

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



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

In Praise of the Secular

Lloyd Geering published *In Praise of the Secular* in conjunction with St Andrew’s Trust in 2007. Margaret Mayman, from the St Andrew’s Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, provided the Foreword. The book is 56 pages, with no illustrations. The four chapters that comprise the book each stand by themselves: What Does Secular Mean? The Emergence of the Secular Age, The Value of Being Secular, and Spirituality in the Secular World.

Lloyd provides a scholarly introduction to “secular”, tracing the idea to Erasmus from 1509. Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus was a Dutch Christian humanist, Catholic theologian, educationalist, satirist, and philosopher (2). Lloyd is not without humour, quoting Erasmus “monks they bray like donkeys in church repeating by rote the psalms they have not understood”. Erasmus was a former monk, now viewed as the spiritual ancestor of modern religious thought. Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched. But the work of these two was based on the conflict between Catholic and Protestant.

Etymology of the word “secular” - the age or world in which we live is worldly. It focuses on life on earth as opposed to eternity. Originally religion didn’t refer to a set of beliefs but to a commitment or devotion that people displayed towards their most important interest.

But that real world can be a pretty nasty place at times and perhaps that is why secular thought espouses 'justice in the marketplace and peace among the nations' just as proposed by Israeli pundits.

Do we all live in the same real world? YES and NO. Reality is an interpreted worldview, so each has his own. But increasingly we live in a new cultural age that is increasingly global.

The foundations for constructing this new world include Copernicus Galileo (planet earth as part of a greater universe) Newton (universal laws of nature) and Darwin (human species interconnected). John Stuart Mill, in 1851, published *On Liberty* – a theory of a secular state.

The values of a secular state include defence of human rights, abolition of slavery, emancipation of women, legitimacy of homosexuality.

Now the conflict is between religious and those who regard themselves as secular. Christians and Muslims vs Dawkins/Hitchen/Harris who view religions as superstition. Lloyd explores a mediating position.

Dawkins points to biblical ignorance but suggests that we not lose touch with the treasured heritage of the cultural past.

Spirituality provides the individual with joy and self-control but in conjunction with others - kindness, love, faithfulness and gentleness - living together in harmony.

Lloyd examines in part the history of attitudes toward nature. Christians had little interest in Nature (save Noah) but St Francis spoke of Mother Earth, out of these monks came Roger Bacon who looked to observation of nature leading to experimental science. Thomas Berry focuses on the survival of the natural world. Lloyd proposes that this - 'worldly needs of pure air, clean water, healthy food, adequate shelter, the regeneration of the species and the overcoming of threats to human survival have become genuinely religious issues'.

Don't put your head in the sand, that is my takeaway. Trace the origins of secularism and then live a new form of interconnected spirituality.

Mary Ellen Warren

An Excerpt from *In Praise of the Secular*

Religio, and hence religion, basically meant conscientiousness, and in particular ‘a conscientious concern for what really matters’. This is what Paul Tillich was recovering for the word when he defined religion as ‘the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life’. Carla Della Casa, an Italian scholar of modern religion, put it even more simply: ‘Religion is a total mode of the interpreting and living of life’.

[W Cantwell] Smith suggested that in the current confusion we should stop talking about ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ and instead fasten our attention on the capacity of people to be religious. In this sense an atheist like Richard Dawkins, who is sincerely and passionately protesting against the traditional understanding of God out of a concern for truth, is to be judged more religious than those nominal Christians who have at best a half-hearted commitment to the God they claim to believe in.

Further, Smith asserted that we should stop thinking of religion as a ‘thing’ – something consisting of beliefs, rituals, holy scriptures, moral codes and so on – that we may choose to embrace or reject. He called such a complex of individual and shared elements the ‘cumulative tradition’ of a particular path trodden by people on the religious quest. As but one of many routes, it is not to be confused with the quest itself, for it is simply the collective behaviour of people who walk a particular pathway of faith. Being a product of the inherent religious dimension of human existence, it must always remain secondary to the continuing religious quest itself.

Humans show themselves to be religious whenever and wherever they take the questions of human existence seriously, and then create a common response to whatever they find to be of ultimate value to them. The only truly non-religious person is one who treats human existence as trivial or meaningless, for ultimately the religious phenomenon arises out of human experience as we reflect on the fundamental nature of human existence. With but rare exceptions, people everywhere and at all times have made some kind of response to the demands of human existence. They have tried to make something of life. They have looked for meaning and purpose. They have hoped for some kind of fulfilment. For such reasons humankind has in the past been universally religious, and there is no good reason to suspect that in the

future people will cease to be religious. And this is true even though an increasing number have grown dissatisfied with the religious forms of the past, having found them to be irrelevant in the new cultural age we have entered.

From *In Praise of the Secular* by Lloyd Geering, 2007, pages 10 and 11.

Ephesus- Recent Impressions and Reflections

This article by Murray Jansen, a more recent member of Ephesus, a Wellington based group closely aligned with SOFiA, contains current information on the group and some considerations regarding the future. It follows on from the article by Ian Harris in the previous newsletter.

As a relative newcomer to Ephesus here are some personal impressions from the last few years:

I've enjoyed the informality: the cup of tea and pot-luck finger food, catch-up with familiar faces, then with tables cleared, the opening: "We meet to explore and understand ways of fully living and being in the 21st Century, not forgetting what has been in the past and looking to what will be in the future."

There is simplicity and directness in this, and the night's topic is set in motion. To "explore" and "understand" means our minds will be engaged – that's a given. Richard Rohr says that a characteristic of liberals is their reaching for what is "real" and authentic. That implies some mental activity - and some honest reflection. This is Ephesus.

Discussions, usually part of a presentation, often bring up a personal insight or roadblock that someone has wrestled with, although in a larger group setting there is not always time to tease things out. The absence and welfare of members is noted at meetings by those in touch, and behind-the-scenes contacts maintained. I've been impressed with the range and depth of interests among members (they are often the session presenters in the list below), the variety of book titles I hear about, and the willingness to consider ideas. Some session topics over the last year or so:

"Do we really want a good society" (pre-election series);

"Darwin in his Life and Times";

"Saving Jesus from the Church" (Robin Meyers on YouTube);

Dominic Crossan: illustrated talks on Resurrection and Ascension (video series);

"Impermanence in Religion, Philosophy, Art and Quilting";

"Francis of Assisi as Patron Saint of the Natural World";

“Upending Power and Privilege”;
“The Green Man”;
“Pentecost: Inspiration and Music”;
“Process theology”;
“What are we going to do with the Bible?”.

This last topic was an historical overview by Jim Cunningham whose regular input is always appreciated.

The weekend retreats, with focus topic and speaker, have been an annual highlight in pre-Covid days. As well as exploring a theme, these were opportunities for members to spend time together and develop closer relationships. Now, I wonder if the energy is still in the group to revive this?

Occasional liturgies remind us that there is an implicit centre to this group, and that we also value this quieter space together. That we continue to build regular liturgies into our programme says something: Ephesus is more than individuals with burning questions (and answers) and a general pooling of ideas.

Religion is complex and multilayered – apparently binding people in different ways depending on our personal needs, age, education, or social setting. For it Biblical roots and rich Judeo-Christian tradition are important. “Spirituality”, tricky to pin down, is always present too, yet easily slips under the radar, maybe because it can be very personal - and fragile. I notice the aversion to invoking simplistic or outdated ways of talking about “God”. Rational territory is more easily navigated, but in my mind, by itself, is incomplete.

The future: with an aging membership where now for Ephesus? Do we look to younger people to hold the old baton – or a new one? Would the new holders run things in the same way? Or does the new future need to be more action oriented – something the Ephesus I know was not expected to be.

There is something perennial about Ian Harris’s Ephesus metaphor of transposing the valued past into current culture – today largely secular; and the brief set out almost 35 years ago is certainly wide enough to admit any worthwhile new directions. So, is it now just a matter of settling on burning 21st century issues such as climate change, interfaith connections, inequality? If so, the way they are handled may be all-important.

Ephesus website: <https://ephesus.org.nz/programme.htm>

Towards the Future

Summary of Presentation by Cleveland Yates to SOFiA (Sea of Faith in Aotearoa), Sept 21, 2024

Clive gave us a summary of Christian and Pre-Christian theology over 5000 years. It has changed over that time; but the average person doesn't realize that. Some say that religion is finished. But Clive says no. In this day of increasing religious freedom, you are enabled to find God for yourself. But along with God, show respect and care.

Based on Spong's analysis, Clive proposes:

- 1 Choose words carefully, words that embrace life
 - 2 Community is important and as part of that a shared ritual is supportive
 - 3 Support Ethical purposes: charity, kindness, good will
- Music and Arts are important for expressing meaning.

General observations

The PowerPoint slides were attention-getting and helpful. They supplied a WOW factor. Clive and the screen worked well together; he was a person, not just a speaker.

Questions for Clive

Where does the environment fit in?

Clive indicated it was in kindness to others which includes other species and the planet.

Can we obtain notes?

Yes they will be published

Question of original sin coming from Genesis through Paul 's letter to the Romans.

Paul himself didn't argue for atonement. In place of atonement, with its acritical overtones, Paul spoke of Christ's followers as being 'in Christ', a phrase that focuses on living in the Way or Spirit of Christ'.

Thanks to Cleveland Yates for his presentation and for the powerful PowerPoint slides.

Mary Ellen Warren

Saving God from Religion and Spiritual Defiance

Both by Robin Meyers. A review by Tom Hall.

Robin Myers is a phenomenon. This thoroughly progressive Christian of the stamp and calibre of Jack Spong, Dom Crossan, and Lloyd Geering has been for nearly four decades senior pastor of Mayflower Christian Church UCC in Oklahoma City – the epicenter of evangelicalism. (By way of analogy imagine an Eastern Orthodox priest serving a church in Rome or a Sunni imam in a Riyadh mosque.) Then note that he is an emeritus professor of philosophy at Oklahoma City University and the author of eight widely regarded books on matters religious and spiritual.

Thus when my pal Pete Cowley asked me to review two of his books for the Sea of Faith New Zealand newsletter, I agreed – but with the proviso that rather than offering the opinions of a minor-league, I would choose a number of brief selections that might both indicate the material of the books and motivate readers to obtain and further appreciate their vital lessons.

The first is *Saving God from Religion*, one of a flood of books and essays in the last couple of decades that exhort us to recognize the failure of our religious traditions to deal with a changing world. Its fundamental topic is how the pulpit and the pews must create a new relationship and vision based on reality rather than myth.

The long-held distinction between the sacred and the profane is itself profane.

Jeremiah... suggests that if worship is substituted for justice, the Temple itself will be destroyed (Jer 7:57)...For saying this [he] was almost killed,... foreshadowing the fate of another Jewish prophet named Jesus. The message is exactly the same: Participation in empty ritual without personal and social transformation is a mockery of prayer.

[W]hat is the biggest problem facing our society?...It is *greed* – the demon stepchild of all the other deadly sins.

God doesn't force anything to happen. God offers possibilities.

[Process theology] was a needed corrective to the idea of God as wholly other, restoring the idea of an undivided creation, free will, and the universe as an awe-inspiring and continuous process of self-revelation...Millions now believe God is not “out there” but...“in here”... They no longer look up to find God. They look around.

So completely has the church replaced the ethics of Jesus with doctrines *about* Jesus that if you ask someone ... what it means to be a Christian, she or he will probably begin by listing a set of beliefs.

In the Sermon on the Mount there is not a single word about what to believe, only words about what to do and how to be. By the time the Nicene Creed is written, only three centuries later... – *only* words about what to believe.

The doctrine of original sin [diagnosed] the human race with a disease that only the church could cure. That is the ultimate spiritual franchise.

...Christ is not Jesus' last name but a recognition that the human and the divine could be united in space and time – in the actual, present world that we inhabit.

I grew up singing “Blessed Assurance,” but what the world needs now is a “blessed assignment.” Churches [must] be “doers of the word, and not merely hearers...”

In the years since the words “deep water” were first uttered in a sanctuary on the red dirt of Oklahoma, over 150 volunteers have served the Mayflower Medical Outreach...All because of a puff of air turned loose in a sanctuary? Can a minister flapping his lips in Oklahoma cause a medical mission miracle in Nicaragua? That is the spiritual version of quantum entanglement.

If organized religion is to survive and not destroy us, then we will have to recognize that God does not *do* anything. But that without God, who connects all things to all things everywhere all the time, *nothing gets done*.

Oklahoma clergy routinely thank God in their prayers for...fracking, when what they are really thankful for is the wealth it has created. It would be better to ask forgiveness for the consequences of something that God had nothing to do with. This is precisely the problem with objectifying the divine and then placing it on retainer. It removes the idea that the divine itself is being wounded and we are to blame.

[This may be the most destructive myth in the church: that] *faith can be personally redemptive without being socially responsible*.

A theology of consequence suggests...[that] God is *all* of us... [that] no good deed goes unrewarded.

Instead of concluding that we are “a little lower than God,” we might consider something that is both more frightening and more empowering: that we are the very image of God and that our treatment of one another is our treatment of God.

Prayer is a verbalized form of meditation, and the object is not to get an answer, but to shift consciousness, to interrupt the mundane, to mitigate selfishness, to admit we are addicted to illusions of control and infatuated with immortality...Dom Crossan put it well: “Are we praying for God’s intervention, or is God praying for our collaboration?”

A man confessed to me once that as a child he loved to sing “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” “It was enormously comforting,” he said, “[until I got old enough to discover that he frequently drops it”... Our deep desire to honor God may in fact be dishonoring God... Instead of [imagining] a God who delivers the good, the bad, and the ugly...why can’t we evolve into creatures who can separate the tragedies that result from purely physical forces in the natural world from the spiritual consequences of our own moral choices?...We might find ourselves once again grounded in the mystery of what Barbara Taylor Brown has called the Luminous Web. What if we do indeed live in a world of spiritual as well as physical equilibrium?...We can continue to live in a God-created pre-scientific cosmology that no longer exists, or we can graduate to an understanding of God that is as complicated and mysterious as the universe itself [and] move from fear to reverence. From obedience to wisdom. From separation to unity... Even the smallest of decisions add up to enormous consequences, but not because God is punishing or rewarding us. This is the created order...We are free to participate in the...consequences of the Luminous Web, or we can wait to be rescued. “You have heard it said, but I say...” is a radical template for the dismissal of faith as a belief system, now replaced by an ethic, a new way of being in the world.

[Rabbi Heschel was led] to conclude that the primary emotion of the truly religious should be *embarrassment* [at] the gap not only between the rich and the poor, but between what ought to be and what is.

What if God is not trying to save us, but [calling us] to become mindful of our choices and the infinite power of their consequences?

True freedom is about what you *give up* to be in real relationships, not simply what you get from [them]. The most important question was answered long ago. We *are* our sisters’ and brothers’ keeper.

Our sins are not against God but against our neighbour, in whom the spirit of God resides.

Selfishness and cruelty are the gifts that keep on giving. Love multiplies into infinity as well. The choice is ours.

If science can point us toward an undivided physical universe, then why can't religion point us toward an undivided ethical universe in which no action ... is inconsequential? What if so-called unintended consequences reveal just how mindless we really are when it comes to moral cause and effect?...When we destroy ourselves with bad choices,...the devil did *not* make us do it. We have just stopped paying attention and gone in search of a scapegoat.

I am interested in wisdom as a way of *being* in the world, not the incarnation as a singular metaphysical occurrence unavailable to the rest of us. An emphasis on wisdom could actually unite the world's religions, because it is grounded in behavior, not belief.

Spiritual Defiance

The second book is Meyers' *Spiritual Defiance*. Based on the author's 2013 Beecher Lectures at Yale, it is a different sort of book: no longer is the theme limited to "Saving God from the Church"; its existential dimension demands the broader and grittier caption "Saving the Church from Civilization." The Prologue sets the scene for his polemic:

Here on the red dirt where I was born, ...I watched the last ounce of prophetic courage and relevance disappear from Christian communities... Who thinks of the church anymore as a defiant community...or faith itself as embodied resistance to the principalities and powers? Whatever else may be said of the Jesus Movement, it was born in opposition to the status quo... Its founder constituted an unacceptable risk to the Roman Empire, and that resistance seemed so counterintuitive and subversive that even his mental health was questioned.

[Some] people blame science for the death of the church... Yet science is not a traitor. It is a methodology... Science magnifies the details of creation, but not its moral or ethical significance... Science is not the enemy of faith, only of ignorance... [O]thers argue that the church is dying because it is deluded about its enduring relevance... In the twentieth century loud voices called for the abandonment of all ancient institutions as oppressive relics.

[But t]he Beloved Community was born in resistance to the established order of death and indignity. It was...a body of non-compliance with the principalities and powers. Now we are as compliant as the subjects of any empire, resisting nothing that threatens our comfort, our success, our reputation, or our safety... [and we] coddle the industries that ravage the earth. [To] help the American church grow, we have dressed it in the uniform of Western culture.

So let this be the subject of my Beecher Lectures and book: faith as resistance to ego, to orthodoxy, and... to empire.

Audacity comes easily to most preachers ... because we ... stand before our congregations and presume to tell strangers the secrets of their hearts... They listen politely and patiently, even when we don't know what we are talking about, and a deadly illusion sets in – that we do know what we are talking about. The ego is such a beast.

[T]he church of Jesus Christ ... once was an “embodied force opposed,” ... a resilient colony of dissenters from the forces of death ... that destroy and marginalize creation; ... [it was] born to resist in love all that is the enemy of love... [M]inistry is a career, which means that the clergy are trained to please the various constituencies that will advance their career. Yet we do this at the risk of forgetting that our first obligation is to please only the One who called us....

[T]he lifeblood of the gospel is being drained by clergy whose overwhelming desire to be admired and affirmed robs them of their call to be authentic... and I say this ... [as] a minister with an ego and ... a fairly well-developed sense of self... [I]n order ... to take our work more seriously, we are going to have to take ourselves less seriously... Certain personality types are not suited to parish ministry: ... the grandiose, the perfectionist, and the depressive ... They call for active resistance... [for] they put us at risk.

Resisting orthodoxy, on the other hand, will set off alarm bells of heresy... To be a disciple of the resister from Nazareth is to resist theological perversions as well... [We must] push back against the idea that Christianity is an orthodox belief system instead of a very unorthodox way of being in the world... The greatest illusion of all ... is the idea that anything resembling early Christian discipleship would be recognized, or tolerated, in the present age... Our obsession with right worship and right belief ... is ultimately a form of narcissism... [D]oubt is a precondition of faith, not its antithesis...

[W]hen theological explanations of Jesus become more important than the experience of Jesus, the church becomes a house of cards. Arguing about the ... divinity of Jesus has gotten a lot of people killed... But it has not made a single disciple... [I]n clinging to orthodoxy and the cosmology it requires, we are forcing intelligent and honest people to walk away.

People no longer feel obligated to attend services on Sunday morning pretending to believe things they know are not true in order to get rewards they doubt are even available... It would be wise to remember that these beliefs are primarily metaphysical claims about him by others, ...rather than claims about how his teachings could make teachers, healers, and mystics out of all of us... [W]e are not believers who act, but actors who believe... The deadliest illusion in Christendom is that faith is the transfer of information sufficient for salvation. Jesus rises from that muddy water [of baptism] not just cleansed and forgiven, but God-intoxicated, ...then spends the rest of his brief and tragic life asking people ,,, to drink from the same cup.

Creeds and doctrines were meant to answer great theological questions, but ended up creating a theological monarchy... How strange that we insist on theological uniformity when those first followers of Jesus disagreed about almost everything.

We do not look at Jesus and see a God Man, but rather a man so well acquainted with God as to shame what we think it means to be human.

We know that Jesus resisted the ways of Rome, and that his first followers called him Lord, which means that Caesar was not. But we still suffer under the illusion that we don't live in an empire. This illusion is deep and deadly and must be undone. [T]he Jesus People formed spiritual collectives, BELOVED COMMUNITIES OF DEFIANCE... Read Acts 4: "no one claimed private ownership of any property ... there was not a poor person among them"... [Y]ou might use a stronger word than "socialism" to describe the early Jesus People... What happened to the church that once gave the empire fits and now fits right in with empire?

Illusions of being a "Christian nation" must also be undone... the cross is not the mark of a cosmic bargain [but] of cosmic resistance.; When I look at a cross, I see an icon of Roman brutality... [you] hose down the area ... and close the Jesus file... So, who opened it? Perhaps... it was women who opened it – women who went to the gravesite to perform funeral rituals... in defiance of Roman prohibitions, especially for victims of crucifixion... Why do we still look

for Jesus in the sky when the real miracles are always happening on the ground?

It is a myth that the gospel of Jesus Christ can ever be personally redemptive without being socially responsible: ... [C]harity and justice are not the same thing;... Just as Moses came against Pharaoh and Jesus came against Rome, so must the church complete the story by coming against this and every empire that displaces the power of love with the love of power.

An empire [is] something that] exerts ... “sovereignty, domination, or control” ... For example, there is an American entertainment and mass media empire, an American political empire [,] and an American cultural and religious empire that rewards dull conformity and obedience... Just consider, for example, the endless chatter on professional sports talk shows...

“Onward, Christian Soldiers” is a theological contradiction... Just ponder this: we went from no Christians could be soldiers in the second century to only Christians could be soldiers in the fourth century.

[Or] consider that in the Sermon on the Mount... [there are] only words about what to do and how to be in the world. Yet in just a few hundred years, ... the great creeds [contain] not a single word about what to do or how to be... but only what to believe.

Then, following a brief fulmination against predatory capitalism and the compliant Chamber of Commerce Jesus who approves of whatever the market will bear, Meyers offers a brief description of eighteen offensive cases or situations to each of which the audience is urged to respond by shouting, “For the love of God, resist!” He closes with a heartfelt wish:

“Would that the church today could stoke [the] fires of resistance again!”

[How to Split Our Society: the Follow-on](#)

The February edition of the newsletter contained an article by Dame Anne Salmond, reprinted from Newsroom. This so resonated with Maria Cash that she was determined to take action. The result: a well-attended meeting on October 7 at St Andrews On-the-Terrace jointly organised by the Wellington Ephesus group and St Andrews, at which Anne Salmond and Professor Jonathan Boston spoke on *Divisiveness and Democracy in our Society*.

You can listen to this conversation at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvO2rwWoiIM>

Editor's Note

Thanks to Mary Ellen for her book review of 'In Praise of the Secular'. It was her first attempt at a review. Also apologies for not including the third and final part of my series on Death; with the flood of offers for publication, there was no room left in this issue.

About SOFiA

SOFiA (The Sea of Faith in Aotearoa) is a network of people interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of values, meaning and spirituality. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives. SOFiA is not a church: it is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and perspectives. SOFiA itself has no creed; its members come from many faiths and from those with no attachment to any religious institution. If you are in sympathy with our aims, you are most welcome to join us; receive our Newsletter, and/or attend a local group. We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from "Sea of Faith", the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

Committee

Our national Committee oversees the work of SOFiA.

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