

## **In Praise of the Secular**

by Lloyd Geering

Part 3 of 4

### **The Value of Being Secular**

It is sometimes claimed that New Zealand is the most secular country in the Western world. The basis for such a claim is not simply that church going has reached an all-time low, for that is true of Europe also. It is rather that New Zealand is believed to have extricated itself from its Christian past rather more than any other country shaped by European culture.

Of course the claim is debatable; but if it is true, we may be hard pressed to recognize the values of secularity simply because they are so much a part of our way of life that we take them for granted without recognizing them for what they are. To appreciate the significance of living in a secular society we need to go back two to three hundred years and make a comparison with the Christendom our British ancestors lived in. The whole fabric of European society was then under the spell of Christian authority much more than it is today. Some quite understandably think that was a preferable state of affairs and would like us to return to it.

#### **All that glisters is not gold**

But was classical Christendom quite as wonderful as some imagine? The passage of time can make things appear much more attractive than they were. Certainly there appeared to be less laxity in social life than we observe today to our sorrow. But that is because so little choice of alternative lifestyles ex-

isted. The two powerful institutions of Church and state shaped the social *mores* and gave each other mutual support in doing so. And because peer pressure more strongly supported the status quo than it does today, much less latitude was permitted for the personal freedom and individual creativity that people now enjoy. Those who stepped beyond certain clearly defined lines were quickly punished by ostracism, imprisonment, or excommunication. Executions were frequent, and those guilty of lesser crimes were often transported for life to penal colonies like Australia. Making public statements at variance with Christian dogma was regarded as a serious offence, and anything judged to be blasphemy led to harsh punishment.

Consider the example of George Holyoake (1817–1906), who incidentally was a relative of Sir Keith Holyoake, our former prime minister and later Governor-General. At an early age he became attracted to the social ideals of the Scottish reformer Robert Owen. In 1841 he had the odd distinction of being the last person to be imprisoned in Britain on the charge of blasphemy. Holyoake's misdemeanour was this: at the conclusion of a public meeting where the need for social reform was being discussed, this twenty-four year old idealist had the audacity to offer the facetious motion that the General Manager of World Affairs [meaning God] be placed on half pay for not looking after the poor as he had promised.

### **A healthy pragmatism**

Convicted of blasphemy, Holyoake was sentenced to six months in Gloucester Gaol, and after serving his time coined the term 'secularist' to describe his position. He preferred it to the term 'atheist', and spent the rest of his life promoting secularism as a replacement for the Christianity he knew. He defined 'secularist' as 'one who gives primary attention to those subjects the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life. The secularist principle requires that precedence should be given to the duties of *this life* over those which pertain to another world'.

Holyoake was not on the whole opposed to Christianity; rather, he wanted to emancipate daily life from ecclesiastical control so that more could be done to promote social justice and equality of opportunity for all. He drew a clear distinction between religion and morality. 'Leave religious dreamers to wait on supernatural aid', he said, 'let *us* look to what man can do for man'.

The rise of secularism in Britain gave rise to the spread of freethought associations in New Zealand – perhaps a major reason for New Zealand's present reputation as the world's most secular country. These associations flourished between 1870 and 1900, and had their own buildings and Sunday schools. In the census of 1881 more than 24,000 registered as freethinkers. One of their leading lights, Robert Stout, was the virtual founder of Victoria University College, Chancellor of the University of New Zealand for twenty years, and Chief Justice from 1899–1927.

The first clear indication that the young New Zealand nation would adopt the secularist policies being advocated by Holyoake is to be found in the 1877 Education Act. This established a national system of primary education that was to be 'free, secular and compulsory'. What led up to this?

Today we take it for granted that every country should provide a formal education programme for its children. But in the nineteenth century the idea that the state should be responsible for education was still quite novel. Such schools as existed in Britain up until the early nineteenth century had been established by the Church and they were open only to those who could pay for education. That is why, in 1780, Robert Raikes founded the institution of the Sunday school. This was originally designed to take the one day of the week when the children of the poor were not working in the factories and use it to teach them to read and write.

## **Legislating a dream**

Of course the chief book they were taught to read was the Bible. That was only to be expected, for in those days all education was heavily weighted with church catechisms and biblical knowledge. Entry to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge required a test of religious knowledge and belief, and even then was confined to male members of the Church of England.

This was the background of European migrants to New Zealand from 1840 onwards, and thus it was that the churches established the first schools here also, and they naturally inculcated their children with their own denominational form of Christianity. All children in Otago, for example, had to learn by heart the Westminster Shorter Catechism. But since the migrants came from all parts of the British Isles, New Zealand comprised a more diverse society than the one they had left behind. There soon developed much confusion and religious strife, particularly between Protestants and Catholics, though even the Protestant denominations were keen to defend their own distinctive beliefs and rituals.

By about 1870 the church-sponsored schools began to seek government aid to meet the needs of a rapidly increasing population. But how was this to be done for such a religiously diverse community? If the state were to take over responsibility for education and the curriculum was to include Christianity, what brand of Christianity was to be taught? With the gift of hindsight we can now say that it was religious diversity, leading often to bitter competition and animosity, that hastened New Zealand's development into a secular state.

The question of religious diversity in New Zealand was resolved in 1877 by deciding that the national education system should be 'compulsory, secular and free'. Though the churches were not entirely happy with the Act, the Protestants somewhat reluctantly accepted it, mainly to prevent the state from subsidizing what they judged to be the evil of Popery. The Protestant

churches were confident they could provide their children with a religious education through the institution of the Sunday school, since by then it no longer had to teach children to read and write. The Roman Catholic church, unwilling to allow the educational curriculum to be fragmented into religious and secular, took on the heavy financial burden of providing a complete educational system for its own people.

### **The payoff: social stability**

The 1877 Education Act did more than simply avoid religious dissension; it began to shape the secular character of New Zealand society. Through the way it chose to educate the vast majority of its young people, it laid the foundation for a modern secular state.

Of course New Zealand still shows many of the signs of its Christian past, for the British migrants brought many Christian customs with them. Parliament opens with prayer. In the law courts the oath is taken on the Bible. For a long time Sunday was strictly observed as a day of rest, and is still different from other days. The Christian holy days remain as holidays. But there is no state church as in England and Scotland – even though the Anglican church, being the largest, has shown a tendency to assume that role. The churches can no longer dictate to the state on religious and moral issues. Their status has been reduced to that of being lobby groups and even that power has declined markedly with the passing years.

Even though New Zealand was tacitly judged to be a Christian country in the nineteenth century, it is no longer so in the twenty-first. It is best described as a secular country with a Christian cultural heritage. Indeed, the most important aspect of that heritage is found in the values we commonly share. These are often referred to as Christian values, though in the form in which are expressed some of them are less than 300 years old. Perhaps more than that of any other country, our history over the last 150 years demonstrates how a

post-Christian secular society can evolve out of a specifically Christian society without any noticeable social revolution.

While I contend that it is our responsibility to keep New Zealand secular because of the values intrinsic to a secular society, I must repeat from the first lecture what I mean by the word 'secular'. A secular society is oriented to 'this-world' and not towards an unseen 'other-world'. A secular society is guided by natural and humanistic ideals and not by supposedly supernatural ones received by revelation from a higher realm.

The inherent values of such a secular society derive from the fact that the structure of the state is religiously neutral. A secular state does not identify with any particular religion or ideology. It neither promotes nor defends any particular religious stance, but neither does it attempt to stamp religion out. A truly secular state allows its citizens maximum personal freedom; the only human behaviour it should forcibly prevent is that which is harmful to other citizens. A secular society is fully democratic in that it is ruled by all of its citizens collectively and not by any form of dictatorship, whether human or divine. A secular state is the precise opposite of a theocracy.

### **A cockeyed optimist ...**

This was the burden of the philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–73) when in 1859 he published his famous essay *On Liberty*. It has been called 'the first modern exposition of a theory of a secular state'. He called for an open society that allowed wide disagreements, contending that only with the interplay of conflicting ideas is truth free to emerge. Mill, like all democrats, assumed we are all potentially wise and capable of making a good decision.

He may have been overconfident about the human condition; indeed, his ideal secular society may not be wholly achievable. Yet it remains the ideal we should be ever seeking to attain. And we should rejoice in those elements of it that we have already implemented here in New Zealand, circumstances

that were not present in the Christendom of more than two hundred years ago.

**... justified by the results**

The first value of living in a secular state is simply personal freedom – the freedom to think for oneself, without having beliefs imposed by an external source, whether that be the state or an anthology of sacred writings from the past. The freedom to think outside the square nurtures our inherent creativity. Next comes the freedom to express one's thoughts without fear of reprisal. A secular state defends the freedom of the public media to transmit information, provided only that it conforms to the truth.

Personal freedom to think and follow one's inclinations also implies freedom of religion -- the freedom to determine and explore whatever form of religious belief and practice one finds most satisfying. As Robert Stout once addressed the churches on behalf of freethinkers, 'We shall not attack you or try to exterminate you. We shall simply *explain* you in the context of the now developing science of comparative religion'.

The second value of living in a secular state is its discernment and defence of human rights. Classical Christendom never acknowledged human rights. Traditional Christianity focused not on human rights, but on human responsibilities – responsibilities to God, to King and country, and to one's fellows. All of these were believed to be encoded in the Bible, and that explains why the absolute monarch of former times could appeal to the 'divine right of kings'.

Of course one might argue that if only Christians had in all things followed the Golden Rule and loved their neighbours as themselves, then spelling out human rights would not have become necessary. But they did not, and so it *did become* necessary. And for that reason it is now the task of the secular state

not only to protect its citizens from *external* threats, but to safeguard their human rights from threats *within* the state.

The third value of the secular state is the welcome it provides for diversity. The tolerance that Christians once regarded as a weakness has now become a virtue. Under the rule of king and Church everyone was expected to conform to the norm long established by tradition and divine authority. Indeed, until quite recently those in England who did not belong to the Church of England were labelled non-conformists, and those who strayed too far from the norm were not tolerated. A secular society, by contrast, sets a positive value on diversity and does not expect all of its citizens to be clones of some ideal model. Of course the secular society must still set some limits to human behaviour. This follows from its duty to safeguard the human rights of its citizens, and therefore behaviour detrimental to the welfare of others cannot be tolerated. But having noted that caveat, we can boast that the secular state allows much more latitude to human behaviour than closed societies do.

So it is that only with the progressive secularisation of society have we advanced by degrees towards a purer democracy, abolished slavery, promoted the emancipation of women, curbed the evils of racism, and accepted the legitimacy of homosexuality. It is a sad commentary on Christendom that the church was initially opposed to every one of these marks of a secular society.

The advent of secularism has gradually emancipated us from whatever in our cultural past promoted depersonalisation and stereotyping: we have learned to condemn cultural conditioning, class stratification, and discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, and age. People are being freed and encouraged to develop their human worth and potential in whatever way best fulfils the physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of the human condition.



## **One shining vision**

A magnificent but heart-rending illustration of this process of emancipation is to be found in the life story of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the young Somali woman who was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 Most Influential People of 2005. Her book entitled *Infidel* is an account of her struggle against great odds to become a fully emancipated, responsible, and self-fulfilling person.

Hirsi Ali was raised in a strict Muslim family that in turn was part of a closely-knit Somali clan. Among the many sufferings and privations stemming from the Somali civil war, she was subjected to female circumcision and brutal beatings. In her adolescence she became a devout believer under the influence of the newly established Muslim Brotherhood, but to escape from an enforced marriage she sought refugee status in Holland, where her outstanding abilities led to increasingly responsible roles. University studies in political science led to an appreciation of what the enlightenment had done for Western society and opened her eyes to new social and religious possibilities. Assuming a leadership role among her fellow Islamic refugees, she began to fight for women's rights and the reform of Islam. This led her into the political arena, and she was elected to the Dutch Parliament.

Gradually and very reluctantly she came to realise how oppressive had been the Islamic culture of Somalia in which she was reared. In 2003 she met a Dutch TV journalist named Theo van Gogh with whom she produced a ten-minute documentary film entitled *Submission: Part One*. It was a plea for the reform of Islam in the form of questions addressed to Allah. That documentary brought to a head the Islamic reaction that had been steadily growing against her. In 2004 Theo van Gogh was stabbed to death by Islamic extremists and Ayaan Ali, being a Member of Parliament, was sequestered under police protection. This tragic series of events led to the fall of the Dutch Government, and Ayaan Ali found it necessary to seek safety in the United States.

This is not simply the story of how an inquisitive and intelligent little girl progressed from a dutiful and submissive daughter to a pioneer for women's rights and social reform. It is also a parable that epitomizes a phenomenon occurring today on the grand scale – the pain and anguish accompanying the birth-pangs of a global secular society. While some rejoice in it because they see it as the emancipation of people from the stranglehold of religion, others deplore and violently oppose it. They see secularisation as a force that undermines the religion that gave their culture cohesion, and one that results in the decline of moral standards and the slow slide into social chaos.

### **Two kinds of blindness**

The story of Ayaan Hirsi Ali all too vividly attests that any truly secular society will have enemies. They are of two opposing kinds. At the one extreme there are the religious fundamentalists who, whether Christian or Muslim, want to reimpose their beliefs and practices on what they see as a fallen world. At the other extreme are the militant ideologues who want to curtail and at last stamp out all forms of traditional religion and establish a uniformly atheistic society.

It was this latter extreme that the philosopher Karl Popper brought to our attention in 1945 when he published *The Open Society and its Enemies*. It is interesting to note that he wrote this book while lecturing in philosophy at Canterbury University, having come to New Zealand from Vienna as a Jewish refugee to escape from Nazi Germany. What I am calling the secular society is pretty much what Popper meant by the Open Society. The enemies he referred to were, of course, the totalitarian juggernauts of Nazism and Communism.

Soviet Russia under communist rule was not a secular state for the simple reason that it was not religiously neutral. It was an anti-religious state that made atheism a dogma to be imposed on all. It did not leave its citizens free to follow their own religious preferences.

Contrast Soviet Russia with India. Even though the Indian people are intensely religious, often in fairly traditional ways, the state of India that came to birth in 1947 declared itself in its very constitution to be a secular state. Being secular, the state of India leaves its citizens free to be Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist or atheist just as they prefer. It neither imposes one religion exclusively nor does it seek to stamp out religion.

New Zealand has become a secular state not by constitution but by cultural evolution. But we should not take this development for granted simply because it has been natural and relatively peaceful. Even in New Zealand the two extreme enemies of the secular society are still present. There are some who would like New Zealand to revert to the kind of Christian society that existed in the days of Christendom. The Destiny Church, for example, has clearly indicated its political intentions in this respect.

On the other hand, it is just because of the 1877 Education Act that we face the danger of going in the opposite direction. By stating that no teaching of religion should take place in our schools it has led us to interpret the word secular to mean non-religious or even anti-religious. It should, of course, be understood to mean religiously neutral.

This fact began to become a little clearer with the recent resurgence of Maori culture. The majority of pakeha seem to have little awareness that they have a culture, let alone any knowledgeable appreciation of it. The reason for this is that our national educational system tends to leave New Zealanders ignorant of their cultural past, so largely shaped by Christianity. It is important for us, then, not to allow either of these two extreme positions to undermine the religious neutrality of our secular society.

I became aware of these two opposing forces in New Zealand because of an incident that occurred some thirty-five years ago. The Department of Educa-

tion judged the time ripe for a review of the secular clause in the 1877 Education Act. Since the ecclesiastical rivalry that led to the secular clause had long since been amicably resolved, it was thought that the study of religion could be reintroduced into the curriculum to enable each generation to gain a more complete understanding of our cultural past. To this end it organised a conference in Christchurch to which it invited such interested parties as teachers, parents, and the Council for Christian Education.

For this conference I was invited to prepare a broad-ranging paper that I entitled 'The Religious Content of a Liberal Education in a Secular World'. After defining religion in broad terms, I stressed its importance for a well-rounded curriculum that aimed to prepare young people for life and offered some proposals for how this could be done.

### **An unfortunate stalemate**

My suggestions largely followed the example of Britain, where religious studies had become a compulsory subject. But such a venture for New Zealand was finally stymied by two extremist groups at the conference: conservative Christians insisted that traditional Christianity alone should be taught; and the militant secularists refused to allow any mention of religion in the official school curriculum. This temporary and cruelly ironic alliance of two extreme groups cost New Zealand an opportunity to develop a form of education that could have promoted tolerance, understanding, and goodwill in our increasingly pluralist society.

The result has been that there now exists something like a religious or spiritual vacuum in New Zealand. While Maoridom revives its own forms of spirituality, and while the more traditional forms of religion cater to a minority of the non-Maori society, the majority of New Zealanders have been left with little knowledge of our past spiritualities and have been given no guid-

ance as to how to develop their own. (I shall return to this topic in the last lecture).

Now let us turn to the world scene, where the problems preventing the emergence of a global secular society are much greater. Not only is the process of secularisation much less advanced in some countries than in others, but its enemies are much more powerful. Secularisation is most advanced in the Christian world simply because that is where it emerged, and primarily for that reason the non-Christian world often regards it as a foreign influence that must be resisted. Resistance is particularly strong in the Islamic world, and especially in Iran and Pakistan, which were specifically designed to be Islamic states. In Turkey, by contrast, Kemal Ataturk carried through a major cultural revolution in 1922 that left his country much more secularised than before. Egypt, largely due to the long British influence there, is also more secularised.

### **Challenges to freedom**

Around the globe today, the chief enemies of the secular state are the growing forces of religious fundamentalism. They arose in the twentieth century as a reaction to the spread of secularisation in both the Christian and the Islamic worlds. Ironically, each of these fundamentalisms grew out of a movement that was healthy and positive.

We are more familiar with the way it arose in the Christian world. The Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century set out to reform the church, and by the eighteenth century, no longer restrained by papal authority, Protestant thinkers gave rise to the Enlightenment. This in turn hastened the arrival of liberalism, Christian modernism, and secularisation. At the beginning of the twentieth century fundamentalism arose as a reactionary force, seeking to counter liberalism and stamp out secularisation. And Christian fundamentalism has been growing ever since.

Strangely parallel to this is the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. It began in the eighteenth century with the Saudi Arabian Wahhabi movement, which sought the purification of Islam. Then the influence of the Western enlightenment gave rise in the late nineteenth century to a form of modernism that was more successfully crushed in the Islamic world than in the Christian simply because it was seen as foreign. The success of the Wahhabi movement inspired the foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, a group that sought not only to revive traditional Islam and restore theocracy to the Islamic world, but also to root out what it saw as the insidious effects of Western secularisation. A direct link connects the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia.

Religious fundamentalism, whether Christian or Muslim, rejects the human freedoms that grew out of the Western Enlightenment and is dedicated to the elimination of secular humanism. Fundamentalism asserts that humans must submit to the authority of the divine being, whose revealed truths and absolute commands they believe to have been permanently revealed – in the Torah for the Jew, in the Bible for the Christian, and in the Qur'an for the Muslim.

Fundamentalism is distrustful of human reason. It cannot enter into open dialogue because its dogmas must not be questioned. It is wary of democracy, the assertion of human rights, and the equality of the sexes. It favours strong, male, charismatic leadership, both in religion and in society.

Fundamentalism seeks to exercise control over others by establishing theocratic societies that conform to the absolutes it believes to have been divinely revealed. Hence Israel *must* be a Jewish state, Iran *must* be an Islamic state, while American fundamentalists *are committed* to making the United States a more truly Christian state.

The widespread tension and unrest in the Middle East is admittedly complex and many-faceted, inasmuch as it includes such issues as competition for oil and the resurgence of nationalism. Yet the common factor that underlies the whole poisonous admixture is the rise of fundamentalism. President George Bush and his supporters make a great mistake in treating the Iraq war as a war against terrorism. Terrorism is simply one of the unfortunate symptoms of a conflict that has much deeper roots. Above all else, it is a clash of fundamentalisms, as Tariq Ali showed in his book of that name.

### **When ignorant armies clash by night**

The Jewish fundamentalists who hold the balance of power in any Israeli government insist that the whole of the Holy Land belongs to the Jewish people by divine right. They stand in the way of any plan to establish a just settlement for the Palestinians. The now long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in some respects the key to the whole of the Middle East unrest.

Muslim fundamentalists see the establishment of the state of Israel as an unjustified invasion of the Islamic world and they hope to destroy it. Failure to do so has exacerbated Muslim discontent with the secularised Christian West, which Muslim fundamentalists now regard as the domain of Satan. The Qur'anic concept of *jihad* (meaning 'striving') is motivating Muslim fundamentalists to strive to eliminate all Western influence and power over them and to restore the Islamic world to its former greatness by establishing truly Islamic states after the pattern of Iran and Pakistan. All who die in this holy war are judged to be martyrs; suicide bombers expect to go straight to their reward in heaven.

The Christian fundamentalists who help to keep Bush in power see the Islamic fundamentalists as an axis of evil, the struggle against which they consider a God-given task. What is even worse, the Christian fundamentalists of America secretly hope the Middle East conflict will lead to the cosmic battle of Armageddon that will hasten the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Iraq today we witness not only a clash between the Islamic fundamentalists and Christian fundamentalists, but the revival of the long-standing conflict within Islam between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. Saddam Hussein, the leader of the secular Ba'ath party had suppressed that conflict, but only by cruelly oppressive means. Now, American intervention has brought it out into the open, and any hope of seeing Iraq evolve into a democracy is doomed for the foreseeable future. For democracy and secularity go hand in hand, and fundamentalism, whether Muslim or Christian, springs from its inherent opposition to secularisation.

### **It takes a (global) village**

Not only is the secular state difficult to bring to birth, but even when achieved its maintenance requires continued effort. Where personal freedom is not matched equally with personal responsibility, the secular society begins to erode. So even we who enjoy the benefits of a secular society can become its enemies if we do not both learn to appreciate what we have and work hard to maintain it.

If we fail to do this, the secular society, instead of manifesting an harmonious and co-operative spirit, descends by degrees into a collection of greedy and self-centred individualists among whom anti-social and even violent behaviour becomes more prevalent. This turmoil produces outcries to bring back the birch, institute longer terms of imprisonment, and restore capital punishment. When such right wing reaction gains sufficient strength, people will either grudgingly or willingly submit themselves to a military dictatorship that promises law and order. And then, of course, the secularising process has to start all over again.

To maintain a healthy secular state we need to nurture personal responsibility. That requires some form of spirituality, as it did in the religious societies



of the past. But what form of spirituality is possible in a secular world? That is the issue we shall turn to next.



This is the third of four lectures given by Lloyd Geering in 2007  
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You can download the other three lectures from  
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## Further Reading

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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)