

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



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

The Ephesus Group in Wellington

This article provides a picture of the Ephesus group initiated by Ian Harris in Wellington in 1990. It is the talk Ian gave at the 25th Anniversary of Ephesus in 2015 (slightly updated) and gives interesting insights into how and why the group was set up. Quoting the hymn by Charles Wesley and alluding to the painful history of the beginnings of the Methodist Church reflected in it, he titles his talk “And Are We Yet Alive?”

While the origins of Ephesus were initially within the New Zealand Presbyterian Church, members today come from many different denominations and some have no religious affiliation at all. Active members currently number 15-30 and a small programme planning group meets about twice a year.

And Are We Yet Alive?

On the 25th Anniversary of Ephesus May 3, 2015, by Ian Harris

If “we” is Ephesus, yes, we are – and that’s somewhat surprising to me. When first we met in March 1990, people were asked to commit to four exploratory sessions – yet here we are, still meeting, 25 years on.



Our title for the evening, *And are we yet alive?*, has an honourable back-story in church history, especially for the people called Methodist. Methodism was a movement among the poor, especially in the new mining towns of England and Wales, and it was loathed and despised by the squirearchy and the Anglican establishment. In some places mobs were set on the Methodist preachers and those who had gathered to hear them. They were attacked with mud, stones, rotten eggs and staves.

Well, our experience as an Ephesus Group has been less dramatic than that, thank goodness. The churches from which we've come have ignored us. And we've got on with our life without them. Nonetheless, Ephesus does share one key feature of the early days of Methodism: it was conceived in the womb of an existing church, which then disowned it.

Our Origins

So how did we come about? Tonight I shall go right back to the beginning, because not everyone knows that Ephesus had a pre-existence.

In 1986 I took up an appointment as Director of Communication for the Presbyterian Church. As time went on, I became aware of a malaise among many people, a sense of dissonance between what was being affirmed in

preaching, the creeds and a lot of the hymns, and what they were thinking deep down. As John Spong said, “The heart cannot worship what the mind rejects.” So good folk were turning off, dropping out, or just hanging on by their fingernails and increasingly wondering why. This, of course, was the result of the secularisation of society over the past 200 years, and of the churches’ unsatisfactory response to it. We had moved into a new world, but the church was anchored firmly in the old one.

I was Director of Communication, and I saw this as a communication problem. How was it to be addressed? My answer was first, to encourage the church to acknowledge the new reality; and second, to set up a research group in the Communication Department to check out the extent of what was going on.

For this, I proposed the umbrella name Ephesus. It was a New Testament metaphor growing out of the tradition that it was at Ephesus, in western Turkey, that John took a Jewish understanding of the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, and transposed it so it would resonate with people of a Greek cultural heritage. The name “Ephesus” suggests that a transposition of similar proportions is necessary in Christianity today: from a pre-modern interpretation of our Christian heritage to one that fits with the secular understandings of the 21st century.

We produced a number of booklets addressing these issues, eight in all, beginning with one based on Massey University research on New Zealanders’ values:

What New Zealanders Believe

Attitudes and Life-Styles

Earthing our Faith in the 21st Century / The Church in the New Era

Bridging the Generations

Salvation and Hope in the New Zealand of the 1990s

The Greening of Christianity

A Deep Flowing Stream (on New Zealand women and their churches)

Exploring the Meaning of Life.

All these were published as titles in the “Ephesus Series”. The first five added the line “Presbyterian Church of New Zealand”, the last three “Christian Research Association of New Zealand”. There’d been a switch, as I’ll explain.

Broadening Out

Then I developed a proposal to broaden what we’d been doing to a more comprehensive “Project Ephesus” – a request to the Council of Assembly in its

budget-setting role to allow me to spend one day a week working on this approach.

It was approved, and in February 1989 we got under way with an exploratory group comprising Yvonne Curtis, Lester Reid, Shirley Murray, Maurice Brown, Nola Ker (Borrell), Sharon Ross-Ensor, Jim Veitch, for a time Silvia Crane, and myself.

At that point Ephesus was defined as “a project to explore new ways of understanding God and expressing faith in terms of New Zealand culture and experience, and to form networks of people throughout New Zealand who wish to share in the task”.

Turning-Point

Then in July 1989, out of the blue and without any consultation at all, the Council of Assembly dropped the Ephesus initiative. I was totally cheesed off, to put it mildly – that’s when I started looking for another job. Later the council ditched the research group, too.

So I put to the exploratory group three options:

- Lie down and die.
- Get up and kick.
- Push on with the Ephesus emphasis outside the institution that had rejected it.

The issue for me was a choice between an open, inclusive approach in matters of faith, and giving priority to the survival of parishes where “the unity of the church” demanded that nobody must rock the boat. My interest was clearly with the first of those. Well, our little ad-hoc group continued to meet, and finally decided to test the ideas we’d been discussing by inviting people to come to four sessions early in 1990. We produced a programme and sent a letter to people who might be interested. Here are a couple of quotes from that letter:

“The starting point is that the way people experience and understand reality in this secular age is so different from the past that a wholesale rethinking of theology is needed, to be reflected in the way the Church understands God, and in the way we worship . . .

“Ephesus doesn’t assume it has all the right answers. But we think that at least we are starting with the right questions. If you think so too and would like to take an active part in an unpredictable journey, you are welcome to join with others at . . . [time and place].”

After the four sessions, we asked people if they wished to continue or not. They did. At the end of the first year, we asked again, Do you want to carry on in the new year or not? They did, and the answer has been “yes” for 25 years.

I’ve spent some time on the origins of Ephesus because people know less about them – and the nearer we get to today, the more you’ll be aware of anyway.

Milestones

Now I’ll touch on a few milestones in our development, and then reflect briefly on the unpredictable journey we’ve been on.

- Ephesus has a leaflet setting out our aims and emphases. In 25 years we’ve made only two changes. One is where we referred to “exploring new ways of understanding Christian faith in [our] increasingly secular world”. That was changed to “understanding and expressing Christian faith”, etc.

And we originally had “Its God is the I AM God, not a God defined, a God ‘out there” Then someone said: “I don’t know what that means”, and I said “Neither do I.” So we changed it to “Each person is free to think of God and express that understanding in his or her own way”. Behind both of those, of course, was an attempt to emphasise an open, non-dogmatic approach, and not pin talk of God down in a doctrinal straitjacket.

- We moved about town. We’ve met in the national offices of the Presbyterian Church, at St Andrew’s on The Terrace, St Peter’s Undercroft, Crossways, Trinity Union (Wellington South), and in recent years at Johnsonville Uniting Church.
- In 1993 we began to spend a weekend away, first in the Marist Brothers’ beach house at Otaki, then at the Magnificat Community at Cross Creek. The purpose in 1993 was to watch and discuss Don Cupitt’s Sea of Faith TV series, and in following years The Power of Myth, Healing and the Mind, and so on. We obviously valued these weekends, and they continued till Covid, and subsequently an ageing membership, led to our dropping them.

- Ephesus was heavily involved in forming the Sea of Faith Network in New Zealand – eight members of the foundation committee were from Ephesus, and we planned the first national conference at Hamilton. Ephesus and Sea of Faith overlapped closely at first, but since then they've diverged and taken their own paths. Which is fair enough.
- We allowed ourselves the freedom to fail. If something was worth trying, it seemed better to try it – and if it didn't work, we learnt something for next time.
- Ephesus recognised gradually that there's more to faith than endlessly chewing the fat on worthy topics. That led to our actively exploring new ways to express what we were discovering, and so to a new approach to liturgy. Lots of people have been involved at various times in the preparation and performance of liturgies, with Jill Harris making a major contribution. In the longer term, reclaiming liturgy is probably the most important thing we do.
- Out of our exploring and honest sharing there has developed a sense of community, a valuing of, and commitment to, one another.
- Another milestone was, after 10 years, my relinquishing the roles of devising our programme and acting as co-ordinator for the group. It isn't my group, it's our group. And we've been well served over the years by Maxine Cunningham, Norm Ely, Jeanette Brunton, Archie Kerr, Rob Wilkinson, Margaret Rushbrook, and today (2024) Maria Cash.

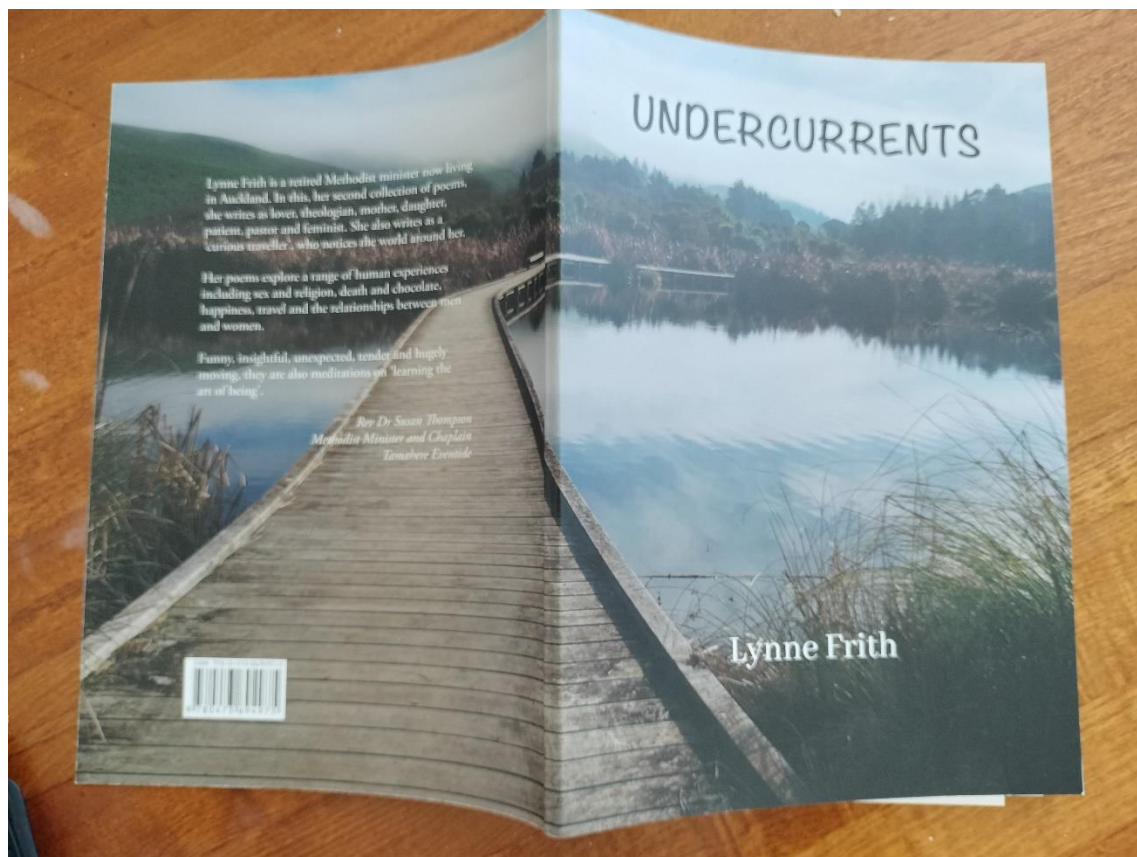
So has it all been worthwhile? I can only answer personally, and for me yes, in spades. They've been years of delving, widening horizons, exploring themes that are off limits or frowned on in a lot of church circles. Years of fluctuation in degrees of participation, but there have always been opportunities to participate, and encouragement to participate. Years of making new friends and, sadly, losing old ones; yet we will remember them, for they remain part of the fabric of our communal experience.

So here we are, 25 years on, still ready to learn what we can, still ready to share in the life of a unique faith community, still aspiring in our consumer society to be more rather than to have more. At least I hope so.

So are we yet alive? Too right we are, and let's go on together, in the hope that the best is yet to be.

Ian Harris

,Book Review: Undercurrents by Lynne Frith



The cover photograph of a boardwalk in Pekapeka Wetlands, south of Hastings, was taken by Sally Carter, Presbyterian minister in Napier.

Lynne Frith had chosen to live in Hawkes Bay in her early years of retirement, and both had served Wellington churches in early ministries.

The photo captures well the searching spirit that underlies Lynne's collection of forty-six poems. The boardwalk imagery symbolises walking the spiritual faith journey through a darkened bush landscape and over deep waters of uncertain depth.

A similar idea is caught in the following poem:

Fancy Footwork

Oh, there is a man walking on a roof.

Not as remarkable as walking on water
but just as tricky.

Not only is there the matter
of elegant footwork

needed for walking on a slope

but also the large bucket of paint
which would be messy
If the man walking on the roof
fell over.

The trick to walking on water
is knowing where the shallow bits are.

The ordinariness of imagery, the careful placing and length of lines, the repetition of key words, and the punch line to end, all illustrate the wit and wisdom of Lynne's poems. Neither can we overlook the scriptural reference.

Church ministers, in their preaching and prayers, choose their words with the congregational needs paramount. It is not that their salary depends on this, but rather that they communicate most ably when their words reflect the life experience and common sense of the people for whom they offer their pastoral ministry.

The writing of poetry is a more personal act. There is a greater freedom to create and play with language. It both reveals and conceals. In a selection of eleven poems published in *Music in the Air* Summer/Autumn 2008, Lynne writes: 'Readers of poetry often assume that all poetry is autobiographical. It is more accurate to describe mine as responses to both lived and observed experience...When I read poetry, which I do avidly, the inspiration behind a poem is less important than the response the poem evokes in me.'

Two categories provide a framework to the choice and diversity of subject matter in this collection:

First is C.S. Lewis's four loves described in Greek thought: familial or affection (storge), friendship (philia), romantic (eros) and spiritual (agape) – 'the highest does not stand without the lowest'.

And second, a listing of topics: places of ministry, the landscape of Aotearoa, arts of painting and music, New Zealand poets, road travel, the four seasons, home life, travel overseas, loners, relations between women and men, and moments of epiphany.

There is a Prelude 'Opening words from an old friend', written by Dr Nicola Francis, an ordained Spiritual Carer, Wellington. This is a wonderful tribute to Lynne as lifelong friend and poet. Readers could first make their own acquaintance with Lynne's poems, and then come back to this foreword as guide to deeper levels of meaning.

Readers are encouraged to take time to find their own meanings and stories from the poems. Earlier I wrote about the language of poetry that 'reveals and conceals'. That is, it moves from the literal to metaphorical, the outward to the inward, the physical to the spiritual.

Each reader is invited to find their own interpretation of the poem. Each reader is open to further changes in understandings. The message is open-ended, waiting for the reader to find their own meaning or meanings!

Nicola Francis's Prelude records Lynne's learning to live with Parkinson's disease. This led to her return to Auckland, where church, family and friends give support. This shadow has slowed down her passionate commitment to life's callings and causes. Now she heeds the doctor's advice to manage her illness, and choose a more quiet life, accepting Parkinson's company. This is superbly illustrated in the opening poem of this collection:

Practising the art of being

You could learn the art of being
the doctor said,
as an antidote to feeling useless.

Being still,
being quiet,
being present.

It's a hard learning,
so imprecise and not easily measured.

Your graduation ceremony
will be your last breath.

John Thornley, publisher of Music in the Air (1996-2015)

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Note: Auckland Methodist Central Parish, Pitt St, handle sales. Order to Administrator, Roberta.hammond@methodistcentral.org.nz Phone: 09 373 2869, PO Box 68184, Victoria Street West, Auckland 1142. Cost per copy \$25 + PostageCD Review

Manawa Wera by Ria Hall

Ria Hall (b.1983), Maungatapu, Tauranga, is a recording artist, singer/songwriter and television presenter. Her lead-singing roles in the July 2024 World Choir Games in Auckland were a highlight of this celebration of choral music. She took her first steps into the local body elections in Tauranga, also in July. While not gaining a place on the Council, she presented a visionary platform for creative ways of empowering people. Sea of Faith members look forward to her continuing engagement in local politics. The nation also cries out for new ways of governance that engage all people.



Manawa Wera - Lyrics

History

My feet are fashioned from the earth
Crafted of mud and stone and dirt
I wear our stories on my skin
I swear it's where we must begin
Give the children the knowledge, let them bathe in the sun
May they bask in the glory, of the time we became one
Give the children the teachings, so they know who they are
Show them all of the writings, of the time we became one

Know your history, yeah!

Look around, you can't deny it, deny it, No!
North to south, ain't no way to hide it (Yeah, Yeah)
Sing it
Let the floodgates open, let the river flow
Weave our worlds together so the children they know
Know your history, yeah
One more, know your history, Yeah!

Cause and Effect

Back against the wall, cornered, no control
I am naked see my soul, grind me down to blood and bone
Render me weak, drop to my knees. Merciless, do as you please
Boundaries are not defined. Out of sight means out of mind.

Cause and effect. Take me back, a simple you for I and I
Cause and effect, run rampant. You cannot fight against the tide

Harder they come, harder they fall. Once or twice, then none at all
Leave me blowing in the breeze, your honesty aint what it seems
You give me nothing for something, when all your somethings mean nothing
She is a queen upon her throne, I am a mountain set in stone
They say, they say, the hotter the battle, the sweeter the victory
Jah victory

A simple you for I and I
Cause and effect run rampant
You cannot fight against the tide

Owner

No one owns the water, no one owns the lands
No one owns the oceans, no one owns the sands
These are given by our mother, the planet provides for free
Only at the hands of the greedy does the earth require a fee. Yeah!
You hear me sing it
Lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. Yeah!
Judge not by skin colour, judge not by one's creed, judge not by her religion
We gonna judge you by your qualities
These are gifted from the father
Even handed impartially

Only at the hands of the willing do we find strength in humanity.Yeah!
You got me singing
Oh people let me tell you
Lead a horse to water, he too sick to drink
Give knowledge to man, but you cannot make him think

Flow

You arrived in silence from a land of dreams
Where mystical desires drew you to me
Blood and bone, mud and clay
Together we dance, forever we stay

Let your waters flow over me
In the moonlight your tide moves with me

Primal perfection of my hands you came
No words to mention, I'll take the blame
In the night we ride, by the day we bathe
Bask in the light, no need for shade
Connexion between us is real, so real, so real
Connexion between us is real

Let your waters flow over me
In the moonlight your tide moves with me

Chant

You all lack conviction with no desire to end the war to end it all
You fall on expectation there can be no rainbow without a storm
You clutch at straws

You just live and hope, but your promised land has been swallowed by the sea
And it occurs to me that no more shall we sit idle or
Lay down our guns if Babylon gonna fall

Chant for hope
Chant for faith
We must sing

Walk

Your love has got no meaning when it matters most
Your charms had me believing, now I'm sleeping with a ghost

I should have listened to myself
But I, I'd rather walk alone
Your touch had me believe I was the only one
Your worlds had me deceived, and now I'm lying in the dust
I should have listened to myself
And now, I'd rather walk alone
I'd rather walk alone
No use feeling sorry
I know, I know things will never change

Hope

I hope some day you're gonna find a way
Through the stormy weather
I know things can only get better
You know I've tried to keep us together
Seems like I was the only one
My tears fall with the setting sun
And the hardest thing that I know
Is you'll never change
I hope you know I'm still in love, I'm still in love
Well I hope some day you're gonna find a way
Through the stormy weather
I know things can only get better
You know I've tried to keep us together
Seems like I was the only one
My tears fall with the setting sun

Manawa Wera, CD Review

Loop Recordings 2020

Ria Hall's first CD *Rules of Engagement* (2017) took eight years from research to recording. Now, five years later, we have further evidence of the artist's professionalism. *Manawa Wera* is a stunning collection of seven songs, in both vocal and instrumental performance, and lyrics or words.

Apart from the title and mihi (greeting) on sleeve insert, all songs are printed in English. On Radio NZ, when Kim Hill asked the artist why she had chosen English rather than te reo Maori, she replied, 'I wanted my message to be heard by all people.'

The title translates as 'Angry or challenging chants', and the militant opening track, with its collective voices chanting 'Know your history' against the

compulsive reggae back beat, lays down the wero or challenge. But Ria Hall is more sorrowful and pleading rather than looking for a fight! The overall theme for the CD is title for the final song, 'Hope'.

The words of the songs draw on Maori understandings or world view, including land/river/sea scapes, familial or whanau whakapapa, and an interweaving of the personal and collective identities common to all indigenous cultures' pre-European and colonised narratives. With repeated listenings, the metaphysical or religious depths are revealed. Some illustrations follow.

Track Two: 'Cause and Effect' Our lives are not predetermined by a divine destiny but a very human existence where we make choices. As the US writer Robin R. Meyers puts it, not a 'theology of obedience' but a 'theology of consequence'. As Hall chants: 'Back against the wall, cornered no control / I am naked see my soul, grind me down to blood and bone'; 'You give me nothing for something. When all your somethings mean nothing / She is a Queen upon a throne / I am a mountain set in stone'; 'They say, they say, the hotter the battle, the sweeter the victory / Jah victory.'

Track Three: 'Owner'. 'No one owns the water, no one owns the lands / No one owns the ocean, no one owns the sands'; 'Judge not by skin colour, judge not by one's creed, judge not by her religion / We gonna judge you by your qualities.'

More than once in the songs, there is a frustration towards people unable to face a reality, that all of us face deep change in Aotearoa. From the song 'Chant': 'You all lack conviction with no desire to end the war to end it all / You fall on expectation there can be no rainbow without a storm / You clutch at straws'; 'You just live and hope but your promised land has been swallowed by the sea'; 'Chant for hope / Chant for faith / We must sing.' And this proverbial usage in the closing lines of 'Owner': 'Lead a horse to water, he too sick to drink / Give knowledge to man, but cannot make him think.'

African-American influences are found in both music and words. Reggae and soul join with Pacifica musicking in poi waiata and haka. In lyrics there is the blending of the personal and collective. Aretha Franklin's fusion of the personal and political in her Soul ballads - 'Think', 'Chain of Fools', 'Respect' - is the model to aspire to. Ria Hall delivers on this score!

The closing songs address personal and collective betrayals. 'Walk' has focus on the call to autonomy and separation: 'I should have listened to myself / and, now, I'd rather walk alone'. Over a gentle acoustic guitar strum, the final

song 'Hope' has vision of a better future, together. At the risk of sounding corny, this CD is a song of love by Maori to Pakeha. But tough love!

I hope we're all listening.
'Oh, I hope you know I'm still in love
Oh I hope some day you're gonna find a way
through the stormy weather
I know things can only get better.'

John Thornley

Note: It will not be easy to find a copy of the Manawa Wera CD, though your local retailer may still hold a copy in stock. Your local library may hold a copy. Should it be re-issued, SOFiA members will be told.

John Thornley

On Being Mortal Part 3: Psychotherapeutic Approaches

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 to do. 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 faces its own death, by surveying what literature, medicine, psychotherapy and theology have to say about it.

The Denial of Death by Ernst Becker

This work from 1973 is rightly regarded as a classic, but it does plunge most readers into a foreign world. In this world, Freudian psychoanalysis is king even though Becker is a cultural anthropologist rather than a psychoanalyst. In this book, he is mostly engaged in an attempt to broaden Freud's approach, without fundamentally questioning its authority.

The Heroic is a key concept. We admire those who risk death for some noble aim, for example the soldier who leaps out of the trench to engage with the enemy or a swimmer who risks death to rescue a drowning swimmer. Key to the heroic person is the ability to courageously counter the fear of death, indeed that is what we most admire about him or her. Becker concludes that heroism is a reflex of death anxiety.

He also is most impressed by the dual nature that we humans exhibit. On the one hand, we can in our imagination soar into galactic space or imagine past or future worlds, but at the same time we are a biological creature that has limits, that excretes and has other not-so-intellectual functions.

For Becker, there are two fundamental arguments about death and it isn't possible for either argument to cleanly win. The 'healthy-minded' argument holds that fear of death is not natural but comes about through bad experiences with one's parents. If they are hostile to his life impulses and frustrate him, he will grow up afraid of death. But if they are supportive and loving, he will have no such fears.

The 'morbidly minded' argument holds with the psychoanalyst Zilboorg, that underneath all appearances, the fear of death is universally present. If this fear was always in our consciousness, we wouldn't be able to function, so it is repressed and we ordinarily go about our daily life as if we were immortal. Becker emphatically sides with this argument.

Notable, at least for me, is also the fact that Becker shows a sympathetic understanding of theologians such as Paul Tillich and religious thinkers such as Eric Fromm. Generally speaking, thinkers today do not reference theologians at all. Indeed, Becker aims to bring about a convergence of religious and psychological thought.

"We don't want to admit that we do not stand alone, that we always rely on something that transcends us...Augustine was a master analyst of this, as were Kierkegaard, Scheler, and Tillich in our day. They saw that man could strut and boast all he wanted, but that he really drew his "courage to be" from a god, a Big Brother, a flag, the proletariat, and the fetish of money and the size of a bank balance. (Page 33)

[Existential Psychotherapy by Irvin Yalom](#)

You might be surprised that I include this work, which is something like a textbook, but for this variety of psychotherapy, death is an important feature of existence, along with freedom and meaning. In fact, Yalom devotes 189 pages to the issue of death and ways of dealing with death anxiety.

One major theme is bringing out the positive value of death awareness. This brings home the fact that this is our one and only life. "While the physicality of death destroys an individual; the idea of death can save him." This makes our decisions crucial as time is limited and we cannot live out all options.

Another theme is that we repress the awareness of death. We live as if life would go on indefinitely. It is only particular events that can break through the denial of death and bring an awareness of our finiteness into consciousness: the death of a parent, child, or friend; seeing how our siblings have aged, divorce, even the business of committing to a partner, which means that you have made a choice and are now stuck with it.

After a long section, Yalom turns to examine the way children become aware of death and how they deal with it. Then he looks to the practical business of doing therapy with clients. Here his approach differs from most other psychotherapists. While they are concerned to reduce anxiety and to make life more pleasant and easy, Yalom believes that we need to face reality and that this can make life deeper and more meaningful.

Mortals: How the Fear of Death Shaped Human Society

By Rachel and Ross Menzies 2021

This is a much more recent psychological work by two Australian psychologists and it breathes a much different atmosphere. While Yalom's work contains mostly stories of therapeutic work with clients, this one focusses on empirical research, of which recent times have seen an enormous volume. So they report on clever experiments that conceal their real purpose and can show for example, that being made aware of death leads judges to determine a ninefold greater amount of bail than those not made aware. These experiments always have a control group and provide an exact, quantitative comparison between those recently made aware of death and a similar group that has not. While earlier psychologists relied on personal introspection, they rely on quantitative statistical reports.

They don't have a good word to say about Freud; they emphasise what he got wrong and they don't seem to have any historical sense of the changes his work brought about. Finally, there is also great interest in the evolution of the human brain and the way its workings affect us.

I think this is the best of the writings on death from a psychological perspective that I have come across, although I found much to complain about in their treatment of religion.

After an introductory chapter, the authors look at the way religion has tried and failed to provide an answer to death by erroneous beliefs in life after death. Essentially, we are given a perspective on religion that owes much to

the new atheists, according to which religion is responsible for much of the evil and suffering in the world. “Although religion evolved largely to assuage our fear of death, it has since become one of our biggest killers...Try as it might, religion cannot wash the blood from its hands.”

We are given detailed descriptions of the process of mummification in Ancient Egypt, and an overview of religion in Greece, Rome, Hinduism and Buddhism. We are not to treat seriously a Buddhist monk’s injunction to meditate on one’s death, as real-world religious practice paints a very different picture of Buddhist practice. Money spent on a temple to venerate the Buddha’s tooth would be much better spent on providing undernourished children with food, protection against malaria, or safe drinking water. The authors are determined to denigrate any religious claim, even if it involves a complete sidetrack from the theme of the chapter.

The authors ask, “have any religions failed to promise believers eternal life?” They find an obscure text in the Hebrew bible according to which “Yahweh will swallow up death forever,” not recognizing that Ancient Israel, in marked contrast to neighbouring Egypt, found no consolation in life after death. It’s true that they believed in a post-death existence in Sheol, a sort of shadowy underworld, but this was of no consolation. Only later did they take up the idea of resurrection.

In ancient cultures, religion and culture are intertwined. As Paul Tillich says, Religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion. That there is some form of existence after death was the universal assumption of ancient cultures. It is a mistake to blame this exclusively on religion, as though it were a domain completely separate from culture.

Having comprehensively dismissed all religion, the authors turn to culture and civilization. “The entirety of human civilization may be one elaborate defence against death.” By following the various decrees of our culture, we can attain a kind of symbolic immortality. The oldest pieces of hominid art are Indian sculpture. There’s the Pharaoh Khufu, who had a grand pyramid built, which was once the largest building in the world. And then there’s Michaelangelo, who insisted that his Sistine Chapel paintings were done as frescoes, painted quickly onto fresh plaster. In these various ways, artists attempted to attain a permanent reminder that they once walked the earth.

Successive chapters deal with the upside and downside of love, the health industry and its difficulties letting patients go when there is no more hope, the

value of self-esteem as a counter to death fear, funerary practices (maintaining bonds to the dead is common in many other cultures and may help people cope with the loss – a 2005 study of 92 widows found that nearly half reported talking to their dead spouse, and they were much more likely to be coping well). Then they look at mental illness and the death dread that often underlies it, followed by suicidal thoughts which often lead to a false diagnosis of depression and an examination of the thought of Albert Camus, concluding with an examination of Stoicism.