

# The Seminar on God and the Human Future

A Report on the 2019 Fall Meeting

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In November 2019, members of the Seminar on God and the Human Future convened to discuss the “future” component of its charge. Terrance Dean from Denison University presented on James Baldwin and Afrofuturism and Mathew Arthur from Simon Fraser University presented on Indigenous Futurisms. Futurisms are intellectual and creative movements consisting of art, literature, music, philosophy, and other media that express alternative perspectives about and possibilities for the future. Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurisms each draw on their own respective intellectual and cultural traditions and resources to think creatively about the future. In their presentations, Dean and Arthur honed in on the question of the human future and demonstrated ways that Blackness and Indigenouness complicate how we might think of both humanity and the future.

When the Seminar took its first votes at the spring meeting in 2015, it decided that theology is not about God-as-a-highest-being and that the work of the God Seminar is post-theistic. In other words, the God Seminar’s first decision was to reject the existence of God, traditionally understood. This set it on a path to investigate the varieties of post-theism as the first phase of its work. At the spring 2018 meeting, the God Seminar began to conclude the “varieties of post-theism” phase. In short, the Seminar has wrapped up the “God” part of its charge and is moving into investigating the “Human Future.” The spring 2018 meeting was the transition point that moved the Seminar from the first, God phase into the second, human future phase.

As the God Seminar has progressed over the last five years, it has allowed each meeting and subsequent vote to determine the next steps it will take. Every vote the God Seminar takes builds upon the last and it follows the direction of the work, rather than some preconceived doctrinal structure. This deliberate process has an extremely important consequence that must be kept in mind in order to understand the ongoing work of the God Seminar: it does not measure each presentation it receives against a preexisting set of doctrines. Instead, as a creative and collaborative

endeavor, the decisions that the Seminar makes are done in that very spirit of creativity and collaboration. One of the outcomes of this commitment is that the God Seminar does not shy away from controversial or even self-indicting criticisms and claims. The God Seminar is inspired by the Jesus Seminar’s willingness to vote on similarly controversial topics such as when it affirmed that “Jesus’ body decayed,” for instance. This procedural structure of the God Seminar—building each vote on the last and being willing to go wherever the scholarship might lead—has brought it to a series of significant conclusions over the course of its first, post-theistic phase that continue to inform each new development of its work. Here are some of those conclusions:

- Theology is always already political.
- Atheism operates within theology and is not the opposite of faith.
- God is not sovereign.
- The God Seminar affirms pluralist pantheism for its useful materialism.
- Religious communities and religious naturalism do not require God.
- The God Seminar must adopt a decolonial option as it proceeds lest it repeat and replicate colonialism in its work.

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A summary of all of the God Seminar’s votes to date will follow at the end of this article.

It is important to remember the context for each vote that the God Seminar takes. These propositions—“God is not sovereign,” for instance—do not arise in a vacuum or in some purely theoretical place. It is from this series of conversations that the God Seminar arrived at conversations about Blackness and Indigenouness and their effects on how the Seminar

might move forward investigating “the future.”

## James Baldwin and Afrofuturism

James Baldwin is one of the twentieth century’s most important, influential, and prolific Black writers and intellectuals. His impact on literary and theological studies cannot be overstated. To introduce his topic, Dean began by showing a short excerpt of an interview between Nikki Giovanni and James Baldwin from the PBS show *Soul!* There, Baldwin said,

We have to make our own definitions and begin to rule the world that way. Because kids...cannot use what they have been given. They’re rejecting it. Nobody wants to become the president of Pan Am, or the governor of California, or Spiro Agnew. *The kids want to live.*

Dean proceeded to discuss the ways in which Baldwin creates new concepts and new ways of thinking about the powers of life and possible visions of the future *out of Black experience*. For Dean, it is important that we understand that Black experience is a rejection of white norms and standards. This leads Baldwin to state that, while critique or rejection of Christian orthodoxy is viewed as blasphemy from the perspective of those white norms, “I think the legend [traditional Christian doctrine] itself is a blasphemy. God is our responsibility. God’s only hope is us. If we don’t make it, He isn’t going to make it either.”

For Dean, Afrofuturism is an exercise in imagination and expansiveness generated out of Black experience and history. We should understand Baldwin as one of Afrofuturism’s prophets and thus read him as a preacher and a moveable temple. His Afrofuturism looks in two directions, linking expressions of *memory* of Black life and experience to *imagination*.

In the conversation that followed Dean’s presentation, the scholars discussed how religion and theology might be sites that can be redeemed by Black life. The scholars opened up the possibility that we need to jettison religion and theology and move to Afrofuturist concepts such as energy, imagination, and fiction. It may be that these concepts exemplify the difference between black liberation theology and Afrofuturism. For Baldwin, at least, the old concepts need to be abandoned and replaced. Generating new ways of thinking and engaging with the world are key. So while religion helped Black people through the diaspora—the dispersion of African descendants across the globe, but especially in the Americas—and slavery, we are in a new moment. Young Black people are turning away from the church and toward spiritualities. The Black Lives Matter Movement was co-founded by queer Black women, so it should not be surprising that, unlike the Civil Rights Movement, the church isn’t its primary location.

Regarding the specific Afrofuturist concept of “energy,” Dean urged the God Seminar to focus in on the energy of movements. That framing means that vocalization, performance, and the overall embodiment of a force—the ways that energy is expressed within one’s very body—need to be reckoned with. Baldwin uses the term “dreams” through which, for instance, he thinks of himself as possessing both male and female energies. In “The Welcome Table,” Baldwin’s last text, he imagined himself as Josephine Baker (a female, Black, French entertainer and Civil Rights activist). This is one way of considering energy in terms of sexuality and gender bending. This Afrofuturist way of thinking

about energy uses its flows to disrupt binaries. It is a destabilizing movement.

So two possibilities arose. If Baldwin’s prophetic, immanent presence offered redemption and salvation, then it would continue to operate by the world’s definitions of

theology. He would be reproducing a tradition of understanding redemption in terms of individual moral failing and sin that has contributed to economic exploitation, sexism, and racism. If his presence was *destabilizing*, it would refuse the kind of redemption that is expected within traditional, white theology. Given Baldwin’s emphasis on embodiment, it may be that his prophetic immanence is unintelligible to white theology insofar as white theology has lost its emphasis on the body in its overemphasis on doctrine and thought.

Once again, the way in which this network of concepts functions to destabilize white norms is significant. In his closing remarks, Dean reminded everyone that destabilization is for the sake of reimagining. Is Christianity the way forward for Black people? For Baldwin, the answer is no. But neither is the Nation of Islam or some other Black religion. *Religion isn’t the way.*

## Indigenous Futurisms

The second session centered on a presentation from Mathew Arthur on Indigenous Futurisms. Arthur was present for the earlier presentation by Dean, so a lot of what Arthur had to say was a continuation of that earlier conversation rather than an entirely separate topic.

According to Arthur, Indigenous notions of “the future” complicate notions of “futurity,” or the quality of future occurrences, itself. Looking to something for its contribution to the future stabilizes it—it turns Indigenous knowledge into a resource for “the future” when that Indigenous knowledge is more than just a resource for colonial societies to use. “Futurity” carries with it a Western-inflected notion of time that most cultures around the world do not share. One particular Indigenous concept of time is that the past, present, and future are thought of as bundled together. Taking this notion of time seriously invites us to think about futurity in a radically different way. This would mean that the future isn’t “to come” or “over there.” There is a kind of excessiveness within these Indigenous concepts where time is an overflowing abundance rather than a linear movement from past to present to future. The past and future are present to us now.

Arthur then turned to the broader methodological question of how scholarship on these topics is performed. What are the material practices of scholarship? How do we practice the disruption of academic colonial epistemologies

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(colonial theories of knowledge—what can be known and how—that dismiss Indigenous wisdom as magical thinking or superstition) and scholarly practices when we investigate these topics? One needs to consider that Indigenous diaspora occurred in the location of this scholarly conversation. Indigenous land has been taken and colonized and Indigenous people are displaced.

Within Indigenous cosmology, what is lost is never gone. Extinct species are still with us and in our midst. So this diaspora and loss are nevertheless carried into the present conversation. Therefore when we consider the question of “the human,” we should consider reframing what is shared as comradeship, not commonality. The future will arise not from a common space but from differences. Flattening those differences in the name of some shared humanity in the face of the climate crisis, for instance, actually re-entrenches coloniality and reproduces white theft of Indigenous resources.

As a result, a key component to thinking about Indigenous Futurisms is to accept the ways Indigenous thought and practices resist intelligibility. Theology should be good at this—at not naming things and at allowing for a kind of apophatic willingness to sit with ignorance and mystery—but it’s not. One of the first steps would be to recognize the ways in which Indigenous wisdom is not free-floating knowledge, but embodied both in people and in the land. This means that thinking about Indigenous Futurisms means literally getting back on the land. It is a real material question of access. It requires considering the place of the body in theory. The place of the body is crucial.

Arthur closed his remarks by encouraging the God Seminar to revisit the earlier conversation with Dean about the way Afrofuturism and Blackness destabilize white concepts. Framing the issue in terms of Indigenous Futurisms, Arthur encouraged

a constant attending to enablings and incapacitations. It’s not about displacing whiteness. It’s about attending to what whiteness enables and incapacitates—what whiteness makes possible and what whiteness makes impossible. Does it change the material conditions of Indigenous life? Does it change the material conditions of Black life?

Further, Arthur said that

theology needs to get ethnographic. It needs to tell stories about the methods of its own production. Theology needs to include the collective practices of storying the future into being.

The scholars of the Seminar on God and the Human Future then voted and nearly unanimously affirmed four propositions:

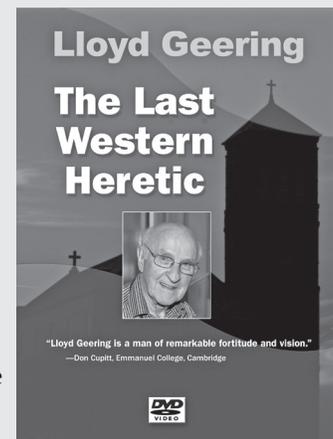
1. No way of thinking about the future can be responsible without attending to what systems that benefit white people enable and incapacitate.

2. Liberal Protestantism reinforces systems that benefit white people at the expense of others.
3. We commit ourselves to practices that situate and decenter those modes through which systems that benefit white people are reinforced.
4. First among these practices is to actively attend to our material conditions, relationships, and communities that inform the work of this Seminar.

As the Seminar moves forward, it will build on these commitments.

## The Last Western Heretic

Filmed in New Zealand and Israel and premiered at the NZ Parliament, *The Last Western Heretic* explores Lloyd Geering’s worldview through a discussion of his ideas—there is no life after death, the Bible is not infallible, Jesus was not divine, among others. Includes live footage from his 1967 heresy trial on charges of “doctrinal error and disturbing the peace of the [Presbyterian] church” which resulted from Geering’s assertion that the resurrection of Jesus should not be interpreted literally.



**Sir Lloyd Geering** is a Minister Emeritus of the Presbyterian Church, Emeritus Professor of Victoria University of Wellington where he established the Department of Religious Studies, and former Principal of Knox Theological College in Dunedin. A three time honoree of the NZ government, in 2009 he became a Knight Grand Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit.

**“Lloyd Geering is a man of remarkable fortitude and vision.”**

—Don Cupitt, Emmanuel College, Cambridge



2007—Top Shelf Productions Ltd.  
DVD, 72 minutes, \$24



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## Summary of All God Seminar Votes

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### Spring '15

The subject matter of theology is not God conceived as a supreme being or highest entity.

### Fall '15

God is not unchanging.

Every theological statement is also a political statement that reveals assumptions regarding human sociality and the political.

The attempt to prove the existence of God is a denial of the theological enterprise.

Atheism is not the opposite of faith, but an element of faith.

### Spring '16

A significant philosophical interest in Paul is in Paul as a power/knowledge event.

Paul of the authentic letters is a figure of transgression and of an alternative horizon.

The instability of metaphor assures that religion is a perpetual problem for humankind.

While in conversation with historical critical work in biblical scholarship, the task of the God Seminar is informed but not confined to historical factual truths.

Theology engages in theopoetics to creatively reimagine God after the death of the God of sovereign power.

Paul's letters are not engaged in constructive "metaphysical" discourse but in cultural/political theopoetics.

### Fall '16

Given the problematic associations with property, possessory closure, and mastery, the concept of sovereignty should no longer be used in reference to contemporary conceptions of God.

### Spring '17

The question "Is God Dead?" has lost its freshness and radicality.

Theological apophaticism is not ethically challenged and politically impotent.

Pantheism is a threat to contemporary theology.

We affirm pluralist pantheism for its ability to locate divinity in the endless multiplicity of the material world.

### Fall '17

Religious naturalism is compelling enough to dispense with the concept of God.

The word "God" is independent of the flourishing of religious communities.

### Spring '18

Post-theism that doesn't confront coloniality will continue to produce Euro-centrism.

Just as conversations about early Christianity cannot be separated from the role of the Roman Empire, contemporary conversations about God/gods cannot be separated from coloniality.

The God Seminar must adopt a decolonial option as it proceeds in its work.

### Spring '19

The concept of human immaturity, set against an evolutionary backdrop, does not provide a good framework for talk of God and the human future.

The concept of triple ultimacy, represented by ultimism, affords a theologically useful conception of God.

It is far too early to give up on religious notions of transcendence and ultimacy.

Ancient and Indigenous wisdom precedes and has the potential to pre-empt and devolve post-theistic categories.

Bodily experiences, practices, and rituals are not secondary to theological concepts.

Any credible vision of the human future must pay attention to ancient wisdoms historically effaced by Western metaphysics.

### Fall '19

No way of thinking about the future can be responsible without attending to what systems that benefit white people enable and incapacitate.

Liberal Protestantism reinforces systems that benefit white people at the expense of others.

We commit ourselves to practices that situate and decenter those modes through which systems that benefit white people are reinforced.

First among these practices is to actively attend to our material conditions, relationships, and communities that inform the work of this Seminar.