In Praise of the Secular

by Lloyd Geering

Part 2 of 4

The Emergence of the Secular Age

Early in the twentieth century the celebrated poet T.S. Eliot wrote these words in his 'Choruses from the Rock':

> *But it seems that something has happened that has never happened before:*
> *though we know not just when, or why, or how, or where.*
> *Men have left God not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before.*

This 'something' did not happen all of a sudden. It was a cultural transformation that had been on its way for a very long time, and only quite recently had its approach accelerated and its imminent arrival become evident. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* referred to this phenomenon as secularisation and described it as 'a movement in society directed away from other-worldliness to this-worldliness. In the medieval period there was a strong tendency for religious persons to despise human affairs and to meditate on God and the afterlife. As a reaction to this medieval tendency, secularisation, at the time of the Renaissance, exhibited itself in the development of humanism, when humans began to show more interest in human cultural development and the possibilities of fulfilment in this world. The movement towards secularisation has been in progress during the entire course of modern history'.

A really old-time religion

I suggest that with the gift of hindsight we can now trace the process of secularisation as far back as the First Axial Period, 800-200 BCE – the era to which all the great religious traditions of the modern world can trace their roots. Of course it appears not only paradoxical but even absurd to suggest that the great world religions had in them the seeds of the secularisation that would eventually bring about their dissolution. So how could this be?

In the cultural era that preceded the First Axial Period – at least 100,000 years in length – our ancient human ancestors were not aware of embracing any religion at all. What they lived by was a labyrinth of myths and rituals that each tribe or ethnic group had slowly accumulated. This body of knowledge taught them they were living in a world owned and controlled by unseen spirits and gods. These could be both beneficent and hostile, and were very unpredictable. Humans did not yet see themselves inhabiting a world they could call their own.

The myths and rituals by which pre-Axial peoples understood and responded to the world were believed to have descended unchanged from the mythical time of origins – the beginning-time. They embodied the unchangeable truth of the world, and this had to be observed and passed on unaltered. Pre-Axial cultures were thus typified by an intrinsic conservatism that both legitimated and preserved the *status quo*. Any innate urge of the human spirit for creative enquiry was severely repressed by a cultural system that was committed to the avoidance of all change.

That is why the Axial Period was such an unexpected phenomenon. Karen Armstrong entitled her recent book about it *The Great Transformation*, for this was a time when a few daring souls such as Zarathustra, the Buddha, Confucius, the Israelite prophets, and the Greek philosophers began to question the cultural knowledge they had inherited. So creative and productive were their

reflections that they were instrumental in (at least) a partial emancipation of humankind from the prison of static cultures. And in doing so they gave birth to traditions that possessed important new characteristics.

A brave new world

First, instead of focusing exclusively on the gods, as had been done hitherto, the new traditions began to honour human figures. I refer to such people as Moses, the Buddha, Confucius, Plato, Jesus, and Muhammad. These historical figures were now allotted prominent and exalted places, as is evident from the myths central to the new cultures. Whereas the myths of the pre-Axial cultures had been set in a supra-mundane world and the chief figures were the gods, those of the First Axial Period and thereafter were clearly grounded in *this* world and focused on historical human figures.

In Judaism Moses led the people of Israel to freedom and received the divine Law on Mt. Sinai. In Buddhism Gautama experienced enlightenment under the bo tree. In Christianity Jesus' crucifixion became the source of divine grace. In Islam Muhammad received the Qur'an from the angel Gabriel. The basic myths of the post-Axial traditions focused on events and people in human history rather than supernatural events in another world. And by setting in this world the myths by which people live meaningful lives, they were taking the first steps in the process of secularisation.

Second, the awareness of personal freedom and responsibility so characteristic of the modern secular world also arose at this time. Until then one had no religious choice, for one's basic beliefs were intrinsic elements of the culture one was born into. That changed in the Axial Period. To become a Buddhist, a Christian, or a Muslim, one had to make a deliberate choice; indeed, the act of making such a choice is part and parcel of ritual practice in those three traditions, as exemplified by baptism and confirmation in Christianity. Further, because these new traditions could be embraced, they could also be rejected. The need to make such a choice showed that a person's destiny was now, in

part at least, in one's own hands and not wholly in the hands of the gods or other external forces as was the case hitherto.

Third, the new role being played by human choice now meant that the rest of a culture was open to change and development at a faster pace than ever before. Whereas the pre-Axial cultures abhorred change, the post-Axial religious traditions not only initiated it, but anticipated even more in the future. Christianity looked for the coming of the Kingdom of God and Islam for the global brotherhood of all people. Thus the new religious cultures not only had a beginning in time but also exhibited lives and histories in a way that pre-Axial cultures did not.

After the initial cultural transformation from the old to the new had taken place, however, the ancient distrust of novelty began to reassert itself, and the new revelations themselves came to be regarded as final and absolute. The Torah contained 613 laws that Jews must obey for all time; the Christian Bible came to be seen as a repository of eternal truth; and the Qur'an contained the revealed Word of God that no Muslim must ever question.

You can't keep a good movement down

Even so, the new cultural ferment, the questioning and creativity that had emerged during the Axial Period, could not be repressed forever. The resulting restlessness reappeared chiefly within the Christian tradition. It is a fact beyond dispute that the modern secular world emerged out of Western Christendom, but that does not explain why the secular world was born in the West and not, say, in the Islamic or the Buddhist world. To be sure, human history does not operate according to the simple laws of cause and effect that govern the physical world, for insignificant events often appear to trigger off major historical movements.

But having acknowledged that general principle, I now wish to point to some traits unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition – or at least more prominent

there than elsewhere – that may help to explain why modern secularism emerged out of the Christian world. Indeed, I shall suggest that secularisation is the logical consequence of specific elements in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and that this is true even though the majority of contemporary Christians do not see it that way and commonly treat secularisation as an enemy to be feared and overcome.

Already in 1967, when I was writing *God in the New World*, I was contending that the seeds of the new secular culture are to be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition itself. I pointed out, for example, that what makes the Bible unique among the holy books of the great world religions is its concern with history. The Cambridge historian, Herbert Butterfield, had said of the Old Testament, 'we have here the greatest and most deliberate attempts ever made to wrestle with destiny and interpret history and discover meaning in the human drama'. In fact, the Old Testament's primary portrait of God is not as the Creator of the natural world, but rather as the Lord of history. In this way the Bible shifted attention away from the unseen realm of the gods to the historical this-worldly scene where we live out our lives.

The old order changeth

The theologian Harvey Cox argued in his widely read book, *The Secular City*, that secularisation is the legitimate consequence of the impact of the Old Testament on world history. The Hebrew doctrine of creation, he said, was the beginning of the disenchantment of the world of nature. The Hebrew insurrection in Egypt, leading to the Exodus under Moses, was the beginning of the desacralisation of politics. The prohibition of graven images was the beginning of what he called the 'deconsecration of values'. Similarly the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann claimed that 'Christianity itself was a decisive factor in the development of the secularisation of the world in that it de-divinized the world'.

The sociologist Peter Berger likewise asserted that 'the roots of secularisation are to be found in the earliest available sources for the religion of Israel'. It thus appears that while modern secularisation came to birth in the Christian West, its roots seem to be in the ancient Jewish heritage out of which Christianity itself sprang. By retaining the Hebrew Bible as the major part of its scriptural canon – even though much of that heritage lay dormant until the Reformation – Christianity never became divorced from its Jewish origins.

Then Christians, influenced by the Jewish concern with history, were led to divide history into BC and AD (before and after Christ) and to envision the end of history and the coming of a new world. Since history was seen as the unfolding of a meaningful story about this world, it is not at all surprising that the Christian West gave rise to the much more extensive story of cosmic and biological evolution, bringing with it our modern acceptance of change and development as being inherent aspects of life and reality.

And while yet in its infancy, Christianity gave rise to an article of faith that can be interpreted as a continuation of the secularising forces present within ancient Israel – the distinctive and central doctrine of the Incarnation. What the early Christians wished to affirm by the Incarnation was their conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was a meeting point between humankind and God. Although fully human, Jesus spoke with all the authority of God. Moreover, he embodied in human form all the divine qualities – the grace and truth of God. The important implication of this tenet for our present purposes lies in its assertion that the human condition can be conceived as capable of embodying the divine nature and manifesting the divine attributes. When looked at in this way the doctrine of the Incarnation may be regarded as a further step in secularisation; for it states not only that the transcendent God is to be found *within* the physical world rather than *outside* of it, but that the divine has become manifest in the human condition.

Making haste slowly

Such a thought eventually proved too daring even for most Christians, and as time went on Christianity developed an interpretation of the Incarnation that was almost the negation of its original intention. The reason for this lay in a theological conflict: it had become virtually impossible to root out the ancient view (the so-called 'Gnostic heresy') that conceived Jesus to be an eternal, divine, and supernatural figure who had once walked the earth *in the form* of a man, but had never really been *completely* human and had soon returned to his heavenly home.

While Christian thought remained under the influence of Plato, it could hardly do otherwise than move ever further in the direction of such a dualistic world view. Jesus came to be seen not as a human preacher and teacher, but as a divine being from another realm who paid a brief visit to our world. To the extent that this view has held sway in Christian thought and devotion, the original thrust of the language of Incarnation, including what we may here call its secularising implications, was obscured and lost sight of.

Thus it was not until after Plato's primacy had been challenged by the recovery of Aristotle's philosophy of nature that we find the secularising process re-emerging. For their knowledge of Aristotle Christian thinkers were indebted to the Muslim scholars in Spain, who at the same time brought to the Christian West some of the tools of science and the related system of Arabic numerals.

The introduction of Aristotle's natural philosophy led to intellectual ferment in the European universities just then being founded. It fell to Albertus, followed by Thomas Aquinas, to resolve the theological controversy. This they did by synthesizing the traditional Christian doctrines with Aristotle's philosophy of the natural world, and thereby they furthered the process of secularisation.

I suspect Aquinas may have been responsible for inventing the mediaeval Latin term *supernaturalis*, for he distinguished between natural truth and supernatural truth. Natural truth concerns the natural world, and is arrived at by observation and reasoned speculation. Supernatural truth, however, is beyond human discovery and depends on divine revelation.

Slouching toward modernity

This division of truth into two domains, as we shall see, played a role in the rise of empirical science. Since the Israelite prophets had denied all reality to the nature gods, Christians had shown little interest in the world of nature other than its usefulness in providing sustenance. They saw themselves living in a fallen world, destined for ultimate destruction.

It was St. Francis (1181–1226) who pioneered the reversal of that negative attitude towards nature – not only by treating the birds and animals as his brothers and sisters, but even speaking of Mother Earth. Not surprisingly, it was from within the order of friars he established that there arose the first proponent of experimental science. This was Roger Bacon (1214–92), who entered into experimental activity with such zeal and energy that he became known everywhere as a kind of wonder worker. He developed the outlines of scientific method, for he believed that by observing a succession of events in nature one could propose a general law to account for them. This he called a 'universal experimental principle'. Experimentation should then proceed to either verify or falsify that principle.

Yet Roger Bacon was an erratic genius who could also be incredibly naïve, and by later standards his work left much to be desired; nonetheless, it was through his writings that the term 'experimental science' became widespread in the West. He strove to create a universal wisdom embracing all the sciences and organized by theology. What is more, it was his deep Christian conviction that spurred him on. Bacon believed that a better understanding of the natural world would serve to confirm the truth of the Christian religion, and

this credo was widespread among scientists until well into the nineteenth century.

Thus when Aquinas drew a clear distinction between natural truth and supernatural truth, he unwittingly opened the door for the rise of empirical science. To be sure, this left revealed truth in the superior position; but a philosophy that would undermine the influence of Plato and eventually challenge the concept of supernatural truth was initiated in the following century by another Franciscan, William of Ockham (c.1300–1349). This vigorous and independent thinker was largely responsible for the spread of a new philosophy known as nominalism.

The prevailing philosophy of the day, based largely on Plato, asserted that only ideas or universal concepts, which are not subject to change and decay, are eternally real. For example, it would have maintained that the idea of a table existed even before the first table had ever been made, and it would continue to exist if all tables were to be destroyed. In direct opposition to this 'realist' position, the nominalists contended that the only things that really exist are the particular objects that exemplify the universals. These invisible universals, they said, are nothing more than concepts or names (*nomina*) that have been invented by the human mind after reflecting on the particular objects observed.

Ground-level reality

Although the great philosophical debate between realism and nominalism may strike us moderns as rather abstract and academic, the opposition between these two ways of understanding the world has had far-reaching consequences. As the nominalists caused attention to be focused more and more on the tangible world and whatever physical forces can be subjected to scientific testing and confirmation, they were nurturing the process of secularisation.

This empirical process of thinking led Ockham to assert that humankind can have no reliable knowledge of God other than by divine revelation. He thus drove a wedge between philosophy and theology and destroyed the Thomistic synthesis. For him theology and philosophy were two quite separate intellectual disciplines. Theology explores and expounds what has been divinely revealed and can be apprehended only by faith. Philosophy explores those aspects of reality that can be examined and understood by human reason and confirmed by empirical means. And philosophy, we must remember, then included physics, which until a hundred years ago was still being called Natural Philosophy in our universities.

Many fourteenth century thinkers began to sense that they were at a crossroads. Nominalism was already being referred to as the *via moderna* in contrast with the *via antiqua*. Thus the teaching of Ockham was recognised in his own day as a serious threat to Christian orthodoxy, and it is not surprising that Ockham was excommunicated from the church and expelled from the Franciscan Order.

In spite of Ockham's fate, nominalism began to capture the foremost minds in the universities of the fourteenth century. It was the forerunner of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, as well as of the innovative philosophy of the seventeenth-century empiricist John Locke. It not only strengthened the foundations of the modern scientific method, but its eventual triumph had the effect of destroying the validity of divine revelation. Copleston, a twentieth-century Catholic historian of philosophy, deplored the success of nominalism, but rightly said of it, 'the way was being prepared for a philosophy of nature which, while not necessarily anti-Christian, emphasised nature as an intelligible totality governed by its own immanent laws'.

The ascent of man

The leading figures of the Renaissance are known as the humanists, because they revalued the human condition upwards. Whereas classical Christianity

since the time of Augustine had so emphasized the sinful nature of humankind as to conclude that human beings could achieve little without the grace of God, the humanists looked positively on the human situation and gratefully acknowledged the natural ability, initiative, and creativity present in humanity. A vertical fixation on heaven above – the view that characterized the Middle Ages and was symbolized in the great Gothic spires – came to be replaced by the horizontal gaze that acknowledged the beauty of the earth and the worth of human endeavour.

The humanists began to take a keen interest in the physical world. One such was Nicholas of Cusa (c.1400–1464), who has been described as a model of 'the Renaissance Man'. Though a cardinal of the church and a theologian, he was also a mathematician, diagnostic physician, experimental scientist, and philosopher. Convinced by his studies of the unity of all reality, he concluded that to know more about God, one must study nature. Such a view encouraged him to urge the increase of knowledge through empirical enquiry. He affirmed that all things are in God and God is in all – a theological position now known as panentheism.

The Renaissance led directly to the Protestant Reformation. I began this series by referring to the great humanist scholar Erasmus and his call for reform, but unfortunately the bitter conflict that broke out between Catholic and Protestant Christians when the Reformation did begin meant that ensuing debate was fought out in such theological terms that the humanist movement was overshadowed. Yet it did continue, although strangely enough it was spread more by the works of Shakespeare than by preachers.

But several features of Protestantism resulted in further secularising. Abolishing the doctrine of Purgatory had the effect of placing more emphasis on everything we do in this world; it meant that death brings us face to face with the Final Judgment, there being no post-mortem opportunity for the purging of our sins. Indeed, Calvin's emphasis on human endeavour in the workplace

was so great that some see it as the seedbed of modern capitalism. But the most dramatic step toward secularisation was the forcible dissolution of the monasteries, a programme that thrust many thousands of monks and nuns out into the world to earn their living.

The emerging triumph of reason

Remembering that empirical science evolved out of philosophy, we may hail as the founding father of British science the philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626). He was the first to expound the enterprise of science as a systematic study by which the true scientist amasses data, conducts experiments, and learns the secrets of nature.

It was a body of men, inspired by Baconian principles, who, in London in 1660, formed the Royal Society – the full title of which is 'The Royal Society of London for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge'. The composition of this group served to illustrate the still close relationship then existing between science and the Christian tradition, for many of them were clergymen.

For the reasons I have outlined, then, historians, scientists, philosophers, sociologists, and theologians have over the last two hundred years discerned an inherent connection between the modern secular world and Western Christianity.

A few specific examples will serve to illustrate the point. Philosopher and scientist C. F. von Weizsäcker claimed in his Gifford Lectures that the rise of modern science cannot properly be understood or accounted for except against the background of the biblical doctrine of creation, a concept he regarded as 'a gift of Christianity to the modern mind'. He concluded that 'the modern world owes its uncanny success to a great extent to its Christian background', since it is 'the result of the secularisation of Christianity'.

After a lengthy discussion on the origin of modern science in his *Science and the Modern World*, the philosopher A. N. Whitehead announced his conviction that the modern world view has 'but one source for its origin. It must have come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher ... the faith in the possibility of science, generated antecedently to the development of modern scientific theory, is an unconscious derivation from medieval theology'.

Perhaps the most surprising statement of this sort comes from a group of Anglican scholars who met between 1883–90 to discuss theology at the rectory of J. R. Illingworth. They were convinced that 'the epoch in which they lived was one of profound transformation, abounding in new points of view and requiring theology to take a new development.' They became known as the *Lux Mundi* (Light of the World) group after the title of the book in which they published their essays. The book went through twelve editions in two years and was still being talked about when I was a student.

Today's Christians may be surprised that as long ago as 1889 these leading theologians were saying, 'The last few years have witnessed the gradual acceptance by Christian thinkers of the great scientific generalization of our time – the Theory of Evolution.' All of the essays focus on the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation; they set out to see how the affirmation of Jesus as the Light of the World can be reconciled with the new science in general and with the story of biological evolution in particular.

Of course much in the book is now very dated; moreover, it is not easy reading, for these men were well versed in the ancient Fathers, in Aquinas, and in the Reformation thinkers. But consider a couple of small gems from the text. After concluding from his reading of history that 'the religion of the incarnation has been the religion of humanity', Illingworth makes this amazing statement: 'It is true that secular civilisation has co-operated with Christianity

to produce the modern world. Secular civilisation, seen from the Christian viewpoint, is nothing less than the providential correlative and counterpart of the Incarnation'. What is more, he said, 'Secular thought has so often corrected and counteracted the evil of a Christianity grown professional and false and foul'.

Why, then, do the official spokespeople for Christianity so often regard the modern secular world as an enemy to be held at bay? Partly, it would seem, because they have not studied our cultural past sufficiently. Partly, no doubt, because as official dignitaries they have not seen the wood for the trees.

And the truth will make you free

An interesting analogy can be seen between the emergence of Christianity out of Judaism and the emergence of the modern secular world out of Christianity. It was not the Jewish priests and scribes who initiated Christianity; they were strongly opposed to it. Christianity came to birth on the margins of Jewish religious life. Jesus was a Galilean Jew, feared and despised by the politically correct Jerusalem hierarchy, yet he never rejected his Jewish roots. And Paul, though influenced by Greek culture and Stoicism in particular, was a Hellenized Jew who to the end remained proud of his Jewish inheritance.

In like manner it was not the Christian bishops who initiated the modern secular world, but thinkers who stood at the margins of Christian life and practice. Although in their own lifetime they often found themselves ostracised by Christian orthodoxy, they never saw themselves as in any sense anti-Christian. Among the many pioneers of the modern secular world, some of the most familiar are St. Francis, Roger Bacon, William of Ockham, Martin Luther, Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, Francis Bacon, John Locke, Isaac Newton, David Strauss, and Ludwig Feuerbach.

Further, just as Christianity was not simply the continuation of Judaism but a radical transformation of it, so the modern secular world constitutes the

transformation of Christendom into the post-Christian age. And here it should be stressed that post-Christian does not mean anti-Christian but rather indicates the continuation of the Christian age in a transformed way.

It is of course paradoxical that Christianity should have given birth to the post-Christian secular world. The sociologist Peter Berger drew attention to this when he said, 'Christianity has been its own gravedigger'. Yet this is no more paradoxical than the theme that lies at the heart of the Christian tradition and is symbolized in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: only out of death comes new life. Christianity came to birth proclaiming the end of the old age and the beginning of the new age. Two thousand years later we are witnessing the rapid decline and death of the triumphant Christendom that resulted from that 'new age' – and we observe the arrival of the new, secular, post-Christian age.

Looking back we can trace the Judeo-Christian tradition through several phases of cultural history. The Israelite prophets led it from polytheism to its monotheistic phase. The impact of Jesus of Nazareth produced its incarnational phase. The pioneering Christian thinkers of Second Axial Period have inaugurated its secular phase. Each transition period has had the effect of accelerating cultural change. In crossing over the threshold to the modern secular world we have experienced a further stage of emancipation, being further freed from bondage to external authority and becoming free and autonomous persons. We are now ready to examine in the next lecture the advantages, dangers, and responsibilities brought to us by the advent of the secular age.

¶

This is the second 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

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*, Free Press, 2007

Armstrong, Karen, *The Great Transformation*, Atlantic Books, 2006

Chadwick, Owen, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1975

Cox, Harvey, The Secular City, SCM Press, 1965

Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion*, Bantam Press, 2006

Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, Penguin Classics, 1971

Erasmus and Luther, *Discourse on Free Will*, Continuum, 2005

Geering, Lloyd, *God in the New World*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1968

Geering, Lloyd, *Faith's New Age*, Collins, 1980

Geering, Lloyd, *Christianity without God*, Bridget Williams Books, 2002

Geering, Lloyd, *Fundamentalism: the Challenge to the Secular World*, St. Andrew's Trust, 2003

Gore, Charles, (Ed.), *Lux Mundi*, John Murray, 1891

Skolomowski, Henryk, *A Sacred Place to Dwell*, Element, 1993

Skolomowski, Henryk, EcoYoga, Gaia Books Limited, 1994

Smith, Ronald Gregor, *Secular Christianity*, Collins, 1966

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Mentor Book, 1964

Von Weizsäcker, C.F., *The Relevance of Science*, Collins, 1964

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)