



A Religious Atheist?

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Critical Essays on the Work of Lloyd Geering

Edited by Raymond Pelly and Peter Stuart, Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2006

Reviewed by Bill Cooke of Auckland

Lloyd Geering is by far New Zealand's best-known theologian. Indeed, most people would be hard pushed to name another one, let alone demonstrate any familiarity with their work. Now that this book has appeared, it seems odd it took so long for Geering's colleagues to have their say. Most of the contributors to this collection of essays are theologians, with a smattering of religious studies scholars and a philosopher.

A Religious Atheist? claims to be an exercise in dialogue, although there are several good reasons to question that. In their introduction Raymond Pelly and Peter Stuart are anxious to say they are not questioning Geering's honesty, courage or motives. And neither, they say, are they criticising him from any one particular standpoint. They insist that there is no 'party line'. But having said this they assert the following:

The world view which Geering brought to this controversy was shaped by reductionist use of scientific rationalism and by the analytic stream within twentieth century philosophy, and it became part of the framework for his continuing explanation of religion. (p 9)

Take care to note the buzzwords here which are strongly reminiscent of a party line: 'reductionist use of scientific rationalism' and 'analytic stream within twentieth century philosophy'. There are few more telling warnings of a party line than the recitation of jargon terms and phrases. These phrases are reminiscent of continental philosophy (particularly Heidegger, Derrida and others) so influential among postmodernist-inclined theologians. At no time is any acknowledgement made that these thinkers are themselves under serious and consistent attack and that postmodernism is clearly on the wane.

No less problematic is Pelly and Stuart's reliance on a key article of the very scientific rationalism they affect to despise. After assuring readers they are not questioning Geering's honesty, they say: 'We ask not 'was it courageous of Geering to say x, y or z', but 'is it true?'' (p 9) 'Is it true?' Can one ask a question more central to the 'project' (another postmodernist buzzword) of 'scientific rationalism' than this? Asking whether something is true or not surely involves some assumption that there is a reality out there which we can take some reliable measure of. Yet this is the very point that most of the critics of scientific rationalism have sought to deny, or at least 'question'. Derrida must be rolling in his grave.

Now I am not implying base motives to Pelly and Stuart, any more than they are with respect to Geering. But what is one to make of this? One item in their list of key points raised by all the essays reads: 'Is it appropriate for the secular media in New Zealand to consult him as the necessary and sufficient oracle on all matters religious?' (p 17) It would be sad if we were getting to the heart of the matter here. The least that can be said of this is that it was unwise to include that as a major bone of contention, if only for the very unfavourable impression it creates.

Part One is called 'Perspective'. And the singular is deliberate, because the only contribution in this section comes from Raymond Pelly, having already co-written the introduction. Once again, one can't help thinking that when only one perspective is offered we have, in effect, a party line. Pelly makes little attempt to hide his animus against Geering, who is accused of three main failings: an absence of any genuine dialogue in his work; a failure of imagination linked to an inability to use symbol, myth and metaphor; and a corresponding inability to understand that 'scientific rationalism' cannot produce a person-centred ethics or an enduring sense of the sacred. (p 27)

Pelly's own world view is sufficiently different from Geering's that there is little evidence of 'dialogue' in his essay. He criticises Geering for having too much of a God's eye view while permitting himself exactly the same vantage point. Pelly assumes the superiority of his postmodernist viewpoint (much as he criticises Geering of doing with his secular viewpoint) and nowhere acknowledges that his own assumptions have themselves been subjected to a considerable amount of criticism, or that the trend is moving away from it toward a variety of positions, the most coherent of which is critical realism, which has a great deal more in common with Geering's view than with his own. Neither does Pelly discuss the clear dissonance between the relativism inherent in his postmodernism and the position of 'truth' he and Stuart are seeking to measure Geering against. Pelly is also disproportionately critical of Geering for not resorting to metaphor more often in his writing. This hardly seems a significant criticism, and its power is undermined by Pelly making no use of metaphor in his own work.

As part of his criticism of not engaging in genuine dialogue, Pelly accuses Geering of putting Isaiah, Jesus and Paul 'through the blender', not allowing them to speak along the way. 'The result is a lot of rather trite generalisations designed to make the modern reader feel superior to the biblical narrative (and its *dramatis personae*) and unchallenged by it (or them).' (p 28) But in the very next paragraph, Pelly quotes a theologian on Paul (not Paul himself) and concludes: 'This is the authentic Paul, the one worth entering into dialogue with.' (p 29) It is hard to see how Pelly is setting a superior example of dialogue here. Or of allowing people to speak for themselves. The issue seems to be not so much that Geering does not engage in genuine dialogue, but that Pelly disagrees with him.

Part Two is entitled 'Fundamentals' and at least we get a variety of viewpoints here. The first contribution comes from Kai Man Kwan, of Hong Kong Baptist University. Kwan quickly leaves Geering behind and delivers a lengthy critique of what he called 'projectionism', as if this refuted Geering's views. In a wide-ranging criticism of atheism – his real target – Kwan

relied on some of the more fundamentalist American publishing houses and authors and cited only the slimmest smattering of atheist thinkers, and those very selectively. Kwan's essay is the weakest in the collection and seems to me vivid confirmation of many of the problems with dogmatic theology that Geering has been warning us against.

The next three articles are hardly less critical of various stances Geering has taken over the years, but are conducted with greater objectivity and less rancour, and are more effective critiques for that reason. Christopher Lewis is critical of Geering's use of the secularisation thesis and brings to bear impressive evidence in favour of his argument. And Christopher Marshall makes some worthwhile (though to me unconvincing) criticisms of Geering's thoughts on resurrection. And I can't resist observing that, before writing off Geering's notion of resurrection as 'trite' he should perhaps look to the sugary, theological-speak solution of Jürgen Moltman that he prefers. Moltman talks of 'faith in the resurrection is the faith in God of lovers and the dying, the suffering and the mourners.' Pots should always take care what they accuse kettles of.

Part Three is called 'Specifics' and is much the longest section, featuring six substantial contributions from respected scholars. In most cases, we get a more sympathetic critique

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from these older scholars, critiques free of the party line. The first of them by John Bishop, questions Geering's non-realist theology and suggests a role for God that is real but without all the bells and whistles of the traditional God – OmniGod, as Bishop calls him. One is left not greatly encouraged that his realist-though-not-OmniGod is a surer bet than Geering's non-realist conception. Gregory Dawes makes some important points about the value of God-talk when stripped of any conventional meaning. His was the most sympathetic and broadly-conceived of all the essays in this book. It would have set a better tone for the book had this essay been included as a 'perspective' to complement Raymond Pelly's more party-line approach. Neil Darragh considers Geering's work in the context of myth-making and accuses him of anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism and a range of other arrogances, even throwing in Rogernomics for good measure, despite acknowledging that Geering has specifically and at length written against all these things. Peter Donovan discusses Geering's understanding of mysticism and Paul Morris is critical of what he sees as some unhelpful attitudes with respect to Judaism and Israel.

Does Geering's work survive this onslaught? The weakness most frequently cited, and given the most thorough grilling, is Geering's view of progress and his equation of 'secular' with 'modern'. While a lot of these criticisms are worth exploring, they are compromised by their own no less contentious postmodernist assumptions. To take one example, several contributors employ the very party-line criticism of postmodernists; that Geering is engaged in zero-sum game (my win is your loss). But none show awareness of committing the same crime – if such it is – when they play the classic zero-sum game of

postmodernist=good/modernist=bad. Geering's supposedly modernist grand narrative is condemned in the name of the postmodernist grand narrative which sees modernism as something 'so twentieth century'. Paul Morris criticises Geering's secular Supersessionism (the term used to describe the Christian claim to have superseded Judaism and the 'Old Testament') but several essays here seem to assume a postmodernist Supersessionism that is no less flawed. What remains unscathed, in my view, is the nobility of Geering's overall vision for the future. It's easy to pick holes in this or that aspect. But Geering is at least prepared to offer a unifying vision of how things could be made better. That is why he is read as no other theologians are read, and why the media consults him.

And finally, another point about dialogue needs to be made. Much is made of the value of dialogue, and Geering is criticised on several occasions for his supposed want of it, but it has to be said that this book makes little progress in this regard. The title of the book is *A Religious Atheist?* and yet no clearly atheist, secularist or humanist opinion has been included. In some essays the 'secular worldview' is condemned and atheism is described as something one lapses into or is otherwise at the end of the spectrum. The book's title trades on that usage. Generalisations are made, some of them little more than caricatures, about what atheists and humanists are supposed to think. But no essay makes any serious reading of secular or atheist literature. As a result of this oversight, no attention is given to issues such as Geering's use of 'faith' to include people who reject the term, his understanding of humanism, and the similarities and dissimilarities with the wide range of humanist thinkers who have written in a similar way; people like Paul Kurtz, Richard Norman, Tzvetan Todorov and Jeaneane Fowler. This is not a failing unique to this book. It is symptomatic of an enclosed world of some theologians, who want to extol dialogue, expound on the fate of the 'Other' while also condemning secular humanism and atheism unread.

Another, even simpler, way to give true voice to dialogue would have been to include a reply by Geering to his critics. It is possible such an invitation was extended although I doubt it. It would have got too much in the way of the party line. How much stronger would this book have been if it had walked the talk on dialogue.

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