

# STIMULUS

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WHY IS LLOYD GEERING STILL IMPORTANT?

WHY PROJECTIONISM MAKES LITTLE SENSE

GEERING & THE QUEST FOR MEANING

JESUS' RESURRECTION & CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

KM Kwan, A  
Comprehensive  
Evaluation of

Lloyd Geering (a liberal  
theologian)

Lloyd Geering



# Why is Lloyd Geering still important?

It is 2008, and the world is well into a century which looks like being dominated by climate change, by China, and by the challenges of religious pluralism in a religious age. New Zealand is slowly turning its attention to all three. It is ill-equipped to understand the third, because it has been ill-equipped to understand religion.

Overall, our small country has shallow intellectual soil – we rely heavily on a few voices canonised by the media to interpret the wider world for us. This is especially true for the wider world of ideas. Generally, we have been shaped by an unreflective pragmatism which has its strengths, but also makes us vulnerable; we can too easily accept the assumptions and confident assertions of others about the state of intellectual play in the rest of the world. Nowhere have we proved more vulnerable to this than in the field of religion.

In the last three decades of the 20th Century, Professor Lloyd Geering came to dominate what religious discourse there was among our chattering classes, and his was also the voice most often chosen by the media to pronounce authoritatively on religious matters to mainstream New Zealand. He did this clearly, articulately, concisely, and honestly. The state recognised his significant role by conferring upon him membership of this country's "Top Twenty" – the Order of New Zealand. And many of Geering's perceptions and judgments about religion have fused to become the lens through which the largest growing religious group (those who ticked the "no religion" box in the census box) have tended to view such things. At the height of his public exposure he often became the only academic authority to which it was convenient to appeal,

especially by those who wished to believe or disbelieve as he did, but who chose not to do the hard yards of critical reading and thinking. The problem is: that lens was, and remains, defective.

Today, Lloyd Geering is less visible, and less known to a younger generation. Yet, there are many New Zealanders who continue to echo his perceptions and judgments, whether

*"Today, Lloyd Geering is less visible, and less known to a younger generation. Yet, there are many New Zealanders who continue to echo his perceptions and judgments, whether aware of their provenance or not ..."*

aware of their provenance or not. Such people often continue to have considerable influence in the media, in academia, and in government circles (including education). That influence is inevitably secularist, working from within Geering's overarching modernist paradigm, rooted in the European Enlightenment. Yet, that paradigm is trebly inadequate.

First, the western intellectual world (at least) has become post-modern and suspicious of overarching narratives.

Second, religion of one tradition or another has become ever more important globally.

And third, the modernist paradigm is only "overarching" where Christian (and other)

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intellectual critiques of it are ignored, as indeed they have been largely ignored by Geering.

Where the modernist paradigm still rules – as it does in much of this country – it must be challenged. Geering, of course, is not an original thinker, as he himself emphasises. Rather, he is a brilliant populariser who has done us a great service in making accessible the work of a not a few classic scholars in the field of religion. Any critique of Lloyd Geering's work is thus a critique of many of the Enlightenment challenges to Christianity over the last several centuries upon which he has drawn. This latter critique can be done, and is being done, from within western academia. There, there is a growing conviction that the Enlightenment's conceptions have failed the tests of intellectual analysis and societal experience, though there is no agreement about what should take

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### Publisher's Information

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their place. It can, however, be salutary (and "enlightening"! ) when a non-European, fully conversant with the intellectual conversations within the western world comments, at some cultural distance, on what is going on.

When Raymond Pelly and I were putting together a set of essays critiquing the work of Lloyd Geering<sup>1</sup> we asked Professor Kwan Kai Man of Hong Kong Baptist University to contribute a paper on Geering's thesis that God is no more than a human construct and a projection of human desires. This Kwan did, but he came up with more than that. Kwan wrote a wide-ranging and penetrating critique of Geering's central intellectual story. Sadly, we could not include Kwan's work in its entirety in our book we had to be content with several sections of it. Yet, we thought it very important that Kwan's whole paper should see the light of day. Hence, this issue of *Stimulus*.

One striking thing about Kwan's work on Geering is how it reveals the extent to which Geering has failed to acknowledge, let alone engage with, the full range of academic discussion about religion in general (and Christianity in particular) which has been going on for decades, both outside New Zealand and within the growing academy of very well-qualified and able New Zealand theologians, biblical scholars, sociologist of religion, etc, who have been, on the whole, much less inclined to court media attention. Kwan's quotations, footnotes, and bibliography provide a different lens, a very different lens, on that wider world of scholarship. He is conversant with that world in a way which Geering is not, and

sometimes expresses his bemusement that Geering has not referred to it or engaged with it.

In addition to this intimate knowledge of western philosophy of religion, Kwan as a Chinese Christian brings a salutary cultural distance into play. Unlike many of us in this country, he knows that the Church lives in many cultures and is thriving in some, and that today its centre of gravity is no longer in the West. He is in bondage neither to our false perceptions of a declining Church, nor to our failing, Enlightenment-soaked culture. There is a cool Chinese head at work here, and we New Zealanders would do well to listen when he speaks.

Kwan's main targets are Geering's neo-Feuerbachianism and theological constructivism, as well as Geering's theological anti-realism of the sort popularised by Don Cupitt (whom Geering greatly admires). Kwan instead takes a "critical realist" approach. Kwan furnishes us with a comprehensive diversity of inputs which stretch from Alvin Plantinga, through Janet Soskice, to N.T. Wright. With respect to the sociology of religion, Kwan draws upon a range of recent and contemporary scholars, particularly Peter Berger and the later Harvey Cox.

This issue of *Stimulus* may well be of interest to those who have adopted the positions espoused by Geering but are still open to the possibility that these positions are not unchallengeable. However, although the issue presents a specific engagement with the thought of Lloyd Geering, the value of the issue is significantly wider than that – inasmuch as Geering's views are representative of the

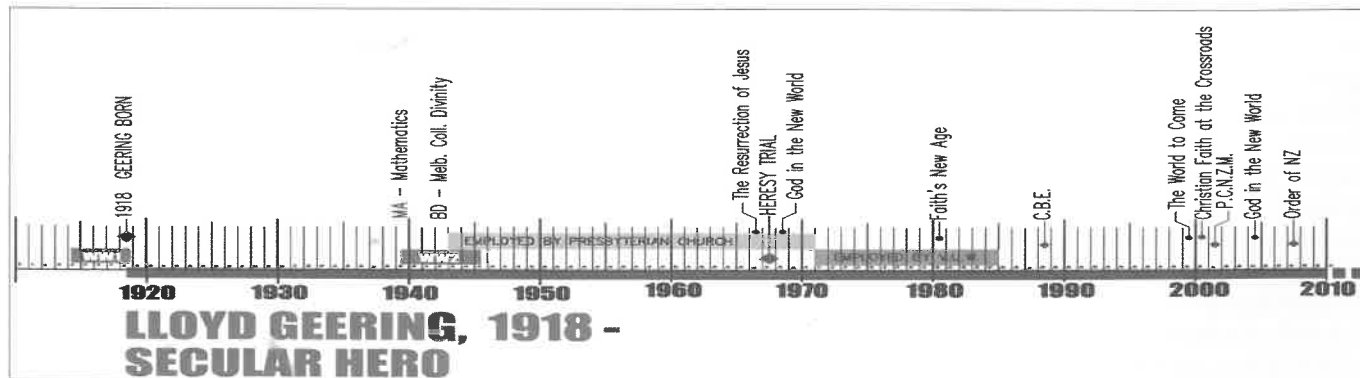
modernism that is at odds with orthodox Christian faith, the issue will be a valuable resource to those who seek to think these matters through in their wider context. The issue should be of interest to those New Zealanders of good will who seek to understand better the continuing phenomenon of religious belief and practice, and are willing to probe beneath the sound-bites of the media. It will be of interest to those who are exploring rational grounds for the faith which they already hold or are being drawn towards. And it is necessary reading for those Christians who have themselves ignored the intellectual challenges of the Enlightenment, and thus opened the way for shallow belief and burgeoning unbelief. Such as they need to be made to think – Geering, and now Kwan, make their readers do just that.

#### Endnotes

1. Raymond Pelly & Peter Stuart (eds), *A Religious Atheist? Critical Essays on the Work of Lloyd Geering* (Otago University Press, 2006).



**Canon Peter Stuart** (MA NZ & Oxon) is a historian and theologian. He was ordained in 1963, he served a curacy in Christchurch, and subsequently held a series of church posts in Wellington, including Anglican Chaplain at Victoria University (where he was also a history tutor), and Canon Theologian and Director of the Wellington Institute of Theology in the Diocese of Wellington. He is now retired, but continues to be active in the field of theological education, in both Anglican and ecumenical settings.



## Kwan Kai Man: a Chinese philosopher, theologian, and Christian

**P**rofessor Kwan Kai Man was born in Hong Kong and grew up there. He was converted to Christianity when he was 14. While studying Electrical Engineering Kai Man was drawn into an agonised reflection on the purpose of life and other ultimate questions. He became critical of his own faith, almost rejecting it entirely. However, after much reflection his faith was renewed and Kai Man decided to devote his life to an exploration of religion and philosophy.

Kwan Kai Man first gained a Bachelor of Science (Electrical Engineering), University of Hong Kong, and a Diploma in Education, Chinese University of Hong Kong. In 1989, Kai Man gained a Bachelor of Divinity (First Class) from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. In 1991 and 1993, he was awarded a M. Phil. in Philosophical Theology and a D. Phil., respectively, by the University of Oxford. He finished his PhD thesis under the supervision of



Professor Richard Swinburne, one of the foremost analytic philosophers of religion.

Shortly after this he returned to Hong Kong where he began to teach theology in the Theology Division of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is now is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy in the Hong Kong Baptist University.

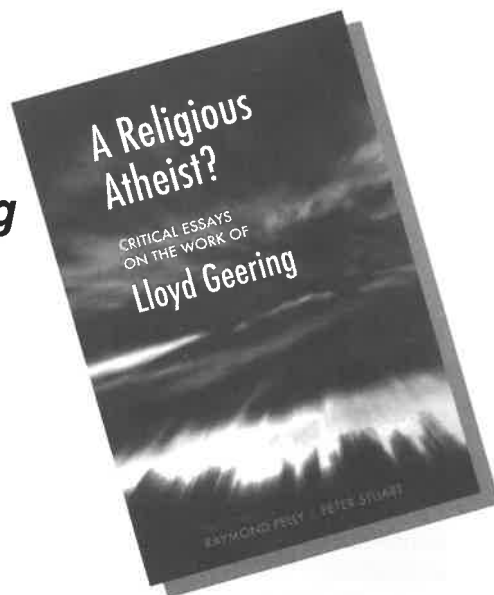
Kwan Kai Man has published articles in journals such as *Faith and Philosophy*, *Philosophia Christi*, and *Philosophy Compass*, and in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2nd edition). He has also published numerous Chinese articles on a wide range of areas. These include philosophy of science, systematic theology, science-religion dialogue, and social ethics. He is the author of several Chinese books including: *I Believe, Therefore I Think*; *God, Secular Society and the Foundation of Ethics*; and *Christian Ethics and the Liberal Society*. He has also edited books including *Postmodern Culture and Christianity*, and *Christian Values and the Humanistic Spirit*.

### Book note

## ***A Religious Atheist?* Critical Essays on the Work of Lloyd Geering**

Raymond Pelly and Peter Stuart (eds).  
Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2006. 205pp.  
ISBN 1-877372-37-4. \$39.95.

Reading Lloyd Geering **Raymond Pelly**  
Secularisation: An Outmoded Concept? **Christopher Lewis**  
Resurrexit: Geering and the End of Resurrection **Christopher Marshall**  
Revisionary Theology: Realism and Non-Realism **John Bishop**  
Religion Without God? **Gregory Dawes**  
The Inventing of Myths, Gods, and Paradise **Neil Darragh**  
Lloyd Geering Without Church **Ken Booth**  
Does Geering's Thought Have a Mystical Side? **Peter Donovan**  
Secular Supersessionism: Geering, Jews, and Judaism **Paul Morris**



See *Stimulus* Vol 15 No 1 pages 47-48 for Peter Lineham's extended review of *A Religious Atheist?*

## Lloyd Geering: a liberal theologian turned secular humanist

**L**loyd Geering is one of the most famous theologians in New Zealand. This is largely due to the highly controversial claims made by Geering, e.g. Christianity can go without God.

Although Geering started his career as a liberal theologian, the position he ends up with is theological non-realism, i.e., the word "God" does not refer to any external reality. It 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".<sup>1</sup> His heroes are Spinoza, Schleiermacher, and Feuerbach. His fellow companions are radical theologians like Don Cupitt in the United Kingdom.

If Geering does not believe in the traditional God, then what does he believe in?<sup>2</sup> 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, and it is on the basis of what we humans have found about that story that we are now constructing the global world."<sup>3</sup>

He is pretty sure that naturalistic evolution is the adequate answer to the origin questions, and 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 with itself at the time of its formation. When the conditions were right, the apparently lifeless earth gave birth to life. So it is quite appropriate for us to think of the*

**"... Geering maintains that as long as we uphold the values inherited from the Christian past ... it can be regarded as 'Christianity without God.'"**

*earth as alive, as a living planet, as a kind of living organism albeit a very complex one. Moreover we humans, like all other creatures, are a part of this living planet.*<sup>4</sup>

From this quote, we can also see that Geering expands the scientific theory of evolution into a new religion of ecology. For Geering, the traditional religions are gone forever. However, we should establish the parameters of the new global and ecological culture and create the forms of spirituality most appropriate to it. These are the genuinely "religious" issues to which we must "devote" ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most provocative slogans of Geering is "Christianity without God." While this sounds like outright contradiction to many people, Geering maintains that as long as we uphold the values inherited from the Christian past – values which lead to emancipations and new human ideals – it can be regarded as "Christianity without God".<sup>6</sup> Of course, the traditional religious practices have to be thoroughly transformed. For example, belief in Christ as the only Saviour has to go, while Jesus as the sage who leads us on the path to freedom can be retained. Rituals and festivals can also be maintained as

the celebration of human values, such as the importance of human relationships and culture.<sup>7</sup>

Geering is very concerned about the problem of globalisation. He

believes humans must learn how to live together in harmony, goodwill, and mutual responsibility. To achieve this goal, we need to have a vision of the global culture, which serves as

the foundation of a global society. As expected, the global culture Geering conceives basically conforms to the values of secular humanism, in particular equality and freedom.<sup>8</sup> In fact he frankly says that the basic principle of the global culture is secularism:

*... the former rigid dividing line between matter and spirit has been eliminated; in the global world reality is experienced as psychophysical 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.*<sup>9</sup>

Geering's writings have many merits. He writes lucidly, and he courageously draws out the conclusions implicit in his approach. He is also very frank about the difficulties confronting Christianity, both sociological and philosophical. However, in this essay I beg to differ from Geering's conclusion. In particular I will evaluate critically his theological non-realism, the foundation of which is his projectionism. I expound his case for projectionism below before giving a critique of it.

### Geering's case for projectionism

It is not always easy to ascertain what Geering's arguments for his far-reaching conclusions exactly are. Often Geering just asserts his position with no clear explanation of his arguments. However, if we look at the whole corpus of his work, we can find some crucial points repeatedly raised by him. Though those points are quite vague, and often put forward as insinuations rather than explicit arguments, they can be reconstructed as the case advanced by Geering.<sup>10</sup> I suggest this case is constituted by one main argument and eight supporting arguments.

#### Main argument:

##### Feuerbach's projectionism

Geering's basic strategy is to tell a naturalistic history of religion which *assumes* projectionism, mainly drawing inspiration from Feuerbach. By repeatedly *explaining away* the gods as the projections of people in different eras, the impression is made on the mind of the reader that projectionism is *the whole truth* about religion. For example, Geering *asserts* that the

reasonably friendly to humans.

The way human imagination creates the gods is 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.*<sup>13</sup>

Geering adopts the same kind of explanation for the 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".<sup>14</sup> Of course, the religious believer is not aware that his own psyche is so remarkably creative. Now however we know the true source of the alleged revelations, and this results in the "loss of divine revelation," which in turn deprives each

ation. ... 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. What those are depends on the world we have constructed, both individually and collectively".<sup>15</sup>

Geering extends this anti-realism to all religious language: "

*Heaven and hell symbolised the issues of ultimate personal destiny. God on his heavenly throne symbolised the unity, purpose and worth of the universe we live in. 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.*<sup>16</sup>

To deny the symbolic status of religious language, e.g. by adopting a rationalistic or realistic approach, would lead to idolatry.

If so, it is Geering and not his critics who have understood "True Christianity", or in Feuerbach's terms, "The Essence of Christianity". Again following Feuerbach, Geering claims that his "Christianity without God" can be established on the basis of the central doctrine of Christianity – the incarnation. Traditional realist interpretation, by creating a gulf between the "other-world" and this world by its dualistic worldview, "had 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 bringing forth 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; ... [it] restored to us the capability and responsibility to manifest divinity by the way we love and respond to one another".<sup>17</sup>

Besides relying on Feuerbach, Geering also draws upon other themes to reinforce his case.

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gods in the myths of ancient times, e.g. the Epic of Gilgamesh, "were wholly the product of creative human imagination, mingled freely with humans".<sup>11</sup> But why this exercise of imagination? It is because the myth reflects the human search for immortality. Moreover, "human imagination had (unconsciously) created the gods as a way of understanding natural phenomena and ordering the environment".<sup>12</sup> These stories about gods also had the effect of personalising reality, of humanising it and making it appear

religious tradition of its supposedly firm foundation.

One of Geering's mentors is Feuerbach (1804-72) who is famous for turning theology into anthropology. Following Feuerbach's footsteps, Geering claims that "God had been invented, out of the necessity to find meaning. ... By referring to the God-symbol we are discussing the meaning of human existence." Just like the gods of ancient polytheism, "'God' is ... a symbolic word. It has no external referent which is open to public confirm-

**Supporting argument #1:  
argument from global anti-realism  
(constructivism)**

Geering's thought is composed of diverse elements, which may not sit well with one another. Sometimes Geering sounds like an Enlightenment rationalist, but at other times he puts on the dress of a post-modern relativist and anti-realist (in this aspect heavily influenced by Don Cupitt). Of course, if global anti-realism is true, theological anti-realism is just a special case of it.

For example, he appeals to Einstein's theory of relativity as a scientific illustration of a much 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; we are dependent on the culture."<sup>18</sup> It follows that cultural relativism is inescapable: "No human culture provides the norm to which all cultures should conform. All human cultures are relative to time, place and experience."<sup>19</sup>

Consequently he endorses Tom 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".<sup>20</sup> The idea is that in a world of relativity, all forms of absolutist theology have to go: they are not only untenable, but also unethical! This is because "[a]ny 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."<sup>21</sup>

As an implication of global relativism and constructivism, all systems of morality and religious symbols are human-created. Geering

is particularly fond of using the three words. "of human origin."

*"All religious traditions are of human origin – none is exempt ... 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 of them is absolute and final, and those which claim to be must surrender those claims if they are to continue to be a viable means of the interpreting and living of life."*<sup>22</sup>

Sometimes Geering arrives at global anti-realism through the path of a constructivist understanding of language. Every "world" is constituted by words of our language which is inescapably a human creation / construction. He quotes Don Cupitt favourably, "Language is the medium in which we live and move and have our

***"Traditional, realistic understanding of theism is destined to disappear. So it makes eminent good sense to abandon the sinking ship, and jump on the rescue boat of anti-realism as soon as possible."***

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. It shapes everything." He then concludes, "We live in a world of language yet language is a human creation. In a very important sense the world in which we live is one which humans, as a species, have created."<sup>23</sup>

Concepts like truth, meaning, purpose ... are also created by humans. "As the coherent whole which the word 'world' implies, it exists primarily in the mind. ... The world we create and perceive is never free of subjectivism."<sup>24</sup> It follows that all religious documents (e.g. the Bible, the Qur'an) and religious concepts (e.g. "God") are human products which are contingent on language: "Language, God and the human species can

never be divorced from one another."<sup>25</sup>

Geering also incorporates this kind of global anti-realism into his vision of the 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. ... So the new global world which we humans of all races and cultures have been constructing, and which sets the outer limits of our shared consciousness, is global, secular, humanly based and changing."*<sup>26</sup>

**Supporting argument #2:  
argument from historical  
inevitability (secularisation thesis)**

One of Geering's favourite topics is the demise of Christian civilisation and orthodoxy. Geering often goes to extraordinary length to describe this development, and in the process suggests that this secularising trend is inevitable. Traditional, realistic understanding of theism is destined to disappear. So it

makes eminent good sense to abandon the sinking ship, and jump on the rescue boat of anti-realism as soon as possible. (Geering, of course, will also claim that it is the rational choice because the demise of orthodoxy is mainly due to its inability to respond to the rational challenges posed by the Enlightenment critique.) For example, Geering says,

*In the post-Christian era divine revelation is no longer seen as a source of knowledge, and the traditional organs of religious authority have become obsolete. The Word of God in the Bible, the voice of the Pope or the decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies – all will fall more and more on deaf ears. ... This all comes from the growth of human autonomy – the freedom of people to think for themselves and to*

*make their own decisions. ... God will no longer be conceived widely as an objective spiritual being – one who personally hears and answers prayers, and who guides human history from behind the scenes. God language, if used at all, will be treated as symbolic. Spiritual practices may take the form of meditation but will not be understood as conversation with an external personal being.*<sup>27</sup>

But one question naturally comes to mind: what about those conservative Christians who persist in the modern world? Geering admits that the “more traditional practising Christians will form part of the fundamentalist reactionary movement. They will even grow in numbers, for their strong convictions are infectious and appear to offer some security in an otherwise frightening world. But, like the remnants of the great churches, they too will become marginalised from society and its chief decision-makers.”<sup>28</sup>

So Geering maintains that the old religious traditions will recede – “as they are almost everywhere in the face of globalisation,” and “there can be no return to the pre-Enlightenment conditions, except by harsh and repressive measures.”<sup>29</sup> He suggests that “the end is in sight for all of the religious traditions to which the Axial Period gave rise ... [The] classical forms of these traditions ... are slowly becoming obsolete.”<sup>30</sup> The global world to come will be basically secular.

### **Supporting argument #3: argument from religious plurality**

Another reason to abandon traditional theism and to embrace projectionism is the fact of religious plurality. For example, while Jews, Christians, and Muslim all claim that their gods are absolute, they “have never agreed on the question of who the true God is. ... For the Christians, God is the One who became incarnate in Jesus Christ.

For the Muslims, God is the One who appointed Muhammad as the last of prophets and through whom he delivered the Qur’an. In each case the attribute is a *sine qua non* of the tradition in question, yet in no way can it be reconciled with the others.”<sup>31</sup> In this situation even the meaning of the word “God” is in doubt. Anyway, “Encounter with other cultures increased the awareness of cultural relativity and undermined the exclusive and absolute claims made for Jesus Christ. ... He too was a man of his own time ... he could no longer be

***“Anyway, if one acknowledges that some views of God can be seriously mistaken, how can we be sure they are not all astray?”***

acclaimed as the one and only saviour of all humankind.”<sup>32</sup>

Geering is aware that some believers will suggest these religious traditions are “all inadequate descriptions of the same hidden reality,” but he thinks in practice “this usually means that one regards one’s own tradition as the true understanding of God and all others as belief systems which are partly true and partly false.” His objection is that it is arbitrarily chauvinistic:

*Each religious tradition has exempted itself from natural explanations, while applying them to all the other traditions. In today’s global world, this will no longer do. We land ourselves in this inconsistency by not acknowledging relativity. If Christians use logical or natural explanations to explain the rise of other traditions, such as the foundation of Mormonism on the visions of Joseph Smith, these explanations must be applied to the Judeo-Christian tradition as well.*<sup>33</sup>

Anyway, if one acknowledges that some views of God can be seriously mistaken, how can we be sure they are not all astray?<sup>34</sup>

### **Supporting argument #4: argument from historical research** Geering thinks that his under-

standing of the Christian story as merely a myth is supported by modern historical research:

*The application of the scientific method to historical research has led us to draw a sharp distinction between myth and history ... modern historiography has undermined the emotional and intellectual power of the historically grounded myths of Phase Two ... In the case of the Christian myth, this has necessitated the attempt to disentangle the “historical Jesus” from the “Christ of Faith”, the image of devotion in which Christians have long imagined him.*

*Historical research, we now find, is able to recover all too little knowledge of the original historical Jesus and this has served to bring home to us that what*

*Christians have lived by all through the centuries is in fact a story – a very powerful story, but one which evolved as human imagination and devotion reflected on a specific set of experience.*<sup>35</sup>

### **Supporting argument #5:**

#### **argument from the realisation of full humanity / human freedom**

Geering often emphasises that the story of secularisation is at the same time the story of the growth of human freedom (which is regarded as the realisation of humanity). The free-thinkers which liberate us from the superstition of religion are also pioneers of the modern world. They help to emancipate humanity from the chains of absolute monarchy, slavery, racism, and discrimination against women, homosexuals, etc. They are the champions of democracy and human rights. Following this logic to the end, he suggests that the complete realisation of humanity (human freedom) can only come about after we have abandoned the last vestige of religion, namely theism.

The emancipations “have been made possible only because at the same time we have also been steadily emancipating ourselves from obedience to a supposed

supernatural heavenly Father, whose revealed will was not to be questioned." Geering thinks that

*... to achieve the most mature state of personhood we must become emancipated from the last element of our cultural tradition which has the capacity to enslave us – namely theism. We cannot be fully human until we experience the widest possible range of choices, and learn to take full responsibility for our choices in both action and*

*thought. ... Persons who are honest out of free choice, for example, are more ethically sensitive and more morally mature and responsible than*

*those who act honestly only because they are ordered to do so by an external authority.*<sup>36</sup>

Further, "As Feuerbach so pertinently remarked, the holier and more powerful God was conceived to be, the more powerless and sinful humanity found itself to be."<sup>37</sup>

This is an important strand of Geering's case, and the following supporting arguments can be regarded as variants of the above argument.

#### **Supporting argument #6: argument from tolerance**

Geering often links theism to intolerance. He emphasises that freedom from the commanding voice of a supposed divine authority is very important because the divine voice "turns out to be *simply* the voice of other humans like ourselves."<sup>38</sup> Although Geering is tolerant of all kinds of unorthodox views, he has some harsh words for fundamentalism:

*Fundamentalism ... is socially divisive, calling for absolute (and even) blind loyalty to a holy book or a set of fixed principles. Fundamentalism leads readily to fanaticism, for fundamentalists are so sure of the truth that they are not open to dialogue or other human reasoning. Fundamentalists insist on remaining loyal to the fundamentals, even if this leads to their*

*own death or the death of others. Indeed, Muslim fundamentalists sometimes see martyrdom as the fast road to eternal bliss. Such fanaticism soon leads to terrorism and suicide bombings ... Fundamentalism is an intense form of religious tribalism which can lead to social chaos in today's world.*<sup>39</sup>

So projectionism helps us to expose the dangers of the faith in theism by pointing out that theism "added to

**"One further reason why theism must be abandoned is its patriarchal and male-oriented character."**

purely human words a dimension of absolute authority which they did not deserve. It is this fact that so often caused the Inquisition ... and fundamentalists in modern times, to become irrational, dogmatic, and fanatical ... [T]he continuance of theism enables people unconsciously to project their own beliefs on to a divine authority and then attempt to impose them on their fellows."<sup>40</sup> In short, projectionism is to be preferred because it safeguards us from the dangers of theism.

#### **Supporting argument #7: feminist critique of theism**

One further reason why theism must be abandoned is its patriarchal and male-oriented character. Geering particularly lays the blame on the Israelite prophets who "unfortunately left behind the gender complementarity which had existed hitherto among the deities of the ancient religions. The absolute elimination of the Earth Mother (and other goddesses) by the prophets had the effect of leaving all superhuman power in the hands of the Sky Father." This leads to the "long-term effect of devaluing the feminine gender and all the virtues associated with it."<sup>41</sup> In contrast, in the Pre-Axial cultures male and female values were conceived to be in a state of complementary harmony.

When God was conceived as male, "men began to bask in the glory of at least some of the values on the right-hand side, the praiseworthy values, leaving the left-hand qualities to be associated with females, and thereby downgraded as negative and harmful. It was men rather than women who were taken to have been made in the image of God."<sup>42</sup> So the maleness of God has led to the oppression of women by male domination.

Patriarchy permeates the biblical heritage; so the Bible has to be dethroned for women to become truly liberated.

Geering's projectionism will help to

do that by demolishing the myth of the Almighty (male) God who supposedly rules from on high, and heals us from the non-symbolic objectivist use of the term "God".

#### **Supporting argument #8: ecological critique of theism**

Lastly, Geering's ecological critique of theism is an important part of his case. The underlying argument may be: "Since monotheism has such bad consequences (endangering the survival of humankind) it can't be true, and it must be rejected. It must have been entirely a projection." Geering thinks that the survival of the human species depends on co-operative international action legitimised by democracy. This requires us to think in a new way. "For centuries the Western world has encouraged us to believe that our future is in the hands of a benevolent and all-powerful God and that we have been placed here on earth to prepare for an eternal destiny elsewhere. Consequently we have focused our attention on the heavenly realm and devalued the natural physical world ... [B]iblical theism encouraged us to exploit the earth."<sup>43</sup> The Israelite prophets are again to be blamed because by banishing the gods of nature and the earth-mother, they encourage the desacralising of the earth.

Geering contends that we need

a new kind of religion which can provide us with the motivation to respond to the ecological crisis. While the "green consciousness" and the Gaia model are the first signs of this development, only Geering's projectionism helps us to satisfactorily reconstruct "the God-symbol to mediate to us the bewildering complex of forces on which our existence depends," and to foster "a sense of reverence for the earth." One possibility is to revive "the long-lost worship of the earth-mother".<sup>44</sup>

Geering advocates a meaning system (or religion) which clearly focuses on the earth, and he transfers the traditional description of God to the earth.

*We have evolved out of the earth and we remain dependent on it for our well-being and our future. ... it is the earth itself which, in ways which can only reduce us to awe, has been the matrix of all living forms. We humans have come forth from the earth as from a cosmic womb. ... It is the earth's oceans on which we depend for the water we drink. It is the earth's fruits which continually provide the food which nourishes and sustains us.*<sup>45</sup>

He even describes our relationship with the earth as "a new kind of mystical union".<sup>46</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Lloyd Geering, *Tomorrow's God: How We Create Our Worlds* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 1994), 225.
2. Three books especially will be referred to: *Tomorrow's God: How We Create Our Worlds* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 1994); *The World to Come: From Christian Past to Global Future* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 1999); and *Christianity Without God* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 2002).
3. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 178.
4. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 180.
5. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 142.
6. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 143.
7. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 144-5.
8. Geering, *The World to Come*, 119-20.
9. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 193.
10. I have to admit this process is sometimes quite frustrating. I do not claim that my reconstruction is entirely correct. If Geering thinks I have misrepresented him, then it is

incumbent upon him to formulate clearly his arguments.

11. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 35.
12. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 35. "...where modern physicists create such terms as electrons, quarks and black hole in order to explain natural phenomena, the ancients creates spirits, jinn, angels, devils and gods. ... It was through the gods that the ancients understood who they were and what life was all about". *Tomorrow's God*, 136.
13. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 133-4.
14. Geering, *The World to Come*, 80.
15. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 144-5.
16. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 152-3.
17. *Tomorrow's God*, 232. Making use of Feuerbach again, Geering emphasises that humanity could not be embodied exclusively in one individual. Only humans in community, the unity of I and thou, is God. *Tomorrow's God*, 233.
18. Geering, *The World to Come*, 74.
19. Geering, *The World to Come*, 77.
20. Geering, *The World to Come*, 81.
21. Geering, *The World to Come*, 81.
22. Geering, *The World to Come*, 81. Emphasis mine.
23. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 25.
24. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 43.
25. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 26.
26. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 194-5.
27. Geering, *The World to Come*, 86-7.
28. Geering, *The World to Come*, 87.
29. Geering, *The World to Come*, 88.
30. Geering, *The World to Come*, 115.
31. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 144-5.
32. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 176.
33. Geering, *The World to Come*, 80.
34. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 64.
35. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 39.
36. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 136.
37. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 158.
38. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 136-7. Emphasis mine.
39. Geering, *The World to Come*, 118.
40. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 137.
41. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 138.
42. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 158.
43. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 140.
44. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 228.
45. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 229.
46. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 230.

**Kwan Kai Man**

## Stimulus Response

### You are invited to respond to this issue

A major function of *Stimulus* is, indeed, the stimulus it provides. Partly that arises from the journal's editorial policy of encouraging feedback. From its inception, *Stimulus* has welcomed comment, criticism, and, of course, congratulations, both informally and formally.

The editorial team welcomes feedback, concerning this specifically-focused issue, for editorial consideration.

In providing readers with the opportunity to consider Professor Kwan's extended critique of Professor Geering's thought, *Stimulus* is, among several intentions, recording a type of response that has been generally lacking within the context of the Geering phenomenon.

*Stimulus* makes no pretence to evidence modernist "objectivity" – but, as our mission statement notes, "*Stimulus* is orthodox, evangelical, and catholic while remaining open to publishing worthwhile and thought provoking material from beyond these descriptions."<sup>1</sup> It is within the spirit of that critical openness that *Stimulus* invites thoughtful response from anyone wishing to have his or her views on Professor Kwan's critique – or on other matters – considered for publication.

Alternatively, comments may be made directly via <http://stimulusjournal.wordpress.com>

1. Cf. [http://www.stimulus.org.nz/index\\_files/AboutUs.htm](http://www.stimulus.org.nz/index_files/AboutUs.htm)

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## Christian faith in a "Godless" world: surrender to secularism vs. reaffirmation of a critical faith

Geering is to be commended for his honest exploration of all the difficulties with traditional Christian theism. However, Geering also seems to suggest that there are only two options: either you follow Geering on to the path of projectionism and anti-realism, or you are condemned to be an unreflective, reactionary, and ignorant conservative.<sup>1</sup> Is there really no other way out for those Christians who are aware of the full force of the problems? I suggest otherwise: the path of critical faith is still available.

The fact is that many theologians have already explored the difficulties of the Christian faith in the modern era. For example, Herwig Arts has written a book called *Faith and Unbelief: Uncertainty and Atheism*<sup>2</sup> to tackle exactly the kind of issues raised by Geering. Marcel Neusch's *The Modern Sources of Atheism*<sup>3</sup> honestly faces up to the atheists' critique of faith, including Feuerbach, Freud, and Marx. However, both conclude that faith is still possible in the teeth of these difficulties. It is surprising that Geering has never mentioned these people, and the reader's attention is only drawn to those fundamentalists who, from Geering's perspective, refuse to face the issues.

Geering's work also reminds me of Peter Berger, a famous sociologist of religion and secularisation theorist. Before writing this article, I re-read some of Berger's books, and it strikes me that Berger has in fact dealt with the problem posed by secularisation to theology more than thirty years ago. In his *A Rumour of Angels*<sup>4</sup> he states the problem bluntly: "the supernatural has departed from the modern world. This departure may be stated in such dramatic

formulations as 'God is dead' or 'the post-Christian era'. Or it may be undramatically assumed as a global and probably irreversible trend".<sup>5</sup> So "a profound theological

*"Berger would regard Geering's 'solution' as bizarre and absurd: '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.'"*

crisis exists today".<sup>6</sup> However, while both Berger and Geering take serious the problem of secularisation and the ensuing theological crisis, they provide different analyses and recommend different solutions. Berger would regard Geering's "solution" as bizarre and absurd: "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.'"<sup>7</sup> It is instructive to see why Berger adopts this kind of attitude.

On the whole, Berger has a deeper and more insightful analysis of the options available to religion

in a secular world. He points out that the fundamental option is a choice between hanging on to, or surrendering, cognitive deviance. He knows that to maintain (or possibly to reconstruct) a supernaturalist position in the teeth of a cognitively antagonistic world is by no means easy. In contrast, the option of surrender entails that "[m]odernity 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".<sup>8</sup> However, Berger points out that the result is: "the supernatural elements of the religious traditions are more or less completely liquidated, and the traditional language is transferred from other worldly to this worldly referents".<sup>9</sup>

Berger sharply points out the problems with this surrender option. Firstly, it requires a good deal of intellectual contortion. "The various forms of secularised theology ... propose various practical pay-offs. Typically, the lay recipient of these blessings will be either a happier person or a more effective citizen ... The trouble is that 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."<sup>10</sup> So the preference for this option will probably be limited to people with a sentimental nostalgia for traditional symbols, but exactly this group, under the influence of the secularising theologians, is steadily dwindling! "For most people, symbols whose

content has been hollowed out lack conviction or even interest. In other words, the theological surrender to the alleged demise of the supernatural defeats itself in precisely the measure of its success. Ultimately, it represents the self-liquidation of theology and of the institutions in which the theological tradition is embodied".<sup>11</sup> I think this analysis fits well the kind of "theology" Geering is proposing. Geering makes gigantic efforts to argue for the coherence of "Christianity without God." I won't quibble here over whether his efforts are successful. I just wonder why should the ordinary people who share the worldview of Geering prefer this way of self-description to the plain admission that they are atheists who reject Christianity?

Berger is aware that "larger religious groups are rather inclined toward various forms and degrees of *aggiornamento*, that is of limited, controlled accommodation. Cognitively, this stance involves a bargaining process with modern thought, a surrender of some traditional items while others are kept." This seems to be the classical pattern of Protestant theological liberalism. While this pattern has the healthiest prospects in terms of social survival values, its main problem is a built-in escalation factor – escalation, that is, toward the pole of cognitive surrender: "[O]nce one starts a process of cognitive bargaining, one subjects oneself to mutual cognitive contamination. The crucial question then is, who is the stronger party? If the secularisation thesis holds, the stronger party, of course, is the modern world in which the supernatural has become irrelevant. The theologian who trades ideas with the modern world, therefore, is likely to come out with a poor bargain ... 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, one may guess, will by then have gone away to more interesting company."<sup>12</sup> This seems to be exactly what happens in the case of Geering!

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. ... [A]s recently as 1965 Harvey Cox*

***"Geering makes gigantic efforts to argue for the coherence of 'Christianity without God.' I won't quibble here over whether his efforts are successful. I just wonder why should the ordinary people who share the worldview of Geering prefer this way of self-description to the plain admission that they are atheists who reject Christianity?"***

*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. American cities seem fated to go up in flame in an annual ritual of mad destructiveness and futility.<sup>13</sup> The temptation to compare Cox with Geering is hard to resist, and later I will point out that Cox has completely turned around in recent years.*

Thirdly, the surrender option largely assumes the inevitability of complete secularisation. While Berger at that time was still firmly in the grip of the secularisation theory (which he now repudiates), he was self-critical enough to raise the possibility that "secularization may not be as all embracing as some have thought, that the supernatural, banished from

cognitive respectability by the intellectual authorities, may survive in hidden nooks and crannies of the culture ... [S]izeable numbers of the specimen "modern man" have not lost a propensity for awe, for the uncanny, for all those possibilities that are legislated against by the canons of secularised rationality."<sup>14</sup> Berger concludes that while "the global trend of secularization will continue,... significant enclaves of supernaturalism within the secularised culture will also continue".<sup>15</sup> He envisages that the "large religious bodies are likely to continue their tenuous quest for a middle ground between traditionalism and *aggiornamento*, with

both sectarianism and secularizing dissolution nibbling away at the edges. This ... is more likely than the prophetic visions of either the end of religion or a coming age of resurrected gods".<sup>16</sup>

While Geering sometimes acknowledges the continued existence of conservative Christians, he

tends to write them off and shows a dismissive attitude towards their beliefs. In contrast, though Berger himself is not very sympathetic about the conservatives, he is more honest about the limits of secularism and theological liberalism, and provides a more nuanced analysis of the whole situation. More importantly, Berger knows that

*... it is possible to go some way in asking questions of truth while disregarding the spirit of an age, and even to arrive at answers that contradict the spirit. Genuine timeliness means sensitivity to one's possible destination ... an ultimate indifference to the majority or minority status of one's view of the world, an indifference that is equally removed from the exaltation of being fully 'with it' and from the arrogance of esotericism.<sup>17</sup>*

Berger's call to return to the question of truth is not the result of a refusal to use the modern relativising approaches favoured by Geering (hermeneutics of suspicion). (Berger is one of the major theorists of secularisation and sociology of knowledge.) Rather, Berger thinks that a consistent use of these approaches would force us to face the question of truth in the end.

Berger admits that the perspective of sociology has a relativising effect, and it constitutes the "fiery brook" (Feuerbach in German) through which the theologian must pass.

*It was historical scholarship ... that first threatened to undermine theology at its very roots ... a pervasive sense of the historical character of all elements of the tradition ... led to a perspective in which even the most sacrosanct elements of religious traditions came to be seen as human product ... 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 relativizations.<sup>18</sup>*

In particular, Berger emphasises the challenge of the sociology of knowledge, which eschews the problem of truth and 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, which consists of elements like a variety of social networks or conversational fabrics, systematised explanations, and legitimations.

*The sociology of knowledge ... offers an explanation of belief that divests the specific case of its uniqueness and authority ... The community of faith is now understandable as a constructed entity - ... Conversely, it can be dismantled or reconstructed by use of the same mechanisms ... the*

*theologian's world has become one world among many.<sup>19</sup>*

So far Berger sounds like another Geering (only writing much earlier). However, Berger takes a surprising turn by saying that "there are unexpected redeeming features to the sociologist's dismal revelations" when we are willing to see the relativity business through to its

***"The problem with 'secular' theology, which takes as both its starting point and its final criterion the alleged consciousness of modern 'man', is that there is a hidden double standard ..."***

very end:

*When everything has been subsumed under the relativizing categories in question ... , 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-relativizing asking.<sup>20</sup>*

The problem with "secular" theology, which takes as both its starting point and its final criterion the alleged consciousness of modern "man", is that there is a hidden double standard:

*... the past, out of which the tradition comes, is relativized ... The present, however, remains strangely immune from relativization ... 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. What was good for the first century is good for the twentieth. 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.<sup>21</sup>*

The modern world should not be

elevated to the status of an absolute criterion because the contemporary situation itself is not immune to relativising analysis:

*... relativizing analysis, in being pushed to its final consequence, bends*

*back upon itself. The relativizers are relativized, the debunkers are debunked - indeed, relativization itself is somehow liquidated. What follows is ... a new freedom and flexibility in asking questions of truth.<sup>22</sup>*

For example, Berger points out that because modern societies are highly differentiated and segmented, this leads to a situation in which most plausibility structures are partial and therefore tenuous. Since the modern individual exists in a plurality of worlds, migrating back and forth between competing plausibility structures, it is just natural that he is 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 and sympathize with his predicament, there is no reason whatever to stand in awe of it. ... [S]ociology frees us from the tyranny of the present ... it ceases to impress us as an inexorable fate."<sup>23</sup>

In the end, "[w]e must begin in the situation in which we find ourselves, but we must not submit to it as to an irresistible tyranny".<sup>24</sup> This seems to me sound advice, and

suggests the correct approach. Sometimes we may have been overwhelmed by Geering's grand narrative of the process of secularisation, the "demise" of Christian orthodoxy, and the emergence of the global "secular" culture. There just seems to be no other way than to go along with the secularising trend! However, Berger helps us to see Geering's narrative in a new light, by applying the relativising strategies to that narrative. This means that narrative should be regarded as a myth constructed by Geering, and the reason why Geering regards it as self-evident can be provided by an analysis of his plausibility structures: the fragmented structure of modern society, the larger social ethos which makes secularism look natural, the stories about the evils of theism which help to legitimise irreligion, Geering's significant others (e.g. colleagues) who have nothing but contempt for theism, and so on.

Consequently, his preference for modernity and naturalism is exposed as his subjective choice, and nothing more. In this case, is there any particular reason why others should follow Geering's radical theology? If

Geering insists that 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 to be free from the enslavement of traditional religions, he only ends up being enslaved by the tyranny of the present! Geering may point out that he does provide a lot of arguments for his narrative and so the truth of his narrative should not be dismissed. If Geering falls back on this strategy, then we insist that traditional religion deserves the same treatment, and Geering should acknowledge that it can be rational to go against the majority position. The truth of theism should not be discounted either.

It is interesting to note that both Geering and Berger begin as theological liberals but they develop in different directions. Although Berger remains a liberal, he more and more recognises the importance of robust religious belief in contemporary society, and becomes more and more critical of the secularisation theory, modernity and the option of surrender. Berger, in his *A Far Glory – The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity*<sup>25</sup> again points out that wholesale surrender of faith, even from a tactical viewpoint, is not wise:

*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; what is worse, even in the same locale it keeps on changing, often rapidly. As each new theology comes along it should have a label attached to it that gives its proper place of application ... and a terminal date for its applicability ... Perhaps, for some individuals who have been chasing the Zeitgeist in this manner for a*

***"Consequently his preference for modernity and naturalism is exposed as his subjective choice, and nothing more."***

*while, "folly" begins to seem like not such an unattractive option.*<sup>26</sup>

Berger is also worried that in the very process of accommodation, some very precious truths may have been lost:

*Are we, can we be so sure that the truths of modern physics necessarily imply the untruth of angels? ... I'm strongly inclined to believe the opposite. In that case the Christian churches ... would be paying a very high price for the "updating" of their tradition.*<sup>27</sup>

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. ... if the Church ... gives up the transcendental core of the tradition in order to placate the alleged spirit of the times, what is given up is 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.*<sup>28</sup>

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?"<sup>29</sup> (This might well have been a question put to Geering.) One reason why Christians should not surrender to the secular culture is that they may have something to offer. For example, Berger thinks that there is no secular solution to the problem of the self. In fact the naturalistic and secularist worldview contributes to the process of disintegration of the self: It becomes

*... more and more difficult to see the self as the center 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.*<sup>30</sup>

In the end, the ground of true self may only be found in transcendence: Certainly 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 the consciousness of 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 socializations can only be maintained in a view of reality that includes transcendence. Dostoyevsky ... could be*

paraphrased: If God does not exist, any self is possible – and the question as to which of the many possible selves is “true” becomes meaningless.<sup>31</sup>

Berger is saying that if there is no God, there is also no permanent self-identity. Now Geering may not dispute this argument. He applies his constructivism to personal identity also, but his difference from Berger is that 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.*<sup>32</sup>

I would suggest Geering's celebration of freedom is premature because he does not fully realise the pernicious consequences of a fluid, postmodern self! Suppose it is unethical for the person one is at the present moment to bind the person one has yet to become. Then not only marital vows become meaningless, but holding someone to his promise, business contracts, parenting, trust between friend, and much else are also impossible. The whole idea is also self-defeating. Who can be said to be “unethical” anyway? – the self who is supposed to take the blame is gone forever! It is senseless to combine the postmodern self with the idea of moral responsibility, because the latter in fact presupposes a permanent self.

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

*For well over a hundred years 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 such characters as 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, as we have seen, is an unprecedented gift of freedom, and even that he has frequently experienced as a burden to be shed as soon as possible.*<sup>33</sup>

The relevance of Berger's comments to Geering's project is too obvious to need belabouring. They do not show that Geering is necessarily wrong, but that Geering's surrender option is by no means the only one for a theologian or Christian who honestly faces the problem of secularisation. Berger is no conservative (notice his aversion to neo-orthodoxy) but he still has the courage to reaffirm the transcendence of God, fully aware that it is against modernity. Geering often suggests that it is the orthodox religious leaders who are timid and radicals like Geering who are courageous. But perhaps the courage needed to be a radical in the Church has been exaggerated; he may be considered heretical in the Church, but he is only going back to the embrace of the orthodoxy in the larger secular society!

I too have pondered and struggled over these problems raised by Geering, for over 20 years. At many points I was tempted to quit, but so far I think there is no sufficient reason or even good reason to do so. Faith is still possible in this “Godless” world. Especially for a Chinese like me, from the very beginning the Christian faith is a conscious decision that I have to make, because Christianity has never been the dominant religion in the 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 the Chinese society. I will indicate in the following article why I think Geering's case for projectionism is far from convincing.

## Endnotes

1. “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. These remnants exist like islands of the past in the fast-flowing tide of secularization which is giving rise to the new global world”. Lloyd Geering, *Tomorrow's God: How We Create Our Worlds* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 1994), 173.

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9. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 35.

10. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 35.

11. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 35-6.

12. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 37.

13. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 37. See also Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Urbanization and Secularization in Theological Perspective* (London: Macmillan and SCM Press, 1965).

14. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 39.

15. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 41-2.

16. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 42.

17. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 42.

18. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 46-7.

19. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 54.

20. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 57.

21. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 58.

22. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 59.

23. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 62. Emphasis mine.

24. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 119.

25. Peter Berger, *A Far Glory – The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992).

26. Berger, *A Far Glory*, 11. Thomas Oden is a good example of what Berger relates. He has turned from a liberal theologian into an evangelical. See Thomas C. Oden, *Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

27. Berger, *A Far Glory*, 13.

28. Berger, *A Far Glory*, 15.

29. Berger, *A Far Glory*, 15.

30. Berger, *A Far Glory*, 109.

31. Berger, *A Far Glory*, 98.

32. Geering, *The World to Come*, 86. Emphasis mine.

33. Berger, *A Far Glory*, 127.

**Kwan Kai Man**

# Why projectionism makes little sense

As will be contended below, the most important defect of projectionism as a critique of theism is the question: "So what?"

## The logic of explaining religion

Before evaluating Geering's projectionism, we

need to explore briefly the logic of explaining religion, because

projectionism is supposed to give a true explanation of religion. Firstly, we should note that

there are many kinds of explanation we can give of religion. For example, we can distinguish between internal explanation and external explanation. When the former tries to make sense of some religious behaviour or phenomena, it appeals to concepts internal to religion. For example, it may explain the phenomena of witch-hunting with reference to people's beliefs about witches and their harm to the society. On the other hand, an external explanation of religion offers an explanation in terms of concepts external to religion, e.g. explaining witch-hunting as the outlet for social frustration at that period of time.

Another important distinction is that between partial explanation and comprehensive explanation. While the former only claims 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 some religious

beliefs consciously held by people, and because unconsciously it served as an outlet of their suppressed sense of frustration. However, when each claims to be a comprehensive explanation, conflicts will occur.

Peter Clarke and Peter Byrne

*"... when the theorists of religion provide an external comprehensive explanation of religion, they are in fact overturning the ordinary ways in which believers describe themselves."*

have written a whole book to discuss various ways to explain religion. They point out that most of the leading exponents of grand theories of religion were atheists who wished to foster the cause of unbelief by producing radical explanations of religion- in the form of an external comprehensive explanation. This move is understandable. Of course, if those theorists are fundamentally sceptical about religion, they cannot rest with those religious concepts which are doubted.<sup>1</sup> I will later point out that although grand theories of religion are usually *motivated* by religious scepticism, scepticism does not follow logically from the truth of those grand theories. However, external comprehensive explanation of religion does raise questions about the rationality of religious believers.

We know, normally, that human agents will take appropriate steps to enact their desires and motives in the light of what they believe is the most effective way to realise them. Moreover, they form their beliefs on the basis of what they regard as good evidence for those beliefs. So in our daily interaction with our fellow human beings, we normally take seriously their own self-

understanding, and explain their behaviour in terms of their desires, purposes, and beliefs. Only in cases when people's behaviours are deemed grossly irrational, would we appeal to their unconscious desires, repressed feelings, and so

on. However, when the theorists of religion provide an external comprehensive explanation of religion, they are in fact overturning the ordinary ways in which believers describe them-

selves. For example, when the believers tend to say that they believe because they have experienced God, the theorists tell them they do not quite understand themselves, that what is behind their belief in fact is their desire for the protection of the Heavenly Father, and so on. They typically claim that in the name of objective scientific explanation of human affairs, they have to go below the surface of how the human world (or religion life) appears to us.

However, we need to point out that it is a big assumption that models of scientific explanation in natural science will automatically apply to the human world. Many scholars, e.g. Peter Winch, argue that there is something in human actions and institutions in general which makes scientifically based models of explanation ill-suited to them. It is also begging the question against the religions to assume religious scepticism in the beginning. So a case for conservatism and neutrality rather than scepticism can be made in the explanation of religion. As Clarke and Byrne point out,

*A radical theory of religion must seek to extend the use of such ideas so as to make a convincing case for*

concluding that an entire human institution has one meaning to its participants and yet quite another one in reality. It is right to greet this claim for large-scale illusion in human, social life with a measure of skepticism.<sup>2</sup>

The "problem we face is that of seeing how anyone might even begin to show that an entire institution, such as a religion, or an entire class of institutions, such as religion, might be irrational. The most that could be shown appears to be that particular participants in religion are irrational in their believing."<sup>3</sup> So the burden of proof is on those who maintain

*... religious belief is to be explained as the outcome of non-rational factors which are 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 behavior 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 except through factors operating independently of awareness of evidence and canons and traditions of rational argument.<sup>4</sup>*

In short, we cannot treat the hermeneutics of suspicion adopted by Geering as the default approach in our understanding of religion. Indeed, I think we need to be suspicious of the general claims of the hermeneutics of suspicion.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, believers are free to develop a hermeneutics of trust (or critical faith) whose explanations of religion do not necessarily shy away from making reference to the actual existence of divine realities. Anyway, we should at least entertain explanations of religion which are based on methodological agnosticism rather than religious

scepticism.

### The weakness of Feuerbachian and Freudian projectionism

Feuerbach's earliest theory of religion which reduces God to the essence of humankind is more well-known, but in fact his later theories have different emphases (without contradicting the earlier claims), successively reducing God to the essence of nature, and finally to the essence of desire.<sup>6</sup> Freud's critique is largely an elaboration of the last point (religion as projection of desire) though he gives a kind of psychoanalytic twist to it by bringing into play the unconscious. Geering has made use of all three

**"Geering has made use of all three lines of Feuerbach's argument, and also the Freudian appeal to the unconscious."**

lines of Feuerbach's argument, and also the Freudian appeal to the unconscious. However, numerous thinkers have already mounted a counter-critique of the critique of Feuerbach and Freud<sup>7</sup> (and it is surprising that Geering has never mentioned these writings). So I will explain the main points below.

Feuerbach thinks that human beings are sensible entities immersed in the natural world, and they have a sense of dependence on nature. Gods are nothing but different parts of nature hypostatised. Geering basically follows this idea, and suggests that these natural religions with their worship of nature deities mark the beginning of religion. The monotheistic "God" slowly evolves from these gods, but both are equally projections of the ancients' experience. Now the story may sound plausible as long as we do not ask the critical questions: how on earth Geering (or Feuerbach) can know how the ancients subjectively experienced the world, and where do they get their extraordinary insights into the unconscious mind of the ancients? I think the answer

can only be: they don't really know the stories they tell confidently are nothing but their imagination and speculation. Moreover, Geering seems to favour the evolutionary scheme of religion, but this scheme is also under attack, by, for example, the Scottish writer Andrew Lang.<sup>8</sup> The anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954) has produced twelve volumes to argue for an anti-evolutionary scheme: the oldest religion was not animism, totemism or nature religions, but "primitive monotheism."<sup>9</sup> I don't want to stick my neck out here, and I think Küng's comments are judicious: "It has, then, become clear that *neither* the theory of

degeneration from a lofty monotheistic beginning *nor* the evolutionary theory of a lower animistic or preanimistic beginning can be historically substantiated in a definite manner.

Both are essentially dogmatic systems, the first in the guise of a theologically inspired natural science and the other in the guise of a rationalistic natural science. Not only has the primordial religion not hitherto been found. Scientifically it simply *cannot be found* ... the search should be called off."<sup>10</sup>

Feuerbach's claim that "the consciousness of God is nothing else than the consciousness of the species"<sup>11</sup> also suffers from difficulties. He has managed to draw many interesting parallels, but the correspondence breaks down at certain points. For example, God is conceived as essentially infinite, but the human species cannot really be said to be infinite. Our species is so fragile that a naturalist should expect it to become extinct sooner or later. Even if we could continue to exist forever, that would only be a kind of existence which is *indefinitely long* rather than actually infinite. (Not to mention the human species' essential finitude in terms of knowledge and power.) Moreover, Feuerbach only hypothesises the projection of human properties on to

God, but he does not really explain "why" such a projection should take place. Perhaps this helps human beings to understand themselves (or the world) indirectly, but we need to ask: "Why this detour through an imaginary world instead of a direct grasp of the self and of nature? In what way does the attribution of human or natural properties to God represent a gain for the subject as compared with the simple acceptance of reality as it is?"<sup>12</sup>

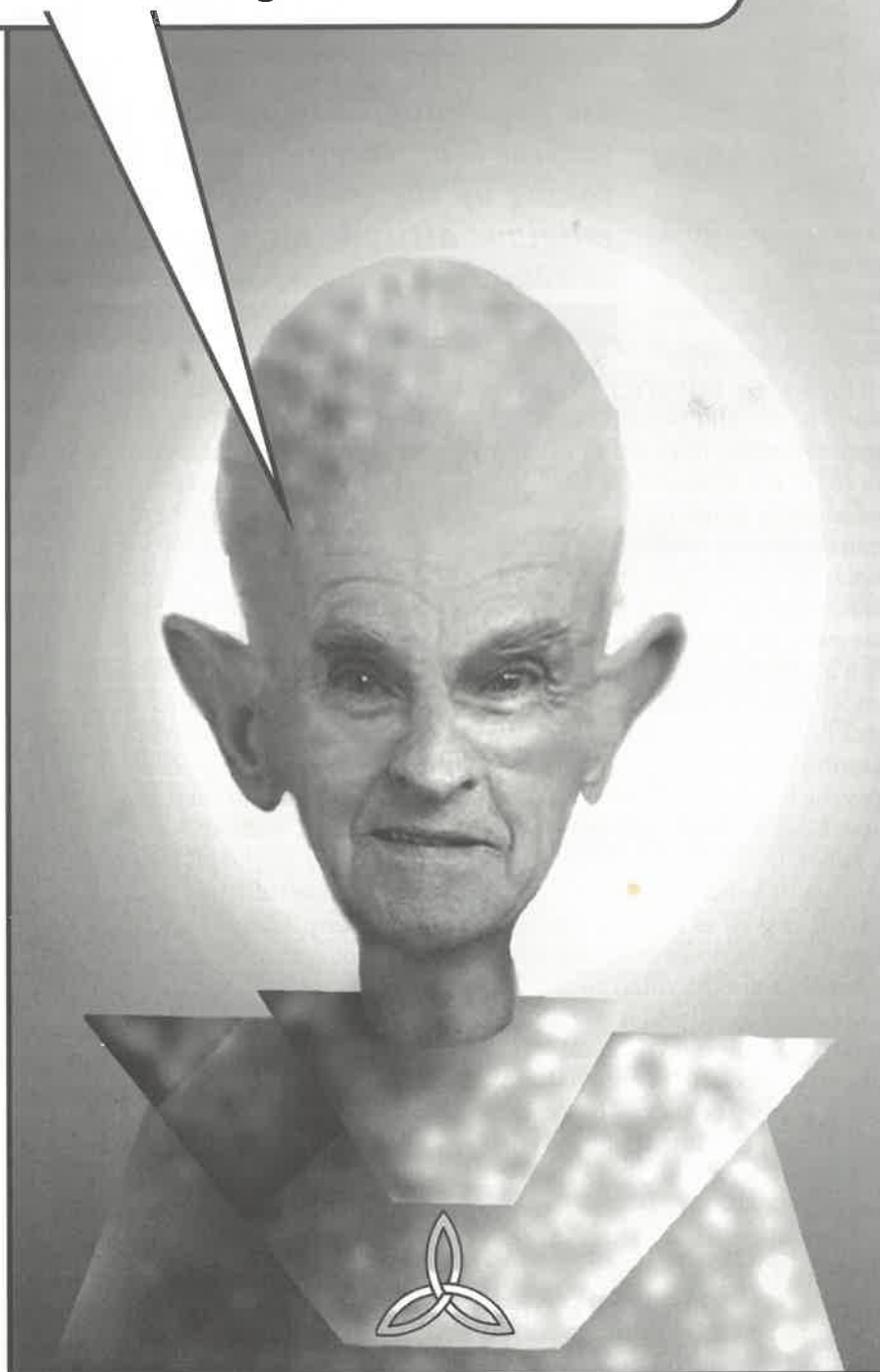
The projection theorist necessarily posits his own superiority to the ordinary believers: "Religion is the childlike condition of humanity. ... [T]he essence of religion, thus hidden from the religious, is evident to the thinker."<sup>13</sup> Neusch again raises sharp questions: "Why should consciousness be thus clouded over? Why such a passage through the religious stage? It must be admitted that 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."<sup>14</sup> The burden of proof is on the projection theorist who wants to insist on his superiority.

To produce some answers to the above questions, I think Feuerbach's later work is quite important. He has always insisted that the imagination is "the essential organ of religion." Later he fastened on human desire as the root from which all the gods spring. Humankind invents gods as fulfilment of his desires. Gods fill the void which desire brings to light. The gods are projections of the dreams of a primitive who is crammed with desires. Desire is essentially inventive, and it may provide the driving force for the projection in question. We can see that this is basically the Freudian thesis that religion is an illusion, which is defined as a belief primarily motivated by wish-fulfilment.

There are many problems with this theory. For example, there are many ways to deal with unfulfilled desires. Why should humankind try

# Faith's new age!

**In our galaxy we know much about the Lord God – but, the Lloyd Geering? It seem that he's merely an image we projected of ourselves many years ago, in a less enlightened time.**



to fulfil our desires by inventing the spurious world of the gods? The following critical comments give a more detailed analysis of the problems involved, and are directed towards the Freudian version of projectionism.

Firstly, we need to see the gap between the need and the conscious belief by distinguishing several things:

(a) a *need* to cope with the threats of nature and civilisation, to understand oneself and the world

(b) a *wish* that there be a Cosmic Father

(c) a *belief* that there is a Cosmic Father

Freud believed that

(a), (b) and (c) are true of humankind (almost)

universally and

that (a) is the

cause/explanation

of (b) and (b) that of (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 (not to say a wish of a particular content) – we can resign or evade or accept stoically the reality. Freud himself can adopt a non-religious way to cope. Why can't others? To make this link more plausible, extra assumptions concerning the human psyche have to be made. Statistically speaking, a wish rarely generates a belief. In contrast to dreams, conscious belief calls for mental assent as well as readiness to act upon it, sometimes at great costs. Freud has not provided clear guidelines to tell when and under what conditions a wish will generate a belief. It is not hard to see that *every* belief can be explained as wish-fulfilment of *some* wish. It means that a Freudian explanation may be quite vacuous.

Actually both (a) and (b) are not apparently true of all believers. Many grow up in a well-protected environment. Many can't recall any insistent wish for a Cosmic Father, or

they deny that it is the wish that causes them to believe. So the wishes do not seem to be necessary conditions for belief in God. To save his theory, Freud has to claim that those wishes have been repressed into the unconscious. (Conscious wishful thinking is self-defeating, anyway.) However, how can we know what exactly is contained in a person's unconscious?

In fact the wishes alone cannot be sufficient conditions either. Otherwise, why are there are unbelievers in all ages? (Remember

***"As a matter of fact, many religious doctrines are psychologically difficult to accept, e.g. selfless love, sacrifice, strife for perfection, taking up the cross. More importantly, a religious attitude often leads to a radical evaluation of our desires."***

Freud thinks that such wishes are universally shared.) So 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? These questions concerning the empirical adequacy of the Freudian naturalistic explanation are crucial. However, the Freudians seldom address these questions. In fact, naturalistic explanations are often thrown around, supported by some special cases and then generalised to all cases, without being aware of the lack of empirical adequacy.

Another difficulty: as a matter of fact, many religious doctrines are psychologically difficult to accept, e.g. selfless love, sacrifice, strife for perfection, taking up the cross. More importantly, a religious attitude often leads to a radical evaluation of our desires. So

*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. Such confession of desire in prayer 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.*<sup>15</sup>

In fact projectionism is a doubled-edged sword: we can also use the projection theory to explain atheism.

<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> This aversion to a theistic world is not hard to understand. As Purtill points out,

*Man in relation to God is not only infinitely feeble and dependent, but is also condemned by his own sinfulness. God's infinite power and his perfect justice leave us in no very flattering position. True, there is also infinite mercy, but 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, without compensating power or admiration, 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. He is 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 or judge us.<sup>19</sup>*

### **The problematic nature of the mechanism of projection**

Another important question about projectionism is

that: how can we know the projective mechanism is in fact operating on this or that believer? To answer this, we have to be clear what is meant by such a mechanism and how to identify

or individuate it. Normally when we say a belief (or experience) is a projection, it means two things:

- (a) the belief is false or the experience is unveridical; or
- (b) the belief or experience accords with your inner desires; and it is produced entirely by such desires.

No doubt some experiences are projections:

*People who are angry and filled with turbulent feelings of unresolved hatred often project that inner turmoil onto others, accusing them of harshness or oppressive behaviour, interpreting the most insignificant remark as hostility. ... Projection is one of the things we do to distort reality and shape it into our own subconscious image ... we also react to others in a disproportionate way in those areas where we are most fragile. An insecure person will interpret even a kindly remark as a grave assault, if it is made flippantly, while an off-hand remark can bring on a major depression.<sup>20</sup>*

However, in this sense "projection" is much more than a word labelling a psychological process: it implies (strongly negative) epistemic evaluation. So it should only be used

when solidly backed up by epistemic considerations. In the above examples, these considerations are provided by our consensual sense experiences and interpersonal experiences. Otherwise, although a belief may accord with one's desire very much, we still cannot conclude that it is a projection. The point is that in the normal cases, apart from the epistemic evaluation of the belief, we have no independent and secure way to identify the psychological mechanism. Likewise, we cannot say that belief in God is a projection

***"I do not claim here that God-experients are more sane than the non-God-experients. I am only saying that to claim the reverse is very implausible."***

unless we can first show that this belief is false. The projectionists simply have not told us their way to identify the projective mechanisms in believers.

Here one may reply that we can identify a certain type of personality which would be prone to have projections. If the believers belong to this type, then there is some reason to think their experiences of God are projections. Although this line of reasoning is not secure, it does bear some weight. But what type of persons would be prone to project? Freud points out that 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".<sup>21</sup> Indeed, common sense observations suggest that people who are prone to self-deception tend to misinterpret others' motives, tend to irrational rage, and the like. whereas those are not so prone are calm, humorous, at ease with others and oneself, able to laugh at oneself, have insights into others' personality and motives, and so on. These are admittedly vague, but I think reasonable judgments in

this area are not impossible. Granting this, I think it is also plausible to say that many God-experients do not display symptoms of the former group at all. Moreover, a significant number of them display signs of the latter group, and some to an exceptional degree. I do not claim here that God-experients are more sane than the non-God-experients. I am only saying that to claim the reverse is very implausible.

Moreover, "the religious type at its purest and highest does not seem to have these characteristics. The

saint, the clear spirit, is characterised usually by innocence and purity of heart".<sup>22</sup> 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. We ought to pause, therefore, before accepting the dismissal of religious faith as a mere projection, because of the persistent testimony of the pure in heart that they see God, and not just some version of themselves in their encounter with the mystery that besets them. 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.<sup>23</sup>*

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

*... do not have the brooding complexity and pain that characterises the insane, the tortured ones who have split off from reality. Nor do they possess the insecurities and anxieties, the greeds and longings of the neurotic majority who are trapped into conforming to the going standards of the time. On the contrary, the closer to God they*

become, the more committed they are to the service of that absolute ..., the more simple and joyful and straightforward they become.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

Many theistic experiences are in fact self-integrating. Some even demand a high degree of honesty, integrity, and self-denial. Consider a contemporary example. Jackie Pullinger is a British woman who came to Hong Kong to serve drug addicts and poor people in the Kowloon Walled City as a result of hearing "God's calling".<sup>26</sup> Her theistic experience certainly led to practical love and sacrifice. However, Freudians may suggest she was only suffering from an unconscious "saviour complex". (We certainly need more people who suffer from this kind of "saviour complex"!) However, when Pullinger experienced further frustrations and rejections, she felt that those people were not worthy of her love and she was tempted to quit. What kept her there? It was a further experience of God's love and illumination, which revealed and removed her snobbishness and urged her to learn humble, self-effacing, and unconditional love. Of course, 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 simply have no reason to believe in such contrived and speculative hypotheses. We have yet to see sound reasons for believing that even a significant proportion of God-experiencers are prone to project.

### Projection or reflection?

The above discussions try to engage

with projectionism and points out its various questions. However, the most important defect of projectionism as a critique of theism can be shown by a counter-question: "So what?" As Küng explains, quoting E. von Hartman, "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

**"We have yet to see sound reasons for believing that even a significant proportion of God-experiencers are prone to project."**

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."<sup>27</sup> Or in the words of Berger: "the entire view of religion as a human product or projection may once again be inverted. ... If I am right in this, what could be in the making here is a gigantic joke on Feuerbach."<sup>28</sup> It is because

... both perspectives may coexist ... What appears as a human projection in one may appear as a reflection of divine realities in another, ... if there is any intellectual enterprise that appears to be a pure projection of human consciousness it is mathematics. A mathematician can be totally isolated from any contact with nature and still go on about his business of constructing mathematical universes, which spring from his mind as pure creations of human intellect. Yet the most astounding result of modern natural science is the reiterated discovery (quite apart from this or that mathematical formulation of natural processes) 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. ... It is possible ... because ... there is a fundamental affinity between the structures of his consciousness and the structures 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.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, the dichotomy between human projection and cosmic reflection is only an assumption inherited from the Enlightenment. From other perspectives, human projection and cosmic reflection - are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and they may indeed overlap to different degrees. Garrett Green also points out that behind the hermeneutics of suspicion, there is a similarly unjustified dichotomy between imagination and reality:

By rather ingeniously combining the descriptive claim that imagination is the engine of religion with the tendentious judgment that religious consciousness is therefore false consciousness, Feuerbach gives us the clue to the mainspring of modernist suspicion about religion. For the modernist ... imagination [is] ... the source of speculation fantasy, and illusion ... the organ of fiction and error ... religion is the product of imagination; therefore religious claims are untrue.<sup>30</sup>

However, after the postmodern turn, the above dichotomy needs to be radically evaluated: we no longer have ... the foundational confidence that we have reliable access to a "reality" against which imagination might be judged "illusory." Imagination now becomes the unavoidable means of apprehending "reality." Even in recent philosophy of science, 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."<sup>31</sup>

So Green suggests, ... the thesis that religion ... is a product of human imagination ought to be accepted. ... For, if we have truly left the security of foundationalist apologetics behind, 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. ... [It is also] a sign of faithlessness toward the God whom we acknowledge to be the author and guarantor of those truths, a claim of ownership over goods that we have been granted in trust. To acknowledge ... that we hold those truths as stewards rather than as masters, in the earthen vessels of imaginative paradigms, is a sign that we have indeed heard the gospel message. ... 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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup>

Though Green is a bit more postmodern than I can totally endorse, the approach he is suggesting is akin to the spirit of critical faith I defend in these essays.

## Endnotes

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26. See Jackie Pullinger with Andrew Quicke, *Chasing the Dragon* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980).
27. Küng, *Does God Exist?*, 210.
28. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 63.
29. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 64-5.
30. Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14.
31. Green, 14.
32. Green, 15-16.
33. Green, 17.

Kwan Kai Man

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# A critical evaluation of Geering's supporting arguments

In what follows we will consider the key supporting arguments that Geering uses.

## #1: the problems with global anti-realism (constructivism)

One major problem with Geering's thought concerns its internal coherence. His appeal to global anti-realism brings this out clearly. Firstly, it is not clear that global anti-realism or relativism is not 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,"<sup>1</sup> what about this claim itself? Clearly the credibility of this kind of statement is relative to culture: it will not be widely accepted except in a western secular pluralistic culture. Moreover, while the statement denies universality to all cultural norms, it is itself a normative claim (note the use of "should") which purports to be able to judge all cultures, especially those which are non-relativistic. How can Geering do this without avoiding self-contradiction?

Secondly, Geering's global anti-realism does not sit well with his other claims, e.g. his faith in the relative objectivity of science, his confidence in the secularisation theory and Feuerbach's theory of religion, and so on. Of course, if global anti-realism is true, all theories of natural science, social science, and philosophy are *nothing but myths*. They are no worse off or better off than religious doctrines in this respect. Even relative judgment of objectivity or the appeal to verisimilitude would not be possible because these moves presuppose an

objective scale to measure degrees of truth. Geering may protest that he has said this all along, i.e., science and his account of religion, and so on, are only stories constructed by him. But these disclaimers appear to be disingenuous. After making these claims to disarm critics, he goes on to proclaim

***"Geering's use of Einsteinian relativity to buttress relativism is dubious. In fact the theory of relativity has nothing to do with relativism."***

confidently 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 to be viable.<sup>2</sup> MUST surrender? This sounds rather absolute and imperialistic to me. Maybe it is all rhetoric. If it is the case, then the readers should remind themselves that they have no *reason* to be swayed by Geering's stories.

Geering's use of Einsteinian relativity to buttress relativism is dubious. In fact the theory of relativity has nothing to do with relativism. It relativises previous understanding of motion, space and time, but it posits its own equations as the newfound truth about our universe. Moreover, it acknowledges at least one absolute in the natural world – the velocity of light is a constant from every frame of reference! Driver's claim that "Christocentrism cannot make sense in the Einsteinian universe"<sup>3</sup> is also unconvincing. At least T.F. Torrance (1984) manages to combine

Christocentrism and relativity.<sup>4</sup> He argues that the Christian faith is more consonant with the dynamic Einsteinian universe than with the mechanical Newtonian world. It is a pity that Geering rarely discusses and interacts with positions other than his own.

Geering has three magic words: "of human origin," which he slavishly and eagerly 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.*"<sup>5</sup> Here Geering seems to commit the fallacy of inferring from "of human origin" to "relative and not absolute." This fallacious inference is in fact implicit in much of his work. To see clearly it is a fallacy, we need to carefully distinguish different meanings of the concepts involved.<sup>6</sup>

When we say some truth claim is of human origin, we may be just saying that it has been created by humans, and expressed in human language. In this sense it is quite tautological to say that every "truth" is of human origin, but it has no earth-shaking implications as sometimes Geering seems to suggest. 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, but *it does not follow* that these are not objective truths. (Even if these "truths" turn out to be false, their falsehood still does not follow from the fact that they are of human origin.) However, sometimes Geering

seems to use "of human origin" in the sense "merely of human origin." When we say a thought T is *merely* of human origin, we are saying that it is entirely generated out of human fantasy with no input from external reality, natural or divine. However, even in this case, it is still fallacious to infer that T has to be false (genetic fallacy). Suppose I dreamt last night that I would win a lottery, and I came to believe that strongly. This conviction is surely *merely* of human origin, but conceivably the dream may come true, if I am lucky. Even some scientific truths, like the ring structure of the benzene molecule, have originated from a dream.<sup>7</sup>

It is, of course, disheartening for religious believers to hear that their cherished revelation is merely of human origin, even if we tell them they might still be lucky! Nevertheless, the above distinctions help us to guard against the confusion between "of human origin" and "merely of human origin," and exposes the fallacy of inferring from the former to the latter. Geering asserts that "everything dependent on language is also human in origin and form. It means that the Bible is a human product, that the Qur'an is a human product, for all such things are contingent on language, which is itself a human product."<sup>8</sup> Now this passage may embody the fallacy I point out above (or Geering is misleading readers by sliding from one sense of the words to another). Of course, even Christians will admit the Bible is "of human origin", in the harmless sense. Nevertheless, they will deny it is *merely* of human origin, because they believe that although the human words are written down (or even created) by humans, they are at the same time inspired by God. This claim may or may not be true, but it certainly is a coherent possibility. To argue that since the Bible uses human words it therefore has no input from the divine reality, is simply a *non sequitur*.

We can now see more clearly the crucial problem with Geering's argument from the constructivist understanding of language.<sup>9</sup> Just as the dichotomy between "of human

origin" and "referring to reality" is false, so too 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." Of course, human language is inescapably a human construction, but we need to note as well that this process of construction is inspired and influenced by our interaction with the real world. This interaction consists of both our perceptual experiences of the world, and the impact of the world 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"<sup>10</sup> (anti-realism)! I think the middle way of critical realism is more advisable. It pretends neither to infallible knowledge nor to the God's eye-view. It acknowledges that human knowledge is partial and revisable, but points out that this does not show that 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 which is open to revision and to critical dialogue with different viewpoints.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, if Geering's global anti-realism is problematic, so also is his vision of the 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."<sup>12</sup> The inner 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 – this implies that global relativism is the fixed point from which we can view everything! To impose this self-contradiction on the global world would be both irrational and exclusivist.

## #2: how inevitable is secularisation?

The *inevitable* demise of Christian civilisation and orthodoxy is a crucial constituent of Geering's case, but Geering may have got the basic facts wrong. For example, Geering maintains that the old religious traditions are almost everywhere receding in the face of globalisation, and that "the end is in sight for" them.<sup>13</sup> But this is certainly incorrect. Geering has not done his homework, and perhaps he is just deducing an empirical conclusion from his philosophical premise. Let us look at the secularisation theory on which he is very much relying.

It seems to me the whole secularisation discourse is skewed: it is Euro-centric and academy-oriented. Despite Geering's awareness of the importance of non-western cultures, he does not seem to understand that the secularisation thesis seems self-evident only from a western perspective. Peter Berger was once a famous secularisation theorist, but now he acknowledges 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."<sup>14</sup> Recently, Berger even admitted that his secularisation theory was fundamentally mistaken.<sup>15</sup>

In particular, there is no long-term decline in the number of people attending church services in the United States<sup>16</sup> and many Asian or African countries. As an Asian, I would like to testify to the enormous growth of Christianity in Korea and China. The first Christian church was established in Korea in 1885. During a century of rapid modernisation, Christianity has also experienced tremendous growth. Now 20-25% of the Korean population are Protestants, and around 4% Catholics.<sup>17</sup> In mainland China, according to the government's statistics in 1992, the number of Christians now reaches 63 million, more than sixty times the figure in 1949. (We also need to bear in mind the fact that the government did not count those Christians in the underground churches.) During this period, the population of China has

only increased by 150%.<sup>18</sup> The secularisation theory does not fit the Latin American situation either. After surveying a vast amount of data, a Latin American sociologist concludes that

*... while a certain percentage of the population is influenced by secularizing currents ... this phenomenon occurs rather as a mere countercurrent to the central trend. The central trend ... consists, on the one side, of the persistence, however eroded, of Catholicism and, on the other, of the growth of new religious expressions of various kinds, especially among the Latin American popular masses.*<sup>19</sup>

The facts seem to show that modernisation's effects on religion are neither inevitable nor uniform. Despite Geering's claim that it would be too difficult for modern people to believe in a transcendent God, the statistics about modern people, who exist in the real world instead of the imagination of the secularisation theorists, tell otherwise. The majority of westerners still do so. In countries like Ireland and the United States, believers in God constitute the overwhelming majority of the population. Moreover, as Berger says,

*... by and large, religious communities have survived and even flourished to the degree that they have not tried to adapt themselves to the alleged requirements of a secularised world. ... [E]xperiments with secularised religion have generally failed; religious movements with beliefs and practices dripping with reactionary supernaturalism [i.e., the charismatics and the evangelicals] (the kind utterly beyond the pale at self-respecting faculty parties) have widely succeeded.*<sup>20</sup>

This fact is also noticed by Harvey Cox, who was known for being a radical secular theologian in the sixties. Now he has completely abandoned the secularisation theory, and calls it "the myth of the twentieth century."<sup>21</sup>

Cox points out that "[o]ne hundred years ago ... Some prophesied the final disappearance of religion, ignorance, and super-

stition. Others confidently predicted a "Christian" century ... A hundred years later, both these forecasts appear to have been wrong."<sup>22</sup> (This is a good example to illustrate the folly of trying to predict history.) Secularisation theory claims that the more modernisation, the more religion would be undercut and marginalised.

*Today this zero-sum construction seems entirely implausible. Religion has not only survived, it has even thrived in some of the most modernised areas of the world ... in many places it has even continued to stimulate the modernisation process ... modern Japan can hardly be thought of as a secular society. Both local and state Shinto are undergoing a certain revitalisation. ... The so-called new religious movements continue to proliferate. ... In Africa, Latin America, and Asia both Christianity, mainly in its Pentecostal form, and other new religious movements ... are burgeoning. In the United States, religion, though changing in important ways, is hardly in decline. In the so-called Third World some traditional and many innovative religious movements appear to prosper. Only Europe, some claim, is an exception to this global process. ... [B]y some standards the world may be even less secular at the end of the twentieth century than it was at the beginning.*<sup>23</sup>

The unanticipated renaissance of religion in many parts of the world today, which surprised so many cultural observers, might turn out to be ephemeral. ... But it could also mark the beginning of a long and fundamental reordering of world-views, one in which cultural patterns that have endured since the Enlightenment would be markedly altered or even replaced ... theologians – including myself – who once accepted the secularization view of modern history ... are witnessing ... neither secularization nor its opposite ("resacralization"). Rather, it is a fascinating transformation of religion, a creative series of self-adaptations by religions to the new

conditions created by the modernity<sup>24</sup>

Finally Cox concludes that "the myth of secularization is dead".<sup>25</sup>

It is rather ironic that a previous secular theologian, who once declared that God was dead and religion was a myth, now says that the secularisation theory is itself a myth which is dead. By contrast, Geering's faith in this "myth" seems to be extraordinarily resilient, and impervious to new developments. In fact, all aspects of the secularisation theory have been forcefully disputed.<sup>26</sup> Is it possible that the story of secularisation is a mythical projection of the immediate environment of the secularisation theorist, a western academy? Perhaps we need to adopt a non-realist approach to secularisation theory, and treat it merely as a product of the creative impulses of human beings?

Geering has always been critical of exclusivist discourse which suppresses other religions. However, he seems to produce a new discourse, i.e., that of a global secular culture, which marginalises the traditional religions. I have grave doubts about whether we can talk in any general way about the global culture. The world seems far too heterogeneous to allow us to do so. Especially in view of the diversity of religious positions of modern people, it is quite misleading to describe the "global culture" (if there is any such thing) as secular. It is also a tendentious picture which ignores the majority of people who still believe in religions.

Geering emphasises that in the post-Christian world, there is a growth of human autonomy, and people will think for themselves. This is true, but Geering ignores the possibility that people will then freely choose to believe and bind themselves to the Christian community. This is what is happening in non-western countries when people become Christians, which is by no means uncommon. We can't call this in any sense an "enslavement." I can agree with Geering that "there can be no return to the pre-Enlightenment conditions,

except by harsh and repressive measures".<sup>27</sup> However, it is wrong to suggest that conservative Christians are trying to turn back the clock<sup>28</sup> or to impose their religion on the society by intolerant measures. Cannot Geering see that conservatives can also compete peacefully with other worldviews in the post-modern society? It is a pluralistic society after all. Their fortunes will vary in different places, but I cannot see any real evidence for the claim that "the end is in sight" for them.

Geering himself is aware that the "attempt to forecast the shape of the future and the post-Christian world is fraught with difficulty".<sup>29</sup>

However, this admission does not make him hesitant about making many confident predictions. On this matter, we should heed Berger's advice:

... all "futurology" is a tenuous business. ... [We should] cultivate a measure of indifference in the matter of empirical prognoses. History brings out certain questions of truth, makes certain answers more or less accessible, constructs and dis-integrates plausibility structures. But the historical course of the question about transcendence cannot, of itself, answer the question. It is only human to be exhilarated if one thinks one is riding on the crest of the future. All too often, however, such exhilaration gives way to the sobering recognition that what looked like a mighty wave of history was only a marginal eddy in the stream of evens. ... I would therefore suggest a moratorium on the anxious query as to just who it is that has modernity by the short hair. Theology must begin and end with the question of truth.<sup>30</sup>

### #3: argument from religious plurality

Concerning the variety of religions and religious experiences, there are

four major approaches:

(1) *Religious exclusivism/Particularism*: only one world religion is correct, and all others are mistaken. I prefer the term "particularism" here, because the word "exclusivism" has negative connotations.

(2) *Religious inclusivism*: only one world religion is fully correct, but other world religions participate in or partially reveal some of the truth of the one correct religion.

(3) *Religious pluralism*: ultimately all

***"It is important to recognise that the problem of reference does not only occur in theology. The consensus of contemporary philosophers of science is that all scientific models and theories also are fallible."***

world religions are equally correct, each offering a different, salvific path and partial perspective *vis-a-vis* the one Ultimate Reality, which in itself is ineffable and unknowable.

(4) *Atheism*: all religions are mistaken; there is no God and no transcendent realm (Geering's "solution.")

I agree the fact of religious plurality does raise serious questions for traditional theism, but it is premature to claim that these questions are unanswerable and that atheism is the only acceptable answer. The arguments involved are extremely complex, and Geering does not always make it clear what exactly his argument is. For example, he says, "Encounter with other cultures ... undermined the exclusive and absolute claims made for Jesus Christ ...[He] could no longer be acclaimed as the one and only saviour of all humankind."<sup>31</sup> As an autobiographical description of Geering's psychology, this may be correct. But when generalised to other people, this statement is manifestly false – many Christians have encounters with other cultures but their faith in Jesus Christ as the only saviour is not shaken at all. Geering may protest that his point is

only that their faith in Jesus Christ should have been shaken. But then it is incumbent upon Geering to explain why it should be the case. So far I can only find two lines of argument against particularism.

### *The problem of reference*

Firstly, the conflicting descriptions of God provided by different religions cause us to query whether the concept refers to a determinate reality. For example, Jews, Christians, and

Muslims believe their gods to have attributes which cannot be reconciled with one other. Here Geering indeed raises a crucial problem, the problem of reference, but he does not seem to catch up with

recent discussions of reference in philosophical theology, say, by Janet Soskice and Arthur Peacocke.<sup>32</sup> He also has no idea about the possibility of critical realism.

It is important to recognise that the problem of reference does not only occur in theology. The consensus of contemporary philosophers of science is that all scientific models and theories also are fallible. They are also changing, and at different stages attribute conflicting *defining* characteristics to entities postulated by those theories, e.g. electrons, space-time. How can we say that all those theories indeed refer to real entities, and guarantee the continuity of reference in the development and revision of our scientific theories? This question becomes especially urgent in light of the Descriptive Theory of Reference, i.e., the view that we can pick out a thing only by providing a description which is uniquely satisfied by that thing. If that is the case, no scientist can be confident that he can successfully refer to a theoretical entity. To avoid this problem, contemporary philosophers of science adopt Putnam's Causal Theory of Reference, which says that we can refer to a theoretical entity, say, electron, as "the

cause of certain phenomena, say, the glowing of some tubes in a certain experiment, whatever it is." The initial experiment, which helps to fix the reference, is called the dubbing event. Although later scientists may not share the same understanding of electrons as the scientist who performs the initial experiment, they belong to the same linguistic community and can refer to the same entity in light of the above theory of reference.

Peacocke points out that "social theories of reference ... indicate how reference may be fixed without being restricted by the straitjacket of a definition and have the virtue of separating reference from *unre-*visable description and grounding it instead in the experience of a continuous linguistic community."<sup>33</sup> Now this kind of cautious critical realism concerning scientific models and metaphors, combined with the social understanding of reference, can also be applied to theology. The consequence is that even though theologies are changing and mutually conflicting, it does not mean we cannot secure the reference to God. Just as we can refer successfully to an electron without knowing what electrons are "in themselves," we can equally refer to God although we don't know who God is in Himself, all models of God being inadequate.

*The distinction between referring to God and describing him is vital to this whole theological critical realist position. It is here that negative theology and positive theology meet: the former recognises that, having referred to God, whatever we say will be fallible and revisable and ex hypothesi inadequate; the latter that to say nothing is more misleading than to say something.*<sup>34</sup>

Armed with critical realism and the social theory of reference, we can see that the conflicting descriptions of God provided by diverse religions does not necessarily undermine reference. It is still an open question whether some of the conflicting models refer to God, and to what degree. For a critical realist, it is not an all-or-none question.

#### *The charge of being arbitrarily chauvinistic*

Geering has another charge against either the exclusivist or inclusivist position: to regard one's own tradition as superior to other traditions is arbitrarily chauvinistic. A short reply is *tu quoque!* Suppose there are only two religions: A or B. If it is arbitrarily chauvinistic for religion A to reject B and *vice versa*, why isn't it also arbitrarily chauvinistic when an atheist (like Geering) rejects both religions? Furthermore, we need to distinguish the issue of chauvinism and the problem of arbitrariness. The latter does not entail the former. The problem of pluralism does not occur only in religion. It is a common fact that people hold conflicting views about morality and politics which are difficult to resolve. Does this mean that we have to abstain from holding any view just because some others hold views conflicting with it? Taking American politics as an example, suppose that just because you are a Democrat who thinks your view is superior to a Republican's, someone accuses you of chauvinism. Is this accusation fair? Probably you will rebut this accusation by saying that while you respect your opponent, you do not need to accept his view. This is not chauvinistic at all. So why is it chauvinistic to accept one religion and reject others?

Let us consider the charge of arbitrariness. One major problem with this argument is that an arbitrary decision is not necessarily irrational, and is sometimes even the most rational course of action. For example, when I decide to go home, several options are possible: by bus, by train or by taxi. Suppose after weighing all the relevant considerations, I find that on balance all three options are equally good, and there are no more reasons for taking a bus than for taking a train, and so on. In this case, no matter what kind of vehicle I choose, my decision is arbitrary: I am adopting a kind of "transport particularism." Does it follow that my decision is irrational or unjustified? Obviously not! On the contrary, if I really want to go home, to fail to make that

arbitrary decision is irrational. In general, when we are facing a number of options which are equally good, and not choosing is not better than choosing, then it is justified to choose *any* option – even if this choice is arbitrary, epistemically speaking.

Now consider the choices we have when we are faced with religious diversity. To simplify the discussions, let us suppose there are only two major religious worldviews: theism and monism. Further suppose we have no more reasons for theism than for monism, and vice versa. The choices are:

- (A) Accepting a religious worldview
  - (A1) Accepting theism: theistic particularism.
  - (A2) Accepting monism: monistic particularism.
- (B) Not accepting any religious worldview: atheism or agnosticism.

By stipulation, the choice between A1 and A2 is arbitrary. However, as long as option B is not obviously the superior choice, as Geering suggests, either A1 or A2 is justified. So the arbitrariness objection to particularism fails. I suspect Geering's arbitrariness objection has initial plausibility because he trades on the ambiguity of meaning of the word "arbitrary," which sometimes carries the connotation of "being unjustified" and sometimes not. If we clearly keep this distinction in mind, then we can avoid the confusion of inferring from one meaning of "arbitrary" (read "no good reasons to favour one option over others") to another meaning of arbitrary (read "unjustified or irrational"). I conclude that Geering has not shown that religious particularism is arbitrary in *any objectionable sense*.

#### *Is religious particularism necessarily arbitrary?*

I now argue that the assumption that the choice between A1 and A2 is arbitrary can also be challenged. Firstly, each religious tradition can adduce pragmatic reasons for being a religious particularist. For instance, it seems rational to trust

one's experience instead of others' experiences when they conflict, even in the absence of a non-question-begging argument for the superiority of one's own experience. (Of course, this trust is only *prima facie* and is defeasible.) So it follows that for those who have a particular kind of religious experience, it is rational for them to trust their experience, and become the corresponding type of particularists.

Secondly, each religion can give evidential reasons for its type of particularism. The above discussion may seem

unsatisfactory because it does not offer any hope of a rational resolution of the conflicts between religious experience. Some may indeed

maintain that this is the end of the story, and ultimately religion is a matter of faith. However, I tend to think that rational considerations can be introduced to argue that one belief system or religion is more reliable or more coherent than others, at least to some extent. Not all are sanguine about this possibility. Richards writes, "there appears to be no criterion of truth independent of the different religious traditions, to enable us to adjudicate between them, and ... the quest for an independent criterion of truth is itself mistaken and confused."<sup>35</sup> This seems to be an overstatement. For example, I think a rational worldview has to recognise the force of our experiences. So one religion may show itself to be superior by producing better explanations of these experiences, e.g. religious experience, moral experience, introspective experience, interpersonal experience and the like. For conflicting types of religious experience, the type which is on the whole more coherent with all the above kinds of experience should be deemed superior. Natural theology can also be helpful. For example, suppose the Design Argument is plausible. It seems to favour a personal account of the

order and purpose of our world rather than an impersonal account. Sometimes purely rational considerations can also be relevant. For example, if the concept of an experience in which the self is abolished is incoherent, it will count against the Buddhist beliefs and experiences. Some other religious experiences may be discounted because sufficient defeaters can be produced, e.g. those caused by drugs. So in all the above ways a certain sort of particularism can be defended. Admittedly the arguments involved would be very

**"... the fact of religious plurality in itself does not vindicate his position."**

complex and inconclusive but I think a kind of "critical rational dialogue" is not impossible.<sup>36</sup>

Geering may have two responses. He may deny the possibility of a critical rational dialogue between different worldviews. If this is the case, Christianity cannot be vindicated as superior to other religions. However, neither can the naturalistic worldview be shown to be superior. Or perhaps Geering may agree that there are rational criteria for choosing a worldview, and then argue that according to those criteria the naturalistic worldview is the best choice. Of course, Geering has not produced such a case. Anyway, the fact of religious plurality in itself does not vindicate his position.

#### **#4: does historical research show that the Christian faith is a myth?**

Geering appeals to modern historical research in support of his contention that the Christian story is *merely* a myth. However, the inferences involved are again problematic. Firstly, Geering posits a "sharp distinction between myth and history,"<sup>37</sup> i.e., these two categories are deemed incompatible. If a story is judged to be a myth which possesses powerful symbolic meaning, it can automatically be

regarded as non-historical. However, this "sharp distinction between myth and history" is by no means the objective scientific distinction he suggests. If we build "non-historical" into the definition of "myth," then a myth cannot at the same time be history, but this is just the consequence of a stipulative definition, and not an empirical discovery. In this case, Christians will object from the very beginning to calling the Christian story myth. Critics who insist on doing so need first to demonstrate that the Christian story is a myth.

Suppose we only understand "myth" as a story full of symbolic meaning which can throw light on the central questions of life. Then the

categories "myth" and "history" are not necessarily incompatible. In fact some Christian thinkers, e.g. C.S. Lewis, maintain that in Christ myth and history have been united: "If ever a myth had become fact, had been incarnated, it would be just like this ... the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, man".<sup>38</sup> "Incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heavens of legend and imagination to the earth of history. ... To be truly Christian we must both assent to the historical fact and also receive the myth (fact though it has become) with the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths."<sup>39</sup> If there is a God who is both the Creator of the human psyche and the Lord of history, isn't it quite possible that some myths which arise out of the human psyche can also be a preparation for what He plans to do in history? As the famous writer Tolkien points out,

*The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. ... But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation*

[mythic artistry] has been raised to the fulfilment of Creation [the realm of historical experience].<sup>40</sup>

Geering, of course, will not agree with the above perspective, but I do not think historical research itself has already falsified it. Even if it were the case that "historical research is able to recover all too little knowledge of the original historical Jesus,"<sup>41</sup> it still does not follow that the Jesus story is entirely fictitious. Even if the gospel story "evolved as human imagination and devotion reflected on a specific set of experience,"<sup>42</sup> it does not mean that the story has to be false. Geering's false dichotomy between imagination and truth is one recurrent problem of his writings. Furthermore, the early Christians' experience of the resurrected Christ may indeed be grounded in history. The "modern historiography" relied upon by Geering in fact refers to that biblical scholarship (e.g. the Jesus Seminar) largely guided by naturalistic presuppositions, which reject the possibility of incarnation and resurrection. It is these assumptions which "necessitated the attempt to disentangle the 'historical Jesus' from the 'Christ of Faith'", and not some proven historical truths. For example, Stephen Evans' *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of History*<sup>43</sup> argues persuasively that this distinction is largely constructed out of philosophical assumptions. Eminent scholars who are free of these assumptions come up with very different conclusions from Geering's views, e.g. the impressive volumes by Tom Wright.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, many scholars argue that sceptical conclusions reached by the Bultmannians or the Jesus Seminar are not warranted.<sup>45</sup> Of course, I can only suggest an outline of a response here. The basic point is that most "historical" conclusions regarded by Geering as obvious are at least controvertible.

#### **#5: are faith and freedom incompatible?**

By suggesting that "liberation" of humanity from religious faith is a necessary condition of the growth

of human freedom, Geering posits an antithesis between faith and freedom. While there is undeniably some tension between faith and freedom, his antithesis is again untenable. By one-sided emphasis on free-thinkers as the pioneers of the modern world, Geering provides a distorted picture of modern history. Geering himself is aware of the contribution of the Christian to the formation of the modern world, e.g. the ideas of democracy and human rights. In the American Declaration of Independence, the foundation of human rights is clearly located in God the Creator. Moreover, many emancipatory movements were in fact mainly or partly inspired by the Christian faith. Consider this statement of Geering: emancipations "have been made possible only because at the same time we have also been steadily emancipating ourselves from obedience to a supposed supernatural heavenly Father, whose revealed will was not to be questioned." This however is often a reversal of actual history. Take for example, the abolition of slavery in the United Kingdom. The slave trade was completely abolished only after several decades of dedicated and persistent efforts of people like William Wilberforce and his comrades, the Clapham Sect.<sup>46</sup> Exactly because he firmly believed that his vision was the revealed will of God, Wilberforce did not waver – and fortunately he did not question his belief! (Moreover, his faith was a result of religious revival, not secularisation.) The success was achieved against all odds, and Wilberforce had to ward off objections from *secular* people who told him not to bring his religious faith and moral values into politics.

Many other examples can be cited to illustrate the consonance of faith with freedom, e.g. the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, the early church, Thomas Munzer in the time of the European Reformation, the abolitionist movement in the United States, the Confessional Church under the Nazi regime, the civil rights movement (Martin Luther King), the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (Desmond Tutu),

the resistance to neo-colonial exploitation and violence in Latin America (Archbishop Romero), the overthrowing of tyrannies in the Philippines and Eastern Europe (Father Popieulsko). I have no intention of hiding the fact that the institutional Church has sometimes been an enemy of freedom in western history, but the above examples are sufficient to refute the claim that faith and freedom are intrinsically antagonistic.

Secondly, although loosening up the grip of some forms of religious faith or its moral values may have contributed to the emancipation of humanity in some cases, common sense forbids us to follow this logic to the end. Geering thinks that "we cannot be fully human until we experience the widest possible range of choices."<sup>47</sup> This is patently false, and will lead to a disastrous libertine philosophy. Is he really suggesting that killers and rapists are more human than the decent citizens because they have experienced more choices? Geering suggests that religious believers are morally less mature because they are bound by an external authority, and he even agrees with Feuerbach that the holier and more powerful God was conceived to be, the more powerless and sinful humanity found itself to be. It is rather surprising to hear these accusations from the mouth of a senior theologian. Geering should know that there are many versions of faith which are more humanistic, and that the divine decrees, when freely submitted to, cannot be regarded as *external* authority. Many reflective people freely choose the Christian faith, and experience the faith as a liberating force which helps them grow and become more human. Others like Geering freely choose the naturalistic worldview, and promote values like equality. On what basis can Geering say that the latter are morally more mature than the former? His argument from the complete realisation of humanity (human freedom) against theism is again unconvincing.

#### #6: is faith necessarily intolerant?

Geering's accusation of intolerance is largely rhetoric. He begs the question against the conservatives when he simply asserts that divine voice is "simply the voice of other humans."<sup>48</sup> We also need to bear in mind that there are many kinds of fundamentalism. While some Muslim fundamentalists do resort to terrorism, Christian fundamentalists basically adopt peaceful democratic means to influence the society. It is unfair to blame Christian fundamentalism alone for causing social divisions, for

divisions only persist when two opposing camps refuse to yield to one another. Both Christian fundamentalists and die-hard liberals (or militant secularists) have "a set of fixed principles." Both camps want to "impose them on

their fellows." Anyway, the "dangers" of theism have been much exaggerated. Is there really an imminent danger that theism would lead to intolerance in the much-secularised West nowadays? Very unlikely!

Finally, no matter whether Geering is right about the psychology of the fundamentalists or not, his argument from intolerance against the truth of theism does not work. The simple fact is that there is no intrinsic connection between belief in traditional Christianity and an attitude of fanaticism. In theory, religious convictions can be combined with a critical realist mindset and a self-reflective attitude – this is the option of a critical faith, which can accommodate fallibilism and pluralism. And in practice, in the democratic West and in countries where Christianity has always been a minority option (e.g. China), many Christians have already exhibited this kind of faith.

#### #7: the limits of the feminist critique of theism

One central assumption of Geering's feminist critique is that hierarchical order between the genders among the deities will be reflected in the hierarchical order between the genders on earth. So the maleness of God has led to male domination. When there is gender complementarity among the deities, it is easier to achieve gender equality on earth. This thesis has an air of plausibility (especially when it is only implicit in the discussions)

*"A prominent female deity in the Chinese culture is Kuan-yin who is known for her compassion. Many Chinese have worshipped this goddess for many years. And in ancient Chinese mythology and many folk religions, female deities are not lacking, ... Nevertheless the Chinese culture is very patriarchal ..."*

which however soon evaporates under critical scrutiny.

For example, Geering contrasts the Israelite prophets who left all power in the hands of the Sky Father with the Pre-Axial religions which also worshipped Earth Mother and other goddesses.<sup>49</sup> So we should expect more equality between men and women among those ancient religions. As a historical thesis, this is rather dubious, and I would like Geering to produce empirical evidence for this claim. Other ancient cultures and religions seem to be at least as patriarchal as the Israelite culture. This was a common feature regardless of the existence or absence of female deities. China and India are good examples. A prominent female deity in the Chinese culture is Kuan-yin (originally known as Avalokitesvara) who is known for her compassion. Many Chinese have worshipped this goddess for many years. And in ancient Chinese mythology and many folk religions, female deities are not lacking, e.g. Temple

Goddesses. Nevertheless the Chinese culture is very patriarchal, and women have low social status. Again, in India, among the several major gods, there is the goddess Kali, but women's status in India is even lower. For example, there is a cruel traditional custom (*sati* or *suttee*) which requires a widow to be burnt alive on her husband's funeral pyre. All in all, the alleged correlation between the existence of goddess and power for women fails to fit the facts.

I think the crucial problem is

that we cannot derive a religion's attitude toward gender equality from a superficial analysis of the "gender" of its God. Although the Christian God is conceived as male in some sense, in the most crucial sense God is neither male nor female. Christian

theologians have vehemently insisted that God is a disembodied Spirit and His deepest nature, despite His revelation, is still hidden from us. So Christians know that the language of Father and the use of the male personal pronoun are metaphors (which co-exist with other female metaphors in the Bible). The maleness of God is not listed among the divine attributes in textbooks on systematic theology. Instead His love and justice are emphasised, and these attributes are consonant with the way the major Christian doctrines (in contrast with many other religions) are impartial towards the sexes. For example, both men and women possess the image of God,<sup>50</sup> are directly redeemed by Christ,<sup>51</sup> and are destined for eternal glory. So although the Church has not always lived up to the biblical ideal, the foundation for gender equality has already been laid down.

The early Church is by no means perfect in this aspect. However, the American sociologist Rodney Stark points out that exactly because the

Christian movement had raised the social status of women and other marginalised groups, this contributed to the phenomenal rise of Christianity.<sup>52</sup> So it is rather one-sided to say that patriarchy permeates the biblical heritage. In fact many forerunners of the feminist movement were Bible-believing women. From a Chinese Christian's perspective, I would like to note that the ideal of gender equality has only arisen in the Christian civilisation, and has never emerged from the indigenous Chinese culture. Many Chinese customs which were unfair to or even oppressive of women continued up to early twentieth century, e.g. women could not attend schools and they had to bind their feet from a very early age. The young girls' feet were tightly wrapped by cloth in such a way that the growth of their feet would be stunted. This was to ensure that their feet would remain small (around three inches wide) even when they grew up. The only rationale for this inhuman and painful custom was that the small feet would look pleasing to the Chinese men! After the western missionaries came to China, they started to found schools for women, and fight for women's liberation from the small feet. Only in this way these unfair practices were in the end abolished. In India, it was also because of the influence of the Christian civilisation that the practice of *sati* and other inequalities like the caste system were changed.

Of course, a lot more needs to be said. I just indicate the case for saying that traditional Christianity is not bound up with the maleness of God in any deep sense, and it does not necessarily lead to male domination. Of course, a lot of critical reflection (or even some revision) is needed on the part of Christians, but this is by no means contrary to the spirit of the critical faith. Anyway, it is not clear that Geering's naturalistic worldview coupled with his mythical ecological religion will provide a better protection of women from men's domination.

#### #8: the limits of the ecological critique of theism

Geering's ecological critique of theism parallels his feminist critique. A similar thesis is that "biblical theism encouraged us to exploit the earth."<sup>53</sup> This again involves a complicated debate which is still going on. I briefly explain why Geering's viewpoint fails to convince many people. Firstly, many critics observe that even in cultures which worship the gods of nature and the earth-mother, the problems of pollution and environmental exploitation still occur. Secondly, many theologians contend that the Bible teaches the stewardship of human beings – which implies that humankind has to be responsible for its dealing with the earth. It is not true that the Christian faith gives a blanket approval of all that humans have done to the environment. Thirdly, the blame for the ecological crisis may in fact lie on the Enlightenment which rejoices in human autonomy, human mastery of the environment and unlimited progress. Exactly because the focus has been shifted from the heavenly realm to the natural physical world, humankind has concentrated his energy on improving its physical and economic well-being. This leads to industrialisation and technological innovations which contribute to the current crisis.<sup>54</sup>

Fourthly, Geering posits a correlation between domination and theological realism, and believes his anti-realism is the way out. He also believes that "the survival of the human species on this planet depends on co-operative international action legitimised by democracy." However, if anti-realism is widely accepted, the implication that values and moralities are all human construction will be gradually made known. When moral obligations are believed to have no objective basis, and there is no one objective way to construct values, why should Geering expect many other people (not to mention the whole world) to follow his own idiosyncratic way of construction? Why should they accept the new way of thinking

suggested by Geering? At least for most of the people who are currently alive, the consequences of environmental exploitation will not immediately be visited on them in any forcible way. Why should they care?

As to Geering's suggestion to reconstruct "... the God-symbol to mediate to us the bewildering complex of forces on which our existence depends," my question is why should I call this complex of forces 'God'?" Yes, "we humans have come forth from the earth as from a cosmic womb. ... It is the earth's oceans on which we depend for the water we drink. It is the earth's fruits which continually provide the food which nourishes and sustains us." But if I were a naturalist, I would ask, "So what?" These are just facts of the universe which happen to be true, and we are fortunate. Beyond this I cannot see why I should attribute more meaning to these facts. I cannot quite understand how we can have "a mystical union" with the earth – I have no Spirit or Self, and the earth has no real awareness of my existence ..."<sup>55</sup>

I conclude that Geering's ecological critique does not fare much better, and on the whole his supporting arguments fail to substantiate his case for projectionism.

#### Endnotes

1. Lloyd Geering, *The World to Come: From Christian Past to Global Future* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 1999), 77.
2. Geering, *The World to Come*, 91.
3. Geering, *The World to Come*, 81.
4. T.F. Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Exploration in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984).
5. Geering, *The World to Come*, 81.
6. William Dembski's essay on "The Fallacy of Contextualism" has a fine discussion of this fallacy. See Dembski, "The Fallacy of Contextualism" In William A. Dembski and Jay Wesley Richards, (eds), *Unapologetic Apologetics: Meeting the Challenges of Theological Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 44-56.
7. We should also distinguish the anti-realist

and fallibilist interpretations of the word "relative." When we say a truth claim is relative in the anti-realist sense, we claim that it is basically false, and it does not refer to objective reality. When we say a truth claim is relative in the fallibilist sense, we just point out that it may not be entirely true, and it 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 is more plausible when "relative" is interpreted in the fallibilist sense but clearly he wants to make the stronger claim- and this is not adequately supported by his arguments.

8. Lloyd Geering, *Tomorrow's God: How We Create Our Worlds* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 1994), 26.

9. On this issue, Geering is heavily reliant on Don Cupitt, who in turn relies on Derrida. See Peter Byrne, *God and Realism* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2003) for a good critique of Cupitt and Derrida.

10. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 25.

11. Of course, this involves a lot of issues in epistemology, philosophy of science and philosophy of religion. Arthur Peacocke, *Intimations of Reality: Critical Realism in Science and Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) has a good discussion of critical realism, and applies this perspective to both science and religion.

12. Geering, *The World to Come*, 194-5. Emphasis mine.

13. Geering, *The World to Come*, 115.

14. Peter Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 32.

15. Peter L. Berger, (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 2.

16. See Andrew Greeley, *Religious Change in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); *Religion as Poetry* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995).

17. *Religions in Korea* (Seoul: Korean Overseas Information Service, 1986).

18. Jonathan Chao and Rosanna Chong, *A History of Christianity in Socialist China, 1949-1997* (Taipei: CMI Publishing Co., 1997), 605. This is a book in Chinese. Similar things happened in the other Chinese societies, Hong Kong and Taiwan. From the fifties to the seventies, the rapid growth of Christianity went hand in hand with the fast pace of modernisation in both

societies. See Donald E. Hoke, *The Church in Asia* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1975). Besides, traditional Chinese religions and Buddhism are also immensely popular in Taiwan, especially in the past decade.

19. Cristian Parker, *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America: A Different Logic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 61.

20. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*, 4.

21. See Harvey Cox, "The Myth of the Century: The Rise and Fall of 'Secularization,'" in Gregory Baum, (ed.), *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 135-43.

22. Cox, "The Myth of the Century", 135.

23. Cox, "The Myth of the Century", 136. Cox also points out that in Europe "although the institutional forms of religions may be weaker than they once were, religion still plays a strong role in public culture. Reference and allusions appear in such widely disparate places as poetry and drama, film, political debates, and even popular music. Pope John Paul II's avowed hope for the restoration of a Christian Europe finds an echo in a vague popular nostalgia for religious roots. Indeed, hundreds of thousands of young people from France, the rest of Europe, and other parts of the world gathered two years ago for a papal visit in - of all places - Paris... a metropolis closely identified with the radical secularism of the French Revolution" (Cox 1999, 138). "Also in allegedly post-Christian Europe journeys to the old pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes, Fatima, and Santiago de Compostella are increasing. Could Christianity in Europe be moving away from an institutionally positioned model and toward a culturally diffuse pattern...?" (Cox 1999, 139).

24. Cox, "The Myth of the Century", 139.

25. Cox, "The Myth of the Century", 143. While some may grant that religion may continue to exist, they emphasise that religion will become more and more privatised. However, the thesis that religions cannot play a role in the public arena has been effectively challenged by Jose Casanova. He produces empirical evidence to show that in the eighties, most political conflicts have a not-so-hidden hand of religion behind. Moreover, religious activists and churches were becoming deeply involved in struggles for liberation, justice, and democracy

throughout the world. See Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4-6. See also John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

26. See Steve Bruce, ed., *Religion and Modernization* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Robin Gill, *Competing Convictions* (London: SCM, 1989); Pal Repstad, ed., *Religion and Modernity: Modes of Co-existence* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996).

27. Geering, *The World to Come*, 88.

28. Of course, this point of "no return" should not be used as an excuse to avoid the crucial task of a critical scrutiny of the shortcomings of the Enlightenment.

29. Geering, *The World to Come*, 93.

30. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, 121.

31. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 176.

32. Soskice, Janet Martin, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985). Peacocke, Arthur, *Intimations of Reality: Critical Realism in Science and Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

33. Peacocke, *Intimations of Reality*, 33.

34. Peacocke, *Intimations of Reality*, 45.

35. Glyn Richards, *Towards a Theology of Religions* (London: Routledge, 1989), 118.

36. For other criteria, see Keith Yandell, *Christianity and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), ch. 8.

37. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 39.

38. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 236.

39. C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, Walter Hooper (ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 66-7. Emphasis original.

40. J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), 71-2. Craig Payne, *Where Myth and History Meet: A Christian Response to Myth* (Lanham, NY: University Press of America, 2001) has a useful discussion of this point.

41. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 39.

42. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 39.

43. C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

44. N.T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, Vol. 1, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992); *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, Vol. 2, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996).

45. See Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995/1999); and Timothy Luke Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1996) for a critique of the Jesus Seminar. Birger Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001).

is also helpful.

46 See John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (Tring, Herts: Lion, 1977).

47. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 136.

48. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 136-7. Emphasis mine.

49. Lloyd Geering, *Christianity Without God* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 2002), 138.

50. Geering says that it was "men rather than women who were taken to have been made in the image of God" (*Tomorrow's God*, 158). I am rather puzzled by this comment because it is clearly against the biblical teaching.

51. In some religions, women are saved only through their affiliation with men.

52. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1997).

53. Geering, *Christianity Without God*, 140.

54. For further discussions, see Philip J. Sampson, *Six Modern Myths Challenging Christian Faith* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), ch. 3; Arthur Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 275ff.

55. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 228. Geering says, "This God is in the physical earth of which we are a tiny part. Even more, this God is to be found in all living creatures. Most of all, however, this God is rising to self-awareness in the (as yet) confused collective consciousness of the global human community. This is Tomorrow's God, calling us from a world yet to be created. But, to create this world, *this God has no hands but our hands, no voice but our voice, no mind but our mind, and no plan for the future except what we plan*" (*Tomorrow's God*, 236; italics mine). This is to say the Tomorrow's God has no real existence now, and we are urged to have mystical union with something we construct in our mind.



**Kwan Kai Man**

# The Last Western Heretic<sup>1</sup>

*Straight shootin' partners - "God" is just a symbolic word*



1. *The Last Western Heretic*, is a documentary, funded by New Zealand On Air, about Lloyd Geering – it was first screened on T.V. One, 9.45pm, Saturday 12 January, 2008.

## A critical faith vs. uncritical suspicion: towards critical realism

Geering has adopted the hermeneutics of suspicion towards religion, and he celebrates critical reflection. However, it is a pity that he only applies his critical acumen selectively and rarely reflects critically upon the critique of religion itself. Even after many theologians and Christian philosophers have already offered able replies to the Enlightenment critique of religion, he is content to reiterate this critique, and does not even bother to mention these replies, let alone engage with them. We have reason to be suspicious of this kind of uncritical suspicion.

The kind of faith I am defending is a kind of critical faith. It adheres to the framework of critical realism which tries to navigate between the Scylla of naïve realism and the Charybdis of constructivism. It is also a faith that is willing to face criticism. In the previous articles, I try to indicate how faith can have a critical dialogue with criticism, sometimes rebutting the criticism and sometimes admitting the need to revise our understanding of the faith. My own judgment is that orthodox Christianity has weathered the storm of Enlightenment quite well, and emerged basically unscathed. On the contrary, it is the Enlightenment ideology which seems to have run out of steam.

Of course, rebuttal of objections can, at most, show that the faith has not yet been falsified. I think it is difficult to have any proof of any worldview, either naturalistic or Christian. However, we can adopt a more realistic model of inference: abduction or inference to the best

explanation (IBE). Using this kind of inference and utilising other criteria like simplicity and comprehensiveness, we can have a rational evaluation of different worldviews. As a first approximation, the simplest worldview which possesses the greatest

***"One major defect of Geering's discussions is that he writes as if the past fifty years of development of philosophy of religion had not happened at all."***

explanatory power of the whole gamut of human experiences and empirical data, when compared to other worldviews, can be deemed superior. The game is open to all, and we should not load the rules in favour of the naturalistic worldview. Every worldview, including Geering's naturalism, needs to show how it can explain things better than other worldviews. My view is that the naturalistic worldview is not demonstrably superior to the Christian worldview, and sometimes the latter has better explanatory power than the former. I cannot go into the detailed arguments here but I would like to highlight the contemporary revival of natural theology below.

One major defect of Geering's discussions is that he writes as if the past fifty years of development of philosophy of religion had not happened at all. This development is even recognised by the atheists who try to combat the contemporary upsurge of natural theology by founding a journal, *Philo*, for that purpose. The editor of *Philo*, Keith Parsons, 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. For instance, Richard Swinburne's The Existence of God applies Bayesian confirmation theory to the traditional cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God.*

*He thereby produces powerful new inductive versions of those arguments which, he claims, are not vulnerable to the standard refutations. In a similar vein, William Lane Craig has employed highly technical points from current physical cosmology to refurbish cosmological arguments. ... Plantinga develops an antifoundationalist position he calls Calvinist (or Reformed) Epistemology. ... Alston argues the intriguing view that the Christian's claims to perceive God need be no less rational than our everyday perceptual claims. ... A new development has been the resurgence of antievolutionism and the emergence of the so-called intelligent design theory. ... Finally, the Fellowship of Christian Philosophers has flourished and produced an outstanding journal, Faith and Philosophy. ... While these various apologetic enterprises have multiplied, with some notable exceptions, the response of nontheist philosophers has been muted.<sup>1</sup>*

Many traditional arguments for theism have found able defenders.

For example, the cosmological argument is defended by philosophers like David Braine, Germain Grisez, Barry Miller, Hugo Meynell, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, even a critic of theism, Richard Gale, has come to embrace a new cosmological argument recently.<sup>3</sup> Richard Swinburne and Brian Davies show that Hume's objections to the design argument are not conclusive after all. (Besides theirs, there are also many other replies to Hume's objections to the design argument.)<sup>4</sup> The claim that science has rendered the design argument redundant is also debatable. Even Parsons recognises the challenge of the Intelligent Design movement to evolutionism,<sup>5</sup> and contemporary science has uncovered numerous "coincidences" which conspire

to make the emergence of life possible. This kind of fine-tuning of the universe has given rise to a new form of design argument, the anthropic design argument.<sup>6</sup> Why does Geering fail to mention any of these developments?

When arguments for theism are construed as inferences to the best explanation rather than deductive arguments, the significance of those arguments can be better appreciated. While each of them may not be conclusive, each can be suggestive and their cumulative force may be hard to ignore. The anthropological argument for the existence of God is especially interesting in our context. While Geering wants to follow Feuerbach in the reduction of theology to anthropology, in fact some theists (e.g. Macquarrie) argue that the anthropological data are more coherent with the theistic worldview than with the naturalistic worldview.<sup>7</sup>

Let Ht denotes the theistic hypothesis concerning man:

**Ht** Humankind is *ultimately* created by God from the "dust" but also in his image with the purpose that he

would freely choose to have personal communion with God and other human beings.

Let Hn denotes the naturalistic hypothesis:

**Hn** Humankind is *entirely*<sup>8</sup> the physical product of naturalistic evolution.

Which of these two hypotheses can in fact explain better the fact of human existence, especially the phenomenon of human self-transcendence? Geering himself points to the amazing existence of "critical self-consciousness" which has the "potential to examine critically our own thinking and the

*"When arguments for theism are construed as inferences to the best explanation rather than deductive arguments, the significance of those arguments can be better appreciated."*

culture which has shaped us." This is "a process of human self-transcendence".<sup>9</sup> The capacity of using language is an awe-inspiring fact. "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?' ... Such questioning arises out of the creative and enquiring capacity of the human psyche".<sup>10</sup> 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".<sup>11</sup>

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 the chance of survival of humans in a primitive jungle. In fact Geering

has a good understanding of the problem here:

*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.*<sup>12</sup>

Geering is effectively admitting that naturalism cannot give a good explanation of the phenomenon of human self-transcendence and that, from naturalism's perspective, the emergence of humankind is an unexpected mystery. However,

he dogmatically assumes that 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".<sup>13</sup> In the end the only "explanation" he can offer is chance:

*It is quite anachronistic, however, to project back into the beginning of the universe ... the kind of purposive, designing activity which has now manifested itself in human consciousness. 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. That constitutes the extraordinariness of the phenomenon of man!*<sup>14</sup>

The phenomenon of humankind is indeed extraordinary, and it is rather unsatisfactory to treat it as a fluke of the evolutionary process. To say that the inanimate universe *must* have had the potential for life and human self-consciousness from the beginning, is plainly begging the question against the theists who exactly argue that the physical universe cannot account for the emergence of life and consciousness by itself. This

"must" is only a conclusion deduced from the illegitimate assumption of the truth of naturalism. I think good cases can be made for the

claims that the emergence of life by chance is extremely unlikely, and that consciousness cannot be reduced to matter. Anyway, assuming this potential of our universe to generate life, we still need to explain this potential. Contemporary science tells us that for the universe just 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.

Anyway, Geering's appeal to chance "explanation" is hardly convincing. Firstly, I deny that such "explanations" have much *positive* explanatory power. Secondly, a large number of "signals of transcendence,"<sup>15</sup> which point in the same direction, can be assembled. A "fluke explanation" may be acceptable for one or several of them, but it becomes increasingly *ad hoc* and unlikely if such "flukes" accumulate in a determinate fashion. Simple statistics tells us that the probability of a series of an "*almost infinite number of chance events*" will quickly dwindle towards zero. Thirdly, it is doubtful these experiences are survival-conducive. Indeed the naturalist can deny that

our life has a cosmic meaning. However, that it is possible makes the extravagant human quest all the more puzzling. Paul Kurtz, the secular humanist, acknowledges, in his book *The Transcendental Temptation*, 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".<sup>16</sup> Suppose Kurtz is

**"... Geering's appeal to chance 'explanation' is hardly convincing."**

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, extravagant, "schizoid" nature of Man.<sup>17</sup> If we really look at it from the evolutionary perspective, the human psyche is unnecessarily convoluted, and its symbol-making capacity redundant. Why can't evolution throw up a kind of human being who is more pragmatic, and single-minded about his own survival?

On the other hand, a coherent theistic explanation is readily available, and it is not a sound argument to reject it just because it seems anachronistic. If we are made to have communion with God, it is to be expected that we should have an implicit drive to achieve a proper relationship with the Infinite which originates from our *imago dei*. Since this relationship is also the source of our *telos*, our meaning and wholeness, the implicit 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 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".<sup>18</sup> 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.*<sup>19</sup>

Obviously, the above contains mostly suggestions and schema of argument which need to be fleshed out. I do not claim that my arguments are conclusive, and certainly atheists will have their replies. My purpose is to show that a critical rational dialogue has in fact been carried out between theistic and atheistic philosophers. Both have to make out 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 when the issue comes up, he misleads the readers by suggesting that the naturalists have decisively won the rational debate.

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2. David Braine, *The Reality of Time and the Existence of God: The Project of Proving God's Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Germain Grisez, *Beyond the New Theism: A Philosophy of Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975); Barry Miller, *From Existence to God: A Contemporary Philosophical Argument* (London: Routledge, 1992); Hugo Meynell, *The Intelligible Universe: A Cosmological*

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5. Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (NY: Free Press, 1996); William A. Dembski, *The Design Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); William A. Dembski, ed., *Mere Creation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998); Phillip E. Johnson, *Darwin on Trial* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2nd edn., 1993); J. P. Moreland, ed., *The Creation Hypothesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994). The July/August 1999 issue of *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* was devoted to this movement. The articles there are very readable.
6. John Leslie, *Universes* (London: Routledge, 1989); M. A. Corey, *God and the New Cosmology: The Anthropic Design Argument* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993).
7. John Macquarrie's *In Search of Humanity: A Theological and Philosophical Approach* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1983) provides an extended anthropological argument, the outline of which is as follows (see ch. XX).
  - (a) Human life has brought to light more than anything else that we know the astonishing potentialities latent in the universe.
  - (b) Some aspects of our humanity suggest a transhuman spiritual source.
  - (c) The human being in certain respects transcends nature, in such a way as to provide an analogy of divine transcendence and to suggest that the goal of humanity is participation in the life of God.
  - (d) Human beings show a natural trust in the wider being within which their existence is set.
  - (e) There are some negative factors in human existence which can be understood as limit-situations, impressing on us our own finitude and at the same time evoking the idea of

absolute being.

- (f) Finally, many of these strands come together in religion, in which men and women claim to experience in various ways the reality of God, and this claim has a *prima facie* case as one deeply rooted in the human condition and one which has never been disproved and perhaps never could be.
8. The naturalistic hypothesis here is a *metaphysical* hypothesis which should be distinguished from the scientific theory of evolution. Even if science has established the fact of gradual evolution of life forms and emergence of complexity, this does not in itself warrant the claim that human being is *entirely* a physical product. God can be the antecedent and sustaining cause of the evolutionary process.
9. Lloyd Geering, *Tomorrow's God: How We Create Our Worlds* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 1994).
10. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 88.
11. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 122.
12. Lloyd Geering, *The World to Come: From Christian Past to Global Future* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 1999).
13. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 87. Emphasis mine.
14. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 231. Emphasis mine.
15. The *signals of transcendence* are a term used by Berger to refer to "phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our "natural" reality but that appear to point beyond that reality" (Berger, Peter L., *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* [Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, 1969], 70). Berger has enlightening discussions of five. First, the propensity for order, man's fundamental trust in reality in the face of chaos. This trust implies that human order in some way corresponds to a transcendent order. Second, ludic, or playful, elements in human culture and the joy play seeks. It is remarkable that in joyful play human beings sometimes seem to step from time into eternity, and imply an affirmation of the ultimate triumph of the human spirit over the gestures of destruction, war and death. Third, hope – which has always asserted itself most intensely in the face of experiences that seemed to spell utter defeat, most intensely of all in the face of the final defeat of death. Fourth, damnation – experiences in which our sense of what is humanly permissible is so fundamentally outraged that the only adequate response to

the offence as well as to the offender seems to be a curse of supernatural dimensions. Five, humour or the comic – which reflects the imprisonment of the human spirit in the world. But by laughing at it, humour implies that this imprisonment is not final but will be overcome. Berger concludes that modern culture has caused a shrinkage in the scope of human experience which has led to profound impoverishment. On the other hand, if we recover the richness of human experiences, we may be able to step outside the taken-for-granted reality of everyday life, and get in contact with the mystery that surrounds us on all sides (p96). Berger has further pursued this line of argument in his *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin and NY: Walter DeGruyter, 1997).

16. Paul Kurtz, *The Transcendental Temptation* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986), xii.
17. Geering is also aware that "[m]ore recently, the inadequacies of the purely materialistic view of reality have come to be felt even by some scientists. ... How are we to understand and explain, on a purely materialistic base, the cognitive capacity of the human being, to say nothing of...our spiritual dimension?" *Tomorrow's God*, 61-2.
18. Aidan Nichols, *A Grammar of Consent* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1991), 48.
19. Nichols, 49.

Kwan Kai Man

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## Geering and the quest for meaning: a critique

Geering emphasises the significance of the quest for meaning: "if we simply abandon the God-symbol we may have to invent another verbal symbol to take its place as a focus of meaning ... human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation".<sup>1</sup> He also knows science cannot provide the answer: "scientific knowledge ... by its very nature is value-free. ... scientific knowledge cannot of itself provide answers to the human quest for meaning. ... The global world, insofar as it is based on scientific knowledge, is devoid of meaning".<sup>2</sup>

However, his own solution is that humankind can create meaning *ex nihilo* (cf. secular humanism and existentialist ethics). "If we are to find meaning in human existence we have to create it for ourselves. Life has become a venture in which each of us is now responsible for creating our own personal meaning system".<sup>3</sup> The answer is relative:

*It is vain to search in general for the meaning of life. Life's meaning depends on whose life it is, on who a person is and what their circumstances are ... the question involves not so much finding something which is already there but rather creating meaning out of the raw material with which one has been provided. ... No answer, however satisfying it is at the time, can ever become final or last forever.*<sup>4</sup>

In contrast with our forebears who were creating meaning unconsciously, we are aware that meaning is a human creation.

Referring to the long periods of evolution, Geering comments, *It has been the cosmic drift which*

*has brought us to this moment. As a result, we humans find ourselves to be creatures whose very raison d'être is to be creators. We are creatures thrust into existence, and motivated by the cosmic drift towards meaning. ... It is the quest for meaning, and not the possession of final answers, which is the key to*

**"While I applaud Geering's noble intentions, his emphasis on the quest for meaning and his proposal to care for the earth, I have serious reservations ..."**

*human existence.*<sup>5</sup>

Geering's own proposal is that we should construct an earth-centred meaning system to replace the human-centred meaning system which has led to the ecological crisis. For example, we should re-symbolise nature as Mother Earth (though only as a symbol), and acknowledge "the sacred character of the earth".<sup>6</sup>

*The meaning of human existence will increasingly become one of caring for the earth ... and caring for one another. All the hopes, values, goals and devoted service traditionally associated with heavenly places must be transferred to the earth. The whole earth must become resanctified in our eyes ... This imperative to care must take precedence over lesser loyalties and over all differences of race, nationality, gender and personal beliefs. It is the kind of love which is ready to sacrifice individual self-interest for the greater good of the whole. We shall be required to limit our own earthly pleasures and expectations in the interests of the generations yet to be born. ... This*

*calls for the kind of self-sacrificing love which has long been affirmed in the Christian tradition and symbolised as the way of the cross ... what is important are the supreme values we come to associate with such time-honoured words as God, and the responsibilities to which those values call us.*<sup>7</sup>

Geering even proposes some necessary constraints on our creation of values:

*In consciously enunciating the values to be identified with the God-symbol, we are not free to make an*

*arbitrary choice. The way we understand the nature of the global world, along with the conditions it sets if human existence is to continue and prosper, will largely guide us in our choice of values and goals. Thus the complex nature of reality, as we see it through the lens of the global world, is supplying us with the materials with which we must create a meaningful future.*<sup>8</sup>

While I applaud Geering's noble intentions, his emphasis on the quest for meaning and his proposal to care for the earth, I have serious reservations about his views just cited. He quotes Nietzsche to the effect that we can invent the concept "purpose" despite the fact that in reality purpose is lacking. His position towards "meaning" is the same. But does this really make sense? We know how to invent a machine but what does it mean to talk about "inventing a purpose" and "creating a meaning"? The problem here is that when we search for the purpose and meaning of our life, we want to find a normative answer which can guide our life and unify all our efforts. If I am a

naturalist who originally sees the world as devoid of meaning, can I force myself to believe the world will be filled with meaning just because I make a choice or invent a purpose? If we were doing this unconsciously, this might be possible. But how can I create a meaning which has normative implications while all along very conscious of the fact that it is *only my creation*?

Secondly, it is arguable that Geering's position in fact has nihilistic implications that may not be intended by Geering. If "each of us is now responsible for *creating* our own personal meaning system", then there is no reason why a sadist or criminal cannot construct a meaning system which glorifies sexual perversion or crime. If meaning is essentially a human *creation*, then everyone is free to make his own arbitrary choice. Why not? Thirdly, Geering may deny the charge of relativism and assert that there are constraints on our choice of meaning system. Sometimes Geering does talk about our meaning of life as if it admits of an objective answer – if not an unique choice, at least some choices are better than others. But then it creates an inner tension within Geering's position. If there are built-in constraints in our search for meaning, in what sense it is really our creation? Critics may charge that those constraints are suggested only to avoid the problem of nihilism, or that Geering is still influenced by some of his "objectivist" moral intuitions inherited from his Christian past.

So Geering seems to be caught in a dilemma.<sup>9</sup> If he really believes that it is "vain to search in general for the meaning of life", then he cannot legislate how other people should create their meaning. He should make it clear that his own preference for an earth-centred meaning system is just his "bias", which is no better and no worse than other preferences for the man-centred meaning system, money-centred meaning system, power-centred meaning system, sex-centred meaning system, self-centred meaning system and so on. Even if he thinks some of these systems will lead to "bad" consequences, e.g. the

ecological crisis, he should bear in mind that what is deemed good or bad is also a subjective construction. There are in fact some people who think the destruction of humankind is a "good" thing, e.g. the Unabomber. Who are we to say that the Unabomber is wrong? So to be consistent, Geering should avoid phrases like "the greater good," "supreme values," "responsibilities," etc., or at least not use them in a way that suggests these moral judgments are in any sense objective. Moreover, he should stop issuing categorical commands like the "imperative to care *must take precedence over lesser loyalties*".<sup>10</sup> Whence these imperatives? There is no reason why people cannot construct their own imperatives which put higher priorities on their "lesser" loyalties. Why are they not free to do so? Within the framework of Geering's naturalism and global anti-realism, I cannot see he can provide any answer to this question.

Fourthly, Geering not only legislates on how others should create their meaning, he also declares that "the quest for meaning ... is the key to human existence." This is again contradictory to his constructivism which entails there is no such thing as the key to human existence. Each person will construct his own key. Full-stop. Geering even appeals to "the cosmic drift towards meaning" to justify the claim that "we humans find ourselves to be creatures whose very *raison d'être* is to be creators." I find this claim surprising. Of course, in the naturalistic world-view, the process of evolution occurred only by chance, and Jacques Monod is closer to the mark when he treats the human being as a number coming up in a roulette wheel in the cosmic Monte Carlo. Anyway, creatures who can think about meaning are destined to be extinct sooner or later in the process of cosmic evolution. To talk as if the cosmic process or human creatures really have a *raison d'être* is again forbidden by Geering's own world-view. I think the above discussions suffice to show that the idea of "creation of meaning" faces enormous difficulties. In contrast, the

traditional Christian answer to the quest for meaning does not have these problems. Even Geering once says, "An even greater strength of Christian dualism is that the other-world provided the meaning for this-world".<sup>11</sup>

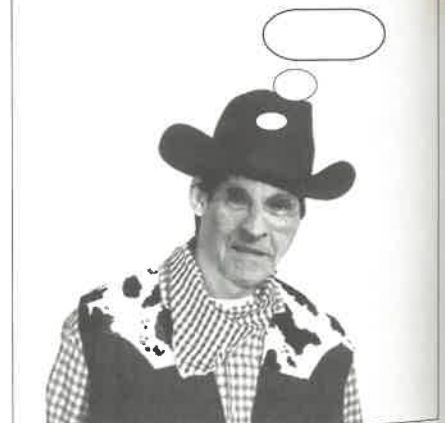
## Endnotes

1. Lloyd Geering, *Tomorrow's God: How We Create Our Worlds* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 1994), 221.
2. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 198-9. Emphasis mine.
3. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 201.
4. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 99.
5. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 100.
6. Lloyd Geering, *The World to Come: From Christian Past to Global Future* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 1999), 157.
7. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 235. Emphasis mine.
8. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 223. Emphasis mine.
9. This is parallel to the dilemma of Sartrean existentialism which advocates that humans are free to create values in any way (existence precedes essence), on the one hand, and that his choice should conform to humanistic values (existentialism is humanism), on the other.
10. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 235. Emphasis mine.
11. Geering, *Tomorrow's God*, 115.

Kwan Kai Man

## The Last Western Heretic has a second thought

Hummm...? Okaay ...  
 "God" is a symbolic word.  
 But, dawgarn eit!!! ...  
 what on God's green earth  
 would a non-symbolic word be ...?



## Conclusion: theism cannot be dismissed so easily

In this series of essays, I argue that Geering's dismissal of theism is ungrounded, and that his analysis of the options is faulty. Geering's positive proposal is flawed, and he has greatly underestimated theism's intellectual strength and its staying power. I conclude that orthodox Christianity – especially when exhibited as a self-reflective and critical faith – is still viable in our global world.

The misuse of the Christian faith has led to grave errors in the past, especially in the West. In part, Geering's radical theology is a reaction to this history. However, in the global world which Geering likes to talk about, we should note the emergence of a truly global Christianity.<sup>1</sup> The number of Christians in the non-western world has already exceeded that 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 sins of the western Church, or to be excessively blamed for them. As a Chinese Christian, the faith I know is always a witness to the precarious existence of a minority community.

As 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: "... does 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?"<sup>2</sup> Or as Charles Taylor comments, it is not inevitable that "the highest

aspirations must lead to mutilation or destruction... There is a large element of hope. It is a hope that I see implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism (however terrible the record of its adherents in history), and in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided."<sup>3</sup>

### Endnotes

1. See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) on the coming Christendom.
2. Marcel Neusch, *The Modern Sources of Atheism* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1982), 55-6.
3. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 521.

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### Further reading

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