



The Greening of Christianity

by Lloyd Geering,

St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion & Society, Wellington 2005

By Don Feist, Dunedin

I've just recently bought and read this booklet, the latest set of Lloyd Geering's lectures for the St Andrew's Trust (see page 10 - ed). I strongly recommend it.

In chapter 1 — **The Global Crisis** — Lloyd spells out just why not only the human race, but the planet, needs urgent and responsible action by humans. As the human population mushrooms, food, water and air supplies are threatened. But one vocal strand of Christianity actually welcomes this crisis, claiming that it will hasten 'the Rapture' when true believers will be lifted up from the earth and transported to heaven. 'If Christianity is to respond to the challenge issued by the ecological scientists, it must put its own house in order'. 'We must move beyond a spirituality focussed simply on the divine and the human to a spirituality concerned with the survival of the natural world in its full splendour, its fertility and its integral well-being'.

The next chapter — **Beyond "Our Father who art in Heaven"** — covers from the beginnings of monotheism to modern rethinking of the idea of 'God'. Monotheism replaced a sense of unity with the natural world with a dualism of earthly/heavenly, material/spiritual, and led to a concept of stewardship which allowed humans to hold on to an arrogant attitude toward other beings on this planet. In the Christian era, 'the twin doctrines of the Incarnation and the Holy Trinity proved too revolutionary even for most Christians to cope with. ... the human Jesus became lost from view behind the wholly divine Christ and the gulf between heaven and earth reappeared.' Some modern Christian thinkers are pointing a way beyond this. 'But are we really up to that?' This chapter is a crystal-clear summary of how Lloyd believes that Christianity has arrived at the crisis it is now in.

Chapter 3 is titled: **The Ecological Imperative, A New Ethical Dimension**. Lloyd starts from a respected 1937 text-book on Christian Ethics *The Divine Imperative*, which I, like him, had to study as a theological student. But with the disintegration of the old monotheism, such an authoritarian, rooted-in-the-past basis for ethics is no longer either adequate or convincing. For people aware that the human race is in process of coming of age, the fundamental question is no longer 'What has God commanded?' but rather 'What is good for the planet and all its inhabitants?' This is the 'ecological imperative' of the chapter title.

Finally, Lloyd turns to **Greening Rites and Festivals**. 'Perhaps' he says, 'there is no better way to reconnect Christianity with the natural world than to examine the major Christian festivals and trace them back to their origins in nature'. Worship that helps us reconnect with nature won't have to throw out everything traditional. There are surprisingly many such links still present — even though most of them have been overlaid with a stress on personal salvation which ignores the natural world, or on the heavenly half of a natural/supernatural dualism. There is more attention paid in most hymns, for example, to a future life in heaven, than to how to live well, now.

But don't take my outline as a substitute — it is worth reading in full.

By Alan Goss, Napier

These lectures, delivered at St Andrews on the Terrace in May 2005, explore the impact our new understanding of ecology will have on the Christian tradition. To what extent, if any, will that tradition need to change?

Lloyd Geering deals first with the current global crisis. Since 1962, when Rachel Carson's seminal book *Silent Spring* was published, many writers have issued warnings about the threat we humans pose to the environment. These warnings are often dismissed or ignored by an apathetic public or by people whose wealth and business interests depend upon the technology doing the damage. Nor is the position helped by those fundamentalist Christians, notably in the United States, who have a death-wish for the end of the world, followed by the 'rapture'. The earth becomes a means to an end, to be exploited and not valued for its own sake.

Lloyd contends that if Christianity is to respond to the ecological challenges confronting us, it must put its own house in order. It must move towards a spirituality which embraces the whole of the natural world, not simply the divine and human. Monotheism, with its dualistic tendencies, e.g. spirit-matter, must give way to re-imagining God in more down-to-earth ways. This process — we call it secularisation — is the long term result of the doctrine of the incarnation, i.e. the earthing of God. We humans are not passive beings dependant on a higher power "from above", the responsibility for shaping our future and that of the ecosphere has been placed fairly and squarely in our hands. Our actions must reflect the highest values we once attributed to God.

In short, Christians must shift focus from an external divine imperative (God "out there") to an internalised earth-centred imperative (God "down here"). This will mean incorporating all that we have learned about human existence from the various human sciences. Our mission is to hand the earth over to our descendants in the best possible shape — or in traditional terms, to love God and love your neighbour.

The last chapter outlines ways in which congregations can re-create the great Christian festivals and rituals, reconnecting them with the natural world and making them more relevant to life.

Within the brief compass of 54 pages Lloyd Geering has given to the Church and to the nation a charter for the future. Martin Luther offered 95 theses. The connection should not be lightly dismissed.

