

We Start With...

A two minute period of silence - a moment of peace.

Our Last Meeting

Our September meeting fell on Ian Bartlett's 90th birthday, which we celebrated in the usual ways. We are very proud of him (and of Robin Smith, also a nonagenarian), and honoured to have him come to our meetings. This day, however, after enjoying some chocolate cake he took off for another meeting (or another celebration?)

Alan Jackson took us through the matter of Freedom of Speech – how much do we have (and how that has changed extensively in our lifetimes), and how much should we have. He had selected a wide range of knotty questions for us to discuss, and we realized this was an important, but not an easy, issue. Thank you Alan.

Gretchen

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Next Meeting

'A life on the heaving sea, A home on the bounding wave!'

Motion and emotion on the Sea of Faith

It's 25 years since the '*Sea of Faith*' started in New Zealand. I've only been involved for about half that time, but I owe much to its exploration of 'religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint'. That is the formal aim of the Network which has been so successful in analysing religion from such a

perspective. But sometimes I wonder if *Sea of Faith* has concentrated too much on the thinking aspects of religion and downplayed the role of feelings.

For that reason, I prefer the simpler, more generalised aim expressed by our Dunedin group. '**We are interested in openly exploring ways of understanding religious faith in an increasingly secular world.**' Even so, it's hard to avoid an innate tendency for groups set up for study purposes to dwell on the intellectual contents of the subject area at the expense of the emotional elements.

How Does it Feel?

Discussion led by

David Kitchingman

Thursday, 26th OCTOBER

**St John's Church Hall,
Cnr Wright Street
& Highgate**

Tea and Coffee
will be available from 5.30pm

**The programme will start at
6.00pm**

Contribution - \$5

The Odd Couple

At our next meeting I will try to address this perceived imbalance. I'll share some of the feelings I've experienced in my own journey. I'll invite you to do likewise, whether you've had a somewhat similar journey to mine, or even if it's been very different. I would like to focus, not so much on the rational analysis of what was happening, as on the emotional impact at various stages in our lives.

I've always found the origin of the *Sea of Faith's* name too cerebral for my liking. I really love the 'sea' metaphor, but Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' poem rather limits its impact to a pebbled shoreline left by faith's receding tide. I'm more attuned to another 19th century poem (by Epes Sargent), which comes nearer to a feeling many of us have of being all at sea. '*A Life on the ocean wave, a home on the rolling deep*' or the poem's final couplet (which I've chosen as the title for our meeting) is more moving for me as a metaphor for the *Sea of Faith* experience.

So, for a change, let's not try too hard to put on our thinking caps. Rather, let's restore what over time may have almost become a memory lapse. Let's concentrate on the emotional content, rather than the validity of the experience. Our focus will be on: '***How did, how does it feel?***' Not whether it was or is right or wrong. After all, religion is about the heart and the soul, as much as the mind. Exploring it from a 'human-oriented standpoint' requires a sensitivity to the total experience, whether it be positive or negative.

We'll traverse a lot of ground or rather cross a vast expanse of sea, starting with memories of our first exposure to faith. We may be able to recall periods of plain sailing, or even a shipwreck perhaps, in the course of the journey. Then we can rate whatever emotional effect faith may now be having in our lives. Finally, we'll try to estimate the effect it might offer future generations, emotionally as well as rationally.

David Kitchingman

Religion gives a complete description of the world, and offers us a well-defined contract with pre-determined goals. 'God exists. He told us to behave in certain ways. If you obey God, you'll be admitted to heaven. If you disobey Him, you'll burn in hell.' The very clarity of this deal allows society to define common norms and values that regulate human behaviour.

Spiritual journeys are nothing like that. They usually take people in mysterious ways towards unknown destinations. The quest usually begins with some big question, such as who am I? What is the meaning of life? What is good? Whereas most people just accept the ready-made answers provided by the powers that be, spiritual seekers are not so easily satisfied. They are determined to follow the big question wherever it leads, -and not just to places they know well or wish to visit. Thus for most people, academic studies are a deal rather than a spiritual journey, because they take us to a predetermined goal approved by our elders, governments and banks. 'I'll study for three years, pass the exams, get my BA certificate and secure a well-paid job.' Academic studies might be transformed into a spiritual journey if the big questions you encounter on the way deflect you towards unexpected destinations, of which you could hardly even conceive at first. For example, a student might begin to study economics in order to secure a job on Wall Street. However, if what she learns somehow induces her to end up in a Hindu ashram or helping HIV patients in Zimbabwe, then we could call that a spiritual journey.

Noah Yuval Harari

Homo Deus p214-215

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