Episode 186 :: Sir Lloyd Geering :: Secular Christianity

TM: Our guest today is Sir Lloyd Geering. Sir Lloyd, welcome to The Secular Buddhist.

Lloyd: Thank you! Very glad to be here!

TM: So tell us a little bit about your background in religious tradition.

Lloyd: Well, I'm a Presbyterian minister, and, and I, I didn't have a, a religious, uh, upbringing to any great extent at all; it was only when I was a student that I embraced the Christian faith seriously, and, and very quickly decided to become trained for the ministry. And, uh, I did that, I had three parishes, and then I moved from there into theological training itself, having specialized in Old Testament study, and I held chairs in the Old Testament in Brisbane for four years and then for about eleven or twelve years in Dunedin; and during my period in Dunedin at Knox College I, I, I became principal of the theological college. And it was while I was principal that uh, the uh, disturbances arose, and namely that I was uh, accused of uh, teaching false doctrine, and of disturbing the peace of the church. And there was a what is commonly referred to today as a heresy trial. Uh, it's not true to say that, that the church tried me; rather my accusers accused me and the general assembly of the church acted as both the judge and jury, uh hearing this. And uh, the result of that was that I was acquitted in the sense that it, it was said that no false doctrine had been established and that the case was closed. And I continued in um, theological teaching for about three years, but I recognized that uh the church had become somewhat divided between a conservative minority in those days and the majority, and so when the opportunity came to teach religious studies generally, uh I was really glad to take that and so my last teaching post was as the foundation chair of religious studies at Victoria University. And, and--but I retired from that now over thirty years ago and, um, in some respects my retirement period has proved the most fruitful of all in that I've done a lot of teaching outside the academic institutions--though in the public area, not in the church really, and I have--most of my writing has been done in that period--I wrote two books while I was uh, still a theological teacher but I--I, I, I've written about eight or ten since that time. So then that's--that's substantially where I stand so far as my career is concerned.

TM: So let's explore a little bit that dispute in 1967: the, the people that were forwarding the complaint; what specifically was it that they were having problems with?

Lloyd: Well, the first thing was, I wrote an article for the church magazine--the Easter magazine--on the Resurrection. And uh, I really asked the question, what do we really mean by saying Jesus arose from the dead? on the grounds that it couldn't possibly mean a bodily resurrection--that just doesn't make, doesn't make sense in a--because uh, if it were a bodily resurrection He'd either be walking the earth to this day or had, had to take a space trip and of course that, that's just non-sensical. So I asked the question, meaning that it obviously was a, as a metaphorical or symbolic expression to it mean something. Well that upset a great number of people in the church who had, had really taken the story of the empty tomb quite literally, and I said it was simply a pious legend which had grown out of the conviction of Jesus arisen from the dead. So, then the whole, um, church, and to some extent society was, it was caught up in this, and--but it, it more or less came to a, a reasonable kind of solution by the end of the year. And then it--it all break out again the following year when I preached a sermon--actually it was a sermon on Ecclesiastes--and in the course of the sermon I happened to say that uh of course uh we mortals don't have any immortal soul; we are mortals. That break out in a great debate in New Zealand; everybody was talking about whether there's life after death and so on--so, that, um, fueled more flames within the church and that's how my accusers gathered strength to uh, to uh, bring it to a, a, uh, some sort of climax at the trial.

TM: The trial itself concluded without too much fanfare and they found you innocent; but what you just said, that there's not a literal, uh, resurrection and we Christians, for example, don't have immortal, unchanging souls, seems to go against Christian doctrine so how, how did they navigate those waters, how did they get through that?
Lloyd: Well of course eh the Bible itself says only God is immortal and that--the idea of an immortal soul isn't in the Bible at all; it actually came into Christianity about the second century and largely due to the influence of Plato. So it, it has certainly been part of traditional Christianity ever since that time, but not in original, not in first-century Christianity. The Jews had no belief in any life after death--that is, that is why they talked about resurrection. And the resurrection took place at the end of time, at the end of the world, when--and, and the idea arose of resurrection was in order to help people feel, that in, in the long run, there is fairness in life. The, the doctrine of reincarnation, in India, arose for exactly the same person--uh, purpose--but they of course solved the problem in a somewhat different way: n-namely that, uh, you mightn't get justice in this life but in, but in the next life that'll be ironed out to some extent. So the whole idea of resurrection was a, an interesting concept to try and assure people of--make people feel--that, that, in the end, morality does pay, that life does have some sort of fairness. Once one had uh reached the point where the general resurrection had not taken place--y-see the first Christians thought it was just around the corner--and, and, and when it didn't happen in their own lifetime they began to be concerned, and in order to meet that concern, they adopted the belief of, that came from Plato, that, that really we, we have an immortal soul which survives the body anyway. And so traditional Christian doctrine is a bit of a mixture of two quite different concepts: one, a general resurrection at the end of time, and a, uh, a life in, a spiritual life in heaven in, in the meantime--because traditional Christianity said that at the end of time, we will be resurrected from our graves and, and rejoined with our immortal souls in heaven and, and we'll be judged all over again! As my theological teacher said, it's all a bit illogical--even--he, he's told me that thirty year--sixty years ago! So it wasn't exactly new to me.

TM: So it sounds like part of your, your defense in this situation was to back up what you were saying with the Bible itself, with your--their own religious strictured--scripts.

Lloyd: Exactly so, yes, yeah. Mind you, you can, you can prove anything from the Bible, really, and the reason being, that it wasn't written by one person, and it is a--I, I have a great respect for the Bible, it's a wonderful collection of documents, but they--of course they're ancient documents and they're documents which testify to what people believed in a--more than two thousand years ago and the world has changed so much and then--since then that, if there's any truth at all in what the Bible says, it usually has to be, it [indistinguishable] has to be reinterpreted to fit the context and the worldview in which we live today.

TM: So I'm making a guess that having your story validated by the most authentic religious document, the Bible--it--within the Christian context--uh that that might not have been so well-received by the people who had brought you into that situation. How, how did they take that--was this new information to them or was this something that they, they just chose to ignore?

Lloyd: Well, it-it's funny that you raise that question because I had two accusers, and these two accusers themselves couldn't agree! One of them was a fundamentalist layman who took every word of the Bible [indistinguishable]. The other was a very well-educated minister who had a very good theological education and um, he knew he couldn't side with the fundamentalist on a whole lot of issues. So when they brought their charges, they brought them separately, and, and in a sense I was able to play one off against the other to some extent. And uh--now, at the end of the trial they were both disappointed, but the um, the Presbyterian minister one, he just stayed in the church and then did his best and actually wrote some interesting books after that, whereas the fundamentalist left the church and started a church of his own, which is what fundamentalists often tend to do.

TM: Sir Lloyd, let's just talk about the--just the word, "secular," and what we mean by that. How do you approach the word "secular?"

Lloyd: Well I approach the word "secular" from its original Latin meaning, "saeculum," which means "this age," or, or "this period," this, "this period in time," "this world," and I'm sorry that, um, it's so often regarded as the opposite of "religious." I'd see the modern secular world simply as the logical continuation of Christendom, in which the, the values that have brought the--uh, of Christendom which helped to bring the modern world into being, have reached the stage where they have thrown off the old supernatural concepts and see life as that which has to be lived within the limits and confines of this world; that is, between conception and death. Uh, our genes may continue on in our--in our later generations but we as individuals are confined to one life. And so, in my view, this is what Christianity--and indeed all the other religious traditions and so on--are all about:
how to live this life. And--and so I don't see any conflict between accepting the secular world as it is and, uh acknowledging what I've loaned from our Christian past.

TM: So shifting the focus of our conversation a little bit into society at large: what would you like to see changed in how society views religious doctrine like this?

Lloyd: Well first of all I would like to help people see that the, the word "religion" is of much wider significance than has--in, in the way it's understood in the popular sense. Usually when people think of religion, they are thinking of a--a super--something supernatural, something that doesn't--is altogether different from the natural world in which we live. Now if you're going to confine religion to that aspect, then religion is completely outdated. It--there's no place for it in the modern world. But, moreover, traditions like Confucianism and Buddhism are not religions either! And--I had to--when I was teaching religious studies--had to discuss what we really mean by "religion." And to work out some kind of definition that, that covered everything. And in doing so, I came to the conclusion that I preferred--and these aren't my words; they're from a scholar--"religion is a total mode of the interpreting and living of life." Now each word is important: it's a "total mode," so that it covers everything, it's right, right to the limits of life. And it's "interpreting"--that is, it's an attempt to understand it, and then having understood it, it's an attempt to live out, to respond, to make that response. Now in, in this way of religion, I think people are just as religious today as they ever were. But religion has abandoned the concept of supernatural simply because that is really the science of the ancient world, that was the knowledge of the ancient world. We, we live in a, uh, world in which we recognize that there is only one reality, one physical reality; and we have evolved within this, we've reached, uh, in our evolutionary uh journey we've reached the point where we can, uh, think and understand and ask questions and try to give answers to those questions--and, and in asking questions and in answering, answering them, that is really religious enterprise. So that, it seems to me, that all the great religious traditions of the past, as they come into this new global secular situation, may have something to offer to what I call, uh, the global religion of the future. Now atheists and, and humanists simply reject this, uh, definition of religion because they say it's too broad. Well, there's no use in getting too caught up with, with what are really verbal debates--and though I want to say that, if you want to reserve the term "religion" to something in the past, then you've got to realize that it's, it's a fair--a pretty narrow definition, and, and let's simply talk about life and the philosophy of life, uh, because that's what I'm talking about by "religion."

TM: Yeah we often get bunched up in what we mean by the words and I think that many of, of my atheist friends and colleagues in the secular humanist movement for example would agree with an importance of how we as people live together, how we, how we live our lives, what we find of value, what inspires us, and how we implement positive change in the world. That's very much something that we're in agreement with and for some there's the term "religion" is attached to that, for some "spiritual," for others, none of those fit and that's okay; we're all referring to what we do together as people. So what do you see as some of the positive benefit of that secular approach to things?

Lloyd: Well, it's not easy to put that in just a few words--

TM: [Laughs] Use a few words, they're free, it's okay! [Laughs]

Lloyd: Let me say this: I think the human species has reached, in this century, the most critical point in its survival that has ever had to face before. And that we have reached the point where the particular cultures in which we lived in the past, and which gave meaning and some degree of satisfaction in life, and they are all in the process of being dissolved, ehm, because we have reached a global situation where the fact that we all belong to one human s--race, the human homo sapiens, is now becoming more dominant than the fact that we are British or New Zealand or American or, or Christian or, or Buddhist or Confucian or whatnot. We, we have received an very valuable inheritance from these! But they now must either contribute to this new global culture, which is hopefully emerging, or only become museum pieces from the past. I have some hope that the human species is going to meet these crises, but it's not going to be at, at all easy, and, and that's why as some more pessimistic--prophets have said, this might be the last century of the human race! For two chief reasons: one is, we're at war with one another--we're not a family, we're at war with one another--and secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, we're at war with the earth! We have interfered so severely with the natural laws of ecology and evolutionary biology that in fact we have become a kind of cancer in the earth, that,
that--and that the earth, if were to personalize it to some extent--the earth has to get rid of us! Now, I still try to be hopeful and optimistic in this situation, and we can only do this if we learn to become one human community. Now there are some very hopeful signs. One is, for example, that it's only in the Twentieth Century that we started to talk about human rights; before that, we talked about the rights of the aristocracy and the--all the rights of the British and so on; now we speak about human rights; we are slowly recognizing that, that we belong together as one human race. And that is why the, the, the religious ideology of, of the future can be called "humanism," that is, we, we believe in, and value, what it is to be a human being, and we value human community, and that's more, always more important than our own personal, uh, destiny for example--which of course is naturally of great importance to each one of us but that ha--always has to take second place to the larger view. And in, in many ways the great religious traditions really have that as the goal anyway, tha--Islam talks about the brotherhood of man--we would call it the brotherhood and sisterhood now but--Christian talk about the Kingdom of God, and Buddhists look to a time in which they would overcome all suffering and really m-mean a, a community which was in some degree of harmony so that's how I see our relationship to the past.

TM: What do you think would contribute most to that creation of global community? What do, what is it we need to do and what is it we have to dispense with?

Lloyd: Well we have to dispense with war to begin with.

TM: [Laughs] That would be a good start!

Lloyd: [Laughs] S-starting with nuclear, uh, weapons and then--and of course chemical weapons [indistinguishable] they're concerned with at the moment. And--let me put it this way. Up until a hundred years ago, we rather gloried in war. That is, one of the great professions was to be a soldier. And the Twentieth Century brought a great change to this. First of all, for example, in 1900, every government had its Minister of War. You know how that changed to "Minister of Defense?" And by the end of the century, we were concerned with war itself. So that I think we are making progress--eh whether we're making it fast enough is another matter but we are making, making progress. So the First World War lead immediately to the League of Nations. Well it wasn't as successful as it was hoped to be. So the Second World War lead to the United Nations. Well it hasn't proved as successful as, as we'd hoped, and we are due now for a third attempt--which really means rewriting the Constitution of the United Nations so that all individuals, and all nations, ha--have a reasonably equal democratic say in what the United Nations does, which at the moment of course they don't because of the five nations that have the power of veto--that, that is really killing the United Nations, a-as our own prime minister happened to say only, ehm, two-three days ago at the United Nations; I was very, very proud of him saying that. And so I think we're ready to move to this new level; the question is will it take a World War Three before we actually do it or not. I hope that reason will prevail amongst those who make these decisions, and that we may move--and the present rapprochement between Russia and America and the European powers just [indistinguishable] beginning to all of that anyway.

TM: Our guest today has been Sir Lloyd Geering; Sir Lloyd, thank you so much for joining us I've really enjoyed speaking with you today.

Lloyd: Thank you.