In Praise of the Secular

by Lloyd Geering

Part 4 of 4

Spirituality in the Secular World

The first century to feel the impact of secularisation was the nineteenth. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Cambridge historian Owen Chadwick entitled his Gifford Lectures of 1975 *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*. Even though vast numbers of people were so unaware of the cultural change going on around them that the churches remained full until the end of the century, many academic minds were busy exploring the new possibilities that the eighteenth-century enlightenment had opened up for them.

This prompted Pope Pius IX to attempt to counter the secularising process by issuing his now notorious Syllabus of Errors in 1864. Here are some of the 80 beliefs he condemned as erroneous:

- All the truths of religion proceed from the innate strength of human reason; hence reason is the ultimate standard by which man can and ought to arrive at every kind of truth.
- Every man is free to embrace and profess whatever religion he shall, guided by the light of reason, consider true.
- Moral laws do not stand in need of the divine sanction.
- The Roman Pontiff can and ought to reconcile himself with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.

A scandalous seminarian

But in that same year, 1864, a French Catholic scholar, Ernest Renan (1823-92) published a book that shocked the Catholic world. While training for the priesthood at a prestigious seminary in Paris, he studied the *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, published by the German scholar David Strauss in 1835; it sowed in his mind seeds of doubt about the truth of Christianity. Accordingly, rather than accept ordination, he became a freelance writer. He so quickly gained a reputation as a scholar that the French Emperor sent him on an archaeological expedition to Palestine and Syria. The result was the first modern book about Jesus to be written by a scholar who had taken the trouble to walk round Galilee.

In this book, *The Life of Jesus,* Renan brought Jesus back to earth from the heavenly places to which Christian belief had long exalted him. He portrayed a wholly human Jesus in his natural setting, stripping the divine Christ of all the supernatural elements surrounding him in the Gospel stories. The book went through eight editions in three months and completely scandalised conventional Christians.

Modern scholars do not think highly of the book, for they doubt that we possess sufficient historical material to reconstruct Jesus' life. According to the scholars of the Jesus Seminar, for example, the best that we can do is to recover the 'voiceprints and footprints' of the historical Jesus. Renan, however, used his fertile imagination to fill in the gaps, and portrayed Jesus as a charming preacher leisurely wandering round Galilee. Albert Schweitzer said rather scathingly of Renan's rendering, 'The gentle Jesus, the beautiful Mary, the fair Galileans who formed the retinue of the "amiable carpenter" might have been taken over from the shop-window of an ecclesiastical art shop in Paris'. Yet even Schweitzer conceded that the book had a magic about it, so much so that it 'marked an epoch, not for the Catholic world only, but for general literature'. The die had been cast for the acceptance of a completely human Jesus.

Since the time of Strauss and Renan Christian scholars and preachers have focused increasingly on the humanity of Jesus and ever less on his divinity. Seeing Jesus as a Galilean teacher meant, of course, that he was being secularised – that is, brought back into this world. Hymns began to appear that celebrated him not as a divine Saviour, but as a hero who led an exemplary life. This trend continued, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet from its inception this humanisation of Jesus was rejected and often condemned by those of a conservative or orthodox persuasion.

The end of religion?

When Renan was appointed to the chair of Hebrew at the Collège de France in 1862, he referred to Jesus in his inaugural lecture as 'an incomparable man.' In his eyes that was the highest praise that one could bestow, but the uproar that resulted from those words led to his suspension from the chair, and it was not restored to him until 1870. In 1868 he wrote, 'Whether one is pleased or not, the supernatural is disappearing from the world: only people not of this age have faith in it. Does this mean that religion must crash simultaneously? Indeed not. Religion is necessary. The day when it disappears the very heart of humanity will dry up. Religion is as eternal as poetry, as love. It will survive the demolition of all illusions … Under some form or other, faith will express the transcendent value of life.'

A few years earlier, Ludwig Feuerbach had similarly assigned to religion the place of highest importance in human culture, even though he judged it to be the product of human beings and not the result of a divine revelation. He believed that more than anything else religion distinguishes the human species from other animals. He judged it to be essential, for in religion we come to terms with our finiteness and find our true place in the natural scheme of things.

Neither Feuerbach nor Renan regarded supernatural beliefs to be an essential element of religion. Unfortunately, many who today champion the secular

world persist in that assumption and consequently have a negative attitude toward the very word 'religion'. This is the reason why Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, 'We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more'. Though as I pointed out in the first lecture it is possible to define religion in a way that does not involve the supernatural, I choose here to use the word 'spirituality' – a term with which many people feel more comfortable – to avoid unnecessary confusion.

But even the term 'spirituality' presents some problems. Because it belongs to the family of words derived from 'spirit', it has close associations with the supernatural world view that is being left behind. In the ancient Roman world *spiritus* meant 'breath', 'air', or 'wind' – and hence came to refer to any such vital human quality as courage and dignity. Because air, breath, and wind could not be seen, spirit was conceived as a form of invisible life-giving energy; and to the world of spirit belonged gods, angels, and other unseen beings. Thus the Bible declares that 'God is spirit'. Humans conceived of themselves as having bodies like the animals but possessing souls that belonged to the realm of spirit.

The scientists of the seventeenth century (unintentionally) undermined the reality of that supposed spirit world when they showed that the air we breathe is a gas that is just as physical as solids and liquids. In other words they secularized the traditional world of spirit. Only slowly has it dawned upon us that in talking about spirit we are talking about something far less substantial than a gas – whether that gas be air, breath, or wind. Indeed, spirit has now lost its 'substance' referent altogether, and has become a purely abstract term, a frozen metaphor from a now obsolete world view. For that reason even the terminology of spirit and spirituality has become somewhat problematical. The only way these words can have meaning in the secular world is to understand them as metaphorical, symbolic, or poetic.

Religion as poetry

But that brings us back to the words of Renan – 'Religion is as eternal as poetry'. Today even theologians are saying that God-talk has more in common with poetry than with science. Religious thought and feeling are often most adequately expressed and effectively communicated in the poetry of the hymns and liturgical readings. One of the fifteenth century Popes claimed that Luther had sung his people into heresy. Today's ready acceptance of the poetic nature of spiritual terminology is more common outside of traditionally religious circles than within them, and largely because traditional religion has been too committed to an outmoded interpretation of the spiritual.

Take for example the word soul. Though many no longer regard the human soul as a self-contained and immortal spiritual entity in the way our forbears did, we may say of a musician that he is technically skilful but shows no soul in his playing. Similarly, we may judge some dramatic production to be a very spirited performance. Whenever we feel drawn to make some reference to the human spirit we are referring to a dimension of human existence, yet one that is other than emotion, volition, and cognition, though dependent upon all three. This spiritual dimension of human existence is expressed most powerfully in the arts.

If we explore the human spirit a little further we find that it is closely associated with the highest values or qualities we associate with the state of being a person. This is why in Galatians 5:22 these qualities are referred to as gifts of the spirit and enumerated as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

These qualities, we should note, cannot be labelled intellectual. They cannot even be called moral virtues, though some of them certainly have moral implications. One has a moral obligation to be honest, for example, but does one have a moral obligation to be patient or gentle? These so-called spiritual

qualities are associated with what we regard as the highest manifestation of human behaviour, and the highest level of self-conscious human existence to which we can aspire. Some of these spiritual qualities point primarily to the quality of life experienced within the person (such as joy, or self-control), while others refer to the quality of our personal relationships with others (such as kindness, love, faithfulness, and gentleness).

Worldly spirituality

Thus far I have been explaining how traditionally religious terms such as spirit and spiritual continue to be used in a secular age. Insofar as they are in complete harmony with the secular world we can say they have been secularised.

The word 'spirituality' has a twofold use. On the one hand it can refer to the spiritual dimension of the human condition, while on the other it can characterize the particular practices in which that dimension is both manifested and nurtured. Of course these two usages share an essential relationship of the kind that should always exist between theory and practice. This can be clearly illustrated by looking at the spirituality of two great religious traditions.

The essence of Islam is human submission to the omnipotent deity, Allah, the only true God, who is believed to have revealed his will in the Qur'an. That is the theoretical substance of Muslim spirituality. In terms of practice, however, the substance of Muslim spirituality is a threefold obligation: five times a day devout Muslims prostrate themselves in both bodily and mental submission to Allah, facing Mecca the geographical place where the divine revelation took place. At least once in a lifetime the Muslim tries to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslims study and memorize the words of Qur'an, thus immersing their minds in what for them is the revealed will of Allah.

Buddhist spirituality is noticeably different. Its theoretical substance is the acknowledgment of the Buddha's analysis of the human condition; this affirms the universality of suffering, the wheel of continual rebirth, and the possibility gaining release from rebirth by becoming enlightened. But the practice of Buddhist spirituality calls for actively embracing the three jewels – the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha – and following of the eightfold path that leads to enlightenment. This latter takes the form of meditation, the clearing of the mind, the release of the will from desire, and the abandonment of possessions – which together lead to the release from suffering. In each of the great religious traditions the basic form of spirituality expresses and rehearses those things that give identity to that culture.

New wine and old skins

With the advent of the secular age it became clear that certain aspects of past spiritualities, particularly those of the monotheistic traditions, must be abandoned. For example, their authoritarianism, their exclusivism (that is, their insistence that theirs is the only way), their patriarchal character, their other-worldliness, their sexism, their slave mentality, and their denigration of individuality.

But what are we left with? What can one discover in secular culture that can lead to some appropriate form of spirituality? As we have seen, secular culture does provide us with values, one of which is personal freedom. But this value in itself means we are free to find or to create our own most satisfying form of spirituality. In the secular age, therefore, there cannot be only one uniform type of spirituality. Even though that may have been the ideal in the past, the secular society is sufficiently open to allow a multiplicity of spiritualities.

That in fact is the direction in which we have been moving for some time. First of all, each of the world religions has already produced not just one uniform spirituality, but a whole family of spiritualities. We have been long used to that in the Christian world because the Protestant Reformation opened the door for

an ever-increasing multiplication of denominations and sects. In the twentieth century that process virtually exploded. Scholars who specialize in the subject have reported that 1,100 new religions emerged in South Africa during that century, and Japan has produced 700 new religions since World War II! Some of these new religions clearly reveal their Christian or Buddhist roots, while others have lost all visible connection with the past. In short, the secular age has not only privatized religion and spirituality, but has generated a vast smorgasbord of spiritualities from which one can choose.

All roads lead to home…

But with all their diversity, do they have a common thread that indicates their rootedness in the secular age? A useful suggestion that may help us to know what to look for is provided by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber in his great spiritual classic *I and Thou*. There he maintained that to regain an adequate understanding of spirituality in the modern secular world we must turn to the subject of personal relationships. It is a mistake, in his view, for us to think of spirit as some intangible thing within us. 'Spirit is not in the I but between I and You', he said. 'Spirit is not like the blood that circulates in you but like the air in which you breathe'. Note that Buber was recovering something of the original meaning of the word 'spirit', yet he was using the word metaphorically to refer to that indefinable something that brings cohesion and quality to the life of a society, something that emerges from the way we relate to another at a personal level.

What is more, it was by directing our attention to the essential importance of human relationships that Buber found he could point to the reality of God. Since God is not a self-existing and objective being, then God can neither be seen nor described. Indeed, God cannot even be talked about, said Buber. God is pure subject and therefore can only be addressed. We address God whenever we address or enter into communion with a fellow human being. God is the spirit present wherever three or more are gathered in a real community. In

effect, Buber was secularising God-talk in much the same way as Renan had secularised Jesus.

This secularising process can be appreciated even more fully if we trace the spirituality of our Christian past back to its roots. When we observe the great variety of present-day Christian spiritualities – all the way from the elevated liturgy of Catholicism's High Mass to the hand clapping and speaking in tongues of Pentecostalism to the silent meditation of a Quaker meeting – we should be asking what it is they have in common. The answer can be easily overlooked because it is so obvious, so simple, and so secular.

… and home is where the heart is

In each case there is a coming together of people to celebrate that which is of greatest importance to them. Let me repeat that: a coming together to celebrate that which is of greatest importance to them. We in the West are so used to associating this simple coming together with religious practice that we often assume it applies to all religions. That is not so. It applies chiefly to those, such as Jews, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, whose traditions can be traced back to Judaism. Because it was not a universal practice, we even miss the significance of the simple words in Acts about the first Christians – 'All who had faith *came together* and they *had all things in common* and day by day they *went to the temple together* and they *had meals together* in their homes'. In coming together they were nurturing their personal relationships with one another and becoming a fellowship, a community.

This coming together did not originate with the Christians; they were simply continuing the Jewish form of spirituality that had been slowly evolving for some four to five hundred years. The Jews called it the Synagogue -- a Greek word that simply means 'a coming together'. After the fall of the Davidic kingdom and the destruction of the Temple the institution of the synagogue evolved slowly and naturally as Jews came together to give one another

mutual support in their distress. They did this by recalling their cultural past and encoding it in a set of scriptures so they would never lose their identity.

The synagogue was not a sacred institution like the Temple. Priests exercised no role within it. The synagogue was essentially a layman's institute, a very secular institution by comparison with the temples of the day, and it was democratically self-ruling. A non-Jewish scholar has referred to it as Judaism's greatest gift to humankind. The synagogue became the prototype of the Christian church, the Islamic mosque, and the Sikh gurdwara.

When the first Christians came together to remember and celebrate the impact Jesus had made on them, they were establishing a Christian synagogue. It is largely due to an odd linguistic fact that the early Christian congregations were not called synagogues. The first Christians, being Jews, took as their scriptures the Jewish Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament. But by that time Greek had become the common language of the Eastern Mediterranean world, and most Jews were reading from a Greek translation, and therefore our earliest Christian records are in Greek. The two Greek words used to translate the Hebrew for 'congregation' and 'assembly' were *synagoge* and *ekklesia*. Soon, however, Jews and Christians became mutually exclusive, and since Jews had already laid claim to the word 'synagogue', Christians adopted the word 'ecclesia', or church.

Even so, the Christian churches still resembled Jewish synagogues much more than the hierarchical institutions they later became. They were not ruled or ministered to by priests, but were fellowships of lay people. This was acknowledged much later by the Protestant reformers when they tried to replace the priesthood with an order of ministry, and later again by the Plymouth Brethren, who in the nineteenth century abandoned even an ordained ministry.

An ancient strategy …

And what was the primary spiritual practice that took place in the Christian churches? Then as down to the present day, in most of the ecclesiastical streams into which classical Christianity has now become divided, the central celebration of spirituality was what Christians variously call the Mass, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper. If we trace this back to its point of origin, we may be surprised to find what a secular or this-worldly origin it had.

The Christian Eucharist did not originate with Jesus and the Last Supper: behind it was the Jewish Kiddush – a simple sharing of bread and wine that concluded the meeting together at the synagogue. It had nothing of the exclusivity that later became an element of the Christian Eucharist, for it constituted a commemoration of the tradition that held them together; in fact, the bread was often taken to symbolize the manna with which their ancestors were sustained while wandering in the wilderness. But the kiddush also had the effect of cementing the bonds of personal relationship to one another as well as to their spiritual ancestors.

And how did the kiddush arise? It was taken into the synagogue from the family setting: the bonds that hold a family together are regularly strengthened by the sharing of meals. The kiddush was thus nurturing a value that had come to be highly prized among the ancient semitic people, one that has been preserved almost unchanged among the Bedouin to this day.

The ancient semites, living as they did in the often hostile and sometimes uninhabitable desert, came to prize hospitality above all things. Hospitality was the key to survival in an unfriendly world. So one was bound to provide hospitality not only to the stranger but even to one's enemies. On the one hand, nothing could be more secular and down to earth than inviting strangers to share one's meal. On the other hand it was regarded as a sacred duty.

… in a modern setting

In stripping away the supernatural trappings with which the later forms of Christian spirituality were clothed, and by tracing them back to their primitive roots, we find ourselves in the same secular world that we inhabit. They lived in a world that transcended them. Just as their spirituality grew out of the necessity to respond to that which transcended them by threatening their existence, so it is with us. Simply because we in the modern secular world have achieved a degree of personal freedom that could not have been dreamed of in earlier centuries, that does not mean the end of our experience of transcendence, of what came to be symbolized by the notion of God.

What transcends us today, however, is not some imagined supernatural reality but – as it was for our ancient ancestors – simply nature itself. Even such a simple and this-worldly phenomenon as the climate transcends us. We talk about it every day, and even try to predict it, but it eludes our attempts to master it. In fact, in our very ignorance we may have brought about changes that will make our climate increasingly more threatening.

The immensity of space transcends us: the very size of the universe is mind-boggling. The passing of time also transcends us: we cannot speed it up or slow it down. The future arrives irrespective of what we do, and we know not for sure what a day may bring forth. However much we learn through science about nature and the way it works, this universe of space and time completely transcends us, filling us with awe and wonder. And this shows how the experience of transcendence has been secularised.

The modern study of ecology is helping us to understand the awe-inspiring way in which all life on this planet forms a complex, interdependent whole. All living creatures are complex systems made up of such components as carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen – which are themselves lifeless. And not only does each living organism constitute a self-contained living system,

but together with its environment it forms a larger living system that could be called a 'life field', or eco-system.

The earth has provided certain basic conditions that must be met by all earthly creatures if they are to survive as a species. Like all other species, humans have evolved within those parameters. For humans to be healthy they must be able to breathe fresh air, drink clean water, eat an adequate amount of nourishing food, and live in an environment not too different from that in which they became human. The more the environment changes from that in which a species has evolved, the more the health and behaviour of that species will show maladjustment; and if such changes are too great or prolonged, then its health will deteriorate and it will die out. A full appreciation of the whole eco-system has led some to describe the earth itself in terms of an organism. The biosphere is the living skin of the earth in the same way as bark is the living skin of a tree.

Back to basics

So it is that this-worldly needs of pure air, clean water, healthy food, adequate shelter, the regeneration of the species, and the overcoming of threats to human survival have become the genuinely 'religious' issues to which we must 'devote' ourselves – together, of course, with the age-old issues of learning how to live together in justice and harmony. In spite of all of our modern sophistication, scientific knowledge, technological expertise, philosophical wisdom, and traditional forms of spirituality, it is in response to these issues that the new forms of spirituality will arise.

It was a Catholic priest, Thomas Berry, who said 'We must move beyond a spirituality focused simply on the divine and the human to a spirituality concerned with survival of the natural world in its full splendour, its fertility, and its integral well-being as the larger spiritual community to which we belong.'

The spirituality of the secular age will be oriented towards this amazing universe of which each of us is a tiny part, towards our mystical relationship with the earth and all its living forms, human and non-human. It will be celebrated in a wide variety of rituals -- indeed in any ritual that gathers people together into community and nurtures one or more of the following:

- An attitude of awe towards this self-evolving universe.
- An appreciation of the living eco-sphere of this planet.
- An appreciation of the capacity of the earth to regenerate itself.
- The value to be found in life, in all of its diversity.
- An appreciation of the total cultural legacy we have received from our human forbears.
- Responsibility for the care of one another.
- Responsibility for the kind of planet we pass on to our descendants.

Such a spirituality could be called secular mysticism. It is not entirely new, for it is reflected in many insights from the past: one need only recall the almost hackneyed words of John Donne, 'No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main'. And as far back as the ninth century that deep original thinker and great scholar, John Scotus Erigena (c.810–877), was already addressing God as 'the everlasting Essence of things beyond space and time and yet within them, the one who transcends and yet pervades all things'.

A new world, a new spirit

In the spirituality for today's secular world we must not be primarily concerned with saving our individual selves, with self-improvement, with introspection, and least of all with any form of navel-gazing. Rather we must be primarily concerned for the welfare of one another, for the future of the human species, and for the health of the planet.

The spirituality of the secular world will evolve, if it evolves at all, out of the many cultures that have preceded it. It will be natural and not supernatural. It will be humanistic; first because it will need to serve all humanity, and second because it will be humanly based. In particular it will evolve out of the Christian past simply because the civilisation of the Christian west indirectly caused the modern world to come into being.

But it will require the rise of a shared global consciousness – a consciousness of the human predicament, an appreciation of humanity's dependence on the earth, and a willingness to act jointly in response. Yet life is so precious and the evolutionary universe so mysterious that these should be more than enough to induce in us a sense of awe and joyful gratitude much like that which played a similar role in past religious experience. The religious rituals of the future will celebrate the wonder of the universe and the mystery of life. They will revolve around the natural processes that have brought life into being and continue to sustain it. All these things may be said to constitute the raw material of the spirituality of the secular age and the coming global culture.

In short, the spirituality of the secular age takes the form of the great coming together of all peoples on a global scale. The coming together will promote unity – unity and harmony among individuals, unity and harmony among the nations, unity and harmony with all forms of life, unity and harmony with the planet. Insofar as such spirituality needs some institutional structure it will be secular in character. For example, the United Nations, though already overdue for restructuring, is our current institution for nurturing unity among the nations. The various ecological movements form the institutions for nurturing the restoration of unity between the human species and the earth.

Just as the spirituality of the secular age cannot be restricted to any one particular set of rituals or institutions, so it cannot be fully expressed in any one language or formula. But if the God-talk of the monotheistic traditions were to

survive, then we could say that the God being worshipped in secular spirituality is the connectedness of all that is. God – that is, the ultimate reality – is the oneness of the universe.

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This is the fourth 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

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)