

# Sea of Faith

Exploring Values, Spirituality and Meaning

[www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz)

CONFERENCE REGISTRATION ISSUE

Newsletter 125, July 2016

## FAREWELL, JANET



**Sarah Jane (Janet) Lambie**

*7 July 1937 – 6 March 2016*

*"Give thanks for life, the measure of our days..."*

Janet Lambie, formerly of Wellington – more recently Canterbury – died unexpectedly of a cerebral haemorrhage, surrounded by the love of her family, on March 6, 2016. She was only seventy-eight years old and had just settled into her new home in Amberley with a strong sense of contentment and belonging in her heart.

Janet is survived by her husband Neil, their children Sarah Jane, Andrew, Mary and David, their daughters-in-law Angela and Dee, their son-in-law James, and their much cherished grandchildren Alexander and Celia, Julia, Alice and Claire, Grace, Elizabeth and Jack, and William, Georgia, Tom and Lucy.

Janet was born in London, to James (Jimmy) and Sarah Jane (Sadie) Nicol. She was their second child of five, all girls. The turmoil of WWII sent Sadie and the three children born before the war to the safety of family in New Zealand while Jimmy served with the British Medical Corps in Europe. On lifestyle family property at the top of Clifton Hill – then on the outskirts of Christchurch – Rachel, Janet and Ann enjoyed an idyllic lifestyle amongst extended family until the war ended.

The family reunited in England in 1945. Janet's parents quickly decided Britain at that time was no place to rear children. They set sail for New Zealand and settled in Christchurch. James established a medical practice; the girls finished their primary schooling in Fendalton and their secondary schooling at Rangi Ruru Girls' School.

During these years Margaret, and later Elizabeth (Etta), were born. Holidays were spent at the family bach in the Malborough Sounds – a place where Janet enjoyed such happiness she expressed a wish that her remains be scattered in the vicinity.

After leaving Rangi, Janet trained as a nurse at Christchurch Public Hospital and worked there until she married her childhood sweetheart, Neil. For the following thirty years, Janet juggled mothering with supporting Neil through career moves that took them to Dunedin, Cromwell and Wellington. Most important for this highly motivated woman, Janet found time to complete a degree in Education and Nursing and to pursue her own very successful career in nursing, public health and midwifery – emerging in every field a leader and an educator of her time.

Everyone who knew Janet knows that she was intelligent and articulate; she was as engaged as she was engaging and as interested as she was interesting. She maintained a capacity for rigorous intellectual enquiry that few people half her age could muster, and was one of those rare individuals who did not allow her own ideas and concepts to solidify into immovable objects.

That said, after finishing as a nurse manager at Wellington Women's hospital in 1989, Janet went on to use her extensive professional experience on, among other things, analysing, processing and publishing (in volumes still used today) statistical information for the Council of New Zealand

Educational Research with Hugo Manson. She was the consultant who facilitated the amalgamation of the Hutt Valley Presbyterian and Methodist parishes; a trainer for the Wellington Volunteer Association; actively involved in the Sea of Faith Network; was the family genealogist; and right up until leaving Wellington, a tutor and executive member for Wellington SeniorNet.

Janet's funeral, led by the Rev. Dr. Jim Cunningham, was at Knox Church in Christchurch and was a fitting tribute to a life lived fully.

To colleagues Janet is remembered as a well-educated, articulate woman committed to doing everything to the nth degree – setting the bar high with her conscientious, fair and principled approach to all at which she worked.

To friends she is remembered as an accomplished, multi-talented woman with a strong will, generous heart and an extraordinary willingness to care for others.

To her beloved family Janet is remembered with deep love as a wonderful mother, grandmother, wife, sister, aunt and cousin – there at every turn, for every milestone, grief, birthday, rite of passage, sickness, celebration, school event, significant moment.

Mother Teresa said "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love."

And that is what this exceptional woman did wholeheartedly, in all that she put her hand to, throughout her life.



The quote under Janet's photo was the title of the hymn sung at her funeral: "Give Thanks for Life", words by Shirley Murray, Music by Ralph Vaughan Williams, Tune *Sine Nomine*.

# 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, Sea of Faith 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](http://www.sof.org.nz), assists in setting up Local Groups, and organises an annual Conference.

We have five **Life Members**: Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Noel Cheer, Ian Harris and Fred Marshall. (The late Alan Goss was, for a time, a Life Member).

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Publication deadlines for submitted Newsletter copy for the rest of 2016 are: 21/8/2016, 21/10/2016, 21/12/2016.

**Members may borrow books, CDs, and DVDs** from the Resource Centre which is managed by Suzi Thirlwall phone (07) 578-2775 email [susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz](mailto:susanthirlwall@yahoo.co.nz) Refer to the catalogue on the website at [www.sof.org.nz](http://www.sof.org.nz).

**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.

**Bonus:** If you already receive the paper version, then you can receive the email version in addition, *at no charge*. Send an email requesting that to [pcowley@paradise.net.nz](mailto:pcowley@paradise.net.nz)

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## Reflections on the Conference Theme

# “With or Without God Community in a Post-theistic Age”

In recent times, religious concepts have become increasingly empty and meaningless: sin, grace, forgiveness, salvation. Even the most fundamental concept, God, is under threat. Cosmology has no need of a first cause, psychology no need of a soul, morality no need of a divine command to establish right and wrong. The new atheists attack and deride religion, desiring its abolition.

Your Steering Committee is pleased and proud to have secured for this year's Conference two keynote speakers each with the highest international reputation. Gretta Vosper is a parish minister who has come out as an atheist, standing in solidarity with those who deny the existence of an interventionist God. Michael Benedikt is an architect and author of “God is the Good we Do” in which he argues for evolving and rethinking the concept of God. These speakers are joined by our own Lloyd Geering and by Geoff Troughton who is a senior lecturer in religious studies at Victoria University.

In past times, a shared religious faith and practice have served to build community, linking often very disparate individuals. How will community be fostered in a new world in which traditional religion is collapsing?

*Laurie Chisholm, Chairperson*

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## On The Virgin Birth

*From Laurie Chisholm, Christchurch*

I am grateful to Robin Boom (Newsletter 124) for taking the trouble to respond to my article on the virgin birth, but disappointed that he does not seem to see anything subversive in scripture. He argues 1) that Matthew and Luke believed they were writing about real events, 2) that the differing genealogies show that they didn't collude, 3) that they would have no interest in borrowing ideas about pagan deities, and 4) that Mary might have told Luke the details of the birth. This all sounds to me like a rear-guard action to defend the traditional view.

1) You can't have your cake and eat it too. Jesus was either a son of David (Messiah) or a son of God (virgin birth), he can't be both, at least not if you regard the virgin birth as a "real event." However, the gospel writers were not writing history in our sense. I think it's more like children playing; in play, a child can really be a princess or a mother. The gospel writers saw symbolic significance in what they wrote but didn't separate out the literal and the symbolic.

2) Matthew and Luke may not have 'colluded' but they do have many stories in common, leading scholars to the theory that both wrote from a common source, commonly called Q, as well as from Mark. The differences between the genealogies may speak against collusion, but they also speak against historical accuracy. They were written with a theological purpose.

3) Psalm 104 is an example of similarities between the Old Testament and Egyptian culture – in particular a hymn to the Aten, the sun God. I wouldn't use the word 'stolen', it's just that they share common cultural assumptions. Ancient Israel was not surgically detached from its surrounding cultures. Genesis 3-11 has many themes, such as the great flood, that were widespread in other cultures. You would be astonished at the similarities between the Lucan birth stories and the story of the birth of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing.

4) While it is difficult to disprove this claim, it runs counter to modern scholarship, which undermines the tradition that apostles wrote the gospels. Moreover, form criticism looks carefully to

see whether there are subtle inconsistencies between the different units of the tradition. For example, the angel Gabriel was sent to announce the birth to Mary, but when the shepherds come and explain what the angels had told them, "everyone was astonished" – as if they knew nothing of Gabriel's message. Scholars therefore conclude that these were two separate traditions, later combined.

Robin's conclusion is that belief in the virgin birth comes down to personal faith or disbelief. But whether something in the past happened or not is to be investigated with the methods of the historian: faith or not-faith must not influence the historian's conclusions, which can only be a matter of greater or lesser probability, not of certainty. The traditional claim by generations of Christian apologists, that events in the gospels prove the truth of Christian doctrine, has to be set aside. Rather, we need to begin with the concept that birth stories were a symbolic way of expressing the significance of the adult person.

*From Derek Pringle, Auckland*

In response to Robin Boom's letter on the Virgin Birth [NL124], I am writing from the planet I share with the modern scholars he referred to. Contrary to Robin, I believe that Matthew and Luke, together with other followers of Jesus who were attempting to spread the good news of Jesus, would certainly have had to give a fig about the so-called pagan' deities of the Egyptian, Roman, Persian (and Greek) traditions. For as soon as they had stepped outside the tiny enclave of monotheism that was Israel, they would have found themselves in a polytheistic world which worshipped these deities.

They therefore had the monumental job, among other tasks, of convincing people that Jesus was a god, but not only that, he was the god above all other gods, and therefore greater than their gods. And since the people of those traditions believed that gods were born of virgin goddesses, then to convince them that Jesus was a god, he would also need to have been born of a virgin goddess. So I believe this is how the Virgin birth stories made their way



into the Bible. They are but one example of how traditions and the mythology of that ancient world were absorbed into Christianity.

***From Tom Hall, USA***

Anyone who imagines that Robin Boom's comments on the virgin birth controversy have more or less closed the book on that topic ought to have a look at *Born Divine: The Birth of Jesus and Other Sons of God* (Polebridge Press 2003), by Robert J. Miller, a fellow of the Westar Institute and editor of their magazine *The Fourth R*.

Along with other important insights, Miller offers a carefully reasoned argument that Matthew did not presuppose a virgin birth. While the Greco-Roman Luke probably took the story at face value (similar events were common enough in his cultural tradition), such a claim would likely have posed serious difficulties for one brought up a Jew. For one thing, Matthew may have been sufficiently acquainted with the Hebrew Bible and aware of the difference between the Hebrew words *almah* and *bethula* to recognize that Isaiah 7:14 spoke about a pregnant young woman, and not a virgin. For another, he would surely have been loath to ascribe Jesus' paternity to the One whose divine 'otherness' makes such a physical intervention a blasphemous notion. Accordingly, Matthew's God directs Joseph to marry the mother-to-be and thus become Jesus' legal father without worrying about who the unknown biological parent was.

I think we would do well to see these irreconcilable birth stories as two parables – one written for Gentile Christians with Jesus as a new and improved Caesar, the other portraying him to Jewish converts as a new and improved Moses – and treat them as no more than that. But, of course, no less.

***From Russell Feist, Waikanae***

Robin Boom's letter reminds me of what I might have written 50-60 years ago. How far we travel during our lives! From an understanding of the bible as the infallible word of God to taking it seriously but not literally. From thinking of the gospel writers as historians to understanding them as interpreters within a first century Jewish context and world view. From thinking of God as interventionist and existing outside of nature and the cosmos and setting aside rules of nature to being a non-interventionist spiritual

reality in our experience, however we might then define or express that experience.

For myself, I have found Marcus Borg and John Spong, not to mention our good friend Lloyd, very helpful in bringing some consistency and sense to my understanding of the Bible, the cosmos and faith. I find the product of modern biblical scholarship very helpful.

The challenge for me is to find an articulation of faith which makes sense to the modern mind and embraces what we have learnt and are learning of the world in which we live.

To use God-language, I believe God was supremely present in the person of the normally conceived human we call Jesus and that what we do conveys the essence of what we believe rather than what we say we believe.

I don't want to rubbish what Robin or anyone else believes, but I found his reasoning highly defective and unconvincing.

## **Pondering The God Stuff**

***From Margaret Gwynn***

I enjoyed the opening article in the May Sea of Faith newsletter "God happens in our heads", particularly the part about whether God goes out of existence when the human species does. The article suggests two positions: God continues to exist because God is the Creator of All Things, or God does not continue to exist because God is a human mental construct.

Isn't there a third possibility? One that does not assume that humans have it all worked out.

Quakers talk of "that of God in all things". Not a separate Being, but an energy interpenetrating "the whole vast tapestry of being" in the universe, as Brian Swimme describes it. We shape our ideas about God, certainly, but Godness will continue in all eternity, long after our human thoughts have faded away.

Does this energy have power? Yes, I think so, but not as humans think of power. There is a desire for life and the wellbeing of all, but the energy chooses to be limited by the vessels containing it. That is as close as I can come to finding words for the indescribable.

If I were to use one of Michael Benedikt's diagrams, mine would be the panentheism one -

three circles – humans in the central circle, the universe in the next circle and God in the outermost circle.

***From Elizabeth Knox***

In response to Noel Cheer's challenge, I would like to offer my perspective. After many years of pondering the god stuff, I settled for a rather unsatisfactory non-theist position; however, it left much unanswered, is negative in nature, and brought no real peace. By chance last year at our book club, I discovered Eckhart Tolle, a remarkable contemporary spiritual teacher and author.

In brief, the main theme of his teaching is to show how we human beings can grow in awareness, recognise our essential 'selves' and live with more joy and liberation. Being identified with the mind has in the past created conflict and suffering, and in many parts of the world, continues to do so. Our ability to think conceptually and use language obviously has many benefits when used constructively, but often our thinking works overtime, loses its grounding, and can be very destructive.

For many of us, our minds are often churning over the past or visualizing the future, and we don't realise that the only moment in time that we ever have is the Now. Through the power of Now, we can realise the deeper dimension of our 'selves' where there is no thought, no forms. Here in the deep stillness, there is a silent knowing, the power of life, the source, love, compassion, God... call it what you will, words are just signposts to what is beyond words. The real 'you' is the space, the awareness in which thoughts and emotions happen, so you become the silent witness to them. This gives you choices. Also there is the knowledge that all being and all life are connected – we are not separate from life.

So what about religion? This simple spiritual practice is compatible with religious beliefs or no beliefs. In a sense, religion does not exist outside the consciousness of the people who adhere to their religion, so the question is, what is their state of consciousness? Perhaps Noel Cheer's challenging opening – 'you can't get rid of God' – has more to do with the nature of being human, where the normal state for most people in the past and still in present times, has been to derive their sense of self from their mind conditioning. However, I believe there is a growing trend nowadays to recognising our

common thread of humanity, and more and more people are growing in awareness with practices such as meditation and mindfulness becoming more mainstream.

Eckhart Tolle extends his ideas to suggest that we have reached a stage in our evolution where, not only are we ready, but it is now crucial, that we grow in our understanding of ourselves for the sake of our environment, our health and our societies.

He discusses many issues of modern life, including religion, and draws on many of the great thinkers of the past – Buddha, Jesus, Meister Eckhart to name a few. (His adoption of that name is no coincidence). He is wonderful to listen to – not a snappy orator – but one who speaks from a deep sense of knowing. His talks are widely available for free on YouTube [for example

<https://www.youtube.com/user/EckhartTeachings/videos> ]

and he is the author of "The Power of Now", "A New Earth" and others.

***From Keith Snalam***

Hi Noel – You invited comment about "Whether God happens in our heads or not" so here is my ten cents worth.

First, my definition of God is "The force that created the universe and all within it". The Universe exists, therefore God exists. This thinking is very simplistic but to me it is logical. If the human race were to be wiped out next week God would still exist because he isn't a product of Man's thinking. Ideas of God in Men's heads are the result of speculation and wishful thinking.

The existence of God cannot be proven by science one way or another, the only sure knowledge is personal experience. All religions have accounts of these stories; many have been debunked by science and modern research but to reject all religious teachings because of this is to "throw out the baby with the bath water". A good example of what not to throw out would be "All is vain but kindness".

In conclusion, I must say that I always enjoy reading your very excellent and thought provoking SOF Newsletter.



## BITS AND PIECES

### NEWS FROM DON CUPITT

#### *May I report some bits of news about my doings?*

On Friday 22 July, a family member will drive me ... so that I can join the [UK Sea of Faith] Conference between about 1.30 and 4.30pm and at least greet some old friends.

Peter Armstrong, who was the producer of the 1984 TV series, has begun filming with me again. He has in mind a slightly refurbished and extended 'second edition' of the old series, a project in which the BBC has expressed interest. But if that doesn't happen, Peter's new film will in any case be put up on the internet, and made available to the SOF websites.

Members may not know about a two hour interview with me on my life and thought, which can be found by Googling 'Alan Macfarlane Interviews', or [sms.cam.ac.uk](http://sms.cam.ac.uk). It's part of a Cambridge project to create a record of the University's intellectual life, and is the best thing of its kind that I have done. It prompted Peter Armstrong to work on a new Episode 7 to add to his earlier work.

*Yours ever, Don Cupitt, Cambridge*

### NO SUCH THING AS FREE WILL?

**But we're better off believing in it anyway.**

The author, Stephen Cave, is a philosopher and writer based in Berlin. He is the author of *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization*. The following excerpts come from *The Atlantic*, June 2016 and are also found at

[www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/theres-no-such-thing-as-free-will/480750/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/theres-no-such-thing-as-free-will/480750/)

For centuries, philosophers and theologians have almost unanimously held that civilization as we know it depends on a widespread belief in free will—and that losing this belief could be calamitous.

Today, the assumption of free will runs through every aspect of Western politics, from welfare provision to criminal law. [Not to overlook religion! Ed]

In recent decades, research on the inner workings of the brain has helped to resolve the nature-nurture debate—and has dealt a further blow to the idea of free will.

But there is also agreement in the scientific

community that the firing of neurons determines not just some, or most but all of our thoughts, hopes, memories, and dreams.

Believing that free will is an illusion has been shown to make people less creative, more likely to conform, less willing to learn from their mistakes, and less grateful toward one another. In every regard, it seems, when we embrace determinism, we indulge our dark side.

When people stop believing they are free agents, they stop seeing themselves as blameworthy for their actions.

Nietzsche called free will "a theologians' artifice" that permits us to "judge and punish." And many thinkers have believed ... that institutions of judgment and punishment are necessary if we are to avoid a fall into barbarism

[Sam Harris in his book, *Free Will*] wrote "Compare the response to Hurricane Katrina, with the response to the 9/11 act of terrorism." For many Americans, the men who hijacked those planes are the embodiment of criminals who freely choose to do evil. **But if we give up our notion of free will, then their behavior must be viewed like any other natural phenomenon**—and this, Harris believes, would make us much more rational in our response. "Hatred is toxic," he told me, "and can destabilize individual lives and whole societies. **Losing belief in free will undercuts the rationale for ever hating anyone.**"

No one has caused *himself* [or *herself*]: No one chose his genes or the environment into which he was born. Therefore no one bears ultimate responsibility for who he is and what he does.

But Harris argues that we must accept that life outcomes are determined by disparities in nature and nurture, "so we can take practical measures to remedy misfortune and help everyone to fulfill their potential."

**[Tell me what you think – Ed]**



Common Dreams is an alliance of Australian and New Zealand kindred organisations which promote the study, discussion and implementation of Progressive Christian and other progressive religious streams of thought and action. It organises *Common Dreams* conferences every three years. The *Fourth Common Dreams Conference* will be held in Brisbane 16 – 19 September 2016.

The theme will be *Progressive Spirituality: New Directions*. Eminent international, Australian and New Zealand speakers will explore aspects of contemporary progressive spirituality including indigenous and inter-faith expressions of spirituality.

To find out more, visit <http://www.commondreams.org.au/>

### By Francis Crick

The Astonishing Hypothesis is that 'You', your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll's Alice might have phrased: "You're nothing but a pack of neurons." This hypothesis is so alien to the ideas of most people today that it can truly be called astonishing. (From his book *"The Astonishing Hypothesis"* p. 3)

# Candle in a Dark Room

## A reappraisal of the Psychology of Religion by Edwin Ezlin

*A review by Shirley Dixon of Porirua*

Edwin Ezlin - the pen-name of Brian Lilburn, a long-term member of Sea of Faith – sent a copy of this booklet to the Newsletter Editor. He wrote in a covering letter: "The approach to Christianity in the booklet is esoteric, more along the line of the Gnostics, and 'God' hardly comes into it – the Christ, yes, in a way, but not the man Jesus".

Ezlin sees the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a struggle between people who hold progressive / secular / science based values, and those who hold regressive / conservative values. This leads him to set out to answer the question: How are we to define a positive side to religion?

Ezlin has a declamatory rather than persuasive writing style, and many statements, which are undoubtedly based on his experience and research and honestly held by him, are stated as facts without backing evidence being provided. This is not necessarily a negative thing as such evidence would not only hold up his narrative, but require a book-length publication rather than a booklet.

This booklet is a deliberation and a reflection on ideas about: the continuation of superstitious, supernaturalist beliefs alongside 'modern', scientific ideas; the power of the unconscious mind; the relationship between our conscious and unconscious mind; the use and interpretation of symbols in the development of a positive power of religion. And, in the final of the five sections of his booklet, Ezlin asks: Can a greater understanding of (religious) symbols help us to exorcise the demons that are causing havoc by taking root in the unconscious of many?

The author presents a personal interpretation of some traditional religious symbols, including the Buddhist wheel of life, the Chinese yin and yang, and the Christian cross. To give some idea of the originality of his ideas, I quote from his booklet:

"The charms of religious symbolism empower [the light of] our candle-flame to set fire to the demons and burn them up if they cannot be re-formed as harmless sprites or protectors of our purist aspirations toward making the best of ourselves."

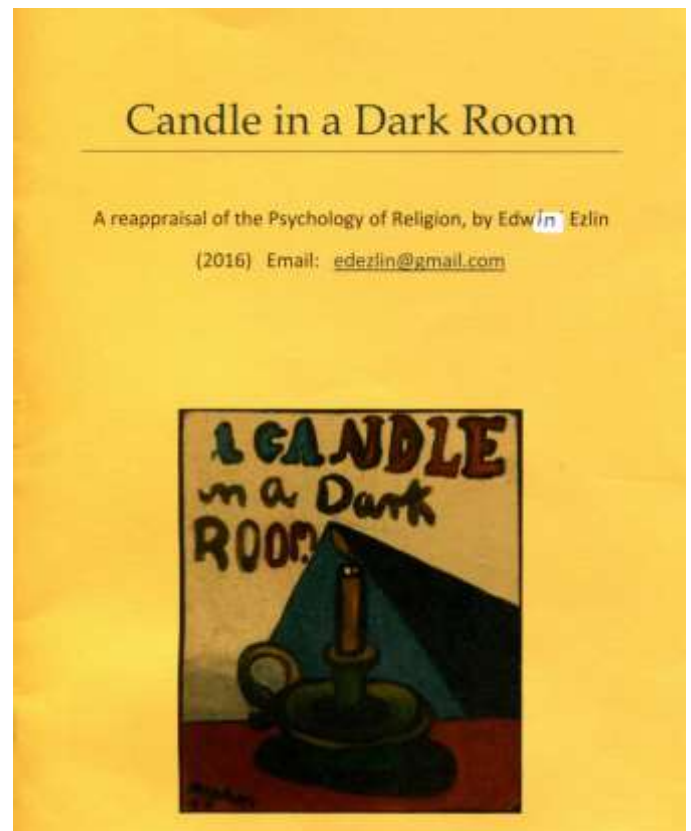
And: "Because the star is a symbol of teaching, it is natural enough to link it to the sun, as a star, to

Muhammad as the teacher of 'messages' from the god-like Sun in its supremacy over earthly time and space."

And, having mentioned the Hindu 'trinity of Heavenly Powers' (Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver Shiva the Destroyer) Ezlin continues: "Compare them to the three-headed god of orthodox Christianity, almost certainly inspired by the Hindu trinity".

Many of Ezlin's interpretations were, for this reviewer, completely new. However, when working out one's own ideas, being confronted with different understandings makes one re-think, re-consider and re-analyse. And that is always worthwhile.

If you are interested in obtaining a copy of this booklet, contact the author at: [edezlin@gmail.com](mailto:edezlin@gmail.com)



### Musing

**As a rigid skeleton gives form to the body so does a  
belief system give form to the mind –  
a skeleton of the mind.**

*Daniel Phillips, Invercargill*



# ***The Sea of Faith Annual Conference Venue***

## ***Why Can We No Longer Have Multiple Locations Around NZ For Our Conference?***

The current Steering Committee has been addressing this question during the term of this Steering Committee. It will continue to do so during the next term to finalise the discussion.

The question of using only one centre instead of moving around has been raised on and off for some years. The current committee has decided to address this matter and to have it resolved in the near future.

As a Steering Committee member who has been involved in a number of Conferences; has chaired the New Zealand SoF; has been on the SoF Steering Committee for 2.2 terms and am currently Treasurer, I am in support of the move to one centre. I have attempted to be unbiased in this article; what follows is not designed to persuade the reader one way or another. It simply sets out the problems encountered over some years and provides some possible answers the questions which I believe members will have.

At recent Conferences we have analysed the responses of members by means of end-of-Conference questionnaires. In addition some years ago an in-depth questionnaire was carried out by the late Ralph Pannett.

We believe that many concerns raised by members may be addressed by using a single location.

### **VENUES**

Venues at a 'fair/reasonable' price with reasonable accommodation are hard to find.

In the past, SoF has utilised schools with accommodation and suitable features for the annual Conference.

These were mainly boarding schools that provided a Hall for the meeting; a couple of breakout rooms; reasonable accommodation (usually dorms and or single rooms along a corridor); normally shower/toilet facilities per floor (often male and female were on different floors); acceptable inhouse meals and some limited technical equipment. They were at a lower cost than other similar options and considerably cheaper than Hotel/Motel type venues. The only issue was that they had to be used in school holidays and as our Conferences spanned a weekend, invariably they had to be the first weekend.

Recently more difficulties have emerged:

- These types of location are becoming harder to find.
- They are becoming more expensive – at least as expensive as average motel/hotel accommodation.
- The facilities are becoming less acceptable to our members. Many members want completely separate rooms; less intrusion by others in the toilet/bathroom facilities; don't want to (or are unable to) move floors on a regular basis for toilet facilities; are considerably less mobile– and more of us are joining this group each year.
- The food is often less acceptable than previously. Many of our members are on some form of restricted food or dietary regime (which is less able to be provided easily at an acceptable cost).

- The technical equipment (mostly audio/visual) is either not as good as we currently require, or we have to pay a significant amount to use it or bring a technician in to use it. We have had ongoing problems with recordings not working and/or other technical failures.

So finding a good venue that provides better value for money and overcomes these problems is very important to a successful conference.

### **LOCAL SUPPORT**

**Lack of Sea of Faith support persons in centres selected.**

- Past practice has been that the Steering Committee selected a centre in which to hold the Conference. Local volunteers came forward and an Arrangements Committee was set up.
- The Chair of the Arrangements Committee was then an *ex officio* member of the Steering Committee.
- The Arrangements Committee handled its expenses by one of two means – either by way of a 'float' or by sending accounts to the Steering Committee Treasurer. As the later was generally cumbersome (especially when funds were needed quickly) there was a move to the 'float' system.
- In most cases the Arrangements Committee was made up of 5+ people and they were able to call on more people for the duration of the Conference (up to 10 people +/-).
- Most people involved with the Conferences were aged 60+ (average age was probably nearer 70).

**More recent difficulties.**

- The Steering Committee needs to be very careful as to which centres it selects for Conferences. We are regularly being informed by members of local groups, even in the main centres, that they are no longer able to be involved in running a Conference because they are too old; exhausted from previous ones; members have died; they cannot get the support numbers to help them (for the reasons given above).
- In the case of smaller towns, we have more Local Groups becoming defunct and losing people able to assist.
- NOTE: The trends mentioned above are not evident in the national membership which, for many years, has been stable. As we lose members others become involved. It seems to me that newer members are already "of advanced years" when they find us. It has been a recurrent concern ever since we started that we are not getting a lot of 'young' people joining up. Aging members are generally more infirm than before. (One issue here is that on a nationwide basis, not just SoF, as people live longer they are becoming more infirm as they do so.)

### **FINANCIAL**

**NOTE: the comments below are NOT a reflection on any group or individual. I am NOT suggesting any nefarious**

***use of funds. They are simply facts that have arisen from the variety of processes that have been used.***

- Over the years many Conferences have encountered financial difficulties.
- It is not uncommon for situations to arise where funds haven't been properly accounted for.
- A lot of Arrangements Committees set up their own local method of accounting for the funds that go through them. Spreadsheets and other accounting processes are not familiar to many people.
- Members of Arrangements Committees have sometimes spent money while forgetting that they need to get receipts. Receipts get lost as they go through various hands. Cash causes difficulties and credit/debit cards are rarely used for such a short time.
- Though all major payments are made via the national Treasurer and, while the funds individually are not large, we have had instances of reasonable sums not being able to be properly accounted for.

## CONFERENCE TRAVEL COSTS

- In the past, travel to Conference had to be in the School Holidays as the Conference venues were most available then.
- Members travel in a variety of ways. Some extend the Conference travel into other uses. Unlike a commercial conference, which would centrally book flights and other transport, we cannot get a bulk-booking financial benefit. Our members book individually with several coming from the same place on different flights over a day or more.
- The result of the above is annually increasing costs.

## OTHER ISSUES

- Getting speakers to places other than the main centres can be very difficult.
- Equalising **total** costs for Conference attendees. If future conferences are held in only one or two centres then a form of cost equalisation will be necessary. This is currently a topic to be resolved by your committee to allow fairness for all.
- Hotel/Motel venues are very difficult. The accommodation component can be expensive and normally requires the booking of a "Conference Centre" as an addition and usually at a higher cost. They mostly don't have good separate facilities for meals. Either you eat breakfast and lunch in the same place as other users of the place or there is a higher charge for setting up a separate place. In addition, many of these places can't accommodate 100+/- people for a dinner and so need to set up another room at a higher cost.

## WHY ONE PERMANENT LOCATION?

### More importantly – Why Wellington?

1. The Steering Committee would view another centre as an addition (two centres on rotation, or even instead of Wellington e.g. Auckland) if the same overall cost savings can be achieved, venue established, and infrastructure (especially members available to assist) confirmed that the Steering Committee believes Wellington can provide.

2. The Steering committee thinks that the venue booked for 2016 Conference addresses most of the issues raised in the above analysis. We have chosen the 'Silverstream Retreat' approximately mid-way between Lower Hutt and Upper Hutt in the Greater Wellington area.
  - The cost of this venue is acceptable and bookings in advance should lower that cost.
  - The facilities are good. Much more acceptable to our older members.
  - The technical equipment is very good and can be backed up by reliable technicians who are known to the Permanent Conference Committee.
  - We will be able to run overseas communications links. This will allow us access to a greater variety of speakers who either don't like travelling; their workload precludes a week or more absence; the cost of getting them to NZ is significant; the fact that the northern hemisphere has summer when we have winter.
  - We will know more about food quality when we hold the Conference. On the surface it looks good value for money.
  - We can have a Conference outside of school holidays thereby lowering the travel costs and enhancing the chance of 'getting a seat' when members want to travel.
3. The Steering Committee thinks that Wellington provides strong 'on the ground' volunteer support.
  - There are two Sea of Faith groups in Wellington plus an Ephesus group with considerable membership overlap.
  - There are very active members in the Wellington region.
4. The Steering Committee intends that there will be very tight control on Conference finances.
  - The finances will be directly controlled by the Steering Committee Treasurer.
  - Finances will form part of the overall budget rather than be separated as at present. This will make it much clearer for the Steering Committee and members generally to see the effects on our overall finances.
5. The Steering Committee proposes having a Permanent Conference Committee (PCC) of which the Steering Committee Treasurer will be part.
  - This PCC will manage, at the detail level, each future conference. Members of the PCC don't **all** have to be from Wellington although, as a working committee, some do need to be from Wellington as they will be the 'on the ground' members. And of course the National Treasurer could be from anywhere in NZ.
  - The Steering Committee will, (as in the past), arrange the Conference theme and speakers. They will also settle dates.
  - The PCC will take instructions from the Steering Committee and then take over the running of the Conference as Arrangements Committees in the past have done.

## SUMMARY

The Steering Committee has decided to use the 2016 Conference as a test bed for a permanent location. This Conference will necessitate the use of every aspect discussed above, and more. This venue is where, at present and subject to member votes, we would plan to hold future Conferences.

Attendees at the 2016 Conference will be asked to fill out a more detailed questionnaire as to the acceptability of the venue.

To give the Steering Committee some planning space we have determined that the 2017 Conference will be held at the same venue as this year's. Qualifying members of SoF (those with paid-up memberships or Life memberships) will be asked to vote on having the Conference in Wellington every year at the same venue or continuing rotating the Conference around centres.

Once that vote is finalised we will either have the one location operational or return to rotating the venue. We plan that this vote will take place late 2016 by Newsletter insert to be returned to the Steering Committee.

I hope this clarifies this issue with you all and, as always, the Editor and the Steering Committee welcome comments, ideas and options.

**Norm Ely, Treasurer**

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## PROSPERITY GOSPEL

**Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption** was a legally recognized church in the United States, established by comedian and satirist John Oliver. The apparent purpose for creating the church was to expose and ridicule televangelists like Robert Tilton and Creflo Dollar who preach the 'prosperity gospel' as a way to defraud victims of their money, and to bring greater attention to the issue of tax-exempt status for churches and charities with little oversight by the government.

Oliver announced the formation of his church on August 16, 2015, in a twenty-minute-long segment on his show **Last Week Tonight**. See

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y1xJAVZxXg>

John Oliver attacked both the televangelists and the inadequate definitions provided by the US Internal Revenue Service.

While Oliver made it clear that the church preferred monetary donations ('seed money'), some supporters sent actual bags of seeds. [An example of literalizing a metaphor! Ed]

On September 13, 2015, Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption was shut down by Oliver.

Upon the church's dissolution, Oliver announced that the tens of thousands of dollars received to date would be donated to Doctors Without Borders, and mockingly said that "if you want to send money to a fake church, send it to Scientology."

The final showing of this 'church' can be viewed here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eT3NRkIII3E>

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## IN THE MELTING POT JESUS?/CHRIST?/GOD?/CHURCH?

**Robin Myers** was the star turn at the recent (May 6–8) *Progressive Spirituality Conference* in Napier. That's hardly surprising because he excels in what he says in a book or on a platform. This is what you can glean from just looking at the covers of his book *Saving Jesus from the Church*.

- There is an antipathy between Jesus and the Church. The duct tape across his mouth says a lot.
- There is a crucial distinction between Christ and Jesus – Christ is *worshiped*, Jesus is *followed*. The book subtitle "How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus" says it all.
- His book attracted a positive comment from Archbishop Tutu.



The back cover picks up on the praise:

### From One of Americas Leading Pastors, a Bold Call to Restore Christianity's True Mission: Following Jesus

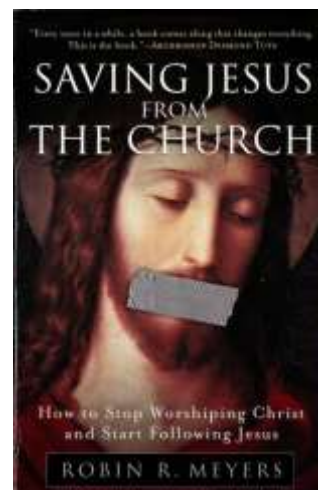
The marriage of bad theology and hypocritical behavior by the church has eroded our spiritual lives. Taking the best of biblical scholarship, Meyers recasts core Christian concepts in an effort to save Christianity from its obsession with personal salvation. Not a plea to try something brand new, but rather the recovery of something very old, *Saving Jesus from the Church* shows us what it means to follow Jesus' teachings today.

For over twenty years, Robin Myers has been pastor of Mayflower Congregational, an "unapologetically Christian, unapologetically liberal" church. He is a professor in the philosophy department at Oklahoma City University, a syndicated columnist, and an award-winning commentator for National Public Radio. Meyers has appeared on *Dateline NBC*, the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, and *ABC World News*, and writes regularly for *The Christian Century*. Visit the author online at [www.mayflowerucc.org](http://www.mayflowerucc.org).

**Having read the covers, devour the interior text – its very good!**

At the end Robin acknowledges the worth of The Jesus Seminar: "This book would not have been possible without the invitation by Dennis Smith, professor of New Testament at my alma mater, Phillips Theological Seminary, to join the famous (or infamous) Jesus Seminar. It has been in the midst of such remarkable and fearless biblical scholars that I have found new ways to uncover, correct, and communicate the Good News. I hope this book helps to take the light of the Westar Institute out from under the bushel basket of animosity toward organized religion, and lets it shine for beleaguered pastors everywhere".

*Noel Cheer, Editor*





# LAURIE'S LAST WORD FOR JULY 2016

**People are familiar with All Saints Day.** 'Saints' originally meant all those who belonged to the church but later came to mean those of special sanctity who are presumed to have arrived in heaven. They are the goody two-shoes, the exceptionally virtuous and especially religious, the ones who unquestioningly accept the truth of the doctrine handed down from the apostles and who conform to the expectations of the institution.

**All Heretics Day** is less well known, but I became an enthusiast from the moment I heard of it. At last, an opportunity to celebrate the contrarians, the rebels, the nonconformists, the doubters, the subversive thinkers who dared to stand out against the crowd. We evidently have the Unitarian Universalists to thank for this innovation which doesn't seem to have a fixed date but can be celebrated on the first weekend in April. All Heretics Day is generally marked by inviting a speaker to give a public lecture. In Christchurch, past 'heretics' have included Lloyd Geering, Juliet Batton (who argues for realigning our celebrations to the seasons in nature), Doug Sellman (you can enjoy life without getting drunk) and Deborah and Roger Fouts (who countered the assumption that humans are innately superior to animals).

Missing from such 'heretics' are those who present a peculiarly attractive but dangerous distortion of Christian truth. But who would count as a heretic in this sense? Lloyd Geering is often thought of as a heretic, but doesn't really count as he is more of an Enlightenment thinker, a rational re-thinker of or non-believer in traditional Christian thinking. Teilhard de Chardin might qualify, especially if you accept the Church's view that he glosses over the reality of evil and that his synthesis of evolution and Christian teaching is unrealistically optimistic. German Christians such as Bishop Ludwig Muller, who propagated a Nazified version of Christianity, would be a good, if distasteful and discredited candidate. The best candidate I can think of is Marcion, one of the most well-known of the 'heretics' in the early church.

Marcion had a very definite view of Christianity's gospel. When his views did not find acceptance in his congregation, he formed a church of his own and this quickly spread throughout the Roman Empire; Marcion evidently had significant organisational skills. He was enough of a threat that almost all the early church fathers have written against him. What we regard as orthodox Christianity did not exist at the time, but was formed at least in part as a reaction against Marcion's views.

For Marcion, God is all goodness and love, with no judgement, condemnation or punishment. This is Jesus' God, who leaves the 99 and goes after the one sheep that is unable to make it back to the fold unaided, who welcomes the returning prodigal son, even though he has

frittered away the family inheritance and been thoroughly irresponsible, who forgives an unimaginable debt on the assumption that we too forgive our debtors. So far, so good, but Marcion concluded that Jesus' God cannot be the same God as is talked about in the Tanakh ('Old Testament', for Christians). Accordingly, there must be two gods: the God of the Old Testament (creator, law-giver and judge) and the God of love, which Jesus proclaimed and who was previously unknown (though perhaps suspected by the Areopagites, who erected a statue to 'an unknown god'). This is an understandable interpretation of St Paul, who opposed law and gospel, commandment and grace, faith and works, but surely a very radical step considering that Judaism was resolutely monotheistic.

So Marcion rejected all of Hebrew scripture, and recognised only some Pauline epistles and the gospel of Luke, suitably edited. Like the gnostics, he tended to view this world as essentially evil and inclined towards a dualism of matter and spirit, without turning this into a rigid dogma. Marcion absolutely rejected any allegorical interpretation of scripture, which makes him attractive to us moderns. The great liberal theologian and church historian, Adolf von Harnack, was fascinated by Marcion and said it was through an interest in Marcion that he found his way into the development of doctrine in the early church. He wrote a monograph on Marcion with the title "The Gospel of the Alien God" (the second edition is 758 pages!) and a massive two-volume "History of Dogma". No-one has provided a more sympathetic portrayal of Marcion before or since.

So there, in brief, is a heretic with an attractive, but one-sided message. He is not a doctrinal thinker and not simply a questioner and doubter. Rather, he is a deeply religious character who has been greatly impressed by the message of Jesus that God is only good, only forgiving, only love. All the passages of judgement and condemnation, which so raise the ire of Richard Dawkins, are denied the status of scripture. And doesn't today's psychotherapy work on the same basic assumption? It works by understanding, not by passing judgement, by trusting that we are basically good and that 'unconditional positive regard' is the right attitude to take.

**Laurie Chisholm,  
Chairperson 2015-2016**



Excerpt from Harnack on Marcion:

<http://www.gnosis.org/library/marcion/Harnack.html>

Review of Harnack's Gospel of the Alien God:

[http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/reviews/harnack\\_alien\\_god.htm](http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/reviews/harnack_alien_god.htm)