

Reflections on the Sea of Faith

Clay Nelson © 16 October 2016

I gave up having a Plan A or B or even C a long time ago. The old joke is they just make God laugh anyway. But the real reason is repeatedly in my life I have watched myself travel from point to point without benefit of an itinerary and yet get to some fascinating and unexpected places that seem unrelated on the surface, but which, in retrospect, were all connected. With the advantage of hindsight, they looked like a well-thought out plan or at least that's my story and I'm sticking to it. In truth, each place led to a new place I could not have booked in advance. None were foreseen or could have been planned for.

A recent example is a journey that began with an unexpected, last minute invitation to the Council of Trade Unions' conference for organisers. There I heard Mark Chenery from Common Cause talk about the importance of triggering the values we all hold, that bring about a more just world, but are often suppressed. He inspired my sermon focusing on the importance of intrinsic values. Those grouped around the headings of self-determination, universalism and benevolence. It is those values that make the world a place worth living in for everyone. They are the values that unite us in our diversity into a Unitarian community. That led to my sharing my personal theological evolution and conviction that Unitarians must save Jesus in our post-theistic, post-Christian world, as he is a human metaphor for all our values. The next stop on the journey was looking at the evolution of Unitarianism from simply being the anti-Trinitarian alternative to orthodox Christianity to being the birthplace of religious toleration, freedom of thought, and rational religion 500 years ago. But Unitarians did not stop evolving after reaching this new place in the evolution of western religion. That led in turn to Unitarianism becoming a religion without doctrinal walls that lifts up intrinsic values and speaks out prophetically for justice, human rights, democratic freedom and the sustainability of our earthly home. Today we are on our way to a new destination as full participants in a spiritual revolution – that we cleared the way for – where denominations are becoming as quaint as typewriters and where a purely rational religion needs reframing.

The next destination on my journey was a progressive religious conference in Brisbane, which explored this spiritual revolution more deeply. As the western world has grown more secular it has not grown less interested in what we broadly call "spirituality." While more and more people have rejected the existence of a traditional view of God, most have not forsaken mystery and some kind of reality that transcends themselves. So today, the spiritual question is, "Where is God?" now that we have rejected the notion of heaven. The answer is: With us. We no longer have a vertical relationship with God but a horizontal one. God is in us, in our relationships with neighbour and nature, and beyond the horizon.

By good fortune I was invited to attend this year's Sea of Faith conference as their guest. I was a little ambivalent about going having just been away for the Brisbane conference. What I didn't know is that the mystery beyond the horizon had already added it to my itinerary.

You may not be aware of the Sea of Faith. I wasn't until I came to New Zealand, although there are members in the US. It is a movement or network, not a religion or

denomination, that started in the UK in 1984. It was a response to a book and television series of the same name by Don Cupitt. Cupitt was educated in both science and theology at Cambridge and is a philosopher, theologian, Anglican priest and former Cambridge dean. His book and TV series surveyed western thinking about religion and charted a transition from traditional religion to the view that religion is simply a human creation.

The name Sea of Faith is taken from Matthew Arnold's mid-19th century poem *Dover Beach*, in which the poet expresses regret that belief in a supernatural world is slowly slipping away; the "sea of faith", he laments, is withdrawing like the ebbing tide.

Following the television series, a small group of radical Christian clergy and laity began meeting to explore how they might promote this new understanding of religious faith. They organised the first UK conference in 1988. By 1992 a post-theistic Sea of Faith faith had come in with the tide on New Zealand's shores. In the UK Don Cupitt was its spiritual leader. In New Zealand Lloyd Geering became its theological touchstone. The Sea of Faith "affirms the continuing importance of religious thought and practice as a vehicle for awe and wonder and for the celebration of key social and spiritual values; draws freely upon our spiritual heritage without being bound by it; promotes the quest for meaning and fulfilment as a human activity; and provides encouragement, stimulation and support in fellowship with others engaged in the quest." One could say they are Unitarians but don't know it (or do know it but don't have a congregation near them).

The topic of their annual conference, held at a retreat centre outside Wellington, was *With or Without God: Community in a Post-theistic Age*. I found it serendipitous that three of the keynote speakers have all been part of my journey. Lloyd Geering's *Christianity Without God* was one of the first books I read upon arriving in New Zealand. It gave me the courage to acknowledge publicly from the pulpit my belief that Jesus was human—full stop – and my non-theistic view of God. Michael Benedikt, an Australian architect living in the US, inspired me to preach on the idea that God is the good we do when I read his book by the same name when it first came out. I first met Gretta Vosper six years ago in Melbourne at a Common Dreams conference. I have read her book *With or without God* and have been in correspondence with her since. I was invited to the conference because I had agreed to fill in for Gretta if her heresy trial in Canada prevented her from attending. All three have shaped my journey as fellow pilgrims.

Lloyd kicked off the conference. You would never know he will be 99 in February or that next year is the 50th anniversary of his heresy trial that played a major role in New Zealand becoming the most secular country in the OECD. He spoke on *The Evolution of Human Community from Family to Global Community*. He began by observing that evolution is prone to create increasingly complex new life. He argued that this happens in the physical world as well as the human thought world. In the thought world, humans first bonded with their family members. When incest became an issue tribes were formed. They are still around. They were bonded by language and language formed their culture. Lloyd suggests language was the most important of human inventions, for it led to human consciousness. We not only know, we know that we know. The thought world eventually bonded us with those beyond our family and tribe and race, and civilisation came into being. Its glue was common language

and culture. A prominent feature of its culture was its religious tradition.

In human history there have been 26 civilisations that have come and gone, often named after their religious tradition.

In recent times from a historical perspective there are three: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Each has had the capacity to create communities that transcend tribal and racial divisions.

From this point Lloyd makes the argument that Christianity created a civilisation open to science. Christians wanted to understand the ways of God and studied Natural Religion. Most of the first members of the Royal Society when it was founded in 1660 were clergymen. It was they who developed the scientific method that led to our secular society.

Lloyd also pointed out that the Christian missionaries of the 19th century thought they would convert the whole world to Christ by the end of their generation. They weren't successful but they made great inroads. The wars of the 20th century began the unravelling of Christian civilisation, but not before Christian civilisation through colonialism became worldwide. This was an important ingredient in creating the next stage of human community. Geering argues that the 20th was the last Christian century and we should start renumbering the year beginning in 2001 as 1 GE, the beginning of the global era, when one global community transcended civilisations. Dating the beginning of this era as AD, the year of the Lord is no longer appropriate. He knows that we aren't fully a global community yet, but he reminded us that when he was born in the early 20th century air travel, telephones, television, smart phones, and the Internet were not envisioned.

Michael Benedikt was the second to give a keynote. Michael is a not very religiously observant Jew, whose parents were survivors of Auschwitz. He spent a lot of his early life struggling with the problem of evil and an all-powerful God. He was heavily influenced by the secular wisdom of Ecclesiastes, who also influenced Jesus. He has come to some radical conclusions: God did not exist until in the course of evolution humans did. God is quite the opposite of an all-powerful deity. God only exists when humans do good acts. His metaphor is the lap. It exists when we are sitting down and the family cat chooses to make itself comfortable there, but as soon as we stand up it disappears. When Jews are sent to the gas chambers. When we destroy the planet. When we bomb innocents in Aleppo. When we leave children in poverty. God does not exist. When we save a dog from traffic. When a worm on the footpath fascinates a child. When we show a kindness to someone in grief. God exists. Should we by our own actions become extinct, God will no longer exist.

Gretta Vosper is, at least for the moment, a minister in the United Church of Canada, that until recently was the most liberal denomination in Christendom. She has led a congregation in Toronto for 15 years that focused on moving beyond a language of faith that is shared in the liturgies, rituals, hymns and sacred objects of most Christian churches, but no longer speaks to those outside the church's walls. She believes that story builds communities, but it also excludes those that cannot put themselves into the story. This led her to build a community beyond belief that would create its own story.

While she considers herself an atheist, she sees relationships as replacing the moral absolutism of God that once bound communities together. We as human beings create God's replacement in how we treat each other. Those relationships are telling a new story.

We also heard from Geoff Troughton, a professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University who is very involved in a longitudinal study of religious attitudes in New Zealand. Perhaps the most important thing he had to say is that while those who mark "no religion" on the census grows by 1% a year, there is more to their story. They are not uninterested in spiritual questions, but in the traditional organisations that claimed spirituality as their own. He concludes that the studies to date show that in spite of becoming increasingly secular we have more respect for diversity in belief and appreciation for the positive resources religion has to offer.

My conclusion from this conference is that religion is far from dead. It is in an exciting phase of transition with possibilities yet unknown. The journey continues to places not on anyone's itinerary. I hope I live as long as Lloyd to see some of them.