

## Lloyd Geering Disturber of Our Peace



Art Dewey

*He waka eke noa—  
We all are in the canoe—no exceptions.*  
Maori proverb

To think, to write, to speak honestly has never been easy. Moreover, when you begin to ask fundamental questions that is when hell usually breaks loose. Most of us prefer our lives as neat as our scotch. Some may call us “risk-averse” but we know better, counting on our stock portfolios to build and bulge without any fussing on our part. Interruptions to our game plan are merely blips on the screen. When you let your logarithms work things out there is no need to fumble about with unnecessary questions. Sit back and enjoy the ride.

But there are some who can’t sit quietly, enjoying the scintillating images of our life. They dare to turn their backs on our conventional certainties. Indeed, they would wrestle with the very assumptions upon which we define our lives. They call into question what many of us have taken for granted for generations. Why upset the universe? What profit is there in it?

Lloyd Geering is one of those disturbers of the peace. Indeed, even as he approaches five score in years, he continues to take the wheel. He declares quite innocently that he never intended to cause trouble. But from his earliest academic days he set his eyes on what is true. He moved from mathematics to theology, taking a sharp intellect into the murky woods of the Bible, doctrine, and tradition. He recognized that the world he lived in was not the world in which many people worshipped. He rejected the schizophrenia of so many believers, who devote their faith lives to a pre-Copernican universe, while living in a nuclear age. He refused to compartmentalize his faith for the sake of keeping things on an even keel. He could not overlook the findings of science that had shattered the three-tiered universe. In short, he wanted to think honestly.

But honesty often carries a cost. What was for Geering a sustained engagement with the trenchant thinkers of the twentieth century proved prophetic for many. Yet it raised the hackles of others who saw in his work the seeds of heresy and ecclesial destruction. One person’s prophet is an-

other’s heretic. Fortunately, the ecclesial boards demonstrated a balance not always found in such situations. Geering was sustained not only in his efforts but also in providing a critical focus for asking fundamental questions.

Geering has long recognized that, if the Christian tradition is to move into the future, it must be translated. That means that what many assume to have been settled is now quite up in the air. His entire career has reminded the churches that reformation is not a done deal but rather a never-ending challenge, that the very basics of the Christian tradition are at best problematic. They can no longer be taken for granted to insure sonorous sermons.

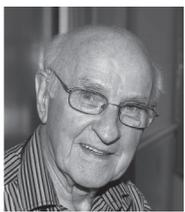
From early on Geering realized that time and space not only have been reimagined, but also form a new context for reading our ancient traditions. We cannot think in dualistic terms any longer, for we are embedded in this evolutionary experiment. As the Maoris advise, “We all are in the canoe—no exceptions!” But if that is so, what does resurrection mean in such a universe? What happens to our sense of reality when we admit that we are all truly mortal without any mythical escape hatches? Where does hope go, when the medieval paradise comes tumbling down?

Geering does not provide his readers with an easy way out. Instead, he urges us to be human to the end. But is that not the hardest task? It means that we must begin to recognize the telling limits of our life. It entails realizing that our religious traditions are human constructions and are not assured prospects of the future. We are in the midst of something without any idea how it will end. Perhaps this is the most daunting knowledge: that we shall die not knowing how things will eventually go.

Is this not what it means to be human? Yet Geering does not leave us abandoned. Rather, he makes the case that we look about and see what is in our midst. Hope grows not out of some prefabricated future but from the depths of our genuine relationships with one another and with the earth. What we have in the past longed for was a selfish extension of our egos, writ large upon the heavens. What we

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into human reality. Before it is too late to retrieve the human situation from possibly absolute ruin, let us look again at the Christian heritage.

There is a little story in St John’s Gospel which, in its present form, is more of a parable than an historical event. It is a parable which speaks quite vividly to our situation. We are told that many of the disciples of Jesus were beginning to have difficulty accepting the truth of what he was saying. Indeed the New English Bible translates their words as “This is more than we can stomach!” (John 6:60)). So thereupon they defected and followed him no more. But the twelve remained loyal and when Jesus asked them if they intended to desert him also, Simon Peter declared, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

It is possible in our cultural situation today to make the same affirmation as Peter and at the same time to confess quite openly that many of the formal expressions of Christian orthodoxy of former days are no longer relevant to our time. Indeed, Christian theology is in a more fluid state today than it has been at any time since the period of Christian origins.

This is not all loss. In fact it can be a distinct gain. We are being forced to learn again that Christianity should never be identified with ecclesiastical systems or with a body of knowledge supposedly divinely revealed. We hu-

mans are always trying to find security in systems and doctrines, for they have the effect of delivering us from the necessity of facing our true human predicament, which is that we do not know for certain who we are or where we are going. There is no infallible body of knowledge which gives us all the answers. God forever remains hidden from sight and we cannot find out what he has done from the beginning to the end. We are forced again to make the venture of faith, not knowing for certain where it will lead us.

We are led to this point because of the Word which comes to us out of the Christian heritage itself. If there had been no Christian faith, there would have been no European Christendom. If there had been no Christian West, there would have been no emerging secular culture, and we would not be the people we are, asking the questions we do.

Much of the historical manifestation of Christianity is ephemeral and destined to pass away. That is why we must be prepared to see ecclesiastical systems and theological dogmas rise and fall. But at the heart of the Christian heritage there is a Word which speaks to us still—a Word which calls us to make the same venture of faith in our human predicament as our Christian forbears did in theirs—a Word which has the power to turn human pessimism into hope and to draw out of the human heart wonder, love, and praise.

For such reasons we neglect the Christian heritage at our peril. For to this heritage we owe the challenging Word to commit ourselves to truth and personal integrity, and the call to sacrifice self for the love of God and one’s fellow human being. From the Judeo-Christian heritage, which came to a focal point in Jesus Christ, there comes to us still a relevant and life-giving Word. It is a Word which should disturb people of all religious traditions and also people who have none. It speaks both to the Christian and to the agnostic. That Word speaks to the eternity in our mind, and calls us to venture forth in faith, that by the grace of God we may be led to full mature personhood—and that is a quality of life which may be rightly called the life eternal. **4R**

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can truly discover is the mystery of life still aborning in the here and now. Our unfinished existence gives us the opportunity to see that we need one another to make sense of this world. We have yet to exhaust the reality of such a planetary insight. In fact, we can draw on our sacred traditions, as well as our science, to come to grips with our situation.

Geering has been called a heretic as well as a prophet. But he really belongs to another sort. He has betrayed himself by the company he keeps. He has spent much time with

the author of Ecclesiastes and has revisited the sayings of Jesus. He has continued to plumb “what you treasure is your hearts true measure” He finds that hope comes from the surprise of love beyond our comfort zones. He detects beauty in the mess of our lives. He notes what Jesus called God’s effective presence in the subtle fusion of our colliding lives. He sees in those delicate, uncertain steps we take together a pathway to our planet’s future. He truly is a sage for our time. **4R**