

Preface

Why a biography of interviews?

A Note on Lloyd Geering and Me

The interviews that follow are drawn from an original set of seven interviews I conducted with Lloyd Geering between 2010 and 2016 in Christchurch and Wellington. The first interview arose out of questions that came to me as I re-read *Wrestling with God*. My copy became heavily annotated with comments and questions, and I decided that there was a need to, in effect, fill in the gaps identified in my reading. I had been thinking about an intellectual biography of Lloyd Geering for a number of years: I first began academic work on him back in 1988 looking at the Geering controversy and public opinion from 1966 to 1967.

Sir Lloyd Geering (1918–) was famously tried for “heresy” in 1967 by the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. At the time, he was professor of Old Testament Studies and principal of Knox Theological Hall in Dunedin. However, his public statements on the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus in 1966 and the immortality of the soul in 1967 were what made him a figure of national debate and controversy. After a public trial at the General Assembly, the charges were dismissed with a decision that no doctrinal error had been established. In 1971 Geering was appointed foundational chair in Religious Studies at Victoria University of Canterbury. Here, as a teacher, prolific author, religious commentator, and a popular public speaker, he consolidated his position as a noted public intellectual, activities that continue in his retirement even as he turned 99 on February 26, 2017. His

status and influence were recognized when he was awarded the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2001 and New Zealand's highest honour, membership of The Order of New Zealand in 2007.

I was born in the year of the trial, and Lloyd Geering has been a constant identity in my life. My father, Frank Grimshaw (1934–85), was taught by Lloyd (as he was always referred to in our house) when he underwent his studies at Knox Theological Hall, 1968–70. My mother, then a speech therapist, knew Lloyd's second wife Elaine, also a speech therapist. I grew up in manses where Lloyd's books (including some inscribed) were on the shelves, his ideas freely discussed. The trial was always referred to as a sad day for the church. My parents stressed that Lloyd's position was one that had offered both freedom and a future, especially as the conservative and evangelical forces began their steady takeover of the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand. This led me as fourth-year student at Otago University in Dunedin to consider the Geering controversy as a topic of inquiry. So I scoured all the newspapers and other print media for a sense of just what had gone on some twenty years prior.

A few years later, to my surprise, I found myself a student at Knox Theological Hall in Dunedin doing a Bachelor of Divinity and training, I thought, for the Presbyterian ministry. The Theological Hall was yet again embroiled in a time of great disruption and conflict between both staff and students. A number of theological battles were raging between a liberal-radical faction and a Barthian-Evangelical-Pentecostal faction. I entered the Theological Hall as a liberal-radical and quickly converted to a radical and secular theology. Already well versed in Geering's work, I discovered the 1960s death-of-God writings of Thomas Altizer and Gabriel Vahanian in a little-read dusty corner of the marvelous Hewitson Library. The librarian Beth Nichol, wife of theologian Frank Nichol, also pointed me to the work of Frank's friend William Hamilton, with whom he had studied at St Andrews. Theologian and clergyman Clive Pearson introduced

me to the work of Don Cupitt, who also appeared in Geering's writings from time to time. All this reading combined with various forms of postmodernism that I had first picked up before turning to theology, from my reading of UK style, culture, and fashion magazines such as the marvelous and edgy *Blitz* (1980–91) and *The Face*. So it was of little surprise that I found myself quickly at odds with the Barthian line of the theology programme. I soon discovered it was counter-productive to mention Geering in classes, essays, and tutorials—let alone Altizer, Cupitt, and so on! Church history luckily offered a far more sympathetic home, even though I kept up my growing fascination and then obsession with radical and secular theology. I also joined the local Sea of Faith network, and I will always be extremely grateful to that wonderful eclectic mixture of clergy and laity who supported and encouraged me as I struggled through my studies within a church and theological hall that seemed to have little place for radical theological thought. All this culminated in my acknowledgement that I could not see a future for myself within the ministry of the church. I knew what had happened to Geering—and I also knew there were very few parishes where someone of my radical views could find a home.

I was able to win an Otago university scholarship to embark on a Ph.D. studying New Zealand church history. While up in Wellington in 1994 for a year of archival research, I was extremely fortunate to gain some work tutoring in the Religious Studies department at Victoria University of Wellington. In one of those life-changing coincidences, Paul Morris was visiting on a sabbatical from Lancaster University, and we forged a deep friendship. After two years back in Dunedin finishing my study, I then returned to Wellington at the start of 1997 to undertake research in the Alexander Turnbull library while I awaited the marking of my thesis. I was able to gain work tutoring and then teaching in Religious Studies at Victoria University because Paul Morris had returned, this time as chair of the department. Lloyd taught Paul

in his early days at Victoria. Another colleague, Jim Veitch, was taught by Lloyd at Knox back in the 1960s and, later, became a notable supporter of Lloyd as a colleague. In this setting I remade myself from dissident theologian into religious studies scholar in an unconscious echo of Lloyd's move that I had not really considered until I wrote this piece. Also like Lloyd, I had not had a religious studies background and so, again in a very similar fashion, my reading speed trebled as I taught for two and half very happy years in the department. At the end of 1999 I relocated to Canterbury University to teach religious studies, now with my partner and young daughter. While in Wellington I renewed my acquaintance with Lloyd via various department functions and forums (including the department-hosted visits by Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan), and I was fascinated at the way he continued to read and write prodigiously in his retirement.

In my new role at Canterbury I also came to give seminars and public lectures on Lloyd Geering and his thought, and reviewed his books for various publications. With Paul Morris, I co-edited *The Lloyd Geering Reader*. We had identified a need to gather together a companion volume of his talks and writings after the publication of his autobiography. The *Reader* in turn, out of further public lectures and discussions, gave rise to this book, as I was aware that there was far more to Geering's thought than had been captured in written records. I had been steadily gathering Geering material for a number of years, not only books but also copies of articles and papers I discovered. Initially the interviews were to provide the basis for a traditional intellectual/theological biography, for which Lloyd agreed at the end of July 2010 to my proposal for a series of interviews. However, at 4.35 AM on 4 September 2010, Christchurch was struck by a 7.1-magnitude earthquake. So began a year of constant earthquakes including the most devastating 22 February 2011 6.3-magnitude quake that destroyed the central city and many suburbs, killing 185 people. Thousands of sizable aftershocks, including a number over five on the Richter scale, contin-

ued into 2012, and years on some aftershocks still rattle the city, thankfully far less occasionally.

In the aftermath of that first quake, I began work on this book. The university was closed and I knew I needed a project, especially in the evenings. Little did I know what a period of earthquakes, devastation, and disruption was in store, and so this book has taken far longer than I thought it would amidst the ongoing effects, not only at a personal level but also at university and city levels, that the quakes created. My first interview with Lloyd in October 2010 was undertaken in a house now no longer here. It was situated on the hills of Mt. Pleasant overlooking a city that, at that time, believed that it had managed to come through a major earthquake with significant disruption but not too much destruction. Of course that soon, tragically changed.

All this disruption, and the ongoing changes in my university as we came through the quakes, including my relocation from a disestablished religious studies department into sociology at the start of 2011, meant that the Geering project (as it soon became named) struggled to find a space for concentrated engagement. The interviews were wonderful and full of rich material; it was, I knew, a privilege to be able to so frankly and repeatedly talk with Lloyd. Then when I undertook archival research, I gathered more background and supporting material that helped give a fuller context to what had happened to him in the 1960s. Yet over time I realized that a traditional biography would in many ways only repeat what he had so richly laid out in his autobiography. A different approach was called for and this evolved into the realization that what I needed was to construct a different sort of intellectual and theological biography composed of the interviews. For in conversation I was able to get Lloyd talking with a clarity and honesty that I deeply appreciated. Here was Lloyd communicating who he was and what he thought and why. Lloyd has always been a most excellent communicator of his thought—especially in his public talks. I wanted to be able to take what he provided in the interviews

and enable him to speak for himself. As I noted down after that first interview:

From the start I found a series of set questions not the best way; it was far more fruitful to develop questions as we talked, which will be the model for future interviews, for what I realized [in that first interview] is that too great a constraint on interview topics stifles the conversation and Geering is really a conversationalist.

Each interview drew on questions that arose as I transcribed the previous interview. Some also came from that aforementioned archival research undertaken in the Presbyterian archives at Knox College, Dunedin, and in the National Archives in Wellington. But the discussions always quickly took on their own form and direction as a question or answer sparked off a new focus. The engagement never stopped after each interview, for often there were supplementary emails between myself and Lloyd in which either I raised various queries and issues, or he commented on something he had been thinking about since the interview.

This process meant that each interview in itself covered a number of topics and, more importantly, different stages of Lloyd's life and thought. While I went into each interview with a series of framing questions, I constantly found that as we talked we would range far and wide through his life. Therefore, when transcribed, there was no particular chronology or focus to each interview as it developed; in short, they were true conversations. Meanwhile the traditional narrative planned for the biography had repeatedly stalled. As I came to realize that I didn't want to write a traditional "life and thought," I kept coming back to quotes I had taken down back in 2010 when I read Geoff Dyer's marvelous *Out of Sheer Rage*,¹ his account of not succeeding at writing a biography of D. H. Lawrence. The first spoke to my current predicament, whereby Dyer noted, "All over the world people are taking notes as a way of postponing, putting off and standing in for."² The second gave me hope and impetus: "... books, if they need to be written, will always

find their moment. The important thing was to avoid paralyzing uncertainty and indecision.”³

I decided that the interviews were in themselves central to the planned biography and in fact would come to comprise the central text. I was then faced with a quandary. Did I keep each interview as it was or, as I did in fact decide, did I draw on all the interviews and reassemble the questions and answers into a chronological narrative? I decided to do the latter because this enabled what is, in effect, an intellectual and theological biography to be developed via the interviews. In our conversations the biography occurs; in effect it is co-written (or perhaps co-narrated?) and then assembled by me. I transcribed all the interviews and printed off a copy of each one. Then, perhaps in what many would view as a very old-fashioned approach, I took over the dining table at home in the evenings and went through each interview with a pair of scissors, cutting it into sections that fit the chronology of Lloyd’s life. These literal snippets were put into large envelopes and labelled with the headings that became the interview chapters. The segments were then assembled into a chronological interview that was arranged under the headings of each phase of Geering’s life. This book is, therefore, composed of interviews that have been reassembled as a type of conversational biography, a process I discussed with Geering and had his agreement to so do.

To my delight and surprise, what is presented here is all of our conversations except for a mere nine lines comprising two questions and answers wherein we “got off topic” in our discussion. So what is presented is almost 100 percent of what we discussed, reassembled as a biography by conversation. It is supplemented by this Preface, an Introduction in which I situate Geering and his thought in both New Zealand and international currents and moments, a general chronology and an overview of the events leading up to and surrounding the heresy trial, an essay discussing his reading from 1966 to 1990 and the accompanying transcription of his reading notebooks, and a transcription of the relevant sections of his 1963

conference lecture that drew him to the attention of the conservative faction upon his return to New Zealand from Australia.

Working on this with Lloyd has been an honour and a deep privilege; it may sound clichéd, but he is a true “scholar and a gentleman” who has gone out of his way to support and encourage me in this project over too many years. In writing this piece I went back through my old notebooks I kept over these years. Right at the beginning I had jotted down the following quote from Christopher Hitchens’ *Why Orwell Matters*: “... the sheer ill will and bad faith and intellectual confusion that appear to ignite spontaneously when Orwell’s name is mentioned in some quarters. Or perhaps not so spontaneously; it can be seen at a glance that the various authors attribute immense potency to Orwell, that they make the common mistake of blaming him for his supposed ‘effect.’”⁴ As I then commented, this reaction holds very true also for Geering. His name creates such an outpouring of misunderstanding. Further the “Geering effect” is one that can be claimed to have been in existence for almost fifty years—to which it must be asked, why has no group or individual been able to “successfully” oppose or even refute him? This book could easily have been called “The Geering Effect” or “Why Geering Matters,” for, especially in New Zealand, Geering has been misunderstood by those who oppose him and not fully understood by those who support or align themselves with him. Yet, especially for New Zealand society and indeed also for wider theological and religious thought over the past century, Geering does indeed matter—and his effect has been a positive one. Hopefully this book and these conversations can help us understand why.

—Mike Grimshaw

9 February 2017

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Introduction

A New Theological Century? Geering, God and Modernity

In a well-known delineation put forward by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012), the “short twentieth century” ran from 1914–91 and was bookended by World War I and the collapse of Soviet Communism and the Soviet Bloc.¹ It was preceded by the long nineteenth century that began with the French Revolution in 1789 and ran to the start of the World War.

It is interesting to think what a theological equivalent would be. The start of the short twentieth century would most probably be Karl Barth’s *Der Römerbrief* of 1918/1919, for as Robert W. Jenson claims, Barth’s commentary “theologically divides the twentieth century from the nineteenth.”² However, when did the twentieth century end theologically? Could it be dated to April 8, 1966, with the infamous cover of *Time* magazine asking “Is God Dead?” in reference to the work of, in particular, Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton? Or was that merely the start of a long interregnum? It may be the case that, theologically speaking, we find ourselves not yet free of the twentieth century but also not yet into a new century. If I wished, a case could be made for the return to theology within Continental Philosophy, in particular the engagement with religion, god-language, and theology by, in no particular order, Derrida, Vattimo, Badiou, Agamben, Zizek, and many others. But is this engagement necessarily a theological turn, or is it a philosophical turn making increasing use of theology? The difference is important—and in particular, has this movement crossed over into the church itself? It would be a rare church or even seminary that made repeated and sustained use of the continental turn to religion. I am

not saying such usage does not occur, but in general the church exhibits little uptake, or even sustained knowledge and engagement. Perhaps the rise of theological feminism and womanism, of liberation theology, of queer theology, of black and post-colonial theologies, of ecological issues could also make a stronger case for an epochal change. But again these movements have all been either accommodated in various and to varying degrees—or sidelined and often neutered.

So is theology actually still—in contrast to political and social history—in a long twentieth century that continues, splintered into a myriad of possibilities and articulations, not yet secular but not fully religious, as mixed in its approach to the revitalization of Islam as it was to the rise and fall of communism? Or did the twentieth century theologically end with the decline and marginalisation of broad-church, liberal Christianity? For, from within the twenty-first century, it is too easy to forget there was a time when, in Protestant churches in particular, the mainstream was a church and theology decidedly liberal in ethos, drawing on the theological legacy of Schleiermacher and the scholarship of the historical-critical method. This was a liberal and broad-church Christianity supporting a generic sense of a Christian culture and Christian values. It was based on the expounding of Christian experience and the relating of it to all other knowledge. This was not a pietistic theology of sermons as to how “Jesus died for our sins”; rather, as cultural and social theology it focused on how to live a Christian life within a broader Christian—or at least Christian-based—society. But such theology and church was in decline from the 1960s, under challenge not only from an increasingly secular society but also with the rise within Christianity of stridently anti-liberal and anti-secular opposition. So we can also ask, did the twenty-first century emerge early, with the rise of conservative, evangelical Christianity and also Pentecostalism as global and political movements? Here the attack on theological liberalism initiated by Karl Barth succeeds—but not in a way that Barth would have expected, or indeed wished. Barth sought to signify a clear difference between religion and revela-

tion, with the latter being a biblical Christianity in opposition to all human undertakings. However, while Barth's aim was a revitalization of broad-church Christianity, in effect the replacement of liberalism with neo-orthodoxy, the dogmatic focus and ethos of Barthian-derived neo-orthodoxy proved unappealing to the vast majority of liberals and, indeed, also to many in the broad church who were in effect cultural Christians. Facing a call to become more dogmatic, more conservative, and more biblical in focus, the effect has actually been that both the mainstream broad church and the liberal church have tended to dissolve into secular society. This is especially so in the Protestant church—and particularly in the Protestant church in western societies. Even neo-orthodoxy itself, which sought to reclaim a broad-church Christianity, albeit versus liberalism, has retreated and increasingly is a minority theological and especially ecclesiastical position. What we see is instead an eclectic mix of theologically, politically, and socially conservative evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal Christianities that are extremely fluid in membership, ecclesiology, and theology. We also see a resurgent Roman Catholic Church that, however, continues to face significant issues in western societies in particular.

So perhaps we need to clarify that something seemed to happen theologically, and we now find ourselves in a new century theologically that we have yet to fully delineate. Perhaps it is a century that began somewhere between the end of the 1960s and the mid-1980s. I am aware that the sociological norm of the secularization thesis was publicly recanted by one of its most prominent supporters, Peter Berger, in 1999,³ but, conversely, the secularization thesis seems to have held true for the Protestant mainstream broad church and the Protestant liberal church. In other words, educated populations in the West, especially those who are liberal in their social and cultural views, have from the 1960s increasingly stopped attending churches and also, perhaps more significantly, stopped seeing a value in the Christian narrative and history. In effect they seek to live what can be called not only a post-Christian but also a post-religious life. It is important to note that the "return

of religion” is the return of theologically, socially, and culturally conservative forms that exist in opposition to not only the continuation of secularized society but also to any remnants of liberal or radical religion, especially Christian but also other traditions. The new century is therefore signalled by the movement of members of broad-church and liberal Protestantism in particular, but also Roman Catholicism, particularly in the West, into secular society. The churches therefore have become far more conservative institutions that operate in increasingly eclectic ways. The West in particular has become a secular society for many who in the past would have been practicing, but now are often, at most, nominal Christians. This is especially so for an older generation who were brought up in the church but, from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, struggled to find a place or reason to remain within increasingly conservative churches. This group often abandoned traditional parishes and gathered in the decreasing number of liberal or radical churches, left the church outright, or became affiliated with parachurch groups such as the Sea of Faith that began in the United Kingdom in 1984 in response to radical theologian Don Cupitt’s book and television series of the same name. The Sea of Faith has now become an international organization with national networks in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia, and other members elsewhere. Geering has become a significant figure in the Sea of Faith, both in New Zealand and internationally. We also must not forget that others retained an interest in religion and theology but saw little point or need to remain affiliated, practicing Christians. Instead they turned to reading and discussion as the source of spiritual and theological interest, often undertaking a Christian-based new age eclecticism.

In such a time of change and decline of the broad, liberal, and radical churches, Christians and post-Christians still needed thinkers to help point ways through the unfolding process, to articulate possibilities, and to assist in steering clear of dead-ends. In New Zealand from the late 1960s, and then increasingly internationally, Lloyd Geering has been taken up as one such thinker. His popu-

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