

Issue 102 –October 2004

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Next Meeting – 21 November 2004

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Meetings:

Dialogue – Third Sunday of the month

Harding – First Saturday of the month

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Editor's Note, This issue is mainly about my recent dealings with the sea of Faith in preparation for and in response to the first Australian Sea of Faith Conference which was held at Wollaston College, Perth in September. Carien McGuin was another Nowletter reader present at the conference and her commentary is also included in this issue.

Our Harding meetings have taken the form of participants volunteering to talk about their particular interests and how they relate them to the Harding message. This month Shane Keher took us through a morning session in which he introduced us to and/or reminded us of Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta – interspersing Harding experiments with the key experiential exercises of these two teachers. I've included the Harding introduction to the book The Essential Teachings of Ramana Maharshi in this issue.

Andrew Cohen will be in Sydney on the 12th, 13th and 14th of November, 2004. Information about his Australian programme and his message can be found on the web sites www.andrewcohen.org and www.wie.org. Please call Michael on 02 4268 1746, Jane on 041 571 3567 or Alex on 041 864 6159 for information about the Sydney events or, for the Perth events, Andra on 08 9335 9705 or Imants on 0438 359 705.

Regrettably, Andrew's visit coincides with my involvement in the annual Krishnamurti gathering at Springbrook from 10 to 17 November. If anyone can provide feedback by way of a report on the Cohen meetings for the December Nowletter please let me know. For details of the Krishnamurti Gathering see page 13.

The November Nowletter will be another single-issue edition carrying an essay by a Victorian reader, David Allan, entitled *War and Peace and War and Peace*.

The Nowletter appears between 10 and 12 times every year and is a vehicle for news and views about awakening to what is really going on. Contributions from readers are considered the most valuable content so please think about letting me have your thoughts, experiences, discoveries and any responses to what you read here.

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Don Cupitt and the Sea of Faith. (background notes from Alan Mann)

I set out to find out about the Sea of Faith when I heard Stephen Batchelor, author of *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, being interviewed somewhere in NZ where he was attending a Sea of Faith conference a couple of years ago. I hoped his presence at that conference signalled the appearance of a Christianity without beliefs, arriving under the banner of the Sea of Faith. This is a summary of what I made of my limited reading of Don Cupitt's writings before my trip to Perth and the Sea of Faith gathering at which he was the keynote speaker.

Don Cupitt is the founder of the movement and has written a series of books which chart the development of his thinking from 1967 to the present. Fortunately, there is a fairly recent book by Nigel Leaves which summarises these publications; including a note on every book and a commentary on the thought and criticism covered in the various books. I say fortunately because reading every book is not to be recommended as they appear at the rate of up to two per annum and represent a record of Cupitt's progressive, ever-changing views about what he is offering; rather like a spiritual fashion parade where every year we can view the latest Cupitt Collection.

Leaves makes an interesting observation on (page 41):

However, we should not forget Cupitt's radical agenda, according to which nothing (not even language) is to be guaranteed ontological primacy forever. In 1998 *The Revelation of Being* will require language to cede an equal share of the stage to "Man" and "Being." To be sure, this anticipates yet another shift in Cupitt's thinking, but it also reveals the inherent danger of trying to force "closure" upon his ideas and of forgetting to ask, "Of which Cupitt are you speaking?"

Which is all very well, and not unlike our usual approach to Dialogue, but it presents some difficulty when trying to get at the essence of his message. This, he argues, is the only valid approach in a post, post-modern environment. Consequently, it is difficult to grasp what is on offer by reading even the latest volume off the press. It is very much a question of what the reader makes of both the process and the content. Cupitt makes the following statements in the foreword to the Leaves book:

"It is still true, though, that in Britain I have been in deep trouble for twenty-five years, and the chief problem has been my incorrigible rationalism. (After all, nobody in British religion ever got into trouble for being irrational, which is normal, and is expected.) In Britain there are two views about religious truth: one is that we don't need ever to question it, because it is known already, and in full (to my denomination, you will understand). The other view is that all religion is simply irrational, and there is no need ever to give the subject any serious thought. These two views are politically entirely acceptable, because neither of them threatens to change anything. Everyone can remain in their present position, and nobody needs to do any thinking at all.

My own view, however, is awkward for everybody. It is that the modern critical study of religion has put it beyond doubt that religion everywhere is just a human creation, and as such remains very important to us, even after philosophical and historical criticism have demolished all our received religious beliefs. To get ourselves into a better position, we need a lot of hard thinking and readiness to accept both personal and institutional change. This will not be easy, but the rewards will be proportionately great; and surely every human being before he or she dies would wish to make some personal effort to reach a considered view on the great questions of life? What are we, what is our world, what can we know, how should we live, what is the best we can hope for? - It's not crazy to be preoccupied with questions like these, and to pursue them determinedly ... is it? Unfortunately, in Britain too much honesty in pursuing such questions can be seen as deeply threatening by many people and by many established interests that are still committed to traditional answers to them."

My greatest difficulty in coming to terms with Cupitt's thought is his belief in language. Leaves explains Cupitt's procedure as Cartesian, he doubts everything until he comes to that which cannot be doubted and that turns out to be – language. Throughout the book there are recurring references to the primacy of language, to the point that a reader begins to wonder whether Belief in God has been replaced by Belief in Language as the source and all-encompassing origin.

This has spawned a dogmatism comparable to anything that exists within the church that Cupitt claims he is hoping to reform or leave behind. Here is an example from a review of his Don Cupitt's book *Mysticism after Modernity* written by David Boulton for the Spring 1998 issue of *Sea of Faith* magazine.

Don Cupitt starts where you'd expect him to start: by reminding us that spirituality and religious experience and mysticism are words, little pieces of language which have grown and developed out of other bits of

language. It helps to find out when these terms were first used, and to figure out what they were supposed to refer to. We are, of course, reminded that what-they-are-supposed-to-refer-to is other words: the notion of non-linguistic experience or non-verbal thought has been so comprehensively demolished in the last thirty years that we can only revisit the territory by climbing on board H.G. Wells's time machine and engaging reverse gear.

Don turns to The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (1958) and looks up "mysticism", where he finds 37 mystics listed. The New Columbia Encyclopaedia (1975 edition) lists 50. What do they have in common? A conventional "modern" answer might be that all of them - Eckhart, John of the Cross, Therese of Lisieux, Julian of Norwich and so on - had some special gift for effing the ineffable, for describing some direct experience of "God" or "Beyond" or "Other". They penetrated beyond language, reached behind and beyond the world of words. But how could we ever have believed such self-evident nonsense? "The notion that there are or can be, either in mystical rapture or after death, extra-linguistic psychological states or experiences that verify beliefs about God will not bear scrutiny. To think it, we'd have to 'put it into words', which would drag it down into language... We cannot think ourselves clear of language. Only language can turn an event into an experience of something."

Yes, but what about the experience of no-thing? I have quoted this at length as it reflects what I have understood of Cupitt's extraordinary devotion to language and underlines my objections to what I feel is otherwise a worthwhile enterprise.

The reduction of the mystics to post-modern 'wordsmiths' suggests I am dealing with thinkers rather than seers. I sense that in Cupitt we have a brilliant intellectual who hasn't actually tasted what the mystics are pointing to. (This, as I discovered later is not the case) He seems to be admitting only what Douglas Harding calls third person science and is oblivious to the first person perspective. I found that surprising as there are many references to Buddhist influences in his writing.

Leaving aside his commitment to language, I haven't found anything in my Cupitt readings which isn't expressed by Traherne. I feel that, in addition to spending the last forty years introducing continental philosophy into the picture, he might well have added back a few of the neglected treasures of the Anglican tradition. On the positive side he talks, amongst many other things, of Solar Ethics and Kingdom Theology.

Solar ethics is based on the notion that we should live like the sun which gives life to our solar system whilst it is dying. "We should not be anxious or cautious but burn brightly in recklessness and extravagance". Kingdom Theology is compared in this table with what it replaces:

<i>Ecclesiastical Theology</i>	<i>Kingdom Theology</i>
world to come	here and now
God is transcendent	God is immanent
mediated, by priests/scriptures	immediate/intuitive
credal and dogmatic	visionary
hierarchical	egalitarian
one Tradition/Canon	global
mysterious	explicit
discord	one equal music
sacred versus profane	all on same level

The right hand option is everyday fare to many Nowletter readers. Much of Cupitt's enthusiastic endorsement is of products for which we share his enthusiasm but wonder why he thinks he is offering something new. The realist God he is disposing of went many years ago and much of his energy seems to have been about flogging that very dead horse. In fairness, I suppose that is because the Anglican Church of which he remains a member is still to a large extent hanging on to that as the foundational belief.

Leaves writes: "Cupitt's main concern is to write *after* Heidegger, who supervening Nietzsche's "death of God," attempted to create a new vision of the human condition - one that recognized the loss of realism, metaphysic, and transcendence without dissolving into the nihilism that entrapped Nietzsche. This was exemplified in Heidegger's famous statement that "*we are too late for the gods and too early for Being. Being's poem, just begun is man.*" I thought that a marvellous quote but I think we might, in fact, be just in time for being as I hope to demonstrate in future Nowletters.

It strikes me that Cupitt is aiming for the wrong target. He is trying to establish a new belief system founded on post-modernist thought and whatever turns up as a result of it rather than getting beyond belief altogether. Perhaps he would say that we have now done with believing and are finally ready for 'Seeing"! The Sea of Seers might be the new vision! I made the following notes at the Sea of Faith Conference in Perth.

Alan Mann

Solar Living and Kingdom Theology

(The following are extracts from Don Cupitt's keynote talks: What's Happening to Religion and The Return of the Great Questions to the Sea of Faith in Australia Conference in Perth – September 2004. The aim of this note is to present the two key elements of Cupitt's thinking in a two-page summary and in his own words).

Background

In the address What's Happening to Religion Cupitt identifies, defines and discusses the three most conspicuous forms of religion as heritage religion, fundamentalist religion and liberal religion. He concludes by dismissing them as inadequate:

Such are the three most conspicuous kinds of religion that survive today; and they are all horrible. Nowhere is religion in a healthy and settled relationship with modernity. Heritage religion is dead, liberal religion is weak and fading fast, and fundamentalist religion is irrational and morally detestable. Frankly, I can't stand any of them, and it is against this unhappy background that I have over the years so often asked what religion can be for us today, and have tried to reinvent it. How am I to find a form of religion that I personally can follow without constantly feeling acutely embarrassed and uncomfortable?.....

.....It is in this context that Kant introduces his phrase 'the autonomy of ethics', and I can now try to explain the idea. In our childhood morality was at first taught to us with the backing of sanctions. We were rewarded for keeping the rules, and punished for breaking them. In effect, this early morality was imposed and enforced by Authority: it was a matter of law and prudence. But as we grew up we gradually began to see the point of morality, and to internalize its demands. The sanctions become less important, and eventually fall away, as we learn that the basic principles of morality deserved to be adopted and followed by us just for their own sakes. The sanctions are redundant. And when we understand that morality doesn't need any external justification - in fact, is better without it - then our own morality has become autonomous; whereas morality imposed by an external authority and backed by sanctions is 'heteronomous'. So there it is: in our childhood morality was at first imposed upon us by parental authority, and it was prudent to do as you were told. But we only reach moral maturity when our morality has become fully our own, and we freely choose to do the right thing just because it is right. No external authority is needed either to lay the Law down, or to enforce it. True morality is moral living that has become fully autonomous, rational, and freely chosen. In politics the same arguments lead to liberal democracy: free people are people who choose their own government and its policies. That is 'freedom under the law'. We made the law and gave it its authority over us.

Now, my suggestion in 1979 was that I would use similar arguments to try to establish 'the autonomy of religion'. Our usual ideas about true religion are highly heteronomous: religion is the worship of a God who is all-powerful and all-knowing who has himself revealed all the principles of true religion to us, including the Creed, the path to salvation, ethics and right worship. If we follow the ways of true religion God will give us a heavenly reward, but if we rebel against God and stray from the right path then God will sentence us to eternal punishment in Hell. Thus God has graciously given us the true religion to live by, and the strongest-possible incentives for following it. Clear enough, but if we apply to this case the arguments for ethical autonomy we are bound to conclude that our practice of religion is purer and more disinterested if it is not driven by the hope of Heaven and the fear of Hell. More than that, I quickly concluded that if we are ever to reach a fully-mature and autonomous spirituality, our practice of religion must become independent of any external justification or enforcement. And that means giving up all realist ideas of God, of religious truth, and of what we are doing in prayer and worship. I was thus coming to the view that religious attitudes, beliefs and practices could be, and should be, adopted, cultivated, and pursued just for their own sakes, as intrinsically good, and good for us. The religious life was simply the good life. As such it need not depend upon belief in doctrines about a very powerful person who imposes true religion upon us with terrifying threats: it may simply be chosen.

Solar Living (1) - from What's Happening to Religion

Today - and especially since the upheaval of the early '90s - my outlook has changed greatly. I have rejected Plato's classic binary oppositions, and now regard all Be-ing as contingent, finite, and temporal. The world-process is a fountain of contingencies that continually pours out and passes away, and we are simply parts of it. Accordingly, I have abandoned the old spirituality of hidden inwardness, and replaced it by a spirituality of life, seen as a continual 'coming out' into expression. We should accept and affirm our own unity with the pouring-out and passing-away of

everything, of which we are part. We should learn to say a wholehearted Amen to our own lives. We should find eternal joy in the present moment, in our own continual passing away. We should burn with love for the world, for life and for each other. We should simply abandon all traditional ideas about what used to be called 'the left hand of God' - ideas about sin, wrongdoing, guilt, judgement, reprobation, punishment, Hell, and so forth - and try to be as comprehensively affirmative as we possibly can.

And so on - in brief, I no longer seek salvation either by escaping from this world like the orthodox, or by transcending it in thought like my own earlier self. I want simply to affirm and to love our transient and contingent life in the here and now. I have invented and quoted various terms for the trick that I am trying to describe here, and you may recognize some of them: 'ecstatic naturalism', 'solar living', 'ecstatic immanence', 'glory', 'natural supernaturalism', 'the mysticism of secondariness', 'entostasy', and so on. None of these expressions has, as yet, quite caught on, but the idea is as old as the Gospels, and it crops up repeatedly in modern literature. It is that in order to find religious truth, we don't need to seek an entirely different world of invisible and timeless things. NO, we should find it in the transient, contingent world of the here and now. The mote dancing in the sunbeam, shadows, flames, bubbles, a transient expression flickering across a face, saxifrages, the wings of insects, a summer's evening. Our rapture should be a purely-immanent delight in all this, just here, now.

Now you may ask: If religion is to become entirely a matter of the way we give ourselves into life in the here and now, what room is there for any kind of religious apparatus of the kind we've known hitherto? Surely, what I've been describing is a kind of mysticism something that will always appeal to a few poets, nature-lovers, and photographers maybe but certainly not something that could ever function as a complete working religion and become established as part of the lives of most ordinary people?

Kingdom Theology from *What's Happening to Religion*

I reply that, in the traditional language of Christianity, what I am describing is the immediate, 'kingdom' type of religion that has since biblical times been expected one day to replace the mediated, 'ecclesiastical' type of religion that we are all accustomed to.

Historically, Christianity has mostly been ecclesiastical. It was assumed that times were very hard, that a strict social discipline was needed, and that people must be taught that the supreme religious happiness they yearn for is still a long way ahead - either in the far future, or (for most of us) after our deaths. Meanwhile, in the present blighted state of the everyday human world, we can make our lives bearable and give them the right direction by constantly cultivating the thought of the blessed, supernatural world above, and by negotiating with it. Religion is therefore mediated: it concentrates on the supernatural world, on holy scriptures, on doctrines, on acts of worship, on the veneration of a range of holy figures, and on building up the great institution of the church, all in order to gain the right direction, the confidence, and the strength for our daily life in the everyday world. Our relation to everydayness is mediated by the supernatural world that one day we hope to see for ourselves. 'Thy Kingdom come', we say. That's the kind of religion we are used to: but why has everything changed?

I reply that over a long period in our cultural tradition the focus of religious attention has been gradually shifting from the heavenly world above to this world, from the long-term future to the present, and from a God-centred to a Christ-centred, or simply human-centred, outlook. Our whole view of this life and this present world has been getting much less pessimistic. We no longer have to live under strict social discipline and absolute monarchy: a free society and liberal democracy are now possible. Everybody can in principle enjoy a full span of life, a decent sufficiency, and civil peace. More than that, our whole life-world has become highly aestheticized and we now take it for granted that we can and should enjoy life in a way our remoter ancestors could only dream of. The kingdom-type of religion, immediate, and finding eternal happiness in the here and now, is ready to be lived and enjoyed by ordinary people. The great supernatural apparatus of mediated religion is now largely redundant, and we should instead be concentrating upon the new religion of ordinary life.

Am I simply saying that modern Western secular culture is the Kingdom of God on earth? No, I am not. On the contrary, I insist that modern Western people are still largely stuck in the ecclesiastical period and its mediated living. Instead of pouring ourselves out into the living of our own lives, we still waste too much of our time dreamily living vicarious lives with the help of dramas acted out on cinema and television screens. Instead of becoming gods and saints ourselves, we venerate celebrities and copy their fashions and their opinions. We are still a long way short of entering upon our full inheritance - which leaves something for religion to be in the future. As always, religion should battle to persuade people that we and our world are still a lot less than we can and should be. Puritans and Evangelicals often darkly suspect that ordinary people are enjoying life too much: I'm dissatisfied for the opposite reason. I say that we are not yet enjoying life nearly enough.

Solar Living (2) from The Return of the Great Questions

On that basis, I build my third and last slogan, which is simply that solar living is *the best religion*. By that I mean that the more we think about the Great Questions and the challenge they present to us, the more we come to understand that there is no way of *escaping* from the basic conditions of life. The only option left is to say Yes to life as a whole and as a package deal: Yes to time, Yes to contingency, Yes to Finitude, Yes even to death. Life has no Telos - that is, no ultimate Goal - and the practice of solar living attempts to achieve *the* final happiness by the way one says Yes to life in the here and now. The effort to live purely affirmatively involves giving up all the *ressentiment*, the complaining, the victim-psychology, the censoriousness, the anger, the bitterness, and the festering sense of grievance that poison so many lives, and seem increasingly to poison the whole world of human beings. Instead, we should try to live purely magnanimously and without any negation or discrimination, like the sun. This purely-affirmative, magnanimous living is also *expressive*. One who lives truthfully lives *out*, and *comes out*. Solar ethics rejects ideas of 'inner' reality. It rejects talk of the soul and the inner life, and it rejects any suggestion that we should hold a bit of ourselves back and use it to refer all the time to a Higher World. No, the only 'real' self is the self that is lived out, acted, presented in our daily living, and solar living must reject all ideas of inwardness and instead go for 100% 'all out' expression.

I've said enough to make it clear that I am now less Buddhist and more Romantic and expressionist than I was until about 1992, I still find a place for meditation, but only as occasional therapy rather than as the daily bread of life. For me, now, Buddhism does not have a satisfactory view of the proper emotional basis of our living and our selfhood. The daily bread of life is a steady stream of outpouring biological (but also culturally- elicited and shaped) feeling. 'This feeling pours out, sustains our selfhood, colours up the world, gives value and is (in brief) what people call *the joys of life*, or simply joy. The young Wordsworth was as well able as anyone has ever been to articulate it: he called it 'living by the heart, and I call it 'solar living'.

I find something of its spirit cropping up in a great variety of teachers: in the original Jesus, in Blake, in Nietzsche, in Kazantzakis, even in someone like Stanley Spencer. It is my own religious response to our troubled, ambiguous times.

Don Cupitt

Sea of Faith-First National Conference – Perth, September 2004 – My Response from Alan Mann

There were about 100 people at the conference and the key speakers were Don Cupitt, Rachael Kohn and David Boulton. The papers were interesting but I would have liked more time allocated to question the speakers or more general group discussion of their topics. However, there were the usual energetic exchanges at meal times and in between the formal sessions, which compensated to some extent.

I imagine myself to be one of Cupitt's target audience, one of those disaffected by what the present day churches offer and interested in any moves to reform. This is a layman's reactions to what happened in Perth. In addition to the Nigel Leaves study of his work, referred to earlier, I have read only one of Don Cupitt's books – more extensive reading might help me over what I see as gaps in my understanding and problems I have with his approach.

In his opening address Cupitt spoke of the progressive democratization of truth; the abandonment of the notion that it is given to human beings from the high ones in the church and from God. Everyday conversation reveals emergence of a new approach to religion. Truth must be arrived at through personal investigation and the only ideas worthwhile are the ones you come to yourself and have tested in conversation with others.

My reaction to the Cupitt story is mixed. I find myself in agreement with him about 'Solar Living' and 'Kingdom Theology' and I have made extracts of what he means by these terms from transcripts of his conference talks (above). The trouble with the Death of God school of spiritual enquiry is their definition of God as that Zeus-like old guy in the sky. Apart from the fundamentalists not many people think of God in those terms any more and for those who don't, the death of something that never was is meaningless. Nor is it necessary to hold to the idea of a transcendent God of any kind for commitment to the life of the spirit. On the other hand, the transcendent God is usually replaced or re-thought as some sort of immanence but that alternative seems to be excluded as far as Cupitt is concerned.

A number of people I spoke to at the conference felt that something was missing. I certainly thought so and I've been trying to pin it down ever since. If everything is as Cupitt suggests then what need of either religion or faith – just get on with life. Cupitt has deconstructed and dismissed the God of the Cataphatics but hasn't laid a finger on the "no-god" of the apophatics. He quotes Pascal's awakening to the fact that he is alone in an empty universe as an example of the death or end of the mediated, cataphatic God out there and yet quotes Pascal's transformative, spiritual experience, the record of which was discovered sewn into the lining of his jacket when he died. That seems to reflect Pascal's own ambivalence about God or Spirit as well as that of the Sea of Faith movement¹.

There is sufficient light for those who desire to see, and there is sufficient darkness for those of a contrary disposition.

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Cupitt's final words to us were that what matters is Life, Life, Life. This word, in my view and in the opinion of many people within the tradition Cupitt claims to be redundant is a synonym for God. So, full circle and what is all the fuss about? And what I understand about the purpose of religion is to live life more abundantly. The 'nothing' he leaves us with is everything - in other 'words' – God. I doubt whether he'd agree with that. It is interesting to compare him with someone like Krishnamurti who also rejected all forms of established religion yet left room for an unspecified 'sacred'. That is one of the missing aspects as far as I'm concerned.

There was much talk of words, of language, being fundamental as opposed to a secondary aspect of being. I find this notion hard to swallow and the claim that the Sea of Faith story as told by Don Cupitt something new or the latest in spirituality even harder to get down. His observations on the need to enjoy life to the full, the wonder of the simple things could be paraphrasing Traherne (d 1674). Traherne, stripped of the Christian trimmings, necessary to protect his living, and Cupitt stripped of his post-modern trappings, required presumably to provide contemporary relevance, are almost identical in what they claim really matters.

Religion arises in response to the sense of something missing or an out-of-jointness, a need for perfection; perfection in the sense of wholeness rather than flawlessness. The response to this urge is an enquiry into the possibility of awakening to a wider perspective, not reaching out for a transcendent or supernatural dimension which Cupitt tirelessly denies but a more comprehensive apprehension of the present one which, as he points out, is all there is.

Rachael Kohn's talk reminded us of the possibility of a more comprehensive reality which is not dependent on me. She told us a cautionary tale about the growing spirituality that promotes the view that everything is me-dependent. She referred to this as the Godself phenomenon and referred to the current crop of gurus who, having seen they are not separate from 'the whole' claim that they *are* it. God once claimed as Self becomes controllable and a source of manipulative power. I didn't take enough notes of Rachael's talk so I can't claim the above is an accurate representation of what she said. Its value for me lay in the provision of a counterbalance to the 'human mind is all we have to go on' of the Sea of Faith.

David Boulton represents the aspects of Sea of Faith I find least attractive. Nevertheless, he is personally quite attractive and gave us a very entertaining speech revealing his vision of Sea of Faith as humanistic-scientism finished off with a layer of DIY spiritual icing. The icing is our mind's best available recipe, i.e., mercy, pity peace and loveⁱⁱ. This is a long way from where I stand and as Blake has been introduced as an underwriter of this view I will draw on him for the opposite position, which is best expressed, as far as this case is concerned, in his revelation that he was blessed with a fourfold vision. David Boulton's seems to be twofold at best and certainly does not allow for the fourfold mystical vision, which Blake prized above allⁱⁱⁱ.

I went to the Conference because I sensed the Sea of Faith might represent the future of what has been referred to in the past as the fellowship of the mystery. I found great fellowship but little of the mystery. The mystery is being surgically removed by the scalpels of post-modernism. The question is no longer whether God is dead but whether, after its removal, the Sea of Faith is still alive. It may be, I'm not sure. But one thing I'm certain of – officially, it has no soul, in fact such a requirement is expressly denied – "no inwardness – all is outwardness" appears to be the creed. And what an outwardness, without a corresponding inwardness, could be defies my imagination. At the heart of seeing lies the ending of the assumed barrier between inner and outer. On the other hand, the community itself seems to be well aware of and able to express inwardness – both individually and collectively.

The only evidence of soul life I found in the official presentations were in Rachael Kohn's paper and in the Aboriginal Spirituality session with Scott Fatowa. In Scott's workshop I discovered an addition to the mercy, pity, peace and love formula - that was the importance of place. So, here at least we had a sign of understanding that spirituality is a response to the wholeness of life not merely my best explanation of it. Blake's spirituality is a spirituality of the actual, enabling what is already the case to blossom forth, eg, when the doors of perception are cleansed what becomes apparent is a combination of perception and interpretation. To give all the credit to interpretation seems odd to say the least. Whatever it is that inspires reverence, wonder, awe and gratitude surely it cannot be some conceptual framework constructed by the wholly human? How could that possibly be?

It seems to me that the Sea of Faith is following the path of knowing. I wondered at the retention of the word 'faith' in the name of the organization. I see it reflects the faith in our ability to find out; to get to the bottom of things by intellectual exploration alone and/or faith in the latest productions of post-modernism to meet our every need. The death of God is not a terminal event in this Sea of Faith where we find him resurrected as Thought, same problem under a new name. Spirit is no longer seen as an aspect of god or as god but another offspring of reason. The All in All can no more be reduced to words than it can be reduced to elementary particles.

David Boulton insisted that we cannot function without a 'point of view' he gave the example of a film director and how ridiculous it would be to produce a film without such a perspective. I agree, a point of view is as necessary for a film director as it is for me in my day-to-day doings but for spirituality to flower it must be suspended. Learning how to suspend it is the religious skill required. Till we see our nothing we cannot understand the value of our being said Traherne and Paul said something about not me but Christ in me - both pointing, in my opinion, to an unnameable and, therefore, language-free truth, inaccessible to an ego lodged either, in Rachael Kohn's terms, in Godself or in denial of anything it hasn't put together itself.

In Don Cupitt's final address he explained that the decline of dogmatic belief leads to the return of the great questions, he gave us a hand-out listing sixteen of them including "Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? What's the point? Who am I? etc. He pointed out that "in our age, the religious life very often takes the form of a lifelong preoccupation with the Great Questions; and many of us are best able to become ourselves and find ourselves by working our own personal 'take' on the Great Questions". That describes much of my own activity and interest but it might be more fruitful to enquire into who or what is asking these questions and thereby create the condition necessary for the transition from knowing into seeing. He concluded by outlining his 'take' which takes the form of what he describes as solar living. (*See separate report*) I certainly go along with that and I think therein lies the strength of the sea of Faith movement.

There is mention in the writings of openings to a broader dimension of being. In reply to a question about his religious experiences Don Cupitt said that he had written forty books, implying the questioner should read them to get her answer. However, life, on his own recommendation, is not to be frittered away in such a manner. I discovered reports of two such 'religious experiences' in Don's own life in the Scott Cowdell book *Atheist Priest*. In the book the author reports that in reply to the question of what Cupitt makes of these experiences he said he supposed he just became witless.

Well, I don't know what to make of that reply either. Did he mean that for once his mind gave up trying to make something of the world and saw it for what it really is, did he regress into to a childish, pre-rational state or did he transcend his language-bound conditioning and enjoy a child-like state? (Suffer the little children, etc.) In my own experience such openings have fallen into the latter category. The wits remain present but in their proper place – for once.

The emphasis on the pre-eminence of language, and how our reality is constructed by the mind strikes me as true, but only at third person level; the world of interpretation, description and explanation. Religion for me is all about seeing through that entrapment and finding an ultimate or at least a broader 'context' prior to all my explanations, interpretations, descriptions and beliefs. Cupitt's theology seems to deliver us into the flatland of extreme post-modernism, a depthlessness which strikes me as life-denying rather the life affirming solar theology he prescribes.

The range of interests of people who attend Sea of Faith meetings is similar to that of the people who come to Dialogue meetings. As far as the spiritual motivation is concerned, most people who come to Dialogue are intrigued by the possibility of, in Bohm's words, "entering the river upstream of the pollution". The pollution being the interpretations, explanations, contexts, etc., which the post-modernists and Sea of Faithers say is our unavoidable condition. If they are right, I see absolutely no justification for their claim to be offering a new religious option or in any way offering a spiritually awake environment.

The whole point of religion, notwithstanding the distortions of institutionalised religion, is to recover the awareness, which has been overlaid by socialization and the introjection of what the world would have me believe about what is going on and what I really am. The most effective rescue remedy I have come across is the work of Douglas Harding.

If I'd spent my life in the arms of the Anglican church I might find the Cupitt challenge very refreshing but anyone who has explored the world of religion beyond the boundaries of traditional Christendom will find that his destination turns out to be somewhere near the starting point for other faiths or non-faiths. In particular I find his dismissal of the mystical message of Christianity an inexplicable evasion of his own message or of a significant part of it. The problem with extreme post-modernism, seems to be an inability to retain and integrate what is of value in what has gone before; all the babies out with all the bathwater seems to be the drill.

In spite of my disagreement with the route taken I am in approximate agreement with his conclusions. Solar Living and Kingdom Theology based on a Zen-like 'there is just this and nothing else' are fine but I am not clear what follows from his understanding. I was interested to read in the Scott Cowdell book that, in earlier times, he was influenced by the essays of John Wren-Lewis. I too have been influenced by John Wren-Lewis but by his later rather than his early writings.

I like Cupitt's rejection of a 'following' or the establishment of a set of rules. He seems to say "this is my way, make of it what you will, take of it what you will but the important thing is to find your own route". This fits well with the approach of Dialogue and I found the people who attended the conference very open to alternative views. One of my new friends said that *this*, meaning the conference and the small regional group actions it brings together, might be the future of the 'church'. I hope he's right. And, as I said at the outset, Cupitt's views on Solar Living and Kingdom Theology ring true. However, as far as I am concerned there is something missing and I think what is missing is depth. His insistence on outsidership without insidership seems to represent the extreme form of post-modern dogmatism and has absolutely no experiential validity in my experience. It strikes me as all about conclusions arrived at on a strictly intellectual basis.

Cupitt spoke at Saint George's Cathedral, Perth on 19 September, at the evensong service. He told us about the development of the BBC series, the series he wrote and presented, and on how he saw the need for change. He mentioned how the British, presumably both in church and academia, were completely shut off to new ideas. I'm sure there is some truth in this but after working on my responses to the Cupitt ideas I feel that this might also indicate a healthy resistance to extreme views of the sort which Cupitt is offering. Ken Wilber has a very good section on the pros and cons of post modernism and spirituality in his book *Integral Psychology* and I attach a footnote describing his view that, when carried too far, post-modernity implodes on itself and redelivers us to the flatland it is seeking to transcend. I'm not suggesting Cupitt takes us to the extremes outlined in this extract from Wilber but some of his statements seem to be getting dangerously close^{iv}.

Nigel Leaves concludes his book with the following quotation from Don Cupitt:

"I am someone who likes modern Western philosophy, who retains a strong devotion to Jesus Christ, who has an affinity with much in the Jewish and Buddhist traditions, and who has been trying to build up a body of free and experimental religious writing which may or may not one day be of use to others."

Anglican services often include the benediction "May the blessing of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we live and move and have our being be with us now and evermore" I wonder if this is the same Christ referred to in the Cupitt quotation above. If so, it implies an immanence which seems to be alternately affirmed and denied in his writing. It is the perspective on Christ which carries meaning for me. For those who cannot abide such words as God and Christ I offer the alternative word *THIS*. I have pondered on the possibility that *THIS*, or something like it, is what Cupitt himself is pointing to.

Alan Mann

ⁱ "From about half past ten in the evening until about half past twelve, FIRE - God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. Certitude, certitude. Heartfelt joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. My God and thy God. Thy God shall be my God" (This text is from what is called the Memorial, a piece of parchment which was sewn into the lining of Pascal's coat).

ⁱⁱ

To Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
All pray in their distress:
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
Is God our father dear:
And Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
Is Man his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart
Pity, a human face:
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine
Love Mercy Pity Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, turk or jew.
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.

William Blake, from "The Divine Image," 1789
Songs of Innocence

ⁱⁱⁱ Now I a fourfold vision see
And a fourfold vision is given to me
Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And three fold in soft Beulahs night
And twofold Always. May God us keep
From Single vision & Newtons sleep

Letter to Thos. Butts

^{iv} Depth Takes a Vacation (*Integral Psychology* by Ken Wilber p169)

.....In fact, most postmodernism would eventually go to extraordinary lengths to deny depth in general. It is as if, suffering under the onslaught of flatland aggression, it identified with the aggressor. Postmodernism came to embrace surfaces, champion surfaces, glorify surfaces, and surfaces alone. There are only sliding chains of signifiers, everything is a material text, there is nothing under the surface, there is only the surface. As Bret Easton Ellis put it in *The Informers*: "Nothing was affirmative, the term 'generosity of spirit' applied to nothing, was a cliché, was some kind of bad joke.... Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaningful ... this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged."

Robert Alter, reviewing William H. Gass's *The Tunnel*-a book claimed by many to be the ultimate postmodern novel-points out that the defining strategy of this postmodern masterpiece is that "everything is deliberately reduced to the flattest surface." This is done by "denying the possibility of making consequential distinctions between, or meaningful rankings of, moral or aesthetic values. There is no within: murderer and victim, lover and onanist, altruist and bigot, dissolve into the same ineluctable slime"-the same Aiding chains of equally flatland terms.

"Everything is reduced to the flattest surface. . . . There is no within"-a perfect description of flatland, a flatland that, beginning with modernity, was actually amplified and glorified with extreme postmodernity: "Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found"

And Alter is exactly right that behind it all is the inability or refusal to make "consequential distinctions between, or meaningful rankings of, moral or aesthetic values." As we have often seen, in the Right Hand world there are no values and no interiors and no qualitative distinctions – no states of consciousness, no realms of transpersonal awareness, no superconscious revelations, no spiritual illumination – for those exist only in the Left-Hand domains. To collapse the Kosmos to Right Hand surfaces is thus to step out of the real world and into the Twilight Zone known as the disqualified universe. Here there are no interior holarchies, no meaningful rankings of the I and the We, no qualitative distinctions of any sort-no depth, no divinity, no consciousness, no soul, and no spirit: "Surface, surface, surface is all that anyone found."

Extreme postmodernism thus went from the noble insight that all perspectives need to be given a fair hearing, to the self-contradictory belief that no perspective is better than any other (self-contradictory because their own belief is held to be much better than the alternatives). Thus, under the intense gravity of flatland, integral-aperspectival awareness became simply aperspectival madness-the contradictory belief that no belief is better than any other-a total paralysis of thought, will, and action in the face of a million perspectives all given exactly the same depth, namely, zero.

At one point in *The Tunnel*, Gass himself, the author of this postmodern masterpiece, describes the perfect postmodern form, which serves to raunchify, to subvert [sic] everything, to pollute the pollutants, explode the exploded, trash the trash.... It is all surface.... There's no inside however long or far you travel on it, no within, no deep."

No within, no deep. That may serve as a perfect credo for extreme postmodernism. just as modernity often slid into dissociation, postmodernity often slid into surfaces.

(The Right Hand – Left Hand references refer to Wilber's analytical quadrant. 'I – IT – WE – ITS' on page 62 of the same book.

A bit of help from some friends!

Here are a couple of quotes which help explain my discomfort with the 'language is all' view. The first is several hundred years old and the second is an extract from an interview with our friend Chris McLean which I lifted from an interview by Louise Southerden from a recent issue of *Dharma Vision*, a publication of the Buddhist Library and Meditation Centre, Sydney.

1) God forbid that the experience itself become so degenerate as to fit into the narrow confines of human language. No, it is not possible and certainly will never happen. . . . Whatever we may say of it is not it, but only about it. Yet since we cannot say what it is, let us try to describe it, to the confusion of all proud intellects.

Book of Privy Counseling

2) *Q. Can you say a bit more about how existentialism can be harmful to Buddhism?*

Chris McLean: In general, the existentialists say that because there's a sense of nothingness to the universe, human beings are heroic in creating meaning out of nothing. Whereas for us as Buddhists, we have to go through that door

of nothingness into the sense of there being a profound meaning that's a lived meaning, which is past nothingness, or, is the true dimension of the nothingness. Existentialism usually stops short of that, and then we end up creating meaning, which is what we've always done, anyway, but not the kind of meanings that lead to the door. So, we don't enter true, vast Emptiness.

So how does that translate into practice for ordinary people? It means that they'll treat Buddhism as a way of being very positive and creating positive meanings and doing positive actions, and so on. Which is all good, but if that's all they do they won't get the Buddha's message which is the cessation of any fabrications, any creation of reality, and entry into the Inconceivable.

Chris McLean

Freeing the Being From God Focus....or Unfocusing Thought – From Carien McGuin

.....living with unfocused eye and no thought in the mind.....

It sounds mindless - pointless. Surprisingly it ends up being mindful and as centering as the unfindable centre of a black hole in space.

....Unfocused eye, no thought in the mind.... applied to a day at the first Sea of Faith in Australia (Sofia) conference, Perth September 2004 -- a vibrance of some 100 souls unenclosed (i.e. open-minded in varying concentrations) within the walls of Wollaston College Conference Centre, in the silence of a bush hillside near the sea.....

Waking morning, a thought (one swirl behind the concentre-rings expressing through this pen): That dead wisdom tooth needs attention - a dental surgeon, they said? Need to find one.....

The sun rises, its warmth bringing to light converse-rings, waves of overlapping thought, words expressed from souls centre-ring into the powerful abyss of Nietzsche's no-god, of Wittgenstein's no future, of British broadcaster David Boulton's republic of heaven, of ABC producer/presenter Rachael Kohn's expose of the centreing God-Self, thought, of the 100 souls questing "What is the future "....skewed by the thought of religion - "Where to now with religion?".....skewed again by the words expressed concerning the future of theologian/philosopher/writer Don Cupitt's open-minded, non-judgmental, unheirarchical Sea of Faith, the souls identifying nor not, centre-ing or not in the sea of faith circlings.....

the waves rocked with breakfast, of beautiful formations and dissolvings of well-cooked and well presented food, and creeks and rivers of coffee and juice, one part of the Rev. Nigel Leaves' conference caring ministrations..... eddying in atomic meetings of thought in clasped hands, earnest eyes or relaxed ears bent towards a common "new"as yet unexpressed.

The conference is over, the tide ebbs, convexing conversations concave, a seashore of splashing adieux, and a sea-shell dragging of maintaining addresses and telephone numbers, emails addresses, the settling waves of thankous.....

And it's Evensong. The bright vestments of days and days of traditions, the solid stone and timber of tactile thought solidified in a past future - a silent cathedral of holy emptiness ringing with organic music and harmonic choir boys, carrying vibrating souls to the rafters and beyond, then dropping them into the low registers of flattened, enjoined prayer, then flaming them with the light of dying day through stained glass windows.....

The Dean invites us to tea with the Primate of Australia, who shakes our hands, opens his heart of god-love to our no-God chatter and we stand on the lawn, the knowing ones informing the unknowing that it is rare to hear such a sung evensong as is still singing in our ears..... We stand on the lawn, ignoring the bishopric's tea and sandwiches (leaving our no-God unleader, well-known former Dean, Don Cupitt, without unfollowers in the God enclave)..... On the lawn we await our restaurant reconnoitre, unconscious, mindlessly focused on our stomachs, where the weekend tide is ebbing most feelingly, modernly unheeding the weight of a courteous tradition.

Miraculously we meet together in a blaze of lights and colour, displaying beautifully carved dark wooden tables and chairs, an enthroned god of good luck, Ganesha, secondary to the powerful Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and fertility. The aromas of Indian cooking displayed in a freshness unusual in a restaurant, surround us in our colourful hosts' welcome table rearrangement and generosity of helpings.

We eat at the table of our Cosmic Birther, Lakshmi, our no-god converse-rings reduced to one-soul expressions overlapping each other, unaware of the oceans of the statued brown-skinned gods around us, nor yet of the white-skinned mitred gods abandoned up the hill.

Our food consumed, we move towards the bill – payment..... A sudden clear voice interrupts. Our waiter -

waiter?!! - demands our attention. "This is not a public restaurant," he says. The mouth with the wisdom tooth drops in communal embarrassment.

"This is the House of Annalakshmi", he says, in the clear Indian accented English of the Oxford British Raj, "and you are most welcome. I will explain to you. A Hindu monk, Swami Shantanand, or Swamiji, has been visiting here in Perth for many years with the message of giving joy to others. 'Do not build another temple,' Swamiji said, 'we do not need another ashram.' What? I asked him, what sort of a swami are you who does not want followers? Yet there was a small group of devotees, largely the Shiva family. Seeing that many of them were excellent cooks, Swamiji inspired the opening of Annalakshmi to bring love and joy to all who came.

You are eating the home-cooked food prepared by mothers and daughters. This restaurant is run by the Shiva family and about 80 volunteers. I, for instance, am a volunteer tonight - a dental surgeon during the day, but I work here for two hours in the evening - sometimes waiting, sometimes dishwashing, sometimes cleaning, alternating with other volunteers. My colleague (gesturing towards the orange-robed alert elderly gentleman at the reception desk nearby) is a Professor of Economics now retired. And we give our time in love and your enjoyment.

Everyone is welcome here, people of all faiths, of all race.....as the sun shines on all people, whether they know it or not. You should try it some time," he laughed, brown eyes glowing deeply with warmth, "working for someone else when you don't have to. It's very wonderful, good for the soul. A great stress release." The bill was a donation that the diner felt fit to give!!!

More amazingly, our waiter-turned dental surgeon-turned swami, then appeared happily at our end of the table and proceeded to continue his gentle but enthusiastic homily in answer to our responses, with quotes from Jesus, as he deftly cleared our plates and debris. And then left us to it. But wait.....I need a dental appointment.....

The day is done, and another conference spirals into the velvet silence of night.....and the moon lights the way to another day in the life of Life.....

Carien McGuin

Journey

Do you want a poem today?
A bold one and obvious
or simply hilarious
or maybe mysterious?
Here is something you can make
into what you like and take
it in your stride.

Suppose our souls are born to earthly life
within our bodies of ten senses –
Born to a startling roller-coaster ride
of joy and strife.
A ride that moves in starts and breaks
and wakes at moments on the brink of
measureless immensity –
of Heaven's healing Light-dark All in All!

A journey in community
with lots to do and see and hear,
and many lives we'll need as we
transform from blinkered sight
to steady, clear, enlightened SEER

Or, are *you* there already?!

Marcia Murray

Foreword by Douglas Harding to "The Essential Teachings of Ramana Maharshi".

(I took the following from some of the hand-out material which Shane Keher gave us during his presentation to the Harding group on Saturday 2 November.Ed.)

I have to record my gratitude to Maharshi for his, insistence on the ever-present accessibility, the naturalness, the obviousness, of Self-realization. Many a time, I had been informed and had read that Enlightenment is, of all states, the rarest and the remotest and the most difficult in practice, and here was a great sage telling us that, on the contrary, it was the easiest. Such, indeed, was my own experience, and I had never been intimidated by those religious persons who were careful to tell me that I couldn't see what I saw. Nevertheless, for me it was marvelously refreshing to find that Maharshi never sent inquirers away with instructions to work for Liberation at some distant date. It is not, he insisted, a glittering prize to be awarded for future achievements of any sort; it is not for earning little by little, but for noticing now, just as one is. Other sages, of course, have stressed the availability of this, but here Maharshi is surely the clearest, the most uncompromising of them all. How wonderful to hear him saying, in effect, that compared with Oneself all other things are obscure, more or less invisible, fugitive, impossible to get at; only the Seer can be clearly seen.

I thank him for his uncompromising attitude to people's problems. For him, all the troubles that afflict humans reduce to one trouble mistaken identity. The answer to the problem is to see "Who" has it. At its own level it is insoluble. And it must be so. There is no greater absurdity, no more fundamental or damaging a madness, than to imagine one is centrally what one looks like. To think one is a human being limited to this perspective is a sickness so deep-seated that it underlies and generates all one's ills. Only cure that one basic disease mistaken identity and all is exactly as it should be. I know no sage who goes more directly to the root of the disease and refuses more consistently to treat its symptoms. WHO AM I? is the only serious question. And, most fortunately, it is the only question that can be answered without hesitation or the shadow of a doubt absolutely.

I thank Ramana Maharshi above all for tirelessly posing this question of questions, for showing how simple the answer is, and for his lifelong dedication to that simple answer.

Douglas E. Harding

Cornfield

When I paused
to look at an ear
of corn, tenderness
passed like a hand
across the field.

*Colin Oliver
From – Stepping into Brilliant Air*

Krishnamurti Gathering – 10 — 17 November 2004

The next Krishnamurti gathering will be a week long from the tenth of November, in Springbrook, Queensland, at the Theosophical Society Learning and Retreat Centre, 2184 Springbrook Road.

Costs: The weeklong gathering costs \$322 from, Wednesday to Wednesday (7 days) including accommodation. Day visitors to pay \$16 per day including lunch. See <http://www.krishnamurtiaustralia.org/> for more detail.

Enrolment: Registration is requested before. Enrolment forms are available through Barry Hora Ph: (07) 5533 5211; Fax: (07) 5533 5548, and Gerald Reardon Ph: (07) 5533 5247. (Download from <http://www.krishnamurtiaustralia.org/text/springbrookgathering.htm>) Please return the completed forms with full payment (Cheque/Money Order to be made out to Krishnamurti Australia) to The Treasurer, Krishnamurti Australia, PO Box 458 Burleigh Heads, QLD 4220 and a receipt will be forwarded.

Academy of the Word Seminar Programme

Dr Alex Reichel (02) 9310 4504 – 2nd & 4th Tuesdays– Under St Peter’s Church, Devonshire St., Surry Hills.
Second Tuesday 6.15pm - *Healing & Well-being* - **Fourth** Tuesday 6pm - *State of the World*

Blavatsky Lodge of The Theosophical Society

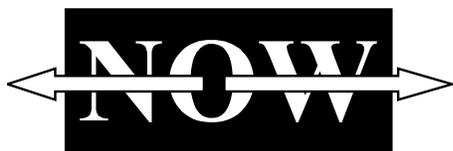
Level 2, 484 Kent St., Sydney (near Town Hall Station) Talks Programme Every Wednesday at 2.30pm and 7pm
 – Printed programme available 02 9267 6955 and at – <http://www.matra.com.au/~hpb/index.html>

Melbourne – Evening Satsang/Dialogue with Penny Fenner

23a Britten Street Glen Iris - Monday evenings 7.30-9.30pm - To confirm attendance and for further information
 please call 03 - 9885 0119 T: + 61 3 9885 0119// 0411 554 007
 E: penny@fenner.org - www.skilfulaction.org

Look for Yourself Meetings

First Saturday of the month at 10-30am, 81Greville street, Chatswood (off Fullers Road) Alan Mann 02 9419 7394
 6 November Meeting: *The Harding – Schloss – Gebser – Wilber Story*



**If unable to deliver please return to:
 81 Greville Street, Chatswood 2067**

Regular Meetings				
<i>LOCATION</i>	<i>DAY</i>	<i>MEETING PLACE</i>	<i>TIME & CONTACT</i>	<i>Phone Nos.</i>
Sydney City	Third Saturday Dialogue	Blavatsky Lodge of the Theosophical Society, Level 2, 484 Kent St., City	2.30pm Terry O'Brien	02 9949 8379
Chatswood	Third Sunday Dialogue	81 Greville St. (off Fullers Rd) Chatswood	10.30 am Alan & Margot Mann	02 9419 7394
Chatswood	First Saturday Harding	81 Greville St. (off Fullers Rd) Chatswood	10.00 am Alan & Margot Mann	02 9419 7394
Nowra	First Saturday Dialogue	The Tea Club, Berry Street, Opposite Roxy Cinema	4-6pm –Riche du Plessis	4423 4774
Nowra	Third Sunday Dialogue	3/117 Berry Street, Nowra	10.30 am Riche du Plessis	4423 4774