

Reimagining God

The Faith Journey of a Modern Heretic

Lloyd Geering

Study & discussion guide prepared by Jarmo Tarkki

PART 1. The Starting Point

Chapter 1. God and Me

Lloyd Geering became a Christian as a young man because it filled a spiritual vacuum for him. Christianity gave shape to his desire to make something of his life. Yet several years later he found himself embroiled in a debate much larger than himself—a debate that enflamed Australians and New Zealanders around issues of biblical inerrancy, resurrection from the dead, and the meaning of God and religion.

1. What has been your intellectual and/or spiritual journey in relation to Christianity and God? How do your experiences compare to those of Lloyd Geering?
2. Geering got into trouble for his comments on the “New Reformation” and resurrection in two 1960s articles. What did Geering mean by these terms? How would his comments be received in your community today?
3. Geering suggests we see human history as divided into an Ethnic and Transethnic Phase divided by the Axial Period. What are some key differences among these three eras?

Chapter 2. The Faith to Doubt

Today we tend to imagine that religious faith consists of holding a certain number of specific and often irrational beliefs, but this wasn't always the case. To say 'I believe' used to mean 'I give my allegiance to' someone or something. Human language changes over time, and words take on new meanings and connotations. These sorts of changes demonstrate why religious language must be updated for new generations if it is to remain meaningful.

1. What did Herbert Cantwell Smith mean by “heresy of believing”? If believing isn't of central significance to religion, what else might be?
2. What is the difference between *credo* and *opinor*?
3. According to Geering, faith is to give one's heart to god, but god is a symbolic term. Symbolic for what? What does god symbolize for you, if anything?
4. What is the difference between nominalism and realism?

Part 2. Learning from My Mentors

Chapter 3. Friedrich Schleiermacher. God Is Experienced

The early nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher revolutionized Christian theology by turning away from reason and divine revelation toward inner experience. He equated God-consciousness with a sense of being a small part of a greater whole, an experience he thought all normal human beings could have.

1. Why did Schleiermacher reject reason and divine revelation as a means of attaining knowledge about God?
2. Did you relate with any of the characters in Schleiermacher's Christmas story? If so, who and why? Would we need to introduce new characters into the dialogue today?
3. Explain Schleiermacher's concept of the "feeling of absolute dependence".
4. If Jesus was completely human, how did he differ from the rest of us, according to Schleiermacher?

Chapter 4. Ludwig Feuerbach. God Is Humanity Projected

Ludwig Feuerbach developed the ideas of Schleiermacher and Hegel into materialist philosophy. He believed physical matter gave rise to human consciousness, ideas, culture and spirituality, rather than the other way around.

1. What was Feuerbach's "new philosophy"?
2. How did Feuerbach adapt Hegelian philosophy? What are the differences between idealism and materialism, mind and matter? Which do you find to be most fundamental, or do you see another, third option for understanding ultimate reality?
3. What was Feuerbach's concept of God?
4. How did Feuerbach distinguish "historical facts" from "religious facts"? Does this distinction appeal to you?

Chapter 5. Carl Jung. God Is in the Unconscious

The rise of modern psychology initiated whole new approaches to religion. Sigmund Freud focused on improving mental health while Carl Jung explored the unconscious as a wellspring of human creativity, leading each of them to very different conclusions about religion. Their diverging views eventually led to a painful break in relations between them.

1. How did Freud and Jung differ in their understanding of religion?

2. What is Jung's "collective unconscious"?
3. How are archetypes and myths understood to operate in the collective unconscious, according to Jung? What about God?
4. What has been Jung's enduring influence on today's interpretations of religion? Do you feel we have moved beyond his views in any significant way?

Chapter 6. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. God is Evolving

In the early twentieth century the Jesuit priest and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin attempted to find a place in theology for evolution. His ideas were popular but his efforts were frequently thwarted by his church, which banished him to a distant post in China and then denied him the right to publish his book or speak in front of large audiences. In spite of this, his ideas exploded into public view with the posthumous publication of his *The Phenomenon of Man*.

1. What did Teilhard mean by his statements in "How I Believe"? How might we update them for a modern audience?
2. What in Teilhard's thinking so alarmed the Vatican that it generated the *Humani Generis*?
3. Explain Teilhard's notion of "cosmogogenesis".
4. What did Teilhard mean when he described a human being as "nothing else than evolution become conscious of itself"? Would you agree? Why or why not?

Chapter 7. John Robinson. Honest to God

In 1963 Bishop John Robinson drew international attention when he published the book *Honest to God*. The ideas in the book were not new to theologians. Nevertheless the book rose to bestseller status. Beyond Robinson, talk of the 'death of God' came to dominate public discourse, and Geering himself underwent a heresy trial in New Zealand. Thus, the 1960s proved to be a critical turning-point for Western Christianity.

1. What led to *Honest to God* becoming a bestseller? To what extent do you think the public has absorbed the ideas Robinson introduced?
2. Why did Karl Barth feel Schleiermacher would bring an end to Christian doctrine? Do you think he was right?
3. Why does the theistic image have to go, in Geering's view?

PART 3. Adjusting to the Challenges

Chapter 8. How Humans Made God

As the work of Teilhard de Chardin perhaps foreshadowed, we have entered an era in which science holds unprecedented power to influence our understanding of our own existence. Here Geering paints a sweeping picture of evolution, narrowing in focus until he reaches the birth of God in human thought.

1. To what extent have the major theological breakthroughs described in Part 2 impacted your community? What are the dominant ideas about religion, God and science where you live?
2. When did monotheism emerge and why?
3. On what grounds does Geering criticize Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens? Would you agree? Why or why not?

Chapter 9. Science and the Judeo-Christian Tradition

Etymologically, science simply means *knowledge*. In modern times we have narrowed that definition to mean knowledge that has been verified by empirical methods. Today religion is commonly viewed as antithetical to science, but this is a relatively recent attitude, with unfortunate results.

1. When did science begin to be seen in conflict with religion and why? Do you find this surprising? Why or why not?
2. What was the role of Muslim scholars in the development of Western culture in the Middle Ages?
3. What were some key contributions of William of Ockham to the advance of science? What is Ockham's Razor?
4. To what extent do you agree with Weizsäcker's claim that "the modern world was the result of the secularisation of Christianity"?

Chapter 10. Idolatry in the Church

John Robinson in *Honest to God* pointed out that the idols most likely to be worshiped today are not '*metal images*' so much as '*mental images*'. Here Geering suggests what some of those modern idols might be, and revisits the prescient work of Kirsopp Lake, who in the 1920s predicted the rise of fundamentalism.

1. How did the ancient Romans differentiate religion and superstition? What is Geering's definition of superstition?

2. What do the terms fundamentals, fundamentalist and fundamentalism mean, and where do they come from?
3. How does one commit “bibliolatry”?
4. In what sense can Christ worship be understood as idolatry? To what extent can the same be said of objectifying God?

Chapter 11. Ethics without God

Because we absorb the values and habits of our parents and culture, we begin to develop a sense of ethics even before we develop the capacity to think critically about it.

Likewise, whole cultures develop and change their overarching values and habits over time in response to major events and discoveries. The Enlightenment provoked such changes in the West.

1. How did the Enlightenment begin to change our views on religion, God, and ethics?
2. How did Fichte and Kant contribute to the collapse of the basis for traditional morality?
3. Geering describes some trends that show an increasing interest in “global” culture. Do you believe a universal human culture is possible? Why or why not?
4. Geering introduces Fletcher’s situational ethics and concludes with a summary of his own understanding of ethical living. How do Fletcher and Geering’s understandings of ethics compare with your own?

Chapter 12. Christianity without Christ

Geering opens this chapter with an anecdote about one of his lectures in which one member of the audience cried out, “You have taken away my Lord!” This is a good metaphor for how many Christians have reacted as the full significance of today’s biblical scholarship is made known to them. But biblical scholarship offers some rich gains that are frequently overlooked.

1. Why did Christianity come to put such emphasis on right belief (orthodoxy) instead of right practice (orthopraxy)?
2. What are the central teachings of the Didache?
3. How do the parables of Jesus differ from a list of rules or a religious creed? What have proven to be the advantages and disadvantages of Jesus’ style of teaching?
4. What is the mission of the church, as Geering sees it? How does this compare to your own view of the church?

Chapter 13. Tomorrow's Spirituality

The long-standing dualistic view of the world as divided between spirit and matter is falling to the wayside in modern times, but our language still carries forward the artifacts of ancient views through words like 'spirit' and even 'God'.

1. How does Geering define spirituality for today? How does this compare to how it was understood in earlier times?
2. How did Martin Buber redefine spirit for the modern world? Does this definition appeal to you? Why or why not?
3. What are tomorrow's spiritual practices, according to Geering? What practices, if any, do you envision as vital for the future?

Chapter 14. Spirituality for an Ecological Age

Geering suggests we have witnessed the end of the Christian Era and are now ushering in what he calls the Global Era. The concerns of the Global Era are very different from those that occupied our ancestors. Most significantly, the religious or spiritual dimension of global culture, if it comes at all, will be natural and not supernatural.

1. What does Geering mean by "Global Era"?
2. How have we moved from an emphasis on saving souls to saving the planet?
3. What are the ten practical premises of ecological spirituality? What would you change or add to this list?