

## Ideas of God change and grow

*Lloyd Geering reflects on a life-time of reflecting on God*

It is part of growing up that a person's ideas should change. That's especially true of ideas about God – yet some people never allow this part of their understanding to grow, and carry into adulthood the ideas they picked up as youngsters. Then they feel the only thing they can do with such childish ideas is reject them – and so they should. Peter Pan notions belong to childhood, not maturity.

That does not stop them from pronouncing freely on religious matters, however. In religion, as in politics, everyone feels their opinion is as good as anyone else's, whether they know anything about the subject or not.

Dyed-in-the-wool fundamentalists, both Christian and atheist, find it particularly difficult to open their minds to what the best contemporary scholars are saying. Certainty of both faith and anti-faith depends on cherished ideas being fixed and unchangeable. This leads to dogmatic assertion, distortion and caricature at both ends of the spectrum.

Lloyd Geering's just-published autobiography, *Wrestling with God*, stands in marked contrast to all that. He has continually been rethinking his understanding of God. As he says, "my personal experiences of life, together with my attempts to understand the changing culture around me, have shaped the way I think about God, while what I think about God has in turn helped to shape my life and supply it with meaning."

It is a journey many will recognise (though not everyone will come to the same conclusions). That is not surprising, because one of the most profound changes in western culture over the past century has been the concept of God.

Geering says his earliest notion of God was similar to the traditional one – "a supernatural, spiritual being who thinks, plans, creates, and exercises ultimate cosmic control."

By the end of his training as a Presbyterian minister, this had blurred somewhat. "Given the limited capacity of the human mind," he says, "I argued to myself that God was the one reality that a person should be content to know little about. For me, 'God' was simply the name of the ultimate mystery of life."

In the late 1960s, Geering read French Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin's book *The Phenomenon of Man*, and it spurred him to a radically new understanding. God became "not so much the maker of the world, the first cause or even the planner of the evolutionary process; rather, the mysterious process of an evolving universe is God."

And again: "Not only was I affirming the human origin of all thinking about God, but God was ceasing to be for me a knowable objective entity, and becoming more a symbolic word for the mystery of life and the spiritual values associated with that sense of mystery."

By the 1990s this had evolved further. Geering says: "Whereas Christian tradition taught that God had not only created the world and humankind but had revealed to us his purpose in doing so, it was now becoming clear to me that the new knowledge we have gained in the modern world has reversed that order: we humans live in a cultural world of meaning (of which God is the central symbol) that we as a species have slowly constructed for ourselves." God was now "a verbal symbol inherited from our mythological past, a human concept we have created and used to find and express meaning in our collective and individual

experience.” Christianity must therefore learn to do without an external, supernatural authority that controls history. “In a world come of age, we humans must now learn to accept full responsibility for our destiny.”

As for the individual, “each of us establishes a personal identity by finding meaning in human existence and a goal to live for – in other words, by finding and serving our God.” And further: “Just as each of us is a unique, individual person, so we each have our own unique way of interpreting life; we each conceive of God (if we choose to use that term) in a unique way. And clearly, people have been doing this ever since the term ‘God’ came into common use, even though they were not aware of it.”

Geering would never claim to have uttered the last word on his vast subject. But the stimulus he gives, even to those who disagree, is always towards a more mature way of thinking about God. That will be the lasting value of his book.

And one last pregnant comment: “The most awe-inspiring mystery in this vast universe is life itself.”

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