

In Praise of the Secular

by Lloyd Geering

Part 1 of 4

What does 'Secular' mean?

The title of this series, 'In Praise of the Secular' was suggested to me by that of a book written as long ago as 1509. It was called *In Praise of Folly* and was written by Erasmus (1466–1536), the most famous scholar of the Renaissance. Although of Dutch origin, he lived and worked in many places in Europe. In fact, when he wrote that little book he was staying in London with Sir Thomas More, and the Latin title was an intended pun on his host's name. (*Moriae Encomium* could be taken to mean 'in praise of folly' or 'in praise of More'.) Although he wrote this 150-page work in a week, it had been forming in his mind while travelling on horseback from Italy to England.

A man of many humours ...

The book is a witty satire in the form of a long address by a personified Folly. By this means Erasmus engaged in a merciless critique of church practices, monastic activities, and scholastic theology. For example, he says of the monks (of whom he had himself been one), 'they bray like donkeys in church, repeating by rote the psalms they have not understood, imagining they are charming the ears of their heavenly audience with infinite delight'.

Because it was intended as a bit of light-hearted tomfoolery (not even Erasmus ever regarded it highly), the book enabled him to say things about church life that he could not even have hinted at in a serious dissertation. But

his words had the same effect as those of the little boy of the fairy tale who exclaimed, 'The emperor has no clothes on'. In the end, ironically, this little satire became his most famous work.

Rather than a philosopher or theologian, Erasmus was chiefly a biblical scholar and a linguist; yet he is widely regarded as the spiritual ancestor of much modern religious thought. He poked fun at the scholastic theology of the day for being quite out of touch with daily life, for he was more concerned with the 'Sermon on the Mount' and ethical religion than with theological niceties. More than most, he was acutely aware of the need for radical reform in the church.

Indeed, it was often said that 'Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched'. Yet, when Martin Luther's challenging acts led to the sudden outbreak of reforming activities, Erasmus held himself aloof from them. This was partly because he was a mild and somewhat timid man. As the illegitimate son of a priest, he had not known the joy and consolation of the family experience, and throughout his life craved affection and appreciation. My teacher John Dickie passed on to us the venerable quip that Erasmus appeared to have descended from a long line of maiden aunts – though today some might find that witticism 'politically insensitive'.

At first Erasmus found much to affirm in what Luther was saying, but he became offended by Luther's 'extremism and rough manners'. Moreover, he had no wish to offend the new Pope, Adrian VI, who was also a Dutchman and an old school friend of Erasmus. Adrian was a reforming Pope who tried to stop the sale of the indulgences that had sparked off the Protestant Reformation. Unfortunately he died prematurely after only a year in office, worn out by the many and difficult problems he faced. Had he lived, church history might have been very different.

That very year Erasmus wrote a diatribe against Luther, entitling it *On Free-will*. He dismissed the excessive confidence in human moral strength held by the Pelagians, but he equally rejected the theory – expounded by Augustine and defended by Luther – of the essential hopelessness of the human condition. Luther was furious with Erasmus, and wrote a reply four times as long, condemning the open-minded middle way proposed by Erasmus. ‘We *must* go to extremes’, concluded Luther; ‘we *must* deny free will altogether and ascribe everything to God’. Erasmus, unable to persuade his critics to adopt a mediating position between these extremist positions, and finding himself condemned by Protestant and Catholic alike, retired from the public controversy.

By now you will no doubt suspect that I have borrowed from Erasmus more than a couple of words for the title of this series; I have briefly described his role in an ancient controversy in order to throw some light on what is the chief area of religious debate today. We are no longer involved in a bitter conflict between Catholic and Protestant, for a great deal of mutual respect and understanding now exists between these two elements of Western religious culture – a respect that was entirely absent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The more things change ...

Indeed, the chief religious conflicts today are not among the major world religions. Rather, it is between those who call themselves religious and those who regard themselves as secular. This great divide, I suggest, is today’s equivalent of the Protestant-Catholic conflict at the time of the Reformation. In those days Catholics and Protestants each claimed to possess the ultimate truth, and fiercely condemned their opponents as the servants of Satan. Today it is the followers of traditional religions and the militant secularists who pour scorn on one another, treating their opponents as dangerous enthusiasts who must be silenced at all costs for the future good of humanity.

Fundamentalists, whether Christian or Muslim, regard all things secular as the work of Satan, undermining what they regard as the ultimate and eternal truths revealed by God. Militant secularists on the other hand, regard all traditional religious beliefs and practices as the results of grotesque superstitions that should be eradicated as harmful anachronisms. Recently, examples of this extremist secularism have been coming off the press in quick succession: *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *God is not Great* by Christopher Hitchens, and *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris.

Like Erasmus of old I want to explore and develop a mediating position in this conflict. Just as he held up to ridicule the traditional beliefs and practices of the church of his day, so I concede that there is much in traditional Christianity that deserves Dawkins' trenchant criticism. A number of the stories, injunctions, and doctrines we find in the Bible are so morally repugnant that we should not hesitate to declare them so.

Furthermore much of the dogma still affirmed by the church and practised in its rituals is better termed superstition than genuine religion. I define superstition as any belief or practice that has outlived the cultural context in which it was once appropriate. These dogmas and rituals are outmoded and superstitious because they were shaped to reflect a view of the world that began to disappear from our common knowledge and experience three or four centuries ago.

By their blanket rejection of everything in the religions of the past, however, militant secularists throw out the baby with the bathwater in their disregard for the beneficial, spiritual and moral values also nurtured by these traditions. Although Dawkins is one who errs considerably in this respect, he nevertheless attempts to rescue himself. Right at the end of his book he declares that he is 'a little taken aback at the biblical ignorance displayed by people in more recent decades' and makes a final plea that we do not lose touch with the 'treasured heritage' of our cultural past.

I intend to expound a mediating position between the fundamentalists and the militant secularists by showing that they both have a faulty understanding of the secular. Fundamentalists see the secular as an enemy to their faith and way of life, but I wish to say something in praise of the secular. Militant secularists, for their part, have also misunderstood what secularism really is, and have declared war on anything associated with religion. As a result, the word 'secular' is commonly taken to mean 'anti-religious', something it did not originally signify at all.

... the more they need explaining

Let us go back, then, to the etymology of 'secular'. Derived from the Latin *saeculum*, which means 'an age' or 'a life-time', the word came to mean 'this age or world in which we live'. During the centuries when Latin was the *lingua franca* of mediaeval academic Christendom, *saeculum* was used to translate the Hebrew *'olam* and Greek *aeon*, words found in such biblical phrases as 'from one age to another' or 'for ever and ever'. In mediaeval Latin this phrase became *ad saecula saeculorum*, and Christians were well accustomed to hearing it in the liturgy of the mass. It is further interesting to note that those in monasteries and convents were known as 'the religious' – since they lived by a strict communal rule – whereas parish priests were known as 'the seculars' – for they lived and worked in the world, as did all their faithful parishioners.

To recapture the original meaning of 'secular', then, one might propose that its nearest synonym is 'this-worldly' and its antonym is 'otherworldly'. For clearly the modern world has brought a steady increase in our knowledge and understanding of 'this-world' -- the physical, tangible world. In particular, the discoveries of Galileo, Newton, and Einstein have caused the 'other-world' of the heavens to become merged with the 'this-world' of our space-time universe. All this has led to a steady decrease in our interest in, or convictions about, any unseen and therefore hypothetical 'otherworld'. It has

even given rise to such quips as 'He is so other-worldly that he's no longer of any earthly use'.

This process of switching attention from the 'other-world' to 'this-world' is what is meant by the word 'secularisation'. It was about 1864 when the word first came into usage to describe the process of cultural change that was by then becoming clearly discernible. One hundred years later the theologian Harvey Cox wrote his widely read book *The Secular City*, in which he described 'secularisation' quite succinctly as 'man turning his attention away from worlds beyond and toward this world and this time'.

But it must be obvious that turning one's attention away from supposed other worlds to this world and this time does not necessarily mean one is no longer concerned with religion. Indeed the Israelite prophets were very much concerned with this world. In no uncertain terms they called for justice in the market place and peace among the nations. Hence the process of secularisation should not be regarded as an anti-religious movement. Actually, it leaves the future of religion an open question.

Wanted: secular saints

This point was made in a lecture as long ago as 1850 by W. B. Hodgson on 'The Secular, the Religious and the Theological'; there he said, 'Secular means belonging to the Saeculum or Age, or *period* of life on this earth, as distinguished from eternity or life to come. It should never have come to mean the opposite of *religious*. The fact that something may be described as secular does not preclude it from also being religious.'

To make this clearer, however, we must turn our attention briefly to what constitutes religion. Because we are in the midst of a period of rapid and far-reaching cultural change, most people think of religion in terms that are far too narrow, identifying it with something they have known from the past. And theologians themselves have sometimes been guilty of that same error.

For example, the great twentieth century theologian Karl Barth, in attempting to expound a contemporary Christian faith, declared that Christianity is not a religion. And following his mentor, the even more radical Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined the phrase 'religionless Christianity' – a term that was later and more appropriately translated 'secular Christianity'.

Even most of the definitions of religion listed in the Oxford Dictionary have become far too narrow. It says, for example, 'Religion is the human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God entitled to obedience'. Only the fifth and last definition it offers is at all satisfactory: 'Religion is action that one feels bound to do'. That definition comes from the etymology of the word, for the root from which comes the Latin *religio* means 'to bind'.

Acknowledging the confusion that surrounds the word 'religion' today, W. Cantwell Smith wrote a seminal little book in 1962, *The Meaning and End of Religion*. There he showed that the popular use of the term to refer to a specific set of beliefs and practices, particularly with a supernatural dimension, is quite modern. Indeed, its derivation shows that it did not originally refer to any particular set of beliefs at all, but to the degree of commitment or devotion that people displayed towards their most important interests. For that reason, the word was never used in the plural as we do today when we talk about 'the religions of the world'.

Pure religion and undefiled

Religio, and hence 'religion', basically meant conscientiousness, and in particular 'a conscientious concern for what really matters'. This is what Paul Tillich was recovering for the word when he defined religion as 'the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life'. Carlo Della Casa, an Italian scholar of modern religion,

put it even more simply: 'Religion is a total mode of the interpreting and living of life.'

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

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

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

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

Where do *you* live?

Therefore let us now look at the cultural features that mark our times as a new age. I shall attempt to explain this in terms of our world view – the way we see, or understand, the world in which we live. Do we all live in the same world? Yes and no! Common sense keeps telling us that we do. But what we see or understand as the ‘world out there’ turns out to be a mental image within our heads; it is a world we have unconsciously interpreted. That interpreted ‘reality’ is our world view. Indeed, we are always one step removed from the objective universe. ‘Our world’, the world to which we respond in the way we live, is not simple reality itself (whatever that might be) but reality understood and interpreted through the grid of our language and culture. The only world we ‘know’ with our minds and talk about with one another is a world we have already interpreted.

Thus each of us has his or her own world view, and being personal and unique to each, it differs slightly from person to person. It exists in our minds as a complex set of mental images that we accumulate during life. Two main sources furnish the material from which we construct our world views. The first is personal experience gained through our senses – chiefly sight, touch and sound. The second is the interpretations with which we clothe the data that we receive through our senses. Through language, for example, we name what we see. This immediately gives us a psychological sense of security and even of power, for we feel we know something when we name it and thus accept it into our world. What we cannot name we tend to regard as mysterious, foreign, and potentially dangerous.

But we do more than name the objects we encounter. We connect them together into a unified world in which we discern some meaning or purpose.

To do this, we are mainly dependent upon the culture into which we are born. Each culture is distinguished not only by its language, but by a general world view that it shares and passes on from generation to generation.

This explains why we live in a new cultural age, one that is increasingly global and secular: our various common world views have been undergoing radical changes. Let me sketch the new world view that came to birth in Western Europe and then began to spread all over the globe – and that explains why today people everywhere see the world rather differently than did their ancestors in the sixteenth century.

Constructing a new world

These, then, are the main phases through which this new world view began to take shape after 1600. First, one can hardly overemphasize the contributions of Copernicus and Galileo. They were the pioneers of the space age. They displaced our human home – planet earth – from the centre of the universe around which everything revolved and made it a tiny and almost insignificant speck in a physical universe too vast for us to contain in our mind's eye. All educated people around the world are now aware of the space-time universe in which we humans live.

Second, Galileo's telescope made it clear that the moon was of much the same material as the earth. Such a discovery was soon to lead to the conviction that the sun, the stars and the nebulae are all of a piece with this earth. From Newton onwards we came to understand that this almost infinite physical universe everywhere operates by the same basic laws of nature. That meant that what was once long regarded as the *supernatural* area of space had now been brought within the sphere of the natural. 'This-world' had suddenly expanded to swallow up what had been traditionally conceived as 'other-world'. That was secularisation with a vengeance!

The heavens, or sky above, had long been seen as God's own domain. 'Our Father who art in heaven', begins the Lord's prayer. It had also come to be seen as the dwelling place of blessed departed. Galileo's discoveries meant that God had become deprived of his holy dwelling space, and the souls of the dead had no actual *place* to go to. Most of us have so unquestioningly accepted this that we regarded as quite silly the observation of the first Russian astronaut that he found no evidence of God in outer space. And even Pope John Paul II was forced to concede, 'Heaven is not a *place*; it is a state of mind'. No wonder that even in Galileo's time the church rightly sensed that his claims had far-reaching consequences and that it tried to silence him.

What gradually took place in the collective European mind over the next few centuries was telescoped into one day for a Papuan whom I once heard tell his personal story. He said his tribe had always believed that their dead continued to live on after death in the next valley, a place separated from them by an immense mountain range. Then came the time when white strangers arrived and took him on a journey through this mysterious valley, and he was stunned and shocked to find it similar to his homeland and the dead ancestors nowhere to be seen. What happened in a single day for that Papuan, had slowly seeped into the collective European mind over three centuries as it came to understand the significance of Galileo's discoveries.

And while we have had nearly four hundred years to change our world view in the light of Galileo and the later cosmologists, we have had much less time to adjust to the second great shift in our world view. This important milestone was largely the work of Charles Darwin. As Galileo made the universe all of a piece with the earth, Darwin taught us to see the human species as related to all other earthly creatures. As the earth was no longer the centre of the universe, so the human species was no longer the special creation – half-animal half divine – that our forbears long supposed it to be. We humans now know ourselves to be but one of the millions of species that have

emerged on this planet. We are all part of the complex and still mysterious, evolving world of nature.

Cast adrift in the cosmos

Galileo and Darwin are only the two foremost representatives of the rising tide of scientists who have been collectively responsible for the radical changes that have taken place in our world views. Empirical science began to enunciate a series of natural laws that explain how the world of nature operates without recourse to any external force. The more they did this, the less room was left for God to perform his miracles. For a while scientists looked for gaps in the system. Even Newton did. But as 'this-world' became more and more self-explanatory, the effect was to ease out of the picture altogether the God who had long been understood as the all-powerful, personal creator. And all this has been part of the process of secularisation.

As empirical knowledge rapidly grew and spread – particularly between the middle of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century – it became common to think of religion and science as bitter enemies of one another. This apparent conflict was partly due to the popular misunderstanding of both science and religion. Let me now attempt to sort this issue out.

When we speak of science today, we are referring to empiricism, by which we mean knowledge that has survived a variety of tests without being disproved. The application of such tests is a method that has gradually improved and widened in its scope, but this should not hide from us the fact that the word 'science' still basically means knowledge.

The classical age of empirical science was preceded by a long period of what we may call cultural knowledge. Each culture accumulated in the course of its history a body of knowledge that it passed on from generation to generation – information that had survived the test of general experience. But confidence in the validity of that knowledge often rested on appeal to the author-

ity of the past. And the culturally transmitted 'body of knowledge' included everything from the origin of the world to the medical cure of diseases. It is anachronistic to refer to its elements as either religion or science, for such a modern distinction could not be made before the emergence of empirical science.

Has God lost his job?

Let me illustrate this by reference to the opening chapter of Genesis. Here we are told that in the space of six days God created everything that exists, from light to human beings. This is no more religious knowledge than it is scientific knowledge. It originated as a cultural theory in a Jewish context and was a great advance on the earlier Jewish story of origins – the one preserved in chapters 2 and 3 of that same book.

To appreciate the significance of the Genesis 1 hypothesis, we need to look at it in the light of modern science. Physicists today have discerned four basic forces – gravitational force, electromagnetic force, the weak nuclear force and the strong nuclear force. They are now looking for what they call the Grand Unified Theory, which they hope will link them all together. If successful they would then have uncovered what is referred to as a Theory of Everything. Now that is exactly what Genesis 1 is – an attempt to explain why everything is the way it is by referring it all to one basic force called God. This theory explained the origin of light, of day and night, the seasons of the year, and the creation of all living things.

This theory was first enunciated in ancient Babylon about 450 BC, and eventually replaced all earlier and more primitive explanations. The unknown author of it could be described as a Jewish 'scientist', as brilliant in his day as the much later Einstein was in his. It was so brilliant that for the next two and a half thousand years it convinced nearly everybody who heard it. It still convinces many today, partly because it is so simple, neat and tidy. Christian fundamentalists still defend it by such explanations and subsidiary exposi-

tions as 'creation science' and 'intelligent design'. What they are defending is neither religious knowledge nor scientific knowledge, but ancient cultural knowledge which, brilliant though it was at the time, no longer stands up to the tests being used by today's empirical scientists.

A new dispensation

The world view that has been arising as a result of Galileo, Darwin and science generally is now spreading round the globe. This is because the intellectual disciplines of physics, chemistry, geology, biology, cosmology are the same the world over. They transcend nationality and the knowledge previously transmitted in traditional cultures. The basic human knowledge that constitutes the raw material of our world view is fast becoming the same for everybody. It has become secular and global.

Secular knowledge is knowledge of the physical, tangible world gained and tested by empirical science. The more this way of learning has enabled us to understand the world in which we live by enunciating the basic laws by which it operates, the less room can be found for anything that could be called *supernatural*. Indeed, for increasing numbers of people the very idea of the supernatural has been completely eased out of their view of the world.

In later lectures I shall be drawing attention first to the many personal and social benefits we all accept and enjoy within the new secular world, and after that to its consequences for religion and spirituality. But in the next lecture I shall discuss how it was out of Christendom that the secular world emerged. Today's world has resulted from the pioneering efforts of creative Christian thinkers.



This is the first of four lectures given by Lloyd Geering in 2007
at St Andrews on The Terrace, Wellington, New Zealand

You can download the other three lectures from
www.satrs.org.nz and www.secularbuddhism.org.nz

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About Lloyd Geering

With his inimitable ability to take us on whirlwind trips through religious history, Lloyd Geering traces the process of secularisation. He sees within earlier forms of Judaism and Christianity, the seeds of secular thought emerging from the margins of previous dominant faith systems. He assures religious people that secular society is not a threat to faith, but is in fact essential for religious freedom. He also speaks to those who hold there is no longer a place for religion, reminding them that along with the freedoms of the secular, we need a 'this worldly' spirituality that will nurture the responsibilities that we have toward one another and the earth itself.

Lloyd Geering is a Presbyterian minister, former Professor of Old Testament Studies in Brisbane and Dunedin, and Foundation Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. Since his retirement in 1984 he has continued to lecture widely both in New Zealand and overseas. He is currently Special Lecturer for the St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society.

In 2001 he was made Principal Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit. In 2007 he was made a member of the Order of New Zealand.

His chief publications are: *Faith's New Age* (1981), *Tomorrow's God* (1994), *The World to Come* (1999), *Christianity without God* (2002), *Wrestling with God* (2006)