

DURING HIS LIFETIME, internationally celebrated New Zealand thinker and author Lloyd Geering has published numerous thought-provoking books on the nature of religious belief – and has also been tried for heresy (in 1967). This book critiques Geering's now well-known religious atheism, examining its philosophical underpinnings.

The authors look at the justifications for 'Geeringism', in particular his rejection of the cognitive content (and other aspects) of Christian belief, and illuminate not only the specifics of his approach to the age-old questions 'How are we to live?' and 'What are we to believe?', but also the wider set of ideas from which such issues have arisen.

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A Religious Atheist? EDITED BY RAYMOND PELLY & PETER STUART



A Religious Atheist?

CRITICAL ESSAYS
ON THE WORK OF

Lloyd Geering

EDITED BY
RAYMOND PELLY & PETER STUART

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RAYMOND PELLY AND PETER STUART

Are Religious Beliefs Human Projections?

KAI MAN KWAN

A LIBERAL THEOLOGIAN TURNED SECULAR HUMANIST

Lloyd Geering, the well-known New Zealand theologian, makes the controversial claim that Christianity can do without God. Although he started as a liberal theologian, the position he ends up with is theological non-realism: that is, the word 'God' does not refer to any external reality, but is merely a symbol for the highest human values: 'It is wrong to use the word God to name a supposed metaphysical being. ... the word God ... is a symbol of the very essence of humanity, coupled with what humans deem to be the essence of the physical world'.¹ His heroes are Spinoza, Schleiermacher, and Feuerbach, his companions radical theologians like Don Cupitt.

If Geering does not believe in the traditional God, then what does he believe in? Naturalism, it seems. Apart from his occasional use of religious symbols, Geering's belief system is hardly different from contemporary secular humanism. For him, the universe is the self-explanatory Ultimate: 'The universe ... can be explained only from within ... The universe explains itself by its own story.'²

He has only contempt for the opponents of evolution: 'the simplest and most adequate explanation of the origin of planetary life is that the earth, like the universe, contained the potential for life within itself at the time of its formation ... It is quite appropriate for us to think of the earth as alive, as a living planet ... Moreover we humans, like all other creatures, are a part of this living planet.'³ Geering expands the scientific theory of evolution into a new religion of ecology. For him, the traditional religions are gone for ever. Establishing parameters for the new global and ecological culture and creating forms of spirituality most appropriate to it are the genuinely 'religious' issues to which we must 'devote' ourselves.⁴

Geering therefore argues for the slogan 'Christianity without God.' While this may sound like an outright contradiction, he maintains that upholding values inherited from the Christian past can be regarded as 'Christianity without God'.⁵ Traditional religious understandings and practices have to be transformed; belief in Christ as the Saviour has to go, while Jesus as the

sage who leads us on the path to freedom can be retained, as can rituals and festivals celebrating human values.⁶

The larger context for this is the problem of globalisation: namely how humankind must learn to live together in harmony and mutual responsibility. To achieve this, we need a vision of a global culture to serve as the foundation of a global society. The global culture Geering favours is secular humanism, with its values of equality and freedom.⁷ Its basic principle is secularism. He writes:

the former rigid dividing line between matter and spirit has been eliminated; in the global world reality is experienced as psycho-physical in that the more obviously physical earth has the capacity to bring forth first life and then thought. This monistic or one-worldly character of the global world is the reason for calling it secular ... The raw material for our common construction of the global world is secular knowledge.⁸

Geering's writings have many merits. He writes lucidly, and courageously draws out the conclusions implicit in his approach. He is honest about difficulties confronting Christianity, both sociological and philosophical. However, in this essay I beg to differ from Geering's conclusion. In particular I seek to critique his theological non-realism, the foundation of which is projectionism.

GEERING'S CASE FOR PROJECTIONISM

It is not always easy to ascertain what Geering's arguments exactly are. However, in the whole corpus of his work he repeatedly raises some crucial points. Though these are often put forward by implication rather than explicit argument, Geering's case can reasonably be constructed from them. I suggest this case is constituted by one main argument (Feuerbach's projectionism) and eight supporting arguments, which include feminist and ecological critiques of theism. Of these supporting arguments, I examine here only that from global anti-realism.

Main argument: Feuerbach's projectionism

Geering's basic strategy is to tell a naturalistic history of religion which assumes projectionism, drawing inspiration mainly from Feuerbach. Repeatedly explaining away gods as human projections, Geering leaves his readers with the impression that projectionism is the whole truth about religion. He asserts that the gods in ancient myths 'were wholly the product of creative human imagination'.⁹ Why? Because myths reflect the human search for immortality. Moreover, 'human imagination had (unconsciously) created the gods as a

way of understanding natural phenomena and ordering the environment'.¹⁰ Stories about gods also personalised reality, making it appear more friendly to humans.

Human imagination creates the gods by projection:

The ancients projected their subjective experience on to their environment ... They simply encountered their environment with awe because of its mysterious movement ... In time the vaguely defined 'Thouness' of their world was divided into specific areas and given particular names appropriate to the function each was believed to perform ... To them it seemed self-evident that all natural events, such as storms were caused by personal wills.¹¹

Geering adopts a similar explanation for revelatory religious experiences: 'What has been claimed as revelation from a divine source of knowledge is in fact the product of human creativity, stretching back over a very long time and involving countless people.' Though the religious believer is not aware his own psyche is so creative, we now know the true source of the alleged revelations. The resulting 'loss of divine revelation' in turn deprives each religious tradition of its firm foundation.¹²

One of Geering's guides is Feuerbach, famous for turning theology into anthropology. Following Feuerbach, Geering claims that 'God had been invented, out of the necessity to find meaning.' Just as in ancient polytheism,

'God' is ... a symbolic word. It has no external referent which is open to public confirmation ... The word 'God' has a function, but no content or meaning except that which we supply ... The content with which we invest it is the set of values and aspirations which we (subjectively) find laying a claim upon us.¹³

Geering extends this anti-realism to all religious language: 'Heaven and hell symbolised the issues of ultimate personal destiny ... The Last Judgment symbolised the issues at stake in every decision we make, great or small. The Christ figure symbolised our need to be saved from the worst we can do to ourselves.'¹⁴ To deny the symbolic status of religious language, by adopting, say, a rationalistic or realistic approach, leads to idolatry. Thus Geering implies it is he, not his critics, who understands 'true Christianity'.

Again following Feuerbach, Geering claims his 'Christianity without God' can be established on the basis of Christianity's central doctrine – incarnation. Traditional realist interpretation, creating a gulf between an 'other-world' and this world by its dualistic worldview,

had the devastating effect of throwing the human condition into disunion with itself, and of destroying forever the possibility of improving human existence on earth. Humans became alienated from their higher selves.

In contrast, Geering's projectionism, by revealing the hidden meaning of the myth of incarnation,

bridged that gulf, enabling the human condition to be restored to its intended wholeness ... True Christianity ... affirms that there is only one life for us humans ... restored to us the capability and responsibility to manifest divinity by the way we love and respond to one another.¹⁵

Making further use of Feuerbach, Geering emphasises that 'divinity' cannot be embodied exclusively in one individual. Only humans in community, the unity of I and thou, is God.¹⁶

Supporting argument: Thoroughgoing anti-realism (constructivism)

Geering's thought has diverse elements, which may not sit well together. Sometimes he sounds like an Enlightenment rationalist. At other times, heavily influenced by Cupitt, he appears to be a postmodern relativist and anti-realist. If, however, global anti-realism is true, theological anti-realism is just a special case of it.

He appeals to Einstein's theory of relativity as a scientific illustration of a wider principle: 'all our knowledge is relative to the human mind that produced it. We humans have evolved in a symbiotic relationship with the culture created by the countless generations before us.'¹⁷ For him, therefore, cultural relativism is inescapable: 'No human culture provides the norm to which all cultures should conform. All human cultures are relative.'¹⁸ He also endorses Driver's claim that 'Christocentrism cannot make sense in the Einsteinian universe, which has no centre and in which every structure is a dynamic relationality of moving parts ... The ethical theological task of the churches today is to find a Christology which can be liberating in a world of relativity.'¹⁹ In such a world, apparently, absolutist theologies have to go. They are not only untenable, but also unethical, because 'any religious tradition claiming to be the absolute truth in a universe so marked by relativity leads not to the salvation of humankind but to its enslavement'.²⁰

As an implication of global relativism and constructivism, all systems of morality and religious symbols are human-created. Geering is particularly fond of using three words: 'of human origin':

All religious traditions are of human origin ... Just as there is ... no one morality which is the norm for all other moralities, so there is no one religion which is the norm for all others. None ... is absolute and final, and those which claim to be must surrender those claims if they are to continue.²¹

Sometimes Geering arrives at global anti-realism through the path of a constructivist understanding of language. Every 'world' is constituted by language inescapably of human construction. He cites Cupitt: 'Language is the medium in which we live and move and have our being. In it we act, we structure the world and order every aspect of our social life. Only language stands between us and the Void.' Geering concludes, 'We live in a world of language yet language is a human creation ... [This] world in which we live is one which humans, as a species, have created'.²²

Concepts like truth, meaning, and purpose are created by humans. 'The coherent whole which the word 'world' implies ... exists primarily in the mind. ... The world we create and perceive is never free of subjectivism.'²³ Therefore all religious documents like the Bible, and religious concepts like 'God', are human products, contingent on language: 'Language, God and the human species can never be divorced from one another.'²⁴

Geering also incorporates this global anti-realism into his vision of global culture: 'There is no permanent fixed point from which we can view reality. ... It can never be more than a human construction of the presumed objective universe, based on our ever-developing body of objective knowledge'.²⁵

Choices for Christians

Geering's honesty in exploring difficulties with traditional Christian theism is commendable. However, he seems to suggest there are only two options: either follow him on the path of projectionism and anti-realism, or be condemned as an unreflective and ignorant conservative. In *Tomorrow's God* he writes:

In relation to the intellectual climate of society at large, the churches have become increasingly conservative and defensive of their identity. As the churches grow smaller and more conservative, we find in them the last remnants of the Christian world ... like islands of the past in the fast-flowing tide of secularisation which is giving rise to the new global world.²⁶

Is there really no other way? I suggest the path of critical faith is still available. Numerous theologians have already explored the difficulties of Christian faith in the modern era, yet conclude that faith is still possible.²⁷

More than thirty years ago, Peter Berger, the well-known sociologist of religion and secularisation theorist, dealt with the problem posed by secularisation to theology. In *A Rumour of Angels* he stated bluntly: 'the supernatural has departed from the modern world ... God is dead ... it may be undramatically assumed as a global and probably irreversible trend.'²⁸ However, while both he and Geering take seriously the theological crisis ensuing from secularisation, they provide different analyses and recommend different solutions. Berger regarded 'solutions' like Geering's as bizarre: 'The

self-liquidation of the theological enterprise is undertaken with an enthusiasm that verges on the bizarre, culminating in the reduction to absurdity of the "God-is-dead theology" and "Christian atheism".²⁹

For Berger, the fundamental options available to religion in a secular world are either to hold onto or to surrender cognitive deviance. Maintaining a supernaturalist position in a cognitively antagonistic world is not easy. Yet its surrender entails that 'modernity is swallowed hook, line, and sinker, and the ... traditional religious affirmations are translated into terms appropriate to the new frame of reference, the one that allegedly conforms to the *weltanschauung* of modernity.'³⁰ Consequently 'the supernatural elements of the religious traditions are more or less completely liquidated.'³¹ Berger sharply points out the resulting problem, a type of intellectual contortion:

The various forms of secularised theology ... propose various practical pay-offs ... [but] these benefits are also available under strictly secular label. A secularised Christianity has to go to considerable exertion to demonstrate that the religious label, as modified in conformity with the spirit of the age, has anything special to offer.³²

This option's appeal will therefore probably be limited to people with nostalgia for traditional symbols – exactly the group which, influenced by secularising theologians, is steadily dwindling: 'For most people, symbols whose content has been hollowed out lack conviction or even interest.'³³ This analysis seems to fit the 'theology' Geering proposes. He makes gigantic efforts to argue for a 'Christianity without God'. Yet why should people sharing Geering's worldview prefer this self-description to saying plainly they are atheists who reject Christianity?

Berger is aware religious groups can adopt a strategy of bargaining with modern thought, surrendering some traditional items while keeping others: the classical pattern of Protestant theological liberalism. Its main problem is its built-in escalation towards the pole of cognitive surrender:

cognitive bargaining ... subjects oneself to mutual cognitive contamination. The crucial question then is, who is the stronger party? ... He who sups with the devil had better have a long spoon. The devilry of modernity has its own magic: the theologian who sups with it will find his spoon getting shorter and shorter – until that last supper in which he is left alone at the table, with no spoon at all and with an empty plate. The devil ... will by then have gone away to more interesting company.³⁴

Secondly, the attempt to make the Faith relevant to modernity is inherently unstable:

a man who marries the spirit of the age soon finds himself a widower ... In 1965 Harvey Cox in *The Secular City* invited us to celebrate the advent of modern urbanism as if it were some sort of divine revelation. Only a few years later it is difficult to rouse much enthusiasm for this particular bit of 'timely' wisdom.³⁵

Cox himself has completely turned around in recent years, talking about secularisation as a myth.³⁶ Berger writes:

Our pluralistic culture forces those who would 'update' Christianity into a state of permanent nervousness. The 'wisdom of the world,' which is the standard by which they would modify the religious tradition, varies from one social location to another ... even in the same locale it keeps on changing ... Perhaps, for some individuals who have been chasing the *Zeitgeist* in this manner for a while, 'folly' begins to seem like not such an unattractive option.³⁷

Thirdly, the surrender option largely assumes that complete secularisation is inevitable. Even several decades ago Berger concluded that 'significant enclaves of supernaturalism within the secularised culture will also continue'.³⁸ He acknowledges now that the only places where the secularisation thesis holds true are Europe and the academy, and 'the rest of the world is as furiously religious as ever, and possibly more so'³⁹ and that his secularisation theory was mistaken.⁴⁰

While Geering acknowledges the continued existence of conservative Christians, he tends to write them off. In contrast, Berger knows that 'it is possible to go some way in asking questions of truth while disregarding the spirit of an age ... Genuine timeliness means ... an ultimate indifference to the majority or minority status of one's view of the world.'⁴¹ Berger's call to return to the question of truth is not the result of a refusal to use the modern relativising approach and the hermeneutics of suspicion (he is, after all, one of the major theorists of secularisation and sociology of knowledge). Rather, he thinks their consistent use will, in the end, force us to face the question of truth.

Berger admits the relativising effect of the sociological perspective, constituting the 'fiery brook' (*Feuerbach* in German) through which theologians must pass. Historical scholarship has led to a perspective in which even the most sacrosanct elements of religious traditions come to be seen as human product, and 'psychology after Freud suggested that religion was a gigantic projection of human needs and desires ... Thus history and psychology together plunged theology into a veritable vortex of relativisations.'⁴² Moreover, there is the challenge of the sociology of knowledge, which goes to the social roots of all truth-claims. The fundamental idea is that our 'knowledge' depends upon the social support it receives – its plausibility

structure, consisting of a variety of social networks or conversational fabrics, systematised explanations, and legitimations.

In *A Rumour of Angels*, Berger writes 'The community of faith is now understandable as a constructed entity ... Conversely, it can be dismantled or reconstructed by use of the same mechanisms.'⁴³ So far he sounds like another and earlier Geering. However, Berger takes a surprising turn. 'There are unexpected redeeming features to the sociologist's dismal revelations' when we are willing to see the relativity business through to its very end:

the question of truth reasserts itself in almost pristine simplicity. Once we know that all human affirmations are subject to scientifically graspable socio-historical processes, which affirmations are true and which are false? We cannot avoid the question any more than we can return to the innocence of its pre-relativising asking.⁴⁴

The problem with 'secular' theology, which takes as its ultimate criterion the alleged consciousness of modern man, is that there is a hidden double-standard:

the past, out of which the tradition comes, is relativised ... The present, however, remains strangely immune from relativisation ... The New Testament writers are seen as afflicted with a false consciousness rooted in their time, but the contemporary analyst takes the consciousness of his time as an unmixed intellectual blessing. The electricity and radio-users are placed intellectually above the Apostle Paul. This is rather funny ... [and] an extraordinarily one-sided way of looking at things ... The world view of the New Testament writers was constructed and maintained by the same kind of social processes that construct and maintain the world view of contemporary 'radical' theologians. Each has its appropriate plausibility structure ... The appeal to any alleged modern consciousness loses most of its persuasiveness.

Therefore the modern world should not be elevated to an absolute: 'Relativising analysis, in being pushed to its final consequence, bends back upon itself. The relativisers are relativised, the debunkers are debunked ... What follows is ... a new freedom and flexibility in asking questions of truth.'⁴⁵

Most plausibility structures today are partial and therefore tenuous. Since modern individuals exist in a plurality of worlds, migrating between competing plausibility structures, they are naturally inclined towards constructivism:

The contemporary radio-user is not inhibited in his capacity for faith by the scientific knowledge and technology that produced his radio ... But he is inhibited by the multiplicity of ideas and notions about the world that his radio, along with other communications media, plunges him into. And while we may

understand ... his predicament, there is no reason whatever to stand in awe of it ... Sociology frees us from the tyranny of the present.⁴⁶

In the end, 'we must begin in the situation in which we find ourselves, but we must not submit to it as to an irresistible tyranny'.⁴⁷ This seems to me sound advice. Some may have been overwhelmed by Geering's grand narrative of secularisation, the 'demise' of Christian orthodoxy, and the emergence of global 'secular' culture. However, Berger helps us see Geering's narrative in a new light. By applying relativising strategies to that narrative, we learn to regard it as a myth constructed by Geering. Why Geering regards it as self-evident can be explained by analysing his plausibility structures: the fragmented structure of modern society, the larger social ethos which makes secularism look natural, stories about the evils of theism which help to legitimise irreligion, Geering's significant others such as colleagues who belittle theism, and so on.

If Geering's preference for modernity and naturalism is his own subjective choice, and nothing more, why should others follow his radical theology? If, however, he insists every myth in every era is nothing but construction – except his own – then Berger's charge of double standard can certainly be pressed against him. Moreover, while Geering wants us to be free from enslavement to traditional religions, will we only end up being enslaved by the tyranny of the present? Geering may point to his arguments for his narrative, in support of its truth. If so, the truth of theism should not be dismissed a priori either.

Interestingly, Geering and Berger both begin as theological liberals but develop in different directions. Although Berger remains a liberal, he increasingly recognises the importance of robust religious belief in contemporary society, and becomes increasingly critical of secularisation theory, modernity, and the option of surrender. In *A Far Glory* he again points out that wholesale surrender of faith, even from a tactical viewpoint, is not wise. He is also worried that, in the process of accommodation, some precious truths may be lost. Berger even urges us to uphold the 'folly' of the Christian Gospel: 'If the Church gives up this "folly," it gives up itself and its very reason for being ... the most precious truth that has been entrusted to the Church's care – the truth about the redemption of men through God's coming into the world in Christ.'⁴⁸

Berger asks, 'Christians who consider themselves "progressives," ... always tell us to "read the signs of the times" ... Has it never occurred to these people that they might write some of these signs?'⁴⁹ One reason why Christians should not surrender to secular culture is that they may have something to offer. For example, Berger thinks there is no secular solution to the problem of the self. Indeed the naturalistic and secularist worldview contributes to the process of the self's disintegration:

It becomes 'more and more difficult to see the self as the centre of the individual's actions. Instead, these actions come to be perceived as events that happen to the individual, separate from himself, explainable in terms of both external (social) and internal (organic and psychic) causes.⁵⁰

In the end, the ground of true self may only be found in transcendence:

the social sciences do not give much support to the notion of a self detached from roles and attachments. Yet there remains the irresistible conviction within ... individuals that there is indeed such a self, a conviction that surfaces most clearly in the area of moral judgments: just reflect on the consequences for our conception of human rights if the idea of an autonomous self were abandoned ... I am also inclined to think that the idea of a self over and beyond all socialisations can only be maintained in a view of reality that includes transcendence.⁵¹

For Berger, if there is no God, there is no permanent self-identity. Geering may not dispute this. He applies his constructivism to personal identity also, but the difference is he celebrates this kind of postmodern self:

People today are more reluctant to commit themselves permanently to any form of association ... Taking life-long vows was once regarded as highly virtuous. Now it may be seen as precarious and even unethical: the person one is at the present moment may not have the moral right to bind the person one has yet to become. We must remain open to what may come, and free to respond to new circumstances.⁵²

I suggest Geering's celebration of freedom is premature. He does not realise the pernicious consequences of a fluid, postmodern self. Suppose it is unethical for the person one now is to bind the person one has yet to become. Then not only do marital vows become meaningless, but parenting, trust between friends, holding people to their promises, business contracts, and much else also become impossible. The whole idea is self-defeating. Who can be said to be 'unethical' anyway? The self who is supposed to take the blame is gone for ever! It is senseless to combine the postmodern self with the idea of moral responsibility, which necessarily presupposes a permanent self.

Berger uses his sociological perspective to expose the myth of the modern man, and to deprive modern consciousness of its apparently superior cognitive status:

theologians have been trying to accommodate religion to the cognitive requirements of a creature called 'modern man,' as if it were self-evident that this entity had an enormous epistemological advantage over ... the biblical authors or the Church Fathers. In fact, modern man is not a terribly inspiring figure;

his much-vaunted rationality is often devoted to projects of little value, and he is chronically insecure about everything, including his own identity. The most positive thing about him ... is an unprecedented gift of freedom, and even that he has frequently experienced as a burden to be shed as soon as possible.⁵³

Berger's comments do not show that Geering is necessarily wrong, but that his surrender option is by no means the only one for a theologian or Christian honestly facing the problem of secularisation. No conservative, Berger still has the courage to reaffirm the transcendence of God, fully aware this conflicts with modernity. Geering often suggests it is the orthodox religious leaders who are timid, and radicals like himself who are courageous. Yet perhaps the courage needed to be a radical in the Church has been exaggerated: it is only going back to the embrace of the orthodoxy in the larger secular society!

I myself have pondered and struggled for over twenty years with the sort of problems raised by Geering. Often I have been tempted to quit, but so far I have seen no good reason to do so. Faith is still possible in this 'Godless' world. Especially for a Chinese like me, from the very beginning Christian faith is a conscious decision I have to make, because Christianity has never been dominant in Chinese culture. In earlier days, converts to Christianity had to pay a dear price for their decision. Even nowadays it is still to some extent countercultural to become a Christian in Chinese society.

A GENERAL CRITIQUE OF PROJECTIONISM

The logic of explaining religion

We need first to explore briefly the logic of explaining religion, because projectionism purports to give a true explanation of religion.

Firstly, note there are many kinds of explanation we can give. For example, we can distinguish between *internal* and *external* explanation. The former, to make sense of some religious behaviour or phenomena, appeals to concepts internal to religion. It may explain (say) the phenomena of witch-hunting by reference to beliefs about witches and their harm to society. On the other hand, an external explanation uses concepts external to religion, and explains witch-hunting as (say) an outlet for social frustration.

Another important distinction is between *partial* and *comprehensive* explanation. The former claims only to identify causes somewhat contributing to the existence of some religious behaviour. The latter purports to tell the whole story about that behaviour. Internal explanations and external explanations are not necessarily incompatible when both are regarded as partial explanations. For example, witch-hunting might have occurred both because it was the natural consequence of religious beliefs people consciously held, and because

unconsciously it served as an outlet for their suppressed frustration. However, when each is claimed to be a comprehensive explanation, conflicts occur.

Most leading exponents of grand theories of religion have been atheists wishing to foster the cause of unbelief by producing radical explanations of religion, in the form of an external comprehensive explanation. This move is understandable. If those theorists are fundamentally sceptical about religion, of course they cannot rest with religious concepts they doubt.⁵⁴ I would later point out that although grand theories of religion are usually motivated by religious scepticism, scepticism does not follow logically from those theories. External comprehensive explanations of religion do, however, raise questions about the rationality of religious believers.

Human beings normally seek to achieve what they want in what they believe to be the most effective way. They form their beliefs on the basis of what they regard as good evidence. In daily interaction with others, we normally take their self-understanding seriously, explaining their behaviour in terms of their desires, purposes, and beliefs. Only when people's behaviour seems grossly irrational would we look for their unconscious desires, repressed feelings, and the like. However, when some theorists of religion provide a comprehensive external explanation of religion, they in fact overturn the ordinary ways in which believers describe themselves. For example, when believers say they believe because they have experienced God, such theorists tell them they do not quite understand themselves, for behind their belief is their desire for a Heavenly Father's protection, and so on. In the name of objective scientific explanation, these theorists typically claim that they have to unmask what lies beneath the surface of the human world (in this case, its religious life).

Yet it is a big assumption that models of explanation in natural science will automatically apply to all aspects of the human world. Many scholars argue there is something in human actions and institutions that makes science-based models of explanation ill-suited to them. To assume religious scepticism from the beginning also begs the question. In explaining religion, a case can be made for conservatism and neutrality rather than radicalism and scepticism. A radical theory of religion must prove that an entire human institution has one meaning to its participants and yet quite another one in reality. This claim for large-scale illusion should be greeted with some scepticism. How can anyone even begin to show that an entire institution, such as a religion, or an entire class of institutions, such as religion, might be irrational? So the burden of proof is on those who maintain

religious belief is to be explained as the outcome of non-rational factors ... hidden to believers themselves ... To make religion as a whole or as such the

subject for external explanation it would have to be contended that there was no route into religious belief and behaviour except through some set of non-rational causes ... We would have to identify typical beliefs of the religious as so grossly false or absurd that no one could be presumed capable of reaching these beliefs [rationally].⁵⁵

In short, we cannot accept the hermeneutics of suspicion adopted by Geering as the default approach in understanding religion. Indeed, we need to be suspicious of the general claims of the hermeneutics of suspicion.⁵⁶ Believers are free to develop a hermeneutics of trust (or critical faith) which does not shy away from references to the actual existence of divine realities. We should at least be willing to entertain explanations of religion based on methodological agnosticism rather than religious scepticism.

The weakness of Feuerbachian and Freudian projectionism

Feuerbach's theories of religion successively reduced God to the essence of man, the essence of nature, and finally the essence of desire.⁵⁷ Freud's critique gives a psychoanalytic twist to the last (religion as projection of desire) by bringing the unconscious into play. Geering uses all three lines of Feuerbach's argument, and Freudian appeal to the unconscious. Numerous thinkers have already mounted a counter-critique of the critique of Feuerbach and Freud.⁵⁸

Feuerbach held that human beings are immersed in the natural world, with a sense of dependence on nature; gods are nothing but different parts of nature hypostatized. Geering basically follows this, suggesting that those religions worshipping nature deities mark religion's beginning. The monotheistic 'God' slowly evolves from these gods, but both are projections. This may sound plausible until we ask the critical questions: how on earth can Geering know how the ancients subjectively experienced the world, and where does he get his extraordinary insights into the unconscious mind of the ancients? Surely the answer can only be that he does not really know, and the stories he confidently tells are nothing but imagination and speculation.

Moreover, Geering seems to favour the evolutionary scheme for a history of religion, but this scheme is also under attack.⁵⁹ The anthropologist Schmidt, in contrast, argued for an anti-evolutionary scheme: the oldest religion was not animism, totemism or one of the nature religion, but 'primitive monotheism.'⁶⁰ Küng judiciously comments:

neither the theory of degeneration from a lofty monotheistic beginning nor the evolutionary theory of a lower animistic or pre-animistic beginning can be historically substantiated ... Both are essentially dogmatic systems, the first in the guise of a theologically inspired natural science and the other ...

of a rationalistic natural science ... the primordial religion ... scientifically ... simply cannot be found... The search should be called off.⁶¹

Feuerbach's claim that 'the consciousness of God is nothing else than the consciousness of the species' also suffers from difficulties.⁶² In spite of interesting parallels, full correspondence breaks down. For example, God is conceived as essentially infinite, yet humankind is not. A naturalist would expect our fragile species to become extinct sooner or later. Even if we could continue forever, that would only be an existence indefinitely long, not actually infinite. And our species is essentially finite in knowledge and power. Moreover, Feuerbach hypothesises the projection of human properties onto God without really explaining 'why' it takes place. Perhaps this helps human beings understand themselves (or the world) indirectly, but: 'Why this detour through an imaginary world instead of a direct grasp of the self and of nature? In what way does ... (it) represent a gain for the subject as compared with the simple acceptance of reality as it is?'⁶³

The projection theorist necessarily posits his superiority to believers: 'Religion is the childlike condition of humanity. ... the essence of religion, thus hidden from the religious, is evident to the thinker.'⁶⁴ Neusch again raises sharp questions:

Why should consciousness be thus clouded over? Why such a passage through the religious stage? ... Feuerbach, while offering a discerning explanation of the process by which consciousness manufactures its gods, remains silent on the causes which lead consciousness into this kind of alienation.⁶⁵

The burden of proof is on the projection theorist.

Feuerbach later fastened on human desire as the root from which all the gods spring. To fulfil his desires, man invents gods, thus filling the void desire brings to light. Gods are projections of the dreams of primitives crammed with desires. Desire, essentially inventive, may provide the driving force for the projection in question. This is basically the Freudian thesis: religion is an illusion, belief primarily motivated by wish-fulfilment. This theory has problems. There are many ways to deal with unfulfilled desires. Why try to fulfil desires by inventing a spurious world of gods?

The Freudian version of projectionism is open to criticism. Firstly, we need to see the gap between need and conscious belief by distinguishing: (a) the need to cope with the threats of nature and civilisation, to understand oneself and the world; (b) a wish for there to be a Cosmic Father; and (c) a belief that there is a Cosmic Father.

Freud believed that (a), (b), and (c) are true of man almost universally, and that (a) causes or explains (b), and (b) causes or explains (c). However, there is

no valid psychological generalisation from either (a) to (b) or (b) to (c). A need may not necessarily generate a corresponding wish. We can resign, evade or stoically accept the reality. Freud himself can adopt a non-religious way to cope. Why cannot others? To make such a link more plausible, extra psychological assumptions have to be made. Statistically speaking, a wish rarely generates a belief. In contrast to dreams, conscious belief calls for mental assent and readiness to act upon it, sometimes at great cost. Freud has not provided clear guidelines as to when and under what conditions a wish generates a belief. For him, every belief can be explained as the fulfilment of some wish. Freudian explanation may thus be quite vacuous.

Moreover both (a) and (b) seem not to be true of every believer. Many grow up in well-protected environments, or cannot recall any insistent wish for a Cosmic Father, or deny it is that wish which causes them to believe. The wishes do not seem to be necessary conditions for belief in God. To save his theory, Freud has to claim those wishes have been repressed into the unconscious. However, how can we know what exactly is contained in someone's unconscious?

Nor can the wishes alone be sufficient conditions. Otherwise, why are there unbelievers in all ages? (Remember Freud thinks that such wishes are universally shared.) Freud needs to postulate psychological processes which operate on all believers and them alone. What are these processes and how are they to be verified? The empirical adequacy of the Freudian naturalistic explanation is a crucial question. However, Freudians seldom address it. Instead, naturalistic explanations are often thrown around, supported by special cases and then generalised to all, without awareness of the empirical inadequacy.

Another difficulty is that many religious doctrines are psychologically difficult to adopt: for example, selfless love, sacrifice, striving for perfection, or taking up the cross. Moreover, a religious attitude often leads to radical evaluation of desires. Thus

the idea of wish-fulfilment in Feuerbach is a fundamentally wrong turn ... If a believer confesses his desires before God, this may be with the purpose of seeing their true status in the light of the divine providence. That in turn involves seeing why they are unimportant, or need modifying or replacing by more religiously appropriate desires ... [This] is a way of coping with the problem that the pursuit of desire satisfaction creates for the ego. But the 'solution' consists in bringing the ego's desires before a standard of what is truly worthwhile. This standard must then be thought of as something independent of and transcending human wishes.⁶⁶

Projectionism is in fact a doubled-edged sword. We can also use it to explain atheism. As Plantinga says, 'Many people thoroughly dislike the idea

of an omnipotent, omniscient being monitoring their every activity, privy to their every thought, and passing judgment on all they do or think.⁶⁷ This is confirmed by a surprisingly candid confession of an atheist philosopher, Thomas Nagel: 'I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. ... I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.'⁶⁸ This aversion to a theistic world is not hard to understand. It has been pointed out that

God's infinite power and his perfect justice leave us in no very flattering position ... To be an object of mercy is hardly comforting to the ego ... [The] idea of the afterlife ... not only presents us with a real chance of terrible and eternal failure, but it also makes us responsible for even the seemingly most trivial of our actions ... Complete responsibility for our actions to a power infinitely superior to ourselves ... is completely repugnant to us ... The secular view of mankind, on the other hand, leaves man himself as the highest known Being, the pinnacle of the universe ... responsible only to himself, which is to say that he is not responsible ... Some humanists feel a sense of responsibility to or for 'mankind as a whole' ... But 'mankind as a whole' cannot call us to account.⁶⁹

The problematic nature of the mechanism of projection

Another question for projectionism is how can we know when the projective mechanism is operating? To answer, we have to be clear what is meant by such a mechanism and how to identify it. Normally when we say a belief (or experience) is a projection, it means either the belief is false or the experience is unveridical; or that the belief or experience accords with inner desires and is produced entirely by them.

No doubt some experiences are projections:

People who are angry and filled with ... unresolved hatred often project that inner turmoil onto others, accusing them of harshness ... interpreting the most insignificant remark as hostility ... Projection is ... [something] we do to distort reality and shape it into our own subconscious image ...⁷⁰

However, in this sense, 'projection' refers to more than a psychological process. It implies (strongly negative) epistemic evaluation and should only be used when solidly backed by evidence provided by our consensual interpersonal and sense experiences. Otherwise, although a belief may accord with one's desire, we still cannot conclude it is a projection. Apart from epistemic evaluation of the belief, we normally have no secure independent way to identify the psychological mechanism. Likewise, we cannot say belief in God is a projection unless we can first show this belief is false. The projectionists simply have not

told us how they identify projective mechanisms in believers.

Is there a personality type prone to projections? If so, and believers belong to this type, there may be reason to regard their experiences of God as projections. However, what type of person would be prone to project? Freud notes it is 'man's self-regard, seriously menaced' which 'calls for consolation'. Holloway stresses the same point: 'Projection of any sort seems to point to some level of self-absorption or narcissism in the subject.'⁷¹ Commonsense observations suggest that those prone to self-deception tend to misinterpret others' motives, exhibit irrational rage, and the like, whereas those not so prone are calm, at ease with others and themselves, able to laugh at themselves, and have insights into others. Many God-experients do not display symptoms of the former group at all, and a significant number display signs of the latter group, some to an exceptional degree. I do not claim that God-experients are saner than non-God-experients, only that the reverse claim is implausible.

Moreover, 'the religious type at its purest and highest does not seem to have these characteristics.' There are spiritual traditions which

help us in our search for self-understanding by prompting us to make acts of radical self-examination, so that we can come to know what is in our own hearts, and to submit to a process of purgation or re-ordering of our ideas and values, so that we can be exposed to reality, including the real nature of the mystery that encompasses us ... Spiritual traditions of any seriousness help us to cut away false projections and untrue images. They call us to die to the self that seeks comfort in illusion.⁷²

Though such traditions may produce deviants, they do produce saints who

do not have the brooding complexity and pain ... [of those] who have split off from reality. Nor do they possess the insecurities and anxieties, the greeds and longings of the neurotic majority ... trapped into conforming to the going standards of the time. On the contrary, the closer to God they become ... the more simple and joyful and straightforward they become ... The insanity of total surrender to God seems to lead to the highest types of humanity, clear and straight in their own natures, and willing and laughter-filled in their service of others. The paradox of sanctity is the strongest contradiction of the claim that religion is an unhealthy projection.⁷³

Many theistic experiences are in fact self-integrating, even demanding a high degree of honesty, integrity, and self-denial. Yes, Freudians can invent further complexes and assert that these experiences are only caused by such complexes, but the approach looks more and more *a priori*. We have no reason to believe in such contrived hypotheses.

Projection or reflection?

The most important defect of projectionism as a critique of theism can be shown by a counter-question: 'so what?' As Von Hartmann analysed the scenario,

If the gods are products of wishful thinking, it does not follow that they are merely such: we cannot conclude from this either to their existence or to their non-existence. It is quite true that nothing exists merely because we wish it, but it is not true that something cannot exist if we wish it.⁷⁴

Both perspectives may in fact coexist. What appears as a human projection in one may appear as a reflection of divine realities in another, as Berger points out:

If there is any intellectual enterprise that appears to be a pure projection of human consciousness it is mathematics ... Mathematical universes, [can] spring from a mathematician's mind as pure creations of human intellect. Yet the most astounding result of modern natural science is the reiterated discovery ... that nature, too, is in its essence a fabric of mathematical relations. Put crudely, the mathematics that man projects out of his own consciousness somehow corresponds to a mathematical reality that is external to him, and which indeed his consciousness appears to reflect ... There is a fundamental affinity between the structures of his consciousness and ... of the empirical world. Projection and reflection are movements within the same encompassing reality. The same may be true of the projection of man's religious imagination.⁷⁵

The dichotomy between human projection and cosmic reflection is in fact only an assumption inherited from the Enlightenment. From other perspectives, human projection and cosmic reflection are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and may indeed overlap. Behind the hermeneutics of suspicion lies a similarly unjustified dichotomy between imagination and reality: 'For the modernist ... imagination [is] ... the source of speculation, fantasy, and illusion ... religion is the product of imagination; therefore religious claims are untrue.' However, after the postmodernist turn, this dichotomy needs to be radically evaluated. We are no longer confident we have 'reliable access to a "reality" against which imagination might be judged "illusory." Imagination now becomes the unavoidable means of apprehending "reality".' Even the history of science 'is the history of the scientific imagination, the narrative of the successive paradigms that have held sway in communities of scientists.'⁷⁶

Accordingly, Green suggests,

the thesis that religion ... is a product of human imagination ought to be accepted ... For ... what else could it be? To insist that our truth claims are

not mediated by imagination is to claim unique exemption from the limits of bodily and historical existence to which our contemporaries are subject ... We hold those truths as stewards rather than as masters, in the earthen vessels of imaginative paradigms ... The mark of the Christian in the twilight of modernity is therefore imaginative faithfulness, trust in the faithfulness of the God who alone guarantees the conformity of our images to reality, and who has given himself to us in forms that may only be grasped by imagination ... [So] we can continue to appeal to the facts, to aim at a truth beyond our own subjectivity, as long as we remember that all theoretical concepts, even the concepts of facts, are paradigm-dependent ... Right interpretation depends on right imagination. ... A postmodernity that acknowledges the fiduciary element inherent in all human activity cannot reasonably exclude theology on the grounds that it appeals to faith.⁷⁷

CRITICAL EVALUATION OF GEERING'S SUPPORTING ARGUMENT

The problems with global anti-realism (constructivism)

One major problem with Geering's thought concerns internal coherence. His appeal to global anti-realism brings this out clearly. Firstly, global anti-realism or relativism seems self-defeating or self-referentially incoherent. If 'no human culture provides the norm to which all cultures should conform, and all human cultures are relative,' what about this claim itself? The credibility of this statement is relative to culture: only in a Western secular pluralist culture will it be widely accepted. Moreover, while the statement denies universality to all cultural norms, it is itself a normative claim purporting to be able to judge all cultures. How can Geering do this without avoiding self-contradiction?

Secondly, Geering's global anti-realism does not sit well with his other claims: for example, his faith in the relative objectivity of science, and his confidence in the secularisation theory and in Feuerbach's theory of religion. If global anti-realism is true, all theories of natural science, social science, and philosophy are nothing but myths, no worse or better off than religious doctrines. Even relative judgement of objectivity or the appeal to verisimilitude would not be possible, because these presuppose an objective scale to measure degrees of truth. Geering may protest he has said this all along. However, he goes on to proclaim the demise of religion and the untenability of religious doctrines as if these are indubitable objective truth claims. For example, he asserts that those religions which claim to be absolute must surrender those claims if they are to continue viable.⁷⁸ 'Must surrender'? This sounds rather absolute. Maybe it is all rhetoric. If so, then we have no reason to be swayed by Geering's stories.

Geering's use of Einsteinian relativity theory to buttress relativism is dubious, for this has nothing to do with relativism. It relativises previous understandings about the universe, but posits its own equations as newfound truth. Moreover, it acknowledges at least one absolute in the natural world – the velocity of light. Driver's claim that 'Christocentrism cannot make sense in the Einsteinian universe' is also unconvincing.⁷⁹ Torrance, by contrast, combines Christocentrism and relativity, arguing that the Christian Faith is more consonant with Einstein's dynamic universe than with Newton's mechanistic one.⁸⁰

Geering has three magic words: 'of human origin', which he applies to everything. However, this process often involves a fallacy. He says, 'All religious traditions are of human origin – none is exempt ... so there is no one religion which is the norm for all others. None of them is absolute and final.'⁸¹ Here Geering seems to commit the fallacy of inferring from 'of human origin' to 'relative and not absolute'.⁸²

When we say some truth claim is of human origin, we may simply be saying it has been created by humans and expressed in human language. In this sense it is tautological to say every 'truth' is of human origin, but it has no earth-shaking implications. The law of non-contradiction, the statement ' $2+2=4$ ', the law of universal gravitation, the claim that there is a place called China or New Zealand and so on, are all of human origin. Yet it does not follow that these are not objective truths (and even if these 'truths' turn out to be false, their falseness still does not follow from the fact of their human origin). Sometimes, however, Geering seems to use 'of human origin' to mean 'merely of human origin'. When we say a particular thought is merely of human origin, we are saying it is entirely generated out of human fantasy with no input from external reality, natural or divine. Yet even here it is still fallacious to infer that that thought has to be false (genetic fallacy). Suppose I dreamt last night I would win a lottery, and came to believe it. This conviction is surely merely of human origin, yet conceivably the dream may come true – if I am lucky. Even scientific truths may, like the ring structure of the benzene molecule, originate from a dream.

The above distinctions help us guard against the confusion between 'of human origin' and 'merely of human origin', and expose the fallacy of inferring from the former to the latter. Geering asserts 'everything dependent on language is also human in origin and form. It means that the Bible is a human product ... for all such things are contingent on language ... itself a human product.'⁸³ Now either this passage embodies the fallacy, or Geering is misleadingly sliding from one sense of the words to another. Christians admit the Bible is of human origin. Nevertheless, they deny it is merely of human

origin because they believe that although the words are written (or even created) by humans, they are at the same time inspired by God. This claim may or may not be true, but is certainly a coherent possibility. To argue that because the Bible uses human words, it therefore has no input from divine reality is a *non sequitur*.

We should also distinguish anti-realist from fallibilist interpretations of the word 'relative'. When we say a truth-claim is relative in the anti-realist sense, we claim it is basically false, and does not refer to objective reality. When we say a truth-claim is relative in the fallibilist sense, we simply point out it may not be entirely true and is open to revision or correction. The fallibilist sense does not entail the anti-realist sense. A fallibilist relative claim may still successfully refer to objective reality to some extent. Geering's argument would be more plausible when 'relative' is interpreted in the fallibilist sense, but he wants to make the stronger claim. His arguments, however, do not adequately support this.

We can now see more clearly the crucial problem with Geering's argument from the constructivist understanding of language.⁸⁴ Just as the dichotomy between 'of human origin' and 'referring to reality' is false, so is the dichotomy between 'words of our language are inescapably human construction', and 'words of our language refer more or less successfully to external reality'. Yes, human language is inescapably of human construction, but this process of construction is also inspired and influenced by our interaction with the real world. This interaction consists of both our perceptual experiences of the world, and its impact on us. It is false to say that our linguistic and conceptual constructs are entirely free of imaginative and subjective elements (naïve realism). But it is also an exaggeration to say that '[o]nly language stands between us and the Void' (anti-realism). The middle way of critical realism is more advisable. It pretends to neither infallible knowledge nor the God's eye-view. It acknowledges human knowledge is partial and revisable, but points out this does not mean all knowledge claims are thereby completely false or useless. Partial description of reality or revisable models of the world can still contain elements of truth and useful guidelines to our intellect or action. The key is a humble spirit open to revision and critical dialogue with different viewpoints.

Lastly, if Geering's global anti-realism is problematic, so is his vision of global secular culture: 'There is no permanent fixed point from which we can view reality. ... It can never be more than a human construction ... Everything previously regarded as fixed and absolute is now seen to be relative.'⁸⁵ The tension within this position is palpable. While declaring the non-existence of any fixed point, Geering is at the same time saying that everything can never

be more than a human construction. Thus global relativism is the fixed point from which we can view everything. To impose this self-contradiction on the global world is both irrational and exclusivist.

CRITICAL FAITH VS. UNCRITICAL SUSPICION: TOWARDS CRITICAL REALISM

Geering, in adopting the hermeneutics of suspicion towards religion, celebrates critical reflection. However, unless we are selectively critical, we should also reflect critically upon the critique of religion itself. Many Christian theologians and philosophers have offered able replies to the Enlightenment critique of religion, and critics of traditional religion should not just reiterate their critiques but engage with these replies.

On the other hand, faith also should be self-critical. Critical realism seeks to navigate between the Scylla of naïve realism and the Charybdis of constructivism. Faith is willing to have a critical dialogue with criticisms. My own judgement is that orthodox Christianity has weathered the storm of the Enlightenment, emerging basically unscathed. It is Enlightenment ideology which seems to be running out of steam.

Now rebuttal of objections can at most show that the Faith has not yet been falsified. It is difficult to have definitive proof of any worldview, naturalistic or Christian. There is, however, a more realistic model of inference, namely abduction or 'Inference to the Best Explanation' (IBE). Using this, and other criteria like simplicity and comprehensiveness, we can rationally evaluate different worldviews. The simplest worldview which, when compared with others, possesses the greatest power to explain the whole gamut of human experiences and empirical data, can be provisionally deemed superior. The game is open to all. Every worldview, including Geering's naturalism, needs to show how it can explain things better than other worldviews. I consider the naturalistic worldview is not demonstrably superior to the Christian one, which sometimes has the better explanatory power.

One major defect of Geering's discussions is that he writes as if the past fifty years of development of philosophy of religion have not happened. Yet this development is recognised by those atheists who have tried to combat the contemporary upsurge of natural theology by founding a journal, *Philo*. Its editor writes in the first issue:

Over the past two decades, a number of outstanding theistic philosophers have produced a number of very significant works in the philosophy of religion. Some of these works employ conceptual tools developed in science, the philosophy of science, and formal logic to give new life to old arguments ... While these

various apologetic enterprises have multiplied, with some notable exceptions, the response of non-theist philosophers has been muted.⁸⁶

Traditional arguments for theism have found able defenders. For example, the cosmological argument is defended by philosophers like Braine, Grisez, Miller, and Meynell.⁸⁷ Gale, a critic of theism, has come to embrace a new cosmological argument.⁸⁸ Swinburne and Davies (amongst many others) show that Hume's objections to the design argument are not conclusive.⁸⁹ The claim that science has rendered the design argument redundant is also debatable, and contemporary science has uncovered numerous 'coincidences' which conspire to make the emergence of life possible.⁹⁰ This kind of fine-tuning of the universe has given rise to a new form of design argument, the anthropic design argument.⁹¹

When arguments for theism are construed not as deductive arguments but as inferences to the best explanation, their significance can be better appreciated. While none may be conclusive, each can be suggestive, and their cumulative force hard to ignore. The anthropological argument for God's existence is especially interesting in our context. While Geering wants to follow Feuerbach in reducing theology to anthropology, some theists argue that in fact the anthropological data are more coherent with the theistic than the naturalistic worldview.⁹²

The theistic hypothesis concerning Man is that he is ultimately created by God in His image with the purpose that he would freely choose personal communion with God and others. The naturalistic hypothesis is that Man is entirely the physical product of naturalistic evolution.⁹³ Which hypothesis better explains the facts of human existence, especially the phenomenon of human self-transcendence? Geering himself points to the amazing existence of 'critical self-consciousness' with the 'potential to examine critically our own thinking and the culture which has shaped us.' This is 'a process of human self-transcendence'.⁹⁴ The capacity to use language is awe-inspiring:

It can even ask questions about the emergent universe which has brought it about. Should we not wonder in amazement how the helpless day-old infant we may be holding in our arms can be asking us only four years later, 'where did I come from? How did I come to be here?' Moreover, humans go on to ask surprisingly penetrating questions: 'Why are we here? ... Why do we die? What is life for?'⁹⁵

This quest for meaning is often expressed in the creation of symbols, and the human psyche can be regarded as 'a veritable symbol-making factory'.⁹⁶

So we cannot help asking: 'Why this kind of psyche? Why this capacity of self-

transcendence?' From the viewpoint of naturalistic evolution, all that matters is survival. It is doubtful that the existential quest in any way contributes to human survival in a primitive jungle. Geering does understand this problem:

One of the great mysteries of the natural world is that out of it has evolved the human species, which has the capacity to think, to ask questions, to look for meaning and to be creative ... There is no obvious reason why we have evolved as we have, nor why there should be any life at all on this planet, since none of our planetary neighbours shows signs of life. The origin and purpose of human existence is itself a mystery.⁹⁷

Geering effectively admits that naturalism cannot explain well the phenomenon of human self-transcendence, and that from naturalism's perspective, man's emergence is a mystery. However, he dogmatically assumes the naturalistic story must be true:

the inanimate universe must have had the potential for life from the beginning ... The universe itself must have had not only the potential for life but also the potential for human self-consciousness ... We must conclude, the creativity present in the human psyche is simply a manifestation of the creativity potentially present in the universe itself.⁹⁸

In the end the only 'explanation' he can offer is chance:

All we can say is that from the beginning the universe and the earth had the potential for purposive action, even though the activity shown by the universe through aeons of time has been blind and unplanned. Only by an almost infinite number of chance events, coupled with the outworking of its own incarnating itself on this particular planet in a particular mode of being, within which self-consciousness, free choice and purposiveness have become a reality.⁹⁹

The phenomenon of man is indeed extraordinary, and it is unsatisfactory to treat it as a fluke of the evolutionary process. To assert the inanimate universe by itself must have had the potential for life and human self-consciousness from the beginning plainly begs the question against theists who argue the contrary. This 'must' illegitimately assumes the truth of naturalism. Good cases can be made for the claims that life's emergence by chance is extremely unlikely, and that consciousness cannot be reduced to matter.¹⁰⁰ Even assuming this potential of our universe to generate life, such potential itself needs to be explained. Contemporary science tells us that for the universe to have the potential to make the emergence of life possible, the universe has to be incredibly fine-tuned, the probability of which is again extremely low.

Geering's appeal to chance 'explanation' is hardly convincing. Firstly, such 'explanations' have little positive explanatory power. Secondly, there are

many 'signals of transcendence' pointing in the same direction.¹⁰¹ A 'fluke explanation' may be acceptable for one or several of them but becomes progressively less so as such 'flukes' accumulate. Simple statistics tells us that the probability of a series of an 'almost infinite number of chance events' quickly dwindles towards zero. Thirdly, it is doubtful these experiences are survival-conducive. The naturalist may deny our life has a cosmic meaning, yet its possibility makes the extravagant human quest all the more puzzling. Kurtz, the secular humanist, acknowledges that

It is as if the species Man has a schizoid nature – his feet implanted on earth but his imaginative soul soaring toward a heaven of magical unreality. Overwhelmed by the ache of humdrum existence, he seeks an escape to another dimension ... Man deceives himself about his ultimate destiny so as not to be tormented by the contemplation of it.¹⁰²

Suppose Kurtz is right. Why the 'useless' soaring imagination? Why the 'harmful' tendency to be tormented by the contemplation of ultimate destiny? The naturalistic worldview does not give a good explanation for this strange, 'schizoid' nature of Man. Geering himself is aware of this.¹⁰³ From the evolutionary perspective, the human psyche is unnecessarily convoluted, and its symbol-making capacity redundant. Why cannot evolution throw up a more pragmatic human being, single-minded about his own survival?

On the other hand, a coherent theistic explanation is readily available, and it is not valid to label it anachronistic and just reject it. If we are created for communion with God, it is to be expected that we would have an innate drive to achieve a proper relationship with the Infinite, originating from our *imago dei*. Since this relationship is also the source of our *telos*, our meaning and wholeness, the innate urge to seek such a relationship is naturally reflected in our quest for meaning, wholeness, and identity.

The pattern of the spiritual quest can be neatly explained by the spiritual origin of the human being:

our tendency to surpass continually our own achieved satisfactions, tells us something about human subjectivity, but it also argues for a divine correlate in the objectivity of God. [That is why] in the course of most human lives advertence to certain features of the finite world does spark off a kind of movement of transcendence, a nostalgia for eternity, a haunting sense of the infinite. This nostalgia can certainly be brushed aside as irrelevant to ordinary living; yet equally certainly it can be interpreted as the eruption into everyday consciousness of the most fundamental orientation of the spirit of man. For man is essentially erotic: man is openness, wanting, and thirsting to be filled.¹⁰⁴

Obviously, these suggestions and arguments need to be fleshed out. My purpose here is to show that a critical rational dialogue can and in fact is being carried out between theistic and atheistic philosophers. Both have to make their cases, and it is by no means true that there is nothing to say for the theistic worldview. Geering has short-circuited the problem of truth most of the time, and his suggestion that the naturalists have decisively won the rational debate is simply incorrect.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I argue that Geering's dismissal of theism is ungrounded, and his analysis of the options is faulty. He greatly underestimates theism's intellectual strength and staying power. I suggest that orthodox Christianity, especially when exhibited as a self-reflective and critical faith, is still a viable option in today's world. The misuse of the Christian faith has led to grave errors in the past, especially in the West. Geering's radical theology is partly a reaction to this history. However, in the global world he likes to talk about, we should note the emergence of a truly global Christianity.¹⁰⁵ Christian numbers in the non-Western world already exceed those in the West. The future of Christianity should not be equated with the future of Western Christianity. There is no reason for the non-Western Church to be preoccupied with the past mistakes of the Western Church, or be excessively blamed for them.

Neusch points out, 'Feuerbach's critique of religion portrays God and man as rivals: what is attributed to God is denied to man, and, conversely, what is given to man is taken from God. The God of Feuerbach resembles Caesar rather than the crucified Jesus.' This is a caricature of God: '[D]oes not the true greatness of God himself consist in his respect for precisely this autonomy? And does not the greatness of man consist in acknowledging that this very autonomy is a gift of God?'¹⁰⁶

I agree with Charles Taylor in believing there is a large element of hope: 'the hope implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism ... and in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human', an affirmation more total than humans can ever attain unaided.¹⁰⁷