

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



Limestone cliffs like those at Dover, scene of the poem “Dover Beach”

We’ve Lost a Gentleman Warrior for the Environment

Rod Oram had a heart attack while cycling. He came off his bike, was taken to hospital, but died three days later. He was 73. His family said that he “passed peacefully” surrounded by family.

Rod Oram studied politics and journalism before earning a master’s degree in journalism. His early career with the Financial Times spanned 18 years (1979-1997) as an editor and writer based in London and New York. In total, he was a journalist for over 40 years.

In 1997, he moved to New Zealand with his family. In 2007, his book on the New Zealand Economy, *Reinventing Paradise*, was published. Rod belonged to St. Andrews Church, Epsom, where he was a diocesan and



general synod representative. He also gave a keynote speech at the 2015 SOFiA Conference on *The Theology of Economics*, and quoted Gus Speth, “I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss,

ecosystem collapse and climate change. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy... and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation...and we scientists don't know how to do that."

In 2014, Rod was central to the Anglican General Synod's decision to divest all its investments in the fossil fuel industry.

Rod has been the recipient of numerous awards. He has attended many global climate conferences and had already booked his ticket for the next one in Azerbaijan. His reporting has reflected an increasing urgency, summed up in his final column on March 1, "Doing what we're doing, just a bit better or a tad faster, dooms us to failure."

He described his recent work as explaining complex issues "the best I can in order to encourage people not to give up," especially on the task of "boldly and deeply" cutting emissions. He will be sadly missed.

A Realistic Scenario

Norman McLean told St Andrew's Church that he would give the Reflection on 14 January 2024. Sadly, this was not to be, as Norman died on 1 December. Beverley Smith was asked to take his place for the service and provided the following:

Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild
Look upon a little child
Pity my simplicity
Suffer me to come to thee

Many of us remember these verses from our childhood.

Jesus – Meek and Mild. Was he really? The third century AD were times a 21st century Christian cannot be expected to fully comprehend; indeed it would be hard for anyone to appreciate the realities of the 16th or any century with only present day perspectives to work on.

Our Bible reading from the Gospel of Thomas throws some light on this Jesus who said: People think, perhaps, that I have come to throw peace upon the world. They don't know that I have come to throw disagreement upon the world, and fire, and sword, and struggle. For there will be five in one house.

Three will oppose two. Two will oppose three. The father will oppose his son and the son oppose his father. And they will stand up and they will be alone.

Ironically, the vast majority of Christians seem to think of Jesus primarily as one who came to throw peace upon the world and to bring loving harmony to families. Evidently Jesus disagreed with that assessment. People whose notion focusses on his status as 'Prince of Peace' seem to be relying exclusively on a phrase found in Isaiah 9:7 but found nowhere in the New Testament.

The final statement "And they will stand up and they will be alone".

Exploring the History of Christianity with a single, authorized set of beliefs – however – and these actually vary from church to church – coupled with the conviction that Christian belief alone offers access to God.

Today, we will begin by studying what we know about Constantine – the Pagan Emperor of Rome who became a Christian after miraculously experiencing Christ's sign in the heavens. He saw the sign of the cross, along with the words 'in this sign you shall conquer'. He then followed an amnesty for Christians and became their imperial patron. But, although there were in Rome groups of all sizes of Christians, he chose to recognize the best-organised and largest group, which he called the "lawful and most holy catholic church."

Since the time of Constantine, Christianity has defined itself essentially through what it believes. In its early years, communities seem to have grown up around different teachers who interpreted Jesus' message and sayings in different ways. Even after the particular books and writings that would eventually be called the canon became primary, what they meant was still up for grabs. Different communities believed different things.

Constantine's recognition carried with it enormous benefits. In 315, he ordered that anyone who had confiscated property from the catholic church of the Christians in any city, or even other places during the persecutions of the previous decades, must return it immediately to 'those same churches' and offer compensation for any damages. Even Churches in Africa received letters exempting the clergy from financial obligations, but he did know that African churches were divided into rival factions and somehow tried to identify those he called the 'ministers of the lawful and most holy catholic religion'.

The years that followed saw new churches being built, including, tradition says, a magnificent Church of St. Peter on the Vatican hill in Rome. Constantine also delegated to certain bishops, the distribution of grain and other necessities to

support people in need, so that they might fulfil Jesus's admonitions to care for the sick and needy.

Christianity grew out of Jewish traditions and was shaped by Roman cultural and political structures for several centuries. An example: the head of the Roman Catholic Church takes one of his titles from the old Roman office of *Pontifex maximus*- the chief High Priest.

To strengthen his own alliance with church leaders and to unify fractious Christian groups into one harmonious structure, Constantine charged bishops from churches throughout the empire to meet at his expense at Nicaea, an inland city, near a large lake. The plan was to work out a standard formulation of Christian faith. From that meeting and its aftermath, during the tumultuous decades that followed, emerged the Nicene Creed that would effectively call the canon – the list of 27 writings which would become the New Testament. Together these would help establish what Irenaeus a Greek bishop had envisioned – a worldwide communion of 'orthodox Christians joined into one 'catholic and apostolic' church.

Iznik's ancient name was Nicaea! For those of us who have visited Turkey, Iznik is a district in the Bursa province.

After 300 years and as many squabbles, the Nicene Creed, approved by the bishops and endorsed by Constantine, would become the official doctrine that all Christians henceforth must accept. The news reached Alexandria and woe betide those who disagreed!

Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, who was promoting the Nicene Creed and wrote a letter calling the Churches to cleanse the church and reject the New Testament books as 'springs of salvation' and he called upon the Christians during the Lenten season to 'cleanse the church from every defilement' and to reject 'the apocryphal books,' which are filled with myths, empty and polluted, books that could incite conflict and lead people astray.

It is likely that one or more of the monks who heard his letter read at their monastery near the town of Nag Hammadi decided to defy Athanasius's order and removed more than fifty books from the monastery library, hid them in a jar to preserve them, and buried them near the cliff where Muhammad Ali would find them sixteen hundred years later when he and his brothers were searching for fertiliser.

The coincidence in 1945; on the one hand, the first lethal explosions of a nuclear bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and, on the other hand, the discovery in a small desert cave near Nag Hammadi, in upper Egypt, of a lost gospel, now known as the Gospel of Thomas. It is as if, at the very moment when humanity was brought face to face with its most extreme capacities for horror, evil, and destruction, so also, in Jesus' astonishing vision of the Kingdom in the Gospel of Thomas, humanity was shown what it could still achieve if only it woke up and realized the splendour of its divine secret identity.

The Gospel of Thomas was the most exciting find at Nag Hammadi, and taken on board like newly discovered pieces of a complex puzzle. Next to what we have long known from tradition, we find that these remarkable texts, after becoming known, were capable of transforming what we know as Christianity. Sadly, rarely shared in congregations.

Norman in his outline for this service wrote LORD in upper case and lord in lower case. I pondered on these words and asked for advice from Sr. Cynthia Kearney. She replied 'why use LORD when we pray and when we sing? It implies ruling over and makes a separation. It does not mean Master and Servant. Today's relationship with God is one of love which implies equality, mutuality. We were guided by the text in Galatians 3. 'For in Jesus, you are all children of God. There is no longer Jew or Greek. There is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Jesus. Why has humanity disregarded this text?

Jesus the LORD? No.

Jesus the Itinerant, mystic, healer and teacher – YES.

Jesus the mystic – YES – study two women, Hildegarde of Bingen and Julian of Norwich along with St. Teresa of Avila who said: Jesus has no body now on Earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours.

Jesus the servant – YES.

Why don't we adjust our faith to our times?

On the positive side – many medical people from the West have given their time in serving.

King Charles III – is quoted as saying "I SERVE"

In conclusion, I quote Nigel Leaves who advocates that “Individual churches be open, welcoming, honest, self-critiquing, dogma-free, values-based, spiritually engaging communities.” And a plea for religions to reinstate the apophatic tradition that affirms the mystery, transcendence, and unknowability of God.

We are all Earth’s children,
And though we live and pray
And celebrate in different ways,
We are linked by a common dream

Beverley Smith

On Being Mortal – a Literature Review

Given that most of us in SOFiA are in our 70s or 80s, it seems strange that death and mortality play such a small role in our writings. In what follows, your Editor attempts to fill this void and to come to grips with the fact that we are not immortal and that life will come to an end for us all. Many thinkers regard exploring death as like staring at the sun; something that’s impossible for more than a fleeting instant. However, the aim in this review is to build up a picture of what it means to be mortal, a biological creature with a limited lifespan, an individual that is facing its own death, by surveying what literature, medicine, psychotherapy and modern theology have to say about it.

Geering Controversy

Lloyd Geering famously said, “man has no immortal soul,” setting off another round of the Geering controversy. An immortal soul is like an indestructible core of our being. The body may perish but the soul goes on. So no problems with doing away with “immortal” but surely, “soul” or something like it, is something we want to affirm. That’s the person, the core of our being, our personality, our self, what makes us us. Lloyd also says that he is not afraid of dying. Well, maybe he has found the secret of dealing with death, or maybe he is in denial, like most of us. But can he help the rest of us who may not be as anxiety-free as he is? In what follows we will indeed assume that there is no real immortal soul, no indestructible entity that survives death. Rather, ‘soul’ is an emergent property of the brain and its physical body. It is not nothing, no matter how difficult it may be to explain just what ‘soul’ is.

Part 1: LITERATURE and MUSIC

With the demise of traditional notions of immortality and life after death, leadership in thinking about death (especially when it comes to practical wisdom) seems to have passed from the theologians to the poets, novelists, doctors, and psychotherapists. We turn now to novelists, poets and artists.

The Death of Ivan Ilych by Leo Tolstoy

Ivan was an important functionary with marital difficulties, who, after seeing multiple doctors regarding a mysterious illness, concludes that he is dying. He found it difficult to grasp this. He was familiar with the syllogism, Caius is a man, all men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal. But somehow, this didn't apply to him. He was not a man in the abstract, but a creature quite separate from all others. He tried to ignore this reality without success; it kept intruding on his consciousness. Other people were no help; it seemed that they were only interested in whether he would vacate his position and give them a chance to fill it. He was tormented by the lie or the deception that everyone claimed he was just ill, not dying. He found some comfort in the assistance of his servant Gerasim. As time went on, he began to question whether his whole life had been wrong. At the end, he recognized the suffering he was causing others, and, determined to put things right, briefly acted in relation to his wife and son and found that death and pain were no more, and instead there was light. Then he died.

Nothing to be Frightened Of

That's the title of a book by Julian Barnes, a famous post-modern novelist. Death is the "nothing" that we are not to be frightened of, but that is a thought he expressed decades before the book, and death does seem to be something that haunts him. The book is a combination of memoir, memories of his parents and grandparents, together with reflections on many and varied authors and a meditation on death. It's compelling reading, and the tone is lightened by a wonderful sense of humour.

We should not forget that prior to this book, Barnes gave us a post-modern version of heaven in the last chapter of "A History of the World in 10 1/2 chapters". In *The Dream*, the protagonist is in a hotel-like situation. He is able to keep working on his golf indefinitely, getting his handicap down and down. Attempts to seduce the hotel staff get nowhere. Eventually, there seems no point in continuing with golf, when he has reached a state of unimprovable

almost-perfection. So he decides for extinction. The moral of the story is, when you look closely at the much-vaunted advantages of immortality, they don't actually stack up. Eventually, boredom and purposelessness increase to a point when it is not worth continuing. By contrast, being mortal creatures means that there is no time to do everything and to remediate bad decisions. This makes life, and the decisions we make in it, more critically important.

In *Nothing to be frightened of*, Barnes gives us vignettes describing the way he, his brother, his parents and grandparents, and a whole host of literary figures have faced or avoided death. Afraid of flying in his youth, he found that watching plane after plane take off or land while waiting for his flight, he lost that fear. However, the hope that the same might apply to death does not work. At the airport he watched people not die, but the death rate of the human race is nothing less than 100%. He also reflects on the alternatives we might face, even if we are unlikely to have a choice in the matter. Are you more afraid of dying or of death itself? He concluded that, logically, there is enough room in the brain for both. Would you like death to overtake you quickly, or have plenty of time to meditate on the end of life? If you find your faculties shutting down one by one, and the only brain activity left is causing you to fear death, you might wish for a quick end instead. Is it better to die before you are forgotten, or to be forgotten before you die? The realization that, while you are a popular novelist now, the number of your readers will gradually decline until there is only one left; a doctoral student a century from now might resurrect you from obscurity to write his thesis on you.

So being remembered is no enduring consolation. Even the human race and planet Earth will come to an end one day.

As an atheist who was never taken to church or Sunday school, Barnes has sympathy for Richard Dawkins, but he is not convinced by Dawkins' attempt to counter fear of death by diverting our gaze to the vastness of the heavens, or by telling us, that merely by existing, we are extraordinarily lucky in comparison with all the logical possibilities inherent in our genes that never come to fruition.

And then there is the case of Eugene O'Kelly, chairman and CEO of an American accounting firm. Learning that he had inoperable brain cancer and only 100 days to live, he set out, as a goal-driven person and corporate competitor, to apply the skill set of a CEO to his predicament. He draws up a to-do list that includes unwinding his many friendships. Unwinding for his

teenage daughter involved flying by private jet to Prague, Rome, and Venice, refuelling in the far North, which gives his daughter the chance to meet with the Inuit. An admirable approach, but he's probably avoiding something through compulsive activity.

Artur Koestler recorded his experiences in prison during the Spanish Civil War. He concluded that "one's disbelief in death grows in proportion to its approach" and that the mind plays tricks to deceive us, rather like Freud, who believed we couldn't imagine our own death, and who wrote: "It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death, and whenever we attempt to do so, we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators."

One Tree Hill by U2

This song is a memorial to Greg Carroll, a Maori boy who became a close associate of U2 and was killed in an accident while returning a motorcycle to Bono's house in Dublin. U2 returned to NZ to attend Greg's funeral. I'm struck by the freshness and originality of the images in the song. "The sun goes down in your eyes" as a metaphor for death. "We run like a river, runs to the sea," as a metaphor for our journey to the end of life and merging to a great infinity. "Raining in the heart" as a metaphor for the experience of grief. The following link is to a 1988 promotional video that includes the song.

<https://norselandsrock.com/one-tree-hill-u2/>

We turn away
To face the cold
Enduring chill
As the day begs
The night for mercy love

A sun so bright
It leaves no shadows
Only scars
Carved into stone
On the face of earth

The moon is up
And over One Tree Hill
We see the sun
Go down in your eyes

You run like a river
On like a sea
You run like a river
Runs to the sea

And in the world
A heart of darkness
A fire zone
Where poets speak their heart
Then bleed for it

It runs like a river
Runs to the sea
It runs like a river
To the sea

I don't believe
In painted roses
Or bleeding hearts
While bullets
Rape the night
Of the merciful, ah

I'll see you again
When the stars
Fall from the sky
And the moon
Has turned red
Over One Tree Hill

We run like a river
Runs to the sea
We run like a river
To the sea

And when it's raining
Raining hard
That's when the rain will
Break my heart

Raining, raining
In the heart
Raining in your heart
Raining, raining
To your heart
Raining, raining

Raining, raining
To your heart
Raining ooh, ooh
To your heart
To the sea

Oh, great ocean
Oh, great sea

Run to the ocean

Run to the sea

Life is Eternal by Carly Simon

Carly Simon is a pop singer, who wove the following traditional words into a modern song: "Life is eternal and love is immortal and death is only a horizon, and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight." These words are attributed to William Penn (1644 – 1718).

Life is Eternal

I've been doing a lot of thinking
About growing older and moving on
Nobody wants to be told that they're getting on
For a long, long stay
But just how long and who knows
And how and where my spirit will go
Will it soar like Jazz on a saxophone
Or evaporate on a breeze
Won't you tell me please
That life is eternal
And love is immortal
And death is only a horizon
Life is eternal
As we move into the light
And a horizon is nothing
Save the limit of our sight
Save the limit of our sight
Here on earth I'm a lost soul
Ever trying to find my way back home
Maybe that's why each new star is born
Expanding heaven's room
Eternity in bloom
And will I see you up in that heaven
In all its light will I know you're there
Will we say the things that we never dared
If wishing makes it so
Won't you let me know
That life is eternal
And love is immortal
And death is only a horizon
Life is eternal

As we move into the light
And a horizon is nothing
Save the limit of our sight
Save the limit of our sight

Friedensreich Hundertwasser

Hundertwasser was an unconventional Austrian artist who made his home in Aotearoa New Zealand. He was adamant that he should be buried naturally, and this required special Government permission, as it went against the regulations at that time. He wrote the following:

I am looking forward
To become humus myself
Buried naked without coffin
Under a beech tree planted by myself
On my Land in Aotearoa.

The interment should take place
Without a coffin, wrapped in a shroud,
In a Layer of earth at least 60 centimeters thick.
A tree should be planted on top of the grave
To guarantee that the deceased will Live on
Symbolically as well as in reality.

A dead person is entitled to reincarnation
In the form of, for example, a tree
That grows on top of him and through him.
The result would be a sacred forest of living dead.
A Garden of the Happy Dead.

Already with this brief survey of the arts we have a wonderful diversity of images that contrast with the monotony of Church tradition with respect to death. There's Ivan Ilych, who changed his attitude to wife and son and found that his pain was not troubling him, the fear of death was gone and instead there was light. There's Julian Barnes, whose dream shows that immortality is not what it was cracked up to be. Sooner or later, we would vote for oblivion. There's Bono from U2, with the image of life as a river running to the sea, opening up to a great infinity and Hundertwasser, insisting on a natural burial and seeing the tree growing from his remains as a form of reincarnation. Now

we are ready to look at the medical profession and psychotherapy in the next issue.

The Editor

Remembering Norman Maclean

On December 11th, 2023, the hall of Gisborne Boys High School was in overflow with those whose lives had been touched by Norman Maclean; teacher of Art and the Classics, artist, writer – Fiction and Non Fiction. In 2009 he won the \$10,000 Ashton Wylie Annual award for an unpublished work in the Body, Mind, Spirit genre. As a theatrical director, he brought to Gisborne a memorable feast: not only popular Irish plays but unforgettable Shakespeare. A popular lecturer for U3A; as a travel guide to Greece and the Middle East, his tours were memorable by his having such an outstanding knowledge of history. Despite his fascination with spirituality, Maclean's outlook was secular and he was a popular marriage celebrant.

Norman was a member of Sea of Faith, contributing articles and speaking at the national conference in Hawkes Bay. We in Gisborne benefitted from his knowledge. In 2017 when the 500 years anniversary of the Protestant



Reformation occurred, our group were privileged to have him lead us through the history of the monk Luther. I was riveted learning about his walk through the Swiss Alps to Rome and later viewing a television program about tourists making the same, but a more leisurely trip in the summertime.

I remember his article in the Gisborne Herald when Trump arrived on the world scene and his comparison of this awful man with Nero tied up the situation expertly.

A quote from his 'A BAD BOY IN PERSPECTIVE.....'

With the exception of Jesus, possibly the most misunderstood of all Biblical identities is that villain of the Nativity, Herod the Great. But by the standards of his day he was no worse than many another. His close friend in the west,

Augustus Caesar, had a worse record in terms of judicial slaughtering and could not blame his ill health for deranged decision making.

When compared with the illustrious Julius Caesar - great uncle of Augustus - Herod was comparatively mild. Caesar managed to win fame for his conquest of Gaul with the slaughter of at least one million. Unknown thousands of Gallic prisoners of war flooded the Roman slave markets thereafter.'

Herod's legacy was a series of architectural marvels throughout his dominions, chief among them being the temple at Jerusalem, the largest and most spectacular place of worship in the entire empire with its thirty-five acres of glittering courtyards, porticos and the colossal sanctuary that supposedly housed the Holy One of Israel behind its elaborate tapestry.'

Norman who, during his life, made an incredible contribution to Sea of Faith, died on December 1st, 2023. At his funeral the Ombudsman Peter Boshier officiated, while the overheads proclaimed the wisdom of hundreds of sages.

Our gratitude Norman, for your incredible contribution to our lives. As Mark Peters, Reporter for the Gisborne Herald wrote: 'Beyond his enormous body of work, all his paintings, all of his prints, all of his plays and all of his artwork, all of his books and all of his writing, in one stupendous lifetime I'd say his greatest body of work is us.'

Beverley Smith