

# Do we Need Jesus?

Lloyd Geering

The theme of this conference is “Do we need Jesus?” That is not a question that I can recall ever having been asked during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though it very well might have been. Earlier than the 20<sup>th</sup> century the question was almost unthinkable and could well have been regarded as too blasphemous to utter. In Christendom, from about the fourth century onwards, it seemed to be self-evident within the expanding Christian community that all humans were in need of the salvation brought to us by Jesus. He was praised and worshipped as the Saviour of the human race.

And even today, in more traditional Christian circles, people sing lustily,

**I need thee, Oh I need thee.  
Every hour I need thee.  
Oh bless me now, my Saviour,  
I come to thee.**

What lies behind this passionate expression of need? It is simply the once widely held conviction that we are all born sinful and can do no good at all except by the grace of God. Further, because of our sinful rebellion against God we are doomed to the fires of eternal punishment unless we take advantage of the saving grace of God offered to us in Jesus Christ his Son. Jesus died on the cross to deliver us from the divine punishment that our sinfulness so thoroughly warrants. We need Jesus as our Saviour.

Alas! many of the hymns being sung on Praise Be on TV1 on Sunday morning still affirm this.

It all goes back to the doctrine of sin, the foundation stone of the Christian dogmatic system. My own theological teacher, John Dickie, regarded by conservatives in his day as a dangerous liberal, wrote in 1930 on the first page of his magnum opus (our text-book), **‘If there is no alienation between God and man, man has no need of a Saviour and historical Christianity is a mere illusion’.**

Even when I was a young theological student we were often warned that, on being approached by elders seeking a new minister, they would want to be assured that we were ‘sound on sin’. This also is why Billy Graham always spent the first two nights of his mission weeks convincing people what a lot of miserable sinners they were, so that he could then follow it up by saying, ‘I have the very message that you need – It’s Jesus Christ, the Saviour’.

Yet already when I was a theological student we liberals shied away from people who asked ‘Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour?’. What was it that happened that caused us to question that particular need of Jesus that was for so long dominant in Christian orthodoxy? The answer to that is long and complex. Let me sketch it simply.

It goes back to the Renaissance, whose leading thinkers became known as the humanists. Humanism is a word that is used today in a great variety of contexts and

has come to mean somewhat different things. I remember being puzzled by it as a student. So let me give a philosophical definition.

**Humanism is any philosophy which recognizes the value or dignity of the human condition, makes mankind itself the measure of all things and takes human nature, with its limits and interests, as its theme.**

This positive and creative potential in the human condition had long been denied by Christian orthodoxy, which emphasized *ad nauseam* the sinful condition of the human species. The Renaissance scholars, perhaps to their surprise, discovered this human potential in the Greek and Latin classics of pre-Christian times; thereafter the study of these classics simply became known in the universities as ‘The Humanities’.

The Renaissance humanists began to ask - How is it that the great thinkers and writers of pre-Christian Greece and Rome could be so creative? The humanists were not anti-religious and certainly not atheistic, yet they were beginning to undermine the most basic doctrine of Christian dogma – the doctrine of sin. Not surprisingly, therefore, the humanists were condemned by church authority. The great scholar Erasmus is a case in point.

Yet the long-term influence of the Renaissance humanists continued and can hardly be overestimated. They provided the conditions that were to lead to the birth of modern empirical science. They also indirectly initiated the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation in turn led to the Enlightenment.

Whereas the Protestant Reformers challenged the Church hierarchy by appeal to the Bible as the Word of God, the leading thinkers of the enlightenment challenged Christian orthodoxy by appeal to human reason. This was when humanism began to triumph.

As a result the Bible itself became subjected to human critical reasoning. **Reimarus** (1694-1768) produced the first critical study of the Gospels. When the first fragments of this were published after his death, they caused such a sensation that further publication was forbidden. In **1835 David Strauss published his famous ‘Life of Jesus’, said by the scholarly Bishop Stephen Neill, to be a turning point in the history of Christianity.**

From that time onwards it has become necessary to distinguish ever more sharply between the Jesus Christ expounded in Christian orthodoxy (now often referred to as the Christ of Faith) and the historical figure who lies hidden behind him (often called the Jesus of history). Although the Christian dogmatic system did not change all that much, the focal point began to change in some of the new hymns being written. Less and less was Jesus seen as the Saviour hanging on the cross and more and more as the great hero who was leading his army of Christian soldiers into a new kind of world in the here and now. The humanity of Jesus was coming to be emphasized more than his divinity.

The nineteenth century saw a vigorous search for a reliable account of the historical Jesus until **Albert Schweitzer in his epoch making book of 1906 showed how fruitless it was.**

Indeed Rudolph Bultmann, arguably the greatest New Testament scholar of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, concluded that we know practically nothing for certain about Jesus except that he was crucified. Yet he believed that does not really matter. What remained important for Bultmann was what he called the *kerygma*, the preached or proclaimed message about Jesus. Yet he conceded that even that had to be demythologised, by which he meant ‘reinterpreted into today’s cultural non-mythological or ‘non-supernatural’ context.

Then came the Jesus Seminar. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this community of scholars, using modern historical methods, meticulously examined all the ancient records –biblical and non-biblical – and produced two important works: *The Five Gospels: What did Jesus really say?* And *The Acts of Jesus: What did Jesus really do?*

The best they could offer to us by way of reliable information about the historical Jesus is what they called ‘the voice prints and the footprints’. These can by no means be set lightly aside and I shall be drawing upon them. Nevertheless the very scantiness of the reliable material has brought into ever-sharper focus the question - ‘Do we need Jesus?’. Do we need a Jesus about whom we know so little?

First of all we can say that, because of the way the humanists undermined the doctrine of sin and because of the way the New Testament scholars undermined the historicity of the **ascended and glorified Christ**, we are no longer in need of Jesus as the Saviour.

But do we need a Jesus whom time and distance has reduced to something as vague as his ‘voice prints and the footprints’? If the historical figure who lies behind the Christ is almost beyond recovery, we can hardly be said to be in need of him either. In this way Jesus seems to be going rapidly into oblivion.

This was brought sharply home to me about fifteen years ago when Alice, my six-year old granddaughter, came up to me shyly and said, ‘You don’t hear much about Jesus these days!’ Indeed you do not! Thus out of the mouths of babes and sucklings come the most perceptive comments.

On the other hand, there are some people who do a lot of talking about Jesus. The strange thing is that **many of us feel inclined to avoid** them.

So how are we to answer the question ‘Do we need Jesus?’.

I would like to pose the question in a somewhat different form. ‘Where would the modern secular world be without the original influence of Jesus?’ **‘Would the modern secular world be today affirming the values of love, peace, justice, compassion, personal freedom, human rights, self-sacrifice, even if Jesus had not lived and taught as he did?’**

Such a question may at first seem to smack of the most extreme form of Christian chauvinism. I can even hear modern atheists and sceptics bursting out into uncontrollable laughter. They will be quick to point out that it has only been by extricating itself from the stifling power of Christian orthodoxy that the modern world has been able to enunciate and affirm such values as personal freedom and human rights for they were for too long suppressed by the church. There is much truth in that.

The church condemned Galileo. It burned heretics and witches. It condemned free thought. It opposed the rise of democracy. Most churches still condemn homosexuality. But just as it has become necessary to distinguish between the Christ of dogma and the Jesus of history, so we must distinguish between the authoritative power of the church and the influence of Jesus.

The point of what I am going to argue is strikingly put in a bumper sticker, recently drawn to my attention.

**‘God is not dead. She has moved to a better neighbourhood’.**

Or to make it more specific for this context.

**‘The continuing influence of Jesus is to be found less and less in the churches and more and more in the secular world’.**

Let us me sketch three different ways of understanding how the modern secular world is related to Christianity.

**1. The secular world and Christianity are absolutely incompatible.**

This is undoubtedly the most commonly held view. But notice a curious phenomenon! The most vigorous protagonists of this view are themselves in polar opposition - fundamentalists and militant secularists. They are the most unlikely bedfellows. Fundamentalists regard the secular world as 'the work of the devil' and are engaged in fighting a crusade to combat the spread of secularism, and win back what was called 'the lost provinces of religion'. That is the title of a little book that was popular when I was a student.

Militant secularists, for their part, rejoice in the advent of the modern secular world and do all they can to condemn and reduce the power of official Christianity because of the evils they believe it has perpetrated. Such is the intention of such books as 'The God Delusion'. Both secularists and fundamentalists agree that there is no possible way in which Christianity can be reconciled with the modern secular world. It is an absolute EITHER/OR.

**2. There is admittedly some conflict between the secular world and traditional Christianity, but because there are important values to be acknowledged in each, a way must be found to resolve the conflict.**

It is too often forgotten that the pioneers of the modern secular world were themselves Christians. They never had any intention of undermining the Christian tradition itself. That is why, at the leading edge of Christian thought, every attempt was being made by Christian thinkers to accommodate the new knowledge and to regard the Christian tradition as one capable of change and adaptability, without losing its permanent essence. Even the Royal Society had many Anglican clergymen in its membership in its early days.

This second position about the relationship between Christianity and the modern old was the one held by leading Protestant theologians from about 1800 onwards. The situation was markedly different in Catholicism; what became known as Catholic Modernism flourished for a few years in the 1890's before being crushed by the Vatican in 1907.

In Protestantism, by contrast, what became known as Protestant liberalism was pioneered by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who may be called the first modern theologian. **His book, *On Religion, Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, was first published in 1799** and became one of the most famous religious books of all time. There is much in it that would surprise, and even shock, the average person in the pew to this day. Protestant liberals were not afraid of the modern secular world. They gratefully acknowledged the new knowledge that was leading to its emergence and were confident that the unchangeable essence of the Christian tradition could be fused with it, and by 1900 they had embraced the whole idea of evolution.

It was into this liberal theology that I was introduced in my theological training. John Dickie my teacher, following Schleiermacher, based Christian theology on Christian experience and not on revealed dogma. Although his book sounds very traditional today it was very different from the earlier tomes of dogmatic theology. What was then happening is perhaps expressed well in the title of a book that describes the change.

**Van De Pol, The End of Conventional Christianity, 1968**

Protestant liberalism perhaps reached its peak in the work of Paul Tillich. But while it was valiantly endeavouring to bridge the gap between the modern world and the Christian world, the gap seemed to be growing faster than the bridge. Protestant liberalism began to run out of steam some time after World War II and reactionary fundamentalism began to spread. Something more radical than reform was called for. It had to be either the end of Christianity as we know it or something very different.

**Jack Spong, Christianity Must Change or Die, 1998.**

3. **The secular world is the consequential product of the Christian world and is more Christian than we thought.** One of the first hints of what was to come entered the mind of **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** in a Nazi prison. He wrote - **‘People cannot be religious anymore’**. He recognized that in the context of the modern secular world people could no longer find the traditional forms of Christianity congenial. Christianity would need to assume a religionless form. Bonhoeffer had written - **‘What God is teaching us is that we must live as people who can get along very well without him’**. Bonhoeffer spoke of our times as **‘mankind’s coming of age’**. That means that what all of us experience in our own personal way when we pass through adolescence, such as cutting the dependency ties with our parents and learning to stand on our own feet is just what the whole of humankind is now going through on the grand scale. Out of these seed thoughts came ‘secular Christianity’.

**Gregor Smith, Secular Christianity, 1966**

At first secular Christianity appeared to be simply a more extreme form of protestant liberalism. Then it became more and more radical. In the 60’s, theologians spoke of it as the ‘the death of God’. The journal Time honoured God with an appropriate obituary.

I must confess that in those days I was still firmly in the camp of liberal Protestantism, doing my best to interpret the Christian tradition in ways relevant to the brave new world. It seemed self-evident to me that there was a very big difference between secular Christianity and secularism? For example, the secular world is atheistic and does not in any overt way acknowledge itself to be Christian. Moreover, there is much that went on in the secular world that I deplored.

Only slowly, and somewhat reluctantly, did I come to realise that the things I had come to value were by no means confined within the boundaries of official Christianity, the church. They were actively present in the modern secular world, sometimes even more active than in the church. The reason for this is that the secular world is not the pagan, anti-Christian world I had taken it to be. The secular world was a post-Christian world. That meant it had been shaped by its Christian past. The modern secular world did not arise out of India, China or the Islamic world. It emerged out of the Christian West. The modern secular world is the consequential product, and continuous evolution, of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Then I looked at what I had been observing happening in the modern secular world during twentieth century; I began to see the secular world in a somewhat different light.

**The acceptance of gender equality.**

**The rise of a more caring society.**

**The increasing condemnation of war.**

**The rejection of imperialism.**

**The condemnation of racism.**

**The affirmation of human rights.**

**The protection of personal freedoms.**

**The acceptance of sexual diversity.**

In some of these the church has been left fighting a rearguard action when it should have been in the vanguard, leading the way.

That is why I began to argue in 'In Praise of the Secular' that Christians should stop trying to combat the secular character of the modern world and learn to appreciate the positive values it honours for these owe much to the Christian heritage of the past. All agree that the Christian tradition owes much to the Jewish tradition; Paul went so far as to claim it was the fulfilment of the Jewish tradition. In a similar way the secular culture of the modern world originated within, and emerged out of, the Christian culture of the West. It owes much to its Christian matrix. Is it too much to suggest that modern secular culture is nothing less than the Christian tradition in its new secular form?

I have been very interested to find that Don Cupitt has taken up a very similar position to this in one of his latest books:

**The Meaning of the West – An Apologia for Secular Christianity, 2008.**

He writes: **'I stick with the view that the post-modern West is secularized Christianity. Since the Enlightenment a vast number of people have supposed that one can reject Christian dogma and leave the church – and thereafter have no further connection with Christianity. No so. We remain what Christianity has made us, and in many respects the post-modern West is more Christian than ever.'**

But can the values we subscribe to in the secular world really be attributed to the original and continuing influence of Jesus? Secularists will strongly deny it and it is not even at all obvious to those of us, liberal and post-Christian though we may be, who still have the strong memory of Jesus as the Christ figure, the Son of God, known for his miracles and his self-sacrificial death on the cross. Surely there must be little connection between him and today's secular values!

It is just at this point that much light is shed on our quandary by the very footprints and voiceprints of Jesus that the Jesus seminar have brought to light. They show that Jesus was not a divine figure. He was not an apocalyptic preacher like John the Baptist. He was not a prophet like Jeremiah of old. Rather, he was a Jewish sage. After all, even his Jewish fellows addressed him as rabbi or teacher. What made him famous was his moral teaching, told in parables and aphorisms about life. It was only during the decade after his death that he was, first, acclaimed as the Messiah and, later, eventually defied.

Jesus did not come to reveal eternal truths about God. He had very little to say about God. He chiefly talked about something he called 'the reign of God'. The heart of the original teaching of Jesus is to be found in his parables and in the collection of his aphorisms such as have in the Sermon on the Mount. There is nothing in all of

these that support any other conclusion than that he taught people how to live a worthwhile and meaningful life.

All this has led Don Cupitt to say in his most recent book, **Jesus and Philosophy**.

**“I have concluded that Jesus was an almost secular teacher, whose teaching was entirely concerned with attempting by all means to persuade his hearers to drop everything and commit themselves whole-heartedly to a quite new moral world, a human-life-world in which everything is open to view and is exactly what it presents itself as being, and a world ruled by love in which everyone lives from and by the heart. This radical-humanist utopia Jesus called ‘the reign of God’.”**

Don Cupitt suggests that ‘The realization of Jesus’ dream is simply a universal secular humanism.’

Some may find this a preposterous claim at first. Yet even before the Jesus Seminar reached its more radical conclusion that Jesus was a sage the liberal scholars began to ask such questions as this - How is it that even the Gospels declare that the main topic of the teaching of Jesus was the Kingdom of God, and yet the great creeds never make any mention of it? It led someone to observe, ‘Jesus came announcing the coming of the kingdom of God, but what we got was the church!’

So even during that period of liberal Protestantism the focal point of Christian endeavour began to move away from the long traditional one of preparing people for life in a world beyond this one. In other words the Christian preaching became more secular or this-worldly. Its goal was to help people living meaningfully in this world. This came to be thought of the realization of the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

It was expressed in popular new hymns.

**Rise up, O men of God!  
His kingdom tarries long;  
Bring in the day of brotherhood,  
And end the night of wrong.**

To help us realise what a creative teacher Jesus was - and that is why he made such a lasting impression - let me compare him with the sage nearest to him. It turns out to be Ecclesiastes, who preceded him by about three centuries. I drew attention to this fact in *Christianity without God*.

Over the last two years I have been giving much attention to the book of Ecclesiastes, one of the most remarkable books in the Bible. It really is quite surprising that this book ever got into the Bible. It questions or negates nearly everything we usually associate with religion, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim or whatever. When one makes some allowance for the fact that it was written in very different cultural times it turns out to be a very secular book, one very appropriate to the modern secular world.

Ecclesiastes repeatedly deplored the fact that life is empty of any lasting meaning. What is more! Life is very short, often unfair and it’s over.

**Humans have no advantage over the animals.  
For nothing they do has any lasting significance.  
All go to the same place;  
all come from dust, and to dust all return.**

There is nothing permanent or lasting about anything. Ecclesiastes sometimes wonders with Job if it were not better not to have been born at all, for then one would

be saved from the distress of experiencing injustice and knowing how meaningless life can be.

Insofar as he does refer to God we find he is really talking about the works of nature. These sometimes favour us and they sometimes harm us. It's just a matter of chance. Nature has no special interest in us humans. Indeed, he observes, most things happen by chance anyway for there is no clear purpose at work at in the world.

**The race is not guaranteed to the swift  
nor the battle to the strong;  
food does not necessarily come to the wise,  
nor wealth to the intelligent,  
nor favour to the learned;  
for all alike are subject to time and chance.**

And this means that life is often unfair.

**What occurs here on the earth is absurd.  
Some righteous people get what the wicked deserve,  
and some wicked people get what the righteous deserve!  
This too, I say, makes no sense at all.**

Ecclesiastes concludes that the best policy in life is simply to eat, drink and get on with life as best as one can.

**The best that anyone can do  
is to eat and drink and enjoy himself in his work.  
This too, I realised, is from the hand of Nature;  
For if it were not for it, who could eat or who could have any enjoyment?**

So Ecclesiastes sounds very much like those people in the modern secular world who say they have no religion and who try to get on with life as best they can. By today's terms Ecclesiastes was a very secular man. Although Ecclesiastes was a Jew by race he showed no interest in Temple, synagogue or Torah tradition; he was what we would call a humanistic and secular Jew. He had nothing we could clearly call his religion. There are Jews like that today particularly as a result of the holocaust.

Here is one of them, a rabbi to boot, Richard Rubenstein wrote in 1965 –

**Judaism is the way we Jews share our lives in an unfeeling and silent cosmos. ...Ultimately, as with all things, it will pass away for omnipotent Nothingness is Lord of All Creation.**

How like the words of Ecclesiastes,

**‘Nothing lasts!’, he said, ‘Everything dissolves into nothingness’.**

Ecclesiastes had nothing to look forward to. He found no lasting meaning in anything. That is why he sounds so pessimistic. It is very easy to become pessimistic in the modern secular world. And for far too many people life is like that. There is nothing to look forward to, nothing to hope for. Nothing has any lasting meaning.

In the traditional, pre-secular world it was different. Everybody had a religion of some kind and it was that which gave life some meaning or purpose. Indeed we may actually define religion in terms of the meaning or purpose that one lives for in life. I think it was the philosopher A.N.Whitehead who said ‘religion is what one does with one's solitariness’.

Now it is on this very issue that we see a great difference between Ecclesiastes and Jesus. They were both sages. They both accepted that there is much about the world of nature that cannot be changed. But whereas Ecclesiastes focused on its lack of any lasting purpose and on its fast-changing character, Jesus fastened on what it is possible to make of life. It can be said that Jesus made a new religion out of the simple but very difficult practice of serving one another, of helping to create a new kind of community, one he called the reign of God. .

We are all familiar with some famous words of Martin Luther King in which he said he had a dream for America in which all Americans, black and white, would live harmoniously together. If Martin Luther King had been like Ecclesiastes he would have despaired of ever seeing any different future for the Afro-American people. In his day that seemed very unlikely. But King was a man strongly influenced by Jesus. Martin Luther King had a dream because Jesus had a dream. Jesus initially told his dream - the coming of the reign of God - to his own Jewish people. It was because, for centuries, they had experienced lack of freedom and political independence. But the dream Jesus brought was one that was equally applicable to all people. That is why it inspired Martin Luther King.

By 'reign of God' Jesus did not mean the restoration of a political kingdom such as the Jewish zealots were ready to fight for. He meant a new kind of human community, a new way of living together, one based on mutual love for one another as humans, irrespective of race, class, gender, age. He went to so far as to say we should love our enemies.

**Don't react violently against the one who is evil: when someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well.**

As I have said, Jesus described the reign of God in the parables. The reign of God is like this and this and this – so we have the Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son. Yet Jesus often did it in an enigmatic way, prompting his hearers to work out for themselves just what he was getting at. 'It's like a mustard seed'. 'It's like a treasure hidden in the field'. I could go on and on, but you know them all.

To find meaning in life one must learn to live for others. That is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer no longer referred to Jesus as the Saviour, but as 'The man for others'.

The religion that Jesus founded was not about 'life after death'. It was about life before death. We humans are not immortal. Death is an essential accompaniment of life. It has only been by the phenomenon of death that life on this earth has evolved in all its diversity. We living creatures shall all die at some point in the future. Astronomers tell us that even the great sun itself will eventually die, but in the meantime sun exhausts itself by giving itself away in light and energy. That is why Don Cupitt has coined the term 'solar living' as the name for what Jesus commended. What gives meaning to life - a meaning that transcends death itself – it the giving of ourselves for the well-being of others.

It is not because it was Jesus who said this, that makes it important. It was because this is what Jesus said, that he came to be seen as a teacher to be honoured. Indeed they soon began to tell such stories about him that he became the embodiment of all that he taught. Before long his followers began to pour such honorifics on him that they lost sight of the radical nature of his teaching, simple though it was. Don Cupitt writes, "By deifying Jesus the Church destroyed almost everything he stood for".

Was it an early follower of the Jesus Way who already saw this beginning to occur who put into the mouth of Jesus, 'Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I say?'

Do we **need** Jesus? I still do not know how to answer that. But I am pretty confident the modern secular world would not be as good as it is if it were not for the original input from Jesus of Nazareth. In any case, should we not rather be asking – **Do we need to love our enemies?**

Lloyd Geering, September 2009