

# Religion NOW

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

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## RE-IMAGINING

*Last November, in Minneapolis, 2,000 women from all over the world gathered for a conference called Re-Imagining. It was part of the World Council of Churches' Decade in Solidarity with Women. It seemed innocent enough but it aroused tremendous controversy*

Each speaker at the conference was introduced by a chant, part of a Hawaiian aural tradition: "Bless Sophia/ dream the vision/ share the wisdom/ dwelling deep within."

The womens mandate from the WCC was to "challenge and expand our horizons in undreamed of ways." They thought they were exploring images of God that were especially relevant for women who longed to worship God and be Christians in ways that had meaning and relevance for them.

The traditionalists were appalled and queried where was "God the father, son and holy spirit?"

Sophia is related to the Greek word for wisdom and came to be known as the Spirit of Wisdom. This is personified in the ancient Old Testament Book of the Proverbs and was referred to as "she". That did not make Sophia/Wisdom a goddess, but Proverbs did speak of Wisdom as a partner with God in the act of creating the world. "I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight," she says, "rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race." (Proverbs 8:30).

Never did the conference speak of Sophia as a goddess in her own right or as a replacement for God. But Sophia/Wisdom took her place as a female image of God, just as we have many male images.

"Wisdom" became an expression for the spirit of God, emphasizing the spirit's creative activities.

As one woman theologian put it: "This Sophia is not a goddess but simply a biblical female metaphor for the Holy...She does not replace but rather refreshes traditional talk of God and Christ."

Organizations of all kinds are having to re-imagine themselves these days. Why should not religion as well? The challenge is not to abandon old truths but to preserve them by finding new ways of expressing them.

To speak of God in female terms is not to deny the validity of male images. It allows women - something that is long overdue - to be more fully human, to realize more completely the image of God.

The spirit of God is not restricted to the past but is alive and well in the present, leading to a new future.

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Jesus attached great importance to women and put them on an equality with men. This was a drastic step in his time when women had no social rights or voice. Jesus welcomed women among his closest followers and entrusted to them usefulness along side the rest.

## ADVANCING SECULARISM CHALLENGES RELIGION

Back in 1968, Peter L. Berger, professor of sociology in the graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, New York, addressed a gathering and predicted that, by the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a world-wide secular culture.

The pressure to give up religion will become intense, he said, because "we are all social beings and like to live in peace - including cognitive peace - with our fellows."

"I think people will become so bored with what religious groups have to offer that they will look elsewhere", he said.

He stressed that if his analysis was correct, religion would not decline because it was false or irrelevant, but simply because of social and psychological forces that were stronger. He said: "I think that, if you understand what these forces are, and also have an engagement with religious ideas, this can be liberating. You can begin to understand that the decline of religion has nothing to do with its truth or falsity."

In an aside in his speech, Berger said the ecumenical movement was "simply price-fixing" among similar religious packagers competing for a shrinking market. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Communism each offer only one of many religious commodities in the market place today, he said. "Since the churches increasingly have to take consumer preferences into account in marketing their wares," he added, "in a secularized world this means the churches are secularizing themselves from within in order to attract consumers."

"Protestantism is furthest advanced," he said. "It has reached the strange state of self-liquidation."

Now, 26 years later we see the fulfilling of his forecast.

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One summer when camping in Algonquin Park I socialized with a young family from Detroit. The mother was a sister of a Roman Catholic priest, James Kavangah, who felt compelled to leave his church because of his liberal views. She explained to me how torn their family was over accepting new concepts and renewal of their religion.

The following is a poem written by Rev. James Kavangah.

I HAVE LOST MY EASY GOD

"I have lost my easy God - the one whose name I knew since childhood.  
I knew his temper, his sullen outrage,  
his ritual forgiveness.  
I knew the strength of his arm, the sound of his insistent voice....  
I never told him how he frightened me,  
How he followed me as a child  
When I played with friends or begged for candy on Halloween.  
He was a predictable God, I was the unpredictable one.  
He was unchanging, omnipotent, all-seeing,  
I was volatile and helpless....  
Now my easy God is gone - he knew too much to be real,  
He talked too much to listen, he knew my words before I spoke.  
But I knew his answers as well-computerized and turned to dogma,  
His imperatives tattooed on my breast,  
his aloofness canonized in ritual.  
Now he is gone - my easy, stuffy God - God, the father-master, the mother-whiner, the dull whoring God who offered love bought by an infant's fear...."

## EACH MUST FIND JESUS FOR THEMSELVES

Based on the new knowledge of the historic Jesus, Daniel Easterman, has written his latest fictional novel, entitled, "The Judas Testament". Just published by HarperCollins, the novel contains the following statement by an old priest:

"When I was a young man, I believed in God - a conventional enough belief, even banal, but sufficient at a certain age to sustain a life of self-denial, which was what I really wanted. I do not know why. Young men are such strange creatures, even to their older selves.

But with time such a life grows harder. It is not so much that the flesh is weak, but more that the spirit is complex, and the mind is prone to wander. So it is that we come to other beliefs, other visions. An absent godhead is not enough. Hume's pendulum swings very heavily. I believed in so many things then: in my country, in peace, in purification through war, in justice, in punishment, in something I called mankind. Some of these I even believed in at the same time, if you can credit that.

Because I was a Christian, I knew that one day I would have to believe in Jesus. Not taste or sample him, not sip him in the mass, not give mental assent to the abstractions of Paul, not crucify myself alongside him in some juvenile denial of my human needs. No, I had to devour him, I wanted to swallow him whole. I knew there was more, but it was hard to find what it was. I believed in whatever came to hand. The saints, the sacraments, the Virgin, life everlasting: anything to put off the day. Anything but come close to that beating heart....

I got there in the end; I don't know how, I could never guide you there, I have no map for such a journey. Perhaps no one has, perhaps everyone has to find his way there alone. But he was there, as I had known he would be, he was

waiting for me. All alone. That was the awful thing to me in my arrival, how alone he was. Nothing can fill the wilderness he lives in. Not the church, not prayers prayed, not hymns sung - nothing. Each one has to appear before him just as I did, the alone meeting the alone."

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## LIFELONG LEARNING TO DO GOOD

Contemporary life raises questions that the church is failing to answer. Society is evolving new forms in which the church can no longer function. Jesus had direct association with the poor and the outcasts. He was where the action was. He was constantly leading out. "Behold, he goes before you into Galilee".

People have become tired of a church that sings harmless songs in a narrow valley on its way to another world. Their insular world presents a style of worship you don't find any place else, a language you don't hear any place else, a physical setting you don't see any place else. Where once the Christian message was preached in the marketplace in the language of the people, it is now preached in an archaic language, to music that is more than a century old, in a setting that is in-ward looking and resistant to change.

It is only fair to say every institution in society these days is playing "catch up" with history. Medicine, education, governments, business, are all running to keep pace with the post-modern era.

The Old Testament prophet, whom Jesus revered, exhorted his people to "learn to do good" (Isaiah 1:17). This is a significant word. We must

(Do Good, contin'd)

"learn to do good". (Isaiah 1:17).  
Isaiah preached that one must not only do the good they know, but must also learn new forms and expressions of goodness as life moves on. We must always make sure that the goodness we do is meaningful in the kind of world in which we live.

The church is forever challenged to live in tension with the example and character of Jesus, and to adjust to the changing demands of a new and ever-changing world.

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"The final test of religion is not religiousness, but love; not what I have done, not what I have believed, not what I have achieved, but how I have discharged the common charities of life". -Henry Drummond.

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#### JESUS CAN'T BE LEFT IN THE PAST

What a man Jesus was! He was a human person who did more than anyone else to better humanity. He did not drift among the commonplaces of life untouched by what he saw. He did not run from trouble because it was implicating, or sidestep human need because it was demanding. He consistently refused to answer the hard questions of life with half-truths or naive platitudes. He never left a person or a situation as he found it.

He was a man! He was the kind of man who had courage and the power to be. As we look at his life we might say, as the rock opera, "Jesus Christ Superstar" declared, "Jesus is cool".

Once you look more deeply at Jesus, the Palestinian Jew who lived in the first century, you find it increasingly hard to leave him in his own time and setting. The early Christians found it hard to leave him dead. They were

possessed with the knowledge his spirit and teaching would remain alive in the world. This was his resurrection and in his followers he is still alive today.

There are three observations that may be made about the influence of Jesus.

(1) Jesus makes God's presence in our world and in human life very human. In the Jesus of history we see a very human being, but one in whom people saw the nature of God, love. He expressed the godlike qualities of humour, joy, concern, power to heal. People saw in him glimpses of what God is like and then found God in their own lives.

(2) Finding God in your life re-orders it. Everyone who met Jesus, listened to him, tried his teaching, found their lives radically changed. They learned how to do good. Moral sensitivity, honesty, helpfulness, caring, became the norms of their lives.

(3) Encountering Jesus, his teachings and spirit, calls for a personal response. Surrounded as we are with a world with so many in need, so many problems, so many threats to our very survival, the ethics of Jesus demand our acknowledgment and acceptance. He showed that God in our lives enables us to better the world around us. It gives us the courage to be, the freedom to become what is our potential.

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"Religion NOW" is published in limited edition by the Rev. Ross E. Readhead, B.A., B.D., Cert. of Corrections, McMaster University, in the interest of furthering knowledge and participation in religion.

Dialogue is invited and welcomed.

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