

Christianity without the traditional God

It's necessary to find new content for that little word "God"

A FAMOUS American preacher, harangued by an atheist about God's shortcomings, retorted: "If I believed God was like that, I'd be an atheist, too." When a New Zealand acquaintance was told that someone was an atheist, he inquired: "Relative to which deity?" The responses highlight the problem of talking about God at all these days: the word means so many different things to so many different people.

Also, till recent times most people in the West would have taken for granted that God and religion go hand in hand. Sure, each religion had its own concept of God (though Buddhism has managed to get along without one); but to contemplate religion without a God of some sort would have seemed like contemplating an ocean without water. As views of God change, however, that is happening. A few years ago a British Methodist, Ray Billington, wrote a book called *Religion Without God*. Shortly afterwards in New Zealand, Presbyterian Lloyd Geering raised eyebrows with his *Christianity Without God*. How come?

Geering acknowledges that the notion of Christianity without God seems absurd. Christianity is supposed to be an outworking of God's purposes through his self-revelation in Jesus and his self-expression in the church – so how can you take God out of the equation and still call it Christianity?

As usual, it depends what you mean. Geering makes clear that the God of his title is "God as traditionally understood", and qualifies its starkness by rephrasing his theme as "Christianity without theism". That opens up a new ball game, for theism is only one way – an important and pervasive way, certainly – of conceiving of God.

In theism, he says, God is taken to be the name of the supernatural personal being who created the world and who continues to oversee its affairs, intervening in them from time to time in miraculous ways. This God enters into personal relationships with human beings, and in the Christian story is encountered supremely in Jesus Christ. This is overwhelmingly the assumption behind the prayers, hymns and liturgies of the church.

Once this view seemed so obvious that it was accepted as the backdrop to all life. But today it seems strangely out of kilter with the flood of new knowledge that has accumulated over the past 400 years, with two centuries of probing into the Bible records, and with a revolution in the way men and women think about their place in the world. Theism has been fading, even among many church-goers, though like the grin on the face of the Cheshire cat, you can see where it has been.

That does not necessarily mean the end of God, however. Christianity itself carries the seeds of a totally different orientation. Its pivotal conviction is that the divine is evident in the life and death of Jesus and what sprang from him. Once you say that, Christianity opens up new insights that take God far beyond the concept of God in Judaism or Islam, for example. In the experience of the early church God became a three-fold "Godhead" or "Godhood", incorporating the human Jesus and the Holy

Spirit. That experience is not to be denied: the tricky bit is the language used to describe and interpret it.

Today, the big question is whether the old theistic model can do the job any more.

Geering does not think so. He asserts that the living stream of Christianity does not depend on theism – rather, in its earliest period it was moving away from theism.

But where Jesus was originally presented as God being experienced in a human being, so breaking open an exciting new option of Godness in all of humanity, the church quickly reversed that and elevated Jesus to be part of the Godhead. This restored the theistic view of a supernatural being demanding submission to the divine will. That early humanising and liberating impulse lay submerged for centuries.

So at one time or other the church authorities upheld the bondages of an absolutist church, an absolutist Bible, absolute monarchy, class, slavery, racism, sexism, homophobia, seeing all of these as part of the divine order. Rebels read the tradition differently, and challenged them one by one.

It must be acknowledged that for millions of people the theistic God has been the source of freedom, dignity, meaning, wholeness and motivation to service.

Nevertheless, society at large has moved on. That leaves the churches on a hiding to nothing, unless they can fill the word “God” with a meaning beyond theism.

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