considered, articulate, wise and thought-provoking. All would be well if Owen and Joy were involved.

I also valued their warmth and friendship.

And then there was just Owen — alone and facing a huge grief and life-adjustment.

I have been very impressed with how well he, with the support of his daughter Dorothea, managed to re-establish himself, at ninety years of age — to live alone, offer hospitality and to keep up with his activities, as far as he was able.

Last Wednesday a small group of his SoF friends met with him for coffee.

It was a very special time of deep discussion, fun and laughter. We all enjoyed it very much — so much so that Owen suggested we should do it again, and a plan was put in place.

I took him home and he was feeling very happy about his morning

I hope with will be a comfort to the family that he had a very happy morning, followed by an early-afternoon visit from two other SoF friends, in what were to be his final hours.



Owen Lewis
1921-2014

It was a privilege to know Owen. His still, wise and articulate contributions will be sadly missed. Owen the man, our friend, will be remembered with gratitude.

Shirley Goss

Remembered by
Margaret Gwynn of Napier

Shirley died on Thursday 6 March, aged eight-one, and her life was celebrated in heartfelt tributes at her lovely funeral service on Tuesday 11 March. During the years of her husband Alan's work as a Presbyterian minister, there were many moves both within New Zealand and overseas, and it was Shirley who created a loving family home in all these different places.

When Alan initiated Sea of Faith in Hawkes Bay in 1994, he was ably supported by Shirley, and for many years she provided afternoon tea or tasty soup at meetings. At a recent meeting of the Hawkes Bay branch, members shared the different ways they had known Shirley: helping her entertain children on family visiting days at Manawaroa prison; international dancing; caring for waifs and strays, both animal and human; running children's holiday programmes; inviting all the Shirleys she could find to donate money to Shirley Boys' High School after the Christchurch earthquake.

All these different ways in which we have known Shirley capture something of the kind of person she was – warm-hearted, dancing as long as she could, generous, reaching out in simple and effective ways to people in her community. Here are a few lines from the poem Ian McQuillan wrote for Shirley's 80th birthday :

"Showering flowers on friends and strangers,
living a life of kindness reaching out, finding the
needy ... We count her amongst the salt of the
earth."

We will miss her very much.



Shirley Goss
1932-2014

ALL ABOUT US

SEA OF FAITH: EXPLORING VALUES, SPIRITUALITY AND MEANING

We are an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.

Our formal name is The Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Inc.

We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

“Sea of Faith” both traces the decline of traditional Christian influence in the West in the past 250 years and invites the viewer to consider what might replace it. In New Zealand, the Sea of Faith Network provides a forum for the continued exploration.

The Sea of Faith Network itself has no creed. We draw our members from people of all faiths and also from those with no attachment to religious institutions.

Our national **Steering Committee** publishes a Newsletter six times each year, maintains a website at www.sof.org.nz, assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

We have six **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, Ian Harris, Alan Goss and Fred Marshall.

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Deadline Dates for Submitted Newsletter Copy are 17 March, 19 May, 14 July, 25 August, 27 October.

Members may borrow books, CDs, and DVDs from the Resource Centre which is managed by Suzi Thirlwall (07) 578-2775 susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz. Refer to the catalogue on the website.

Membership of the national organisation costs \$20 per household per year (\$30 if outside NZ). Both charges drop to \$15 if the Newsletter is emailed and not on paper.

To join, send remittance and details to The Membership Secretary (listed above) or Internet bank to 38 9000 0807809 00 and tell pcowley@paradise.net.nz your mailing details.

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I SAID TO MY CHILDREN,

"I never want to live in a vegetative state,
dependent on some machine
and fluids from a bottle.

If that ever happens, pull the plug."

They got up, unplugged the TV and the computer
and threw out my wine.

Found on the Internet

BEYOND THE BORDERS

PROGRESSIVE SPIRITUALITY,
NEW ZEALAND CONFERENCE

AUCKLAND, AUGUST 28–31

DETAILS AT

<http://progressivespirituality.co.nz/nz-conference-2014/>

THE GALILEAN TERRORIST

Editor's Introduction

Archie Thomson, a member of SoF in Auckland has submitted a narrative for the Newsletter called **REPORT: Execution of a Galilean Terrorist**. His story tells of the supposed events surrounding the trial and execution of the Nazarean Jeshua from the point of view of a Roman spy-master named Markos. Archie's narrative is too long for the Newsletter but is on our website: www.sof.org.nz/galileanterrorist.pdf It is well worth reading.

That there was an historical Jesus is doubted by few. That there exist historically-reliable accounts of what he did and said is more problematic. Opinions vary as to whether the sayings and actions attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are accurate or whether they are narratives used to disseminate opinions *about* Jesus held by distinct (and somewhat tribal) groups of his followers decades after his life. This latter option seems to better match the facts and speculations emanating from informed scholars such as those from the Westar Institute. In the opinion of your Editor the gospel accounts are better thought of as historical novels with polemical 'spin' than as historical data. You, dear reader, may well have other opinions, but the very fact that such diverse opinions can credibly exist shows that, to borrow from Schweitzer, the Quest of the Historical Jesus has not delivered unambiguous fruit. Schweitzer and others take the view that we cannot meet the historical Jesus because the base data are not available. But archaeological finds may yet improve that outlook.

Characterisations of Jesus promoted as historical include: Schweitzer's Eschatological Prophet ("the end is near"); the terrorist as recently promoted by Reza Aslan's *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*; and the Socrates-like sage who attracted hearers through healing as proposed by Westar authors of The Jesus Seminar.

But alongside the debated biographical descriptions of the historical Jesus we encounter a layer of speculations as to what the background conditions might have been like. These argue with traditional facts by offering 'what-ifs' both in harmony with and in contest with the confident certainties of the gospels. One example pointed out by Archie should suffice: what is the probability that the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate would leave his bed in the early hours of the morning to debate with a nobody agitator from the backwoods regions of Galilee? He had troops to look after such matters.

Many other authors (see box) gave us speculative views of the Jesus story and Archie Thomson provides us with a backgrounder which, in his words, "bring[s] out the casual brutality of an occupying regime." Even the 'thorough'

protagonist, Markos, concedes that the punishment of political dissidents is a "hit-and-miss affair."

In locating Jesus as an agitator who was casually-brutalised, Archie's account offers an alternative and simple explanation for the signature 'empty tomb'.

Archie's story doesn't assert that Jesus did not come back from the dead – it simply explains *why* there might have been an empty tomb. And the story also dismisses the idea that it was the Jewish Temple that demanded the execution of the Galilean – and that the callous, rapacious Pilate of history tried to save his life. Archie's idea was to produce a 'thought-provoking' fiction which he refers to as a possibility and not as his 'pet theory'.

Archie's Introduction

In some ways, this *REPORT on the Execution of a Terrorist* is a trick played on you, the reader. The story is so compelling that you'll find yourself believing that *it could have happened just like this*. Even though you've been told that the whole thing is a work of fiction. There's a certain *inevitability* about the unfolding of events – although Markos warns us, more than once, that a lot of stuff happens by chance. He gets you to accept a paradox: that chance is an important ingredient of inevitability. Under his guidance, we

become fatalistic: "A man can change the fate of others, but his own fate he cannot change." What would have happened if the body had been left in the tomb? – maybe we wouldn't have Christianity! That's *chance*

for you.

The reader starts believing – *I myself started believing, and I wrote it!* It's a remote coincidence, for example, that Markos should run into the execution squad taking the bodies to the quarry. Could something like this have actually happened? Yes, it's possible. But 'possibility' is a worthless guide to understanding – because almost anything could be *possible*. So what has been happening to us as we read? – we have become willing participants, creating an *authenticity of narrative*.

Authenticity of narrative is the theme of a 1995 movie, *The Usual Suspects*. How much of what that guy called Verbal is telling the cop is true? All of it? And, if not all of it, how much of it? Several times the cop tells him, "You're lying!" – but we ignore these warnings, we're mesmerised by the narration. We've been told that Verbal is a confidence trickster. But his narrative, with all its improbabilities and loose ends, is so compelling!

In the play *Othello* Shakespeare could have come up with some convincing explanation as to why Iago hates Othello so much that he set up an elaborate plot to destroy him. But he doesn't bother to explain. *The audience is never going to notice*. How likely is it that Iago's 'cunning plan' is going to

Jesus in Fiction – a sample list

Ben-Hur by Lew Wallace, *My Name Was Judas* by C.K. Stead, *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis, *King Jesus* by Robert Grave, *The Robe* by Lloyd C. Douglas, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* by Philip Pullman, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* by Fulton Oursler, *The Testament of Mary* by Colm Tóibín
http://www.goodreads.com/list/show/23737.Fiction_with_Jesus_as_a_Character

work? – it's very unlikely! And careful analysis of the play shows that Desdemona and Cassio simply didn't have an opportunity to be conducting an affair, in the time between her marriage and the beginning of Othello's suspicions about her supposed adultery. But Othello doesn't notice this – and *nor does the audience*. Shakespeare has set up an *authentic-looking narrative*, Othello becomes the victim – and we, the audience, buy it.

Now that we understand how the trick works, we can go back to the Gospels. Several people, including John Shelby Spong, have raised an awkward question about the nativity story in Matthew: the paranoid Herod sends some astrologers that he's never met before to investigate what (according to the astrologers!) could be a threat to his dynasty. It never occurs to him to send along some of his security people, to keep an eye on what these astrologers get up to. Would Herod have employed a spymaster, a 'Markos'? Count on it. The slander of 'Herod the baby murderer' has become an enduring myth in Western culture. And yet Josephus, who exhaustively researched the life of Herod in pursuit of lurid yarns, never got to hear about it. Matthew's nativity story is a compelling narrative. How many people in the audience are going to notice the glaring discrepancies between it and another compelling narrative, that of Luke? Not many.

But let's not waste our sympathy on the late great Herod. As Markos remarks, what people say about you after you're dead doesn't matter. It's time for us to move on to a far more pernicious slander, one that has impacted disastrously on the lives of millions of people: the notion that it was Jews, not just priests but the common people, who were the 'Christ killers'. How many hideous atrocities have been inspired by that single gratuitously mischievous verse "With one voice the people cried, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'" (Matthew 27: 25). All right, what I have written was a work of fiction. Some things in it are obviously *made up*, such as Herod Antipas needing Pilate's approval before executing John the Baptist – there's no reason to think that this would have been the case. But as a work of fiction, it could never do as much damage as the absurd account of an apprehensive Pilate standing there, while a mob yelled at him. Try to imagine the scene, but with Saddam Hussein (in his prime) playing the role of Pilate. Hmmm. But nonetheless, what with the plea from his wife and the symbolic hand washing, it's a compelling narrative. Repeated over and over, it becomes indistinguishable from fact.

And why did the priests hate Jesus so much that they held a special court in the middle of the night – and demanded that the Romans should crucify him? (Mark 14: 53-65, etc). Like the motives of Iago, this is never adequately explained. Perhaps it was the incident of the 'overturning of the money-changers' tables in the Temple.' If that was the worst thing that Jesus did to upset them, wouldn't it have been mentioned at his 'trial'? But it wasn't. The Gospel of John (ch.11) offers a completely different explanation: Jesus was performing too many miracles, specifically bringing a dead man back to life.

Now for the guts of the problem. Why, in the days after the death of Jesus, did his followers become convinced that he had come back to life? Let us, for a moment, discount all the

stories about how they actually 'met the resurrected Christ'. Even without those stories, could they still have had this conviction that he 'was risen' (for a couple of centuries Christians argued about whether 'he was raised from the dead' or 'he rose from the dead')? *And yes they could!* But why? – because on Sunday morning the tomb was empty. *Who moved the stone?* was asked by author Frank Morison (real name Albert Henry Ross) in his book of that name from 1930.

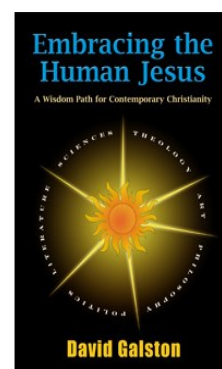
But I'm asking: *Who moved the body?* We'll never know.

Archie Thomson 2014

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EARS TO HEAR HIM

Excerpt from a review by
Jamieson Spencer of David
Galston's *Embracing The
Human Jesus*



As the Rev. Dr. Galston notes, "To be a follower of the historical Jesus does not require beliefs about him; it requires ears to hear him," ears that allow us "to stop worrying about the world and start paying attention to one's presence in it." "It is possible," he adds, "to be serious about Jesus and [his teaching] without being desperate about Jesus and demanding from him our salvation." Galston's chapter on how to approach, interpret and apply the array of parables that embody Jesus' wisdom school are profoundly impressive.

* * * * *

"Smuggling Jesus into Christianity will be hard but exciting work, and David Galston is a clear and lively guide who knows just how much is at stake."

Don Cupitt

* * * * *

WANTED: JESUS CHRIST

ALIAS: the Messiah, the Son of God, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Prince of Peace, etc.

Notorious leader of an underground liberation movement

Wanted for the following charges: –

- Practicing medicine, winemaking and food distribution without a license
- Interfering with businessmen in the temple
- Associating with known criminals, radicals, subversives, prostitutes and street people
- Claiming to have the authority to make people into God's children

APPEARANCE: Typical hippie type—long hair, beard, robe, sandals. Hangs around slum areas, few rich friends, often sneaks out into the desert.

BEWARE: This man is extremely dangerous. His insidiously inflammatory message is particularly dangerous to young people who haven't been taught to ignore him yet. He changes men and claims to set them free.

WARNING: He is still at large.

Conference Backgrounder

THE SOUL DID NOT FALL FROM HEAVEN

or: What Religion Needs to Learn From Modern Brain Research, and Why Science is Not Enough
submitted by Chairperson Laurie Chisholm

Anonymous, Internet

This is an excerpt from *Taking the Fear Out Of God. An Introduction to the Thought of Eugen Drewermann* by Matthias Beier. It was published in German in 2010 as *Gott Ohne Angst: Einföhrung in das Denken Eugen Drewermanns*. Not yet published in English.

Neurology must complete the work of the Enlightenment today: God, soul, freedom and immortality are not concepts of scientific thinking; Religion must not objectify God, if it does not want to turn faith into unbelief, mysticism into magic and piety into fetishism. A2 14

What is left of God, if God cannot be used as an explanatory principle for causes in nature? And what is left of the person of the human being and of her ‘soul’, if anthropology, biology, and cosmology can plausibly explain the origin of the human being and of the world, without a creator God? These questions lead Drewermann to engage with neurology in the two closing volumes of his major work, *Liberating Faith*, entitled *The Breath of Life* (A1 and A2). Can the human person, his faith in God, his hope of immortality and his belief in free will be maintained in the light of all the conclusions of science? The results of neurology show that all higher, “spiritual/intellectual functions of the human being: awareness and self-consciousness, learning and remembering, dreaming and perceiving, motivation and moral behavior, pain and desire, aggression and sexuality, are the result of evolutionary developments. They do not need the metaphysical principle of God or soul for their explanation” (A2 539).

Modern Neurology and the Question of God

Neurology represents the greatest challenge to traditional theology today. For it finds that “the ‘soul’ of the human being has emerged from the evolution of animals” (A2 295). This makes it impossible to maintain the idea, which continues to be widespread and comes

from ancient Hellenistic substance-thinking, that the human ‘soul’ is an ‘immaterial’ being-substance that enters into the ‘body’ at the moment of conception. The teaching office of the Catholic Church uses this substance-based thinking up to the present day, to provide the basis for completely irrational and damaging moral concepts in the abortion debate (AT; A1 17-18). Something is projected metaphysically into the initial stages of the human embryo that is not actually there, simply because the development of the embryonic brain in the first 50 days is scarcely different from that of a fish (A1 261). Without realising it, such a theology also makes God into the greatest mass murder in history. More than a third of all fertilized ova are aborted by nature through spontaneous miscarriage, mostly without the pregnant woman knowing anything about it (U 321-322).

The phony harmony of ‘creation’ and ‘evolution’ in the Vatican, which is constructed on the dualism of soul and body, thus collapses. With his deconstruction of superstitious soul-metaphysics Drewermann wants to lead us back to the real sources of our human hope. If we want to continue talking of the ‘soul’ and ‘God,’ then, given the results of neurology, a completely new, essentially poetic and personal interpretation of what these concepts describe is needed (A1 53).

Clearly, in the question of the soul, a whole lot is at stake. “The doctrine of the soul as spiritual/intellectual bearer of consciousness and self-awareness, of individuality and personality, of self-identity and freedom” has for millennia formed for large parts of humanity the basis for “religiosity and morality, ... humanity and jurisprudence” (A1 13). The destiny of eternal life for every individual, on the basis of the “indestructibility of his soul,” seemed to provide like nothing else a basis for the “dignity and the inviolability of the human being” (A1 13).

Brain research shows Drewermann three things. First he proves in detail with its help that the formation of what we traditionally call ‘soul’, as well as the areas of the brain and the neurological processes underlying it, show no sign of planning and purpose (A1 180). Secondly, he illustrates with numerous examples, that the idea of an omniscient and

Neurology
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today

infinitely good creator, who has perfectly created the 'soul,' founders on the immeasurable 'soul'-suffering, which comes about from the all-too-imperfect structures and processes of our brain in its interaction with the world. Thirdly, he explodes the moralistic perspective on the human being, which was created in the 'Christian' West through the traditional teaching of the Fall, and which lives on today, even if often in secular form, in all parts of society. Because neurology exposes the unfreedom of what we call our 'free will', as long as we do not feel in interpersonal encounters a permission to exist, Drewermann pleads for therapeutic understanding instead of punishing judgment in dealing with people.

A development from unfreedom to freedom cannot come about through merely intellectual, 'cognitive' insights. It emerges "from a decisive change in the structure of the 'I,' which is the result of a fundamental permission to exist that is mediated from person to person" (A2 853). In order to be free, the kind of becoming aware of oneself must be characterized by *trust*. For the "'reconstruction' of the 'I'" the encounter with another person is needed, whom one can deeply trust and "who, with *her* empathy, with *her* understanding, with *her* patience opens that space of permission, of non-judgment, of 'grace,' of which we said that only in it can a person develop and live." Only in such a "warmer climate" is it possible to thaw "the 'permafrost' of the soul and to give back a richer life" (A2 857). This process occurs therapeutically through making the patient aware of the "transference of parental imagoes" onto the therapist. This working-through enables "liberation from this psychodynamics" so that the patient no longer has to play the role in which he experienced himself in relation to his parents. In order to verbalize fears in a spider phobia in such a way that they do not simply retraumatise, a personal encounter is needed, which itself has a fear-reducing effect. "Such a 'making aware' does not occur as a causal process—it is neither externally nor internally describable as a relationship of cause and effect following the model of the course of chemical reactions. Rather it is a matter of forms of personal encounter, in which the freedom of the one becomes a stimulus, an encouragement, a model for the *enabling* of the freedom of the other in freedom." Jesus must have been experienced just like that by people who found psychosomatic healing and a life of their own in his presence. And just that is also what the well-known sentence of Freud means: "Where id was, there ego shall be." Through becoming aware of causal, psychological processes in a personal, understanding encounter, we gain our freedom as an 'I', as a person (A2 859).

Conference Background

ARCHETYPES PRODUCE SECULAR AND SACRED RELIGIONS

Religious beliefs are derived from ever-recurrent, archetypal motifs, which seem to be shared by all mankind and evoke instant emotive responses. But once they become institutionalised as the collective property of a specific group, they degenerate into rigid doctrines which, without losing their emotive appeal, are potentially offensive to the critical faculties.

To paste over the split, various forms of double-think have been

designed at various times -- powerful techniques of self-deception, some crude, some extremely sophisticated.

The same fate has befallen the secular religions which go by the name of political ideologies. They too have their archetypal roots - the craving for Utopia, for an ideal society; but when they crystallise into movements and parties, they can become distorted to such an extent that the actual policy they pursue is the direct opposite of their professed ideal.

This apparently inevitable tendency of both religious and secular ideologies to degenerate into their own caricatures is a direct consequence of the characteristics of the group-mind; its need for intellectual simplicity combined with emotional arousal."

Arthur Koestler: *Bricks to Babel* 504-505

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**Religion is back,
religion with a grudge,
religion with something ugly on its mind.**

Richard Holloway

From Archetype to Expression

Carl Jung developed an understanding of archetypes as being universal, archaic patterns and images that derive from the collective unconscious and which are to the psyche what instincts are to the body. Once they enter consciousness they are given particular expression by individuals and their cultures. It is history, culture and personal context that shape these manifest representations giving them their specific content. The main article discusses how each individual builds his own experience of life, colouring them with his unique culture, personality and life events and expressing these urgings in contexts which are religious, political or both.

from Wikipedia

LIFE OF PI

A review by Laurie Chisholm of the book *Life of Pi*

Media excitement over *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, first over the Man Booker prize-winning novel and then over the visually stunning movie, has long abated, but my fascination and engagement with it, in particular its take on religion, continues. The author himself sets the context as follows:

"If we, citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams."

Pi is the nickname of a young Indian boy and the first part of the book is about how he, as a 16-year-old, sets out to love God, in contrast to his father ("rich, modern, and as secular as ice cream"), his mother ("bored and neutral on the subject. A Hindu upbringing and a Baptist education had precisely cancelled each other out"), and his atheist, Communist biology teacher. First he discovers his Hindu heritage, then Catholic Christianity through a kind priest, and then Islam, through a poor baker, a Sufi who recites the 99 names of God. There are interesting sketches of these three religions and how they strike Pi (Christianity seems very odd, coming from a Hindu background). With lovely humour, the novel describes how three official representatives of these religions meet Pi and his family, each loudly arguing that their religion is the right and best one. Everyone assumes that Pi must decide on which religion to belong to, but Pi wants to belong to all three and responds unanswerably, "Ghandi said, 'All religions are true.' I just want to love God." Interestingly, Pi feels warmly towards atheists, including his biology teacher: "Atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith and every word they speak speaks of faith. Like me, they go as far as the legs of reason will carry them – and then they leap." Pi ends up being baptized (Catholicism) and receiving a prayer mat (Islam). In later life, his house is full of symbols of these three religions: Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, the Virgin Mary, Shiva Nataraja, the cosmic lord of the dance, Krishna playing the flute, the Kaaba, holiest sanctuary of Islam, and a cloth with Allah intricately woven in Arabic.

Pi's exploration of three religious traditions is the theme of the first part, but this is embedded in a larger narrative that embodies a more fundamental reflection on the nature of religion. This is announced right at the beginning, when we are told that Pi's story "will make you believe in God." Pi also says:

"If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for? Isn't love hard to believe? ... Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer."

The second part of the book illustrates this. We are told a scarcely believable tale of shipwreck and survival at sea in a life-raft together with a Bengal tiger. At the end of the book [*plot spoiler follows*], Japanese marine officials interview Pi about his experiences. They express skepticism but he stoutly defends his story. After having responded to all their objections, he volunteers an alternate story, a horrible tale of murder and cannibalism, with humans replacing the animals of the first story. Ultimately, the officials cannot prove which story is true, and so the question is, which story do they prefer. They acknowledge that the story with animals is the better story, and Pi responds, "And so it goes with God."

It is intriguing that in this so-called secular age, a novel is so centrally concerned with religious themes. All through, there are interesting and thought-provoking observations (and not just about religion). A favourite of mine is:

"There are always those who take it upon themselves to defend God, as if Ultimate Reality, as if the sustaining frame of existence, were something weak and helpless."

At the risk of over-interpreting the novel, its basic message seems to be that we have an alternative between "dry, yeastless factuality" and the beautiful stories of our religious traditions. Neither can be proven to be true, but we can choose which story we prefer.

WHY ARE WOMEN'S VOICES GETTING DEEPER?

A Letter to the Editor from Margaret Whitwell of Tauranga

The story of our origins as unfolded by science is truly an awesome wonder. We rose to Homo sapiens, the wise one, for survival, and the emergence of language led the progression to more sentient groups and the consciousness that changed our direction for ever.

But could the early species have practiced their new voice skills not only for the safety of their existences but also because they liked to do so? Much of what humans do today, music, art etc., is on that list. And we still like to talk. Google says that women speak an average of 20,000 words per day, men say a little less but they are catching up. So the total number of words said in a city each day must reach a galactic figure.

About four decades ago it was noticed that many girls in their final year at secondary school spoke with deeper voices. One psychologist at the time thought it was a fashionable fad, an affectation.

Mostly when speaking English the voice goes down at the end of a sentence anyway. It denotes the completion of a module of information and aids understanding. Today we find that the already deeper inflections of some feminine trendsetters descend to a low register on the verge of a croak. Their glottis are functioning in a quite remarkable way. They can be heard on radio and elsewhere. Is this an evolutionary adaption happening before our eyes? (or ears.)

Perhaps a new need has arisen in the shape of social survival. More resonant tones are required to offset the mischief dealt out to our hearing by noisy shopping precincts, high volume music, and other parts of our raucous contemporary life. Or, perhaps the level of women's testosterone is higher than before to allow subtle aggression and confidence needed for a career in a man's world. An empirical study would be interesting.

Maybe, when human females generally are equal to males in status, their voices will return to a modulated treble. Or maybe not. It all depends.

Margaret Whitwell

RENDER UNTO EGO

"The idea of many schools of spirituality that we must kill Narcissus [the ego] in order to be free of personal obstructions, just results in more constipated yogis and schizophrenic priests."

from *Embracing The Beloved: Relationship as a Path of Awakening* by Stephen and Ondrea Levine, Doubleday 1995 page 106

FINDING COMMON GROUND

John Craighead of Blenheim writes:

Chris Stedman came to Christchurch recently to be the guest speaker at the Christchurch Inter-Faith Council's public forum on the 'Spiritual Rebuild of Christchurch'. His personal history and experiences have, at twenty-five, led to his present work as a gay, atheist, humanist Chaplain at Harvard University. These form the basis of the book which seems to follow naturally in the 'New Atheist' stream.

Breaking the psychological restrictions of monotheist thinking and encouraging personal meetings of students from atheist, Christian, Jewish and Muslim faith families, while packaging and distributing food parcels for the impoverished children of Boston is a practical way of tapping into their shared values and actions.

As a 'born again' teenager he was held lovingly by his faith family, when his parents were separating. He was hurt and confused by their rejection of him when he came out as gay. This experience was familiar to a young Muslim woman who shared with him what it is like facing prejudices growing up in America.

His linking up with atheists who were critical of 'believers' confirmed his move to find a middle way and a model of relating that bypassed the old antagonisms.

A suggestion that if he wasn't a true atheist he must be one of those 'faitheists' led to him adopt the label and a model that offers inclusiveness of all believers in an extended faith family which depends on the transformative power of listening to each other's personal narratives.

[This book is a] useful and practical resource for deepening personal or group discussions. For an image of him and the book see www.faitheistthebook.com

John Craighead, Blenheim

There is another review of this book in Newsletter 105 (April 2013). For more about atheists who are at least tolerant of religion, see Newsletter 107 (August 2013) page 8.

TRUTH?

When you leave the theatre after a performance of King Lear you do not ask "Did King Lear actually exist?" or "Is this account of Lear and his daughters historically accurate?" You ask "What does this play say to humanity today?"

This paraphrase of philosopher Mary Midgley who was talking to Howard Jacobsen about the Genesis creation story was supplied by Peter Bore in Australia in

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THE ONE AND ONLY MATTHEW ARNOLD

Right slap-bag in the middle of Page 1 of Newsletter 110, I mentioned "Mathew Arnold" and "Matthew Arnold".

In the *Dover Beach* context, there is only one and it is "Matthew".



Sorry ... Noel Cheer, Editor

BOOK REVIEWS

by Margaret Gwynn of Napier

Old Age

Helen M. Luke, Lindisfarne Books, 2010

Originally published in 1987

There may be different cover layouts available

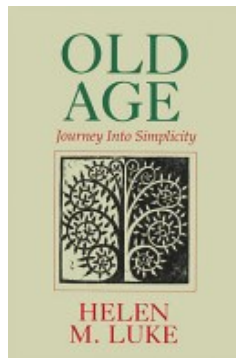
This small book lays before us a choice about how we go into our last years and approach our death. Do we choose to **grow** old or merely **sink** into the ageing process? Do we simply repeat what we know, trying to hold on to youth and the past? Or do we undertake a true journey of the soul, experiencing the agonies and changes of a gradual letting-go?

Helen Luke combines knowledge of Jung's insights with a discussion of three major figures in literature - Homer's Odysseus, Shakespeare's King Lear, and Prospero in "The Tempest". This is followed by comments on T.S.Eliot's Little Gidding in "The Four Quartets" and a chapter contrasting suffering (carrying with courage) and depression (weighed down).

Towards the end of his life, Odysseus longs to make further voyages but is required to give up his need to achieve. Lear comes to accept his suffering and embraces prison, where he "will pray and sing and tell old tales ..."

But the heart of the book is the chapter on "The Tempest" and, in particular, the Epilogue to the play. Will Prospero willingly let go of his will to power at the height of his success? Can he forgive? Accept Caliban? And free Ariel? Will he fall into despair or discover where true freedom lies?

In "Little Gidding", Helen Luke continues her profound exploration of what ageing can be as she discusses Eliot's three gifts of age – physical changes, helpless rage at human folly, and memories. If we can accept all these, we can begin to hear a new language and become aware of our oneness with everything and everyone. As Helen Luke says on p.96, we can then enter the dance, "each individual a small pattern in the dance of creation".



Margaret Gwynne

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;

.....
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.



Little Gidding is a parish and small village located near Sawtry in Cambridgeshire, England.

Book of Silence: a journey in search of the pleasures and powers of silence.

Sara Maitland, Granta, 2008

This remarkable book describes Maitland's ten-year exploration of different kinds of silence as she moved towards her eventual hermitage in south-west Scotland in 2007. She studies silence as experienced by solo sailors, prisoners in solitary confinement, fairy stories, the Desert Fathers and Romantic poets.

But this is not just an intellectual pursuit. Maitland rents a

remote cottage on Skye for six weeks, spends a week on a desert retreat and walks the hills of Galloway, paying close attention to how she experiences these particular silences. Alongside these chosen times of silence, she is experimenting with how to arrange for more silence in her daily life. "One part of this was simply doing it – building up internally and externally a practice of silence ... developing and

maintaining a disciplined pattern of meditation and prayer, unplugging the phone, taking life gently, walking, looking, listening to the silence"(pp.116-117).

Maitland is aware of the dangers of silence and describes vividly being snowed-in for ten days. "Part of me became increasingly scared. Some of the anxiety was 'realistic' – would I eventually run out of food? ... But more of it was emotional – despite the fact that I was supposedly longing for quiet, I increasingly felt invaded. The silence was hollowing me out and leaving me empty and naked. ... One day walking to my gate, my collar blew up against the back of my head and I screamed aloud" (pp.84-85).

In our increasingly noisy world, Maitland wonders if the West distrusts silence because of the Genesis creation story, in which God speaks the universe into being. Creation happens when silence is broken. But for Maitland to see silence as lack, absence or void seems wrong, and she lists many positive silent moments – responses to nature, listening to music, the silence of the great cosmic forces ... She says "I have found it to be a whole world in and of itself, alongside of, woven within language and culture, but independent of it. It comes from a different place altogether" (p. 279).

So Maitland settles into her hermitage. "I want to sit in the sunshine on my doorstep and listen to the silence. ... I want to say my prayers and write some new sorts of stories and make a garden and read some books and walk up the hill ... And just sit" (pp.285-286).

This is an absorbing book. I recommend it.

Margaret Gwynne



THE LAST WORD

Laurie Chisholm, Chairperson

Conference Backgrounder

It is 30 years since Don Cupitt's BBC TV series *The Sea of Faith* explored the challenges that modernity brings to traditional religion.

Newton's mechanical universe leaves no room for an interventionist, supernatural God. The age of rocks and Darwin's theory of evolution gave the lie to the idea that the universe was created recently and for our sakes. Albert Schweitzer's study of attempts made during the to write a life of Jesus showed that we re-made Jesus in our own image; by contrast, he presented a Jesus alien to our modern ways of thinking. The number and diversity of religions on the planet induce religion shock and cast serious doubt on any religion's claim to be the one true religion.

Since then, further challenges have emerged. It seems to me that the most important are evolutionary psychology and brain science. Evolutionary psychology extends Darwinian theory to explore behavior. It looks at morality not from above as a set of abstract principles, but from below, as something that has emerged in the process of evolution. It looks at religion, not in terms of whether its doctrines are true or false, but asks what evolutionary advantage a religion might confer in the struggle for survival. Recent years have seen enormous advances in our understanding of the brain. Previously, we learnt about the brain by dissecting dead brains and by studying people who had sustained brain injuries. Now we can see something of what is going on in live brains, thanks to new scanning technologies such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and positron emission tomography (PET). We can now correlate (for example) a Buddhist monk's experience of meditation or a Catholic nun's experience of prayer with what is going on in their brain. Enormous resources are going into understanding the way that our brains work. Each year, some 30,000 people come together to share new knowledge at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience.

Modern brain science proposes that the traditional dualism of soul and body, and centuries of philosophical argument between materialism and idealism, need to give way to a new perspective: consciousness, our subjective awareness and sense of being an 'I' are not non-material entities separate from our brain but emergent properties of neural networks. If we think of the brain as like an orchestra, it has no conductor; there

is no single locus of control. This is not unknown, for example in string quartets: the different players listen carefully to each other and are able to keep in time with one another. But the brain is even more amazing: it is not playing a composed piece, but making it up as it goes along.

Lloyd Geering (*God in the New World* and *Christianity without God*) and Don Cupitt (*Taking Leave of God* and *After God*) have both given a lot of critical attention to the idea of God. Rather less attention has been paid to that other pillar of traditional Christianity, the soul. It is true that the 1967 'heresy trial' exonerated Lloyd: "The Assembly [the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand] judges that no doctrinal error has been established, dismisses the charges and declares the case closed." What people tend to forget is that in 1970 it dissociated itself from Geering's views, largely because of his statement that "man has no immortal soul." The church apparently found Lloyd's views on the soul more subversive than those on the resurrection and was really worried at their potential to "disturb the peace of the church."

Today, one looks in vain for indications that the churches have made a serious effort to engage with the issue. A central concept of our religious tradition, the 'soul', continues to be fundamentally undermined by modern developments, yet theologians and religious leaders act as though nothing has changed.

CONFERENCE UPDATE

- Airport shuttle: at the same time as you make your air bookings, Google kiwishuttles.co.nz and book a shuttle to and from the conference, stating it is to the Sea of Faith conference. Alternatively ring 0800 365 494. This will ensure you have a cheaper ride to and from the venue. The booking must be made in advance.
- The accommodation at Tolcarne is very comfortable with single and twin rooms available. If you do not have your own transport there are no motels very close and you would have an up hill walk to the conference venue.
- There are several motels at the north end of George Street or Cumberland Street. Nearer ones include Alexis Motor Lodge, Allan Court Motel, Cable Court, Cumberland Motel and Farry's Motel.
- Pacific Court Motel is within walking distance and situated on the same hill as Tolcarne.
- Search Google for "accommodation Dunedin". As information becomes available between Newsletters it will be posted on the website at www.sof.org.nz/2014conf.pdf

The theme of our 2014 Conference is **“Exploring Inner Space: Psychology, Spirituality, and Consciousness.”** We can think of this as exploring a contemporary understanding of the ‘soul’. Soul in this sense is the central core of my being, the person, that which makes me the unique and irreplaceable individual that I am. The development and unfolding of a person can be inhibited or distorted by destructive family dynamics, by the callous employment practices of big business, by group pressures to conform, and by depression and other forms of mental illness. By contrast, it can be facilitated by good human relationships, by psychotherapy and (one would hope) by a modern spirituality. Various disciplines can contribute to an understanding of ‘soul’ in this sense: a whole range of psychological theories and therapeutic practices from Freudian psychoanalysis to humanistic psychology and even transpersonal psychology with its exploration of non-ordinary states of consciousness. Philosophers such as John Searle can help untangle confused thinking.

In this exploration there are two fundamentally different approaches; the subjective and the objective, the mind and the brain. We can describe the feeling of fear or look at the role of adrenaline. We can analyse the experience of falling in love or examine the role of the oxytocin hormone. We can explore consciousness or try to understand how our brains give rise to a sense of being an ‘I’.

These different approaches have led to some pretty fundamental debates, so Conference could be controversial. Many studying the brain are inclined to explain consciousness as a mere epiphenomenon, essentially an illusion. Free will does not fare much better. Some hope that the study of the brain will explain away religious experience and reveal religious ideas to be erroneous. Others are convinced of the opposite: “Mystical experience is biologically, observably, and scientifically real” say Newberg, D’Aquili and Rause. Edward and Emily Kelly’s book *Irreducible Mind* exposes many ‘materialist’ explanations as superficial and unconvincing. The practice of psychiatry has two very different traditions and emphases: psychotherapy and drug therapy, wonderfully explored by Tania Luhrmann in her book *Of Two Minds. An Anthropologist Looks at American Psychiatry*. We need to integrate the subjective and objective approaches. One little sign of this is that the art of medicine is increasingly seen as needing a spiritual side as well as a scientific one, especially when there is no hope of a cure; Richard Egan told Noel Cheer that 80% of US medical schools now teach compulsory courses on spirituality.

In thinking about the Conference theme, I am struck by an overwhelming feeling of wonder and amazement at what is generally taken for granted as a universal feature of our experience; we are not just a bundle of ways of responding to our environment. We are conscious and so are aware of our world and of ourselves.

Laurie Chisholm, Chairperson 2013-2014

Bibliography:

BBC documentary on Human Consciousness:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLu4ESYUdsk>

John Searle talk on Consciousness:

http://www.ted.com/talks/john_searle_our_shared_condition_of_consciousness [note: not_spaces_but_underscores]

Edward and Emily Kelly *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*.

Mario Beauregard. *Brain Wars: The Scientific Battle Over the Existence of the Mind and the Proof that Will Change the Way We Live*

Newberg, D’Aquili and Rause. *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*

FROM THE STEERING COMMITTEE



Refer to Newsletter 110 page 6 for names in this lineup
At its April meeting, the Steering Committee used Skype for the first time, enabling us to see as well as hear each other and greatly reducing the cost of our monthly teleconferences. Even though we had a Skype trial run two weeks before, we still had some teething problems, but we are getting on top of them.

- Unfortunately, Professor Dirk De Ridder is unable to speak at this year’s Conference due to other commitments, so we are looking for an alternative.
- We have begun work on arranging workshops for Conference.
- We plan to have Conference publicity available with the June newsletter. This is two months earlier than last year.
- The report from Marjorie and the Dunedin Local Arrangements Committee updated us on their continuing work for Conference.

We continued to brainstorm themes for Conference 2015. Generally, our planning is well advanced and we plan to keep it that way!

Laurie Chisholm

Keep an eye on www.sof.org.nz for real-time updates