

From 'Supernatural' Religion to Natural Religion



Lloyd Geering

Before we can adequately discuss the transition of supernatural religion to natural religion we have to clarify what it means to be religious. Many people assume that supernatural components, such as miracles and gods, constitute the *sine qua non* of religion. There is an increasing number of people in a secularised society like New Zealand who not only say they are not religious but who also firmly believe that all religion is becoming as obsolete as the view that the earth is flat. As they see it, we are moving into a non-religious era.

On their view of religion they are probably right. By religion they are referring to such things as belief in a personal God, prayer as appeal to supposed supernatural forces, the reality of life after death and so on. These have certainly been integral to the traditional Christian religion though they do not apply to all forms of religion. Buddhism is an obvious example of a non-theistic religion. Originally it was also non-supernaturalistic.

So what counts as religion? Can there possibly be some form of religion consistent with today's non-supernatural understanding of reality? When does religion simply turn into superstition? The answers to such questions depend on how we define religion. Some of the discussion about religion turns out to be a question of semantics and we need to avoid a merely verbal debate.

It is only since the advent of the modern world, say about four hundred years ago, that the problem of what constitutes religion has emerged. W. Cantwell Smith, in his seminal book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, has shown that our use of the word 'religion' as an objective noun to refer to a set of beliefs and practices is quite modern. The word religion never used to be used in the plural, as when we today talk about 'the religions of the world'. Smith urged us to stop talking about 'religions' and to fasten attention rather on the capacity of people to be religious.

But what is it to be religious? Derived as it is from the Latin *religio*, 'religion' did not originally refer to an external, objective thing, but to the humanly subjective attitude of devotion. *Religio*, and hence 'religion', basically meant devoutness, commitment, or what I call 'a conscientious concern for what really matters'. It was not a concrete noun naming a thing but an abstract noun referring to a state of being — the state of being religious. To be religious, therefore, is to be devoted, whole-heartedly committed, and zealous. That is why we talk about religious zeal.

But zealous for what? Albert Einstein, who was not himself religious in any traditional sense at all, said: 'To be religious is to have found an answer to the question of what is the meaning of life.' The theologian Paul Tillich defined religion as 'the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life'. An Italian scholar, Carlo della Casa, defined religion as 'a total mode of the interpreting and living of life'.

Every known human culture of the past has been a coherent structure, unified and held together by its own shared understanding of the world and its own particular set of answers to the quest for meaning. Thus every human culture has had a religious dimension.

In the most primitive human cultures religion and culture were so closely interwoven as to be indistinguishable. Before the Axial Period religion was so much a part of culture as to be unnameable. That is why we are forced to say — ‘the religion of the Babylonians’, ‘the religion of the Romans’, and so on.

How did culture and religion evolve? We humans share our most pressing concerns with the other animals: the need for air, drink, food, shelter, survival and the regeneration of the species. It is from such basic needs and animal instincts that our primitive human ancestors began slowly to create human culture. First came the primitive drive to survive. Then, after humans had created language, there eventually evolved the search for meaning and purpose or what we may call the religious quest. This was initially expressed everywhere in the form of symbolic story or myth.

Let us take the pre-European Maori culture as an example. The world as the Maori conceived it was described by means of a cycle of myths. Papa (the earth mother) and Rangi (the sky father) emerged out of the womb of the primeval night in a very close embrace. These two between them procreated the gods, who subsequently forced them to separate and thus allow the light to enter the world between the sky and the earth. This primeval event of creation is still reflected, as the Maori see it, in the falling rain and the rising morning mists. They represent the weeping of, respectively, Rangi and Papa over their enforced separation from each other.

The Maori interpreted the phenomena of nature in terms of the gods. The reality and power of each was manifested in the area of nature under his control. The leader of the gods was Tane, the deity of the forests and birds. As we look back to the birth of the gods of nature in ancient times, from a cultural context that has long abandoned primitive polytheism, we too readily assume that belief in the Maori gods constituted the heart of Maori religion. We fail to appreciate that the ‘gods’, conceived by human imagination to explain natural phenomena, were just as much the substance of Maori ‘science’ as of Maori religion. By science I mean the common body of knowledge, assumed without question by the Maori people as being wholly true and beyond dispute.

Interestingly enough the Maori account of origins even told how the gods were created. This may be interpreted as an unintended and unconscious acknowledgement that the gods were the creation of the storyteller — not just one storyteller but a long, evolving tradition of story telling. Thus the Maori gods, and the myths which described their origin and function, constituted the substance of Maori cultural knowledge or “science”. Some Maori even refer to it as Maori science. To the Maori these were the self-evident truths about reality. Being religious within this cultural context had to do with the care and devotion which they responded to Maoritanga — a word which sums up all that it means to be a Maori. Showing due respect to one’s ancestors, acknowledging *mana* where one finds it, observing the *tapu*, sharing in the *tangi*, are all just as much manifestations of religious devotion as showing respect to Tane and the other gods of nature.

Thus permeating all the stories and rituals was the religious dimension that provided the Maori with a sense of what life was about in the world, as they understood it. In the pre-European Maori culture, as in all ancient cultures, there was no way to separate the primitive equivalents of what we call religion and science. They formed an indivisible whole.

I have taken the example of the pre-European Maori culture as an example not only because we are in touch with that in New Zealand but because the Maori people have been forced within the short space of two hundred years to come to terms with a process of cultural change which much of the rest of world has been experiencing over a very much longer period.

Throughout the land mass of Asia this process began with the Axial Period some two and half thousand years ago. That is when the polytheistic ethnic cultures of Asia were challenged and superseded by the cultures we now know by religious names — Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, Confucianist. Time allows me merely to mention them by name and to point out briefly that, at that transition, much that had previously been believed and practised came to be discarded and replaced by new ideas and new patterns of behaviour.

In New Zealand all this has been telescoped. First the Europeans brought Christian culture. The Maori were challenged to abandon their view of reality, abandon their ancestral gods of nature and become subservient to the God and Father of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all humankind. They were beginning to make the change with remarkable rapidity until they began to realise that the incoming Christians did not always practise what they preached. There were several reasons for this failure but one that is often overlooked is this.

Hard on the heels on the invasion by Europeans came a further wave of cultural change that was only then emerging in Europe. It is **this** Axial period that brought the modern secular world into being. So radical has been this change that the culture of sixteenth century Europe was still somewhat closer to Maori culture than either is to today's rapidly spreading secular culture.

Right up until the seventeenth century our European forbears believed themselves to be surrounded by a whole host of invisible spiritual powers on which human destiny was thought to depend. The names of these powers differed in Maori culture from those in European culture but the invisible spiritual worlds were comparable. Even when, in the ancient world, polytheism had been replaced by monotheism, first for Judaism and then for Christianity and Islam, much of the former view of the world was retained, exemplified in the phrase 'Our Father in heaven', a remnant of the former Sky-god.

There was also in addition a host of spiritual beings populating that invisible world in both earth and sky. Even St. Paul had spoken very clearly about them as 'principalities and powers, rulers of darkness, spiritual hosts of wickedness as there were also angels and archangels in the heavenly places'. In addition to these, which were taken very seriously by theologians and thinking people because they were named in the Bible, there were also, in the popular view of the world, elves and fairies, hobgoblins and demons. All this was in addition to the Devil and his demons in Hell and the angels and saints in heaven.

In the radical cultural change in the Western world which has occurred in the last three hundred years, we have been moving step by step from one kind of culture to another. The elves, fairies and hobgoblins were the first to go. From the late nineteenth century the reality of the Devil and his demons began to be questioned and later abandoned. During this century the objective reality of God has come to be questioned more widely. God is certainly no longer conceived to be living in the sky, for the ancient and medieval view of the universe has been completely replaced by the vast space-time continuum of modern physics.

For an increasing number of people in modern times the whole spiritual world on which our forebears focused their attention has largely dissolved into unreality. It has been replaced by a complex physical universe of unimaginable dimensions of space and time, stretching from sub-atomic particles to the distant nebulae. Where our forbears in the pre-modern age spoke of spiritual forces — in the form of God, spirits, angels and Satan, we talk about physical energy in the form of gravity and the nuclear forces. We talk of electrons and quarks, DNA and chromosomes, immune systems and amino acids, neurones and synapses. For us these are the basic components of reality with which to explain the nature of the world, the phenomenon of life within it, and even how we human organisms think through our brains.

This does not mean, as too many have concluded, that our forbears lived in an illusory world which they, in their ignorance, had created, whereas we live in the real world because we have now discovered the truth. It is not nearly as simple as that. Both sets of terms are the creation of the human mind. Even though we feel we have very good reason to prefer one set to the other, it is important to acknowledge that both sets of terms have been humanly constructed and neither can claim absoluteness or finality.

Each set of terms constitutes a conceptual language with which we interpret and structure the world of which we are a part. When we create a new way of talking about the world, it is as if we are creating a new world order. An astrophysicist called Bruce Gregory wrote a book about it entitled *Inventing Reality*. There he put it very simply in a little anecdote that serves as a parable.

Three umpires were discussing their role in the American game of baseball, where it was their task to judging the pitching of the ball. The first said, 'I calls 'em the way I see 'em'. The second said, 'I calls 'em the way they are'. The third said, 'Until I calls 'em there ain't yet nothin'.

So the game does not exist uncreated. The rules shape the game. The umpires interpret the rules and, in doing so, he determines the score. Even in a close match of Rugby football the score that determines the winner is often dependent more on judgments made by the referees than on the skill of either team.

Although we may be said to experience reality through the senses there is no way of knowing with our minds what reality is except through language. We create the language and it remains the grid or lens through which we see what we see and which consequently colours and characterises what we see. It has perhaps been quantum physics more than anything else that has helped us to realise this about our scientific construction of the world. In studying what goes on inside the atom, whether we find particles or waves depends on what we decide to look for. What we count as fact is finally determined by the language and methods we use, and not wholly by reality itself. As Einstein said, 'It is the theory which decides what we can observe'.

In the cultural change from the pre-modern world to the modern world that I have been briefly describing, we have been leaving behind one conceptual language with which to describe and interpret reality and replacing it with a new conceptual language. The new language is not a final language but it is preferable to the former one in that it has more explanatory power and is able to predict the future better. Sometimes scientists refer to their explanations as models. If a model has good explanatory power and enables the scientist to make successful predictions, then he puts his confidence in that model. When the model fails it is discarded and replaced by another. What has been happening in the radical cultural shift into the modern world is that the model that has been used, and used with some success, for more than two thousand years, we have been discarding as no longer workable. We have been replacing it with a new model.

It is quite misleading, however, to interpret this cultural change as the discarding of the religious model in favour of a non-religious one. In discarding the gods and spirits of the old model it is not so much religion we are discarding as the now outmoded 'science' of the past. The gods were all part of the primitive science of the ancient world. To continue in the new cultural context to use these old concepts to explain nature is to engage in superstition. (Superstition may be defined as treating as true, a belief or practice that has survived the dissolution of the 'thought-world' to which it belonged).

Much religious belief and practice that has survived into the modern world is to be judged superstition from the standpoint of the world most of us see ourselves now living in. As we are still in the process of moving from one culture to another, some still live happily in

the old world-view, provided they stay within its restricted horizons. For them the traditional beliefs and practices are not superstition but serve as genuine religion. In the same way, while we restrict our lives to a small geographical area there is no effective difference between those who have flown round the globe and 'flat-earthers'.

Let us now turn to the world that we have constructed with our new language and concepts, and then explore what it means to be religious in that world. During the last three hundred years it has been changing out of all recognition from that which our ancestors saw themselves living in. The world we actually live in is confined to planet earth, but we now know it to be only the tiniest speck in a vast universe. About the rest of the universe we know extremely little. Whether there is life anywhere else we have no idea and the human species on this planet may never find out.

What our ancient forbears did unconsciously, in slowly creating their world of meaning, we now have to do for ourselves, quite aware that we are doing it. This, basically, is what it means to be religious in today's world. First we have to choose the verbal symbols we deem most appropriate for us to use in order to create meaning. Our choice may depend on the culture that has shaped us. The Buddhist may prefer to stick with Sunya, the Hindu with Brahman, the Taoist with Tao. We in the West have to decide whether to retain the world God or find a replacement. It is not an easy choice.

If we choose to retain the God-symbol, we must then enunciate the content to be put into the word 'God'. That choice is over to us and is the next step in the creation of meaning. The content we put into the God-symbol is over to us and it will depend on the way we conceive reality and the values we find within it. Whatever the content we place in the word God it is by the lives we live that we demonstrate whether we are ready to worship that God. In other words, to be religious in the world of the future is to create meaning for ourselves by responding to all that ultimately concerns in the context in which we live.

What is that context? It is one of accelerating change - social change, cultural change, technological change. All of this I have set out more fully in *The World to Come*. We in the affluent western world are enjoying technological inventions and a material standard of living that not even our grandparents thought possible. The vast majority of the human race are not so fortunate; a not inconsiderable minority are near starvation. The gap between the rich and the poor has never been greater and this is giving rise to increasing tensions. The human race is at war with itself, the rise of terrorism being only a symptom of something much more serious.

In addition, we are also receiving some alarming signs from the earth. They are early warning signals of a living earth that is beginning to feel the pressure of the machinations of the human species it has brought forth. They are the equivalent, in today's global world, of the prophetic warnings from an angry God in the kind of world in which both Jeremiah and the early Christians lived in.

First, there is the human population explosion, which is now expanding exponentially and threatening to outstrip our capacity to ensure that all are provided with even the basics for existence.

Second, massive human demands made on the earth are leading to the rapid exhaustion of the earth's non-renewable resources.

Thirdly, accelerating pollution is threatening human access to air and water, the two most basic commodities on which human existence depends.

Fourthly, by destroying the rain forests and (unintentionally) increasing the deserts, we humans are interfering with the delicate ecological balance of interdependent forces on which planetary life has hitherto depended.

Fifthly, we are depleting the ozone layer that protects us from the harmful effects of the sun's radiation, and increasing the amount of carbon dioxide in the air, resulting in changing climatic conditions and global warming.

Sixthly, our growing interdependence on one another in the global village has a complexity that also makes the global economy exceedingly fragile. One bad move, or even a chance event, can turn order into chaos.

Seventhly, increasing competition among individuals, classes, cultures, corporates and nations, coupled with the quite unequal use of the earth's limited resources, is building up explosive tensions which may cause the human species to self-destruct.

All this is clearly set forth in Al Gore's film, 'An Inconvenient Truth'. If we humans do not take note of these inter-related issues and change our ways quickly to respond, we too shall go the way of the dinosaurs and all the other earthly species that have now become extinct. Never have the warnings of Jeremiah been so literally apt:

I have seen what the earth is coming to,
and lo, it is as formless and empty as when it began.
I looked and there is not a human to be found,
and all the birds of the sky have fled.
I looked and the garden-land has become a desert
and all its cities are in ruins.

Being religious in the 21st century is a matter of being ultimately concerned with all of these urgent issues, of becoming clearer as to who we are, where we are and where we choose to go. Until we allow awareness of these things to change our scale of values and redirect our economic planning, we remain morally and spiritually inferior to primitive humankind in spite of our urban sophistication and spiritual attainments.

Some steps towards re-sacralising the earth have already been made. We have even taken the concept of "sanctuary" out of the church building and given it back to the earth, as in bird sanctuaries, fish sanctuaries and so on. The ecosphere is itself becoming the God 'in whom we live and move and have our being', to use Paul's words. Indeed, the care of mother earth, and all that that involves, is to a large extent replacing the former sense of obedience to the heavenly father.

It will take all the collective will we humans can amass to halt our exploiting, polluting and destructive way of life and, of our own free choice, turn our collective energy into avenues, which respect the earth, preserve life and promote harmony in the ecosphere.

Arnold Toynbee, in *Mankind and Mother Earth*, the last book he wrote before his death, said:

"Within the last two centuries, Man has increased his material power to a degree at which he has become a menace to the biosphere's survival; but he has not increased his spiritual potentiality; the gap ... has consequently been widening ... an increase in Man's spiritual potentiality is now the only conceivable change in the constitution of the biosphere that can insure the biosphere and Man himself, against being destroyed."

Toynbee was convinced that the present threat to humankind's survival can be removed only by a revolutionary change of heart in individual human beings, and that only religion can generate the will-power needed for such a task, understanding religion to be the 'human being's necessary response to the challenge of mysteriousness of the phenomena that he encounters in virtue of his uniquely human faculty of consciousness.'

Similarly the American historian Lynn White, who tended to blame traditional Christianity for the ecological problems we have created, nevertheless believes that it is only religion, and not science, which will provide the answer to the ecological crisis. The crisis will continue, he says, "until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one ... Since the roots

of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not”.

For such a religion we need to draw in part on the cultures and languages of the past. In the evolution of culture there may be crises and radical changes but there are never complete breaks. Of course in the new global context the Christian tradition is not the only one involved in meeting the challenge. We in the West are not in a position to prescribe or even suggest how they should respond. Our responsibility is to see how we can respond out of the post-Christian West.

First, we must acknowledge that we have entered a post-Christian era and that this means that we must discard some concepts and beliefs of orthodox Christianity altogether. These are some of the things that must be jettisoned:

- The idolising of the Bible.
- The idolising of Jesus of Nazareth as the divine and only Saviour of the world.
- Reliance on a priestly hierarchy.
- The notion of the church as a monolithic and rigid ecclesiastical organisation.
- Divine revelation as a source of knowledge.
- The making of absolute and exclusive claims about the Christian Gospel.
- The notion of God as an objective, though invisible, personal being.
- Prayer understood as conversation with an external personal deity.
- Expectation of a post-mortem personal existence.

Secondly we must be prepared to create new terms and concepts, and new rituals and patterns of social behaviour. There is no way at the present in which we can say just what those may be. But we can observe that a great variety of such things are already beginning to emerge. Only in the last thirty years or so, have such terms as spirituality, culture, eco-theology, our earth-mother, come into more common use.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we must explore how certain concepts and themes from the past may be used in radically new ways. At the Axial period, the primitive gods were left behind but the word ‘god’ was retained and given a new meaning. Now is the time to take that process a stage further. After all we still use such words as fairies, angels, devils and gods but we now use these terms symbolically and poetically. If we speak of God in the 21st century it will not be as the name of an objective spiritual being but as a symbol of what now ultimately concerns us.

I am often surprised by the degree to which this was already beginning to occur in biblical times. From the New Testament itself we have long learned to say that ‘God is love’. Mahatma Gandhi taught us to say that ‘God is truth’. To this we can readily add that ‘God is life’. God is all that we value. All that is of lasting worth to us is, in fact, our God. That is why we can readily speak of the God within us just as much as the God we encounter in our neighbour, the God we encounter in all living creatures, the God we encounter in the mystery of the universe itself.

In other words the God-symbol, if we still choose to use it in the twenty-first century, will refer to the sum-total of those things which will concern us most and which call forth from us the same gamut of emotions of awe, wonder, gratitude and obligation as they did in the past when our forbears had a different view of reality and used a different conceptual language.

To worship God in the 21st century is to stand in awe of this self-evolving universe of which we are a part and which is so vast in space and time that our tiny minds cannot cope with it. As the feminist theologian Sallie McFague as well said, “The universe is the body of God”.

To worship God in the 21st century is to marvel at the living ecosphere of life on this planet of which we are the product and on which we depend for our existence and continuing sustenance. Life on this planet is itself the manifestation of God and we are all part of the living God.

To worship God in the 21st century is to be grateful to the successive generations of our human ancestors who have slowly created the various forms of human culture that have enabled us to become the kind of human beings we are.

To worship God in the 21st century is to value everything with which we are endowed as human beings, our capacity to think and to be engaged in the quest for what is true and meaningful, our capacity to feel, to love and be loved, to show compassion and selfless sacrifice.

To worship God in the 21st century is to accept in a responsible and self-sacrificing fashion the burden of responsibility now being laid upon us for the future of our species and for the protection of all planetary life.

To be religious in the 21st century is to be devoted to maximising the future for all those whose destiny is increasingly in our hands.

To be religious in the 21st century is to value even more than ever the importance of the human relationships that bind us together into social groups. Because we humans are social creatures we are dependent on one another for being what we are, for the way we think, for the understanding and practice of religion. There will be no one way of being religious and no one language for expressing it. There will not be one exclusively religious macro-organisation but rather a whole host of relatively small social groups, in which the members are bonded to one another on a purely personal basis. These groups must learn to be inclusive, being not only ready to accept any one wishing to join but also loosely linked with other groups.

There will be no one form of religious ritual but a great variety of rituals and devotional practices, mostly drawn from our diverse cultural past but adapted to the new situation. Indeed we shall find that, even after discarding much of our own past cultural tradition, there is also much of it that will suddenly light up with new meaning and relevance.

Understanding the God symbol in the way I have sketched, for example, I have no difficulty to affirming the answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, so beloved by past Presbyterians. 'What is the chief end of humankind?' 'The chief end of humankind is to glorify God and to enjoy God for ever'.

Such then is a sketch of the natural religion that may replace the supernatural religion of the past.

Lloyd Geering 2006