

Rescuing Religion: How Faith Can Survive Its Encounter with Science

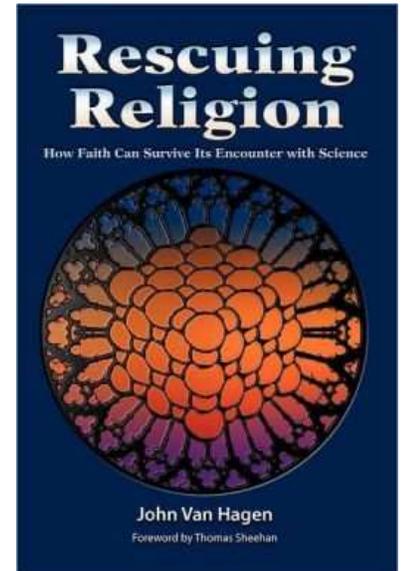
By: **John Van Hagen**

Length: 230 pages

Publisher: Polebridge Press

Publication Date: February 10, 2012

Also available through Amazon.com Kindle edition



In *Rescuing Religion* John Van Hagen argues that psychological theories and models of psychotherapy can help one hold on to a religious worldview while simultaneously living in a world increasingly described in scientific terms. *Rescuing Religion* grapples with that tension as it focuses on science's recent challenges to the historicity of the major Bible stories: Moses never existed, Jesus did not start a church. Yet facing such challenges presents us with an opportunity for religious growth. We can now go behind those Bible stories and glimpse the storytellers who in their own times faced enormous crises of faith. We can learn from their struggles and be inspired to face our own global ones. Like those ancient authors, we can search for God's power moving through history, even as we realize that we, like them, can only describe it in finite terms. Throughout the book, readers are buoyed up by examples of remarkable individuals who have sensed and described this movement.

Book Review by Brian Cahill

God made no covenant with Abraham, Moses did not lead the Jewish people out of Egypt, and Joshua never conquered Canaan. Jesus did not intend to start a new religion, did not see himself as the Messiah, and did not establish apostolic succession.

John Van Hagen, in his scholarly, readable, timely and courageous book, provides a comprehensive summary of recent research regarding the lack of historical evidence of significant events recorded in the Old Testament and the New Testament. He writes from a faith perspective and with the wisdom and sensitivity of an experienced clinical psychologist. He understands how disturbing and disruptive these new discoveries can be. He challenges those of us who are believers to find a middle ground between science and fundamentalism, gently but firmly encouraging us to adjust our focus, to discover how to continue our faith journey in the absence of long held scriptural constructs. He also respectfully challenges organized religion to adjust to this reality, so it can continue to play a meaningful role in people's lives and in their efforts to have a meaningful relationship with God.

He provides both religious leaders and lay people great assistance in this effort, by showing that Jewish leaders of the past and leaders of the early Church were faced with similar challenges. He

warns us of the dangers of relying on scripture as literal history and reminds us that just as religious leaders of Judaism and early Christianity were fallible, so are today's leaders. He probes the value of narrative, myth, ritual and community in our lives, and he presents three examples of individuals forced to adjust but not reject their beliefs, when they were confronted with undeniable realities challenging their world view.

Van Hagen sets the tone of his effort early on: "I wrote this book because I believe new information about religion offers us an opportunity to rethink the values and significance of our deeply held religious beliefs. Additionally, such rethinking can open up a way of appreciating the religious spirit that is within us, within all people, and that comes alive in times of crisis". He adds, "Such a crisis does not mean abandoning our particular belief systems or practices, but encourages us to accept that they are, like ourselves, fragile and fallible".

He defines myth as a story that can inspire us. "We don't just read the story, we are so touched by it that it moves us to act. A myth can be both a map and a toolbox for a spiritual journey. The shift from history to myth brings to the fore our own responsibility to live out the truth captured by the story. Myth is a partial answer to the question of if the Bible is not history, what is it?" He suggests that Bible stories, even if they are not historically accurate, are powerful and motivating.

He is very clear about the issue of historicity: "We are faced with writing that does not so much record the past, but creates it". But he reminds us that our faith even in light of this new evidence, allows us to continue to see the spiritual value of scripture. The author as a man of faith and experienced clinician comes through as he writes, "If we give up our faith, we run the risk of giving up a guidance system that is even more important in a postmodern age that preaches a gospel of relativism". And his own vision is clear: "What I see emerging is a new journey to faith characterized by creatively managing the conflict between traditional faith and new information".

Van Hagen summarizes the work of respected researchers and archaeologists, including Israel Finkelstein and William Dever, demonstrating the lack of historicity of the Old Testament stories of Abraham and his descendents, Moses, Joshua, and later, David and Solomon. He points out that these stories were written well after the fact, during the time of the Babylonian Captivity and the subsequent return of the Jewish people to an out of the way province of the Persian Empire. He argues that the Jewish leaders at that time needed to define Jewish identity, needed to define their relationship with God, and needed to create a narrative that would engender, inspire and fortify the faith of the Jewish people. This was the introduction of monotheism, the belief in one God. This was also the introduction of the concept of God's kingdom here on earth, with Jerusalem as its center.

The author takes some effort to not only deconstruct the story of Joshua (no conquering the land of Canaan, no knocking down the walls of Jericho), but to show what happens when religious conviction can result in the slaughtering of people, when a religious story can be used to justify conquistador devastation of Latin America, Afrikaner exploitation of black South Africans, or illegal settlements in the West Bank. But Van Hagen is careful to assert and endorse the valid and clearly articulated values of justice, charity, compassion and peace that are also found in the Old Testament stories.

Finally, he describes the story of Victor Frankl's survival from the Holocaust experience, facing the horrible, overwhelming, undeniable reality that God's chosen people were not saved, yet using his religion to find meaning in life, and to develop a theology of suffering, a heroic faith in a loving God, and a commitment to encounter, love and serve his fellow man.

In addressing the historicity of the New Testament, the author draws primarily on the work of New Testament scholars Raymond Brown and John Meier. He initially focuses on the distinction between the historical Jesus as developed by recent research, and the Christ of the New Testament. He argues that it is necessary to understand the relationship between Jesus of history and Christ of faith because it is an inherent part of any serious faith journey, and it helps us understand how Christianity developed out of the context of Judaism, and in a short time spread to the non Jewish world, and even took on an anti-Jewish tone.

Van Hagen summarizes the findings related to the historical Jesus, his perception of himself as a prophet, his strong faith in God, proclaimed in words and actions, his belief in a loving God, even in his apparent failure and ultimate death, and the likelihood that he did not see himself as the Messiah, and had no intention of founding a new religion. But always keeping the larger story in mind, the author reminds us that even if Jesus did not begin the movement that we know as Christianity, "Jesus is significant because his tremendous faith offers us the opportunity to appreciate what the process of faith is all about". The faith of Jesus allowed him to reconcile a loving merciful God in the midst of a crushing Roman occupation in an isolated part of the world where poverty and hunger and death were a ever present part of the landscape. The faith of Jesus motivated him to socialize with the poor and with the pariahs of Jewish society. And of course, Van Hagen reminds us, that faith journey of Jesus is one from which we can learn and apply to our world and our life. Managing the tension between belief in a loving merciful God and the existence of a chaotic, destructive, violent and cruel world was the faith journey of Jesus, and is our faith journey.

The author shows that much of the New Testament writings were based on after the fact experiences of the disciples of Jesus, rather than on incidents that can be documented and confirmed during the life time of Jesus. He also summarizes how through the writings of early Christian leaders, particularly Paul, who emphasized Jesus as the Messiah, and later through the Christian Church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, the historical Jesus faded, replaced by Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. Van Hagen also points out that prior to the movement to unity and orthodoxy, the followers of Jesus preached their own version of his message, depending on the needs of the people they were addressing.

In reinforcing the conclusion of scholars that Jesus did not found the Christian Church, Van Hagen references Mathew's Gospel where the writer has Jesus telling Peter that he is the rock upon which the church will be built. Van Hagen cites John Meir's research which shows there is no historical basis for this passage. Meir also refutes the idea of Peter as the bishop of Rome and the first pope, by pointing out that the office of bishop did not come into existence in the early Church until a century after the death of Peter.

The author takes us through a review of each Gospel, its chronology, its emphasis, its audience and the views and needs of those audiences. In doing so, he not only informs and educates us, but he begins a beautiful and powerful review of the early small Jewish/ Christian communities,

the human need for community that existed then and exists now, and the lessons that can be gleaned from early Christian communities regarding the value and efficacy of bottom-up, communal church structure rather than top-down, hierarchical church structure.

He stops just this side of preaching when he writes, “The challenge for the church today is not to simply accept evolution but to see it as part of the process of faith, for individuals and also for communities. Rather than privileging its own survival needs, the church can embrace those of others; rather than focusing entirely on maintaining its own traditions, it can support the preservation of all traditions that contribute to the common good. It can once again strive to create a new kind of community, one in which serious differences are tolerated for the common good”. But Van Hagen is not naïve or even overly hopeful, especially when he describes the transition of the mostly communal first century church to a more doctrinaire second century church where, “Identity became dependent on specific beliefs and the penalty for not believing became a serious crime”. While the author is clear that the need to address the findings and implications of recent scriptural research should be a major church priority, he is silent on where Catholic Church leaders should place that priority in relation to other compelling priorities, such as recovering credibility from the child abuse scandal, rethinking their position on women, gays and their entire approach to sexuality, and reclaiming their lost moral authority as shepherds and teachers.

Van Hagen points out that the leaders of the second century church were mostly non Jewish, and he describes the roles of Justin Martyr and Ignatius of Antioch in defining the new Christian faith, emphasizing uniformity and hierarchy. The author also describes the fractures between Judaism and Christianity and the Roman persecution of Christianity as formative traumas that significantly influenced both the growth and identity of Christianity, and brought forth a new narrative relating to the cult of martyrdom, the claim of apostolic succession, and the development of sacred writings augmenting Jewish scripture, including emphasis on the Gospel of John, which promoted the divinity of Jesus. Van Hagen presents Irenaeus of Lyons as a key player in assembling and organizing the new Christian writings, joining them with edited Jewish scripture, and eventually developing the core foundation for Christian belief stated in the Nicene Creed, that with some minor changes, is still recited today.

Van Hagen points out that even though the origin stories of both Judaism and Christianity do not stand up to historical scrutiny, each story “contains an expression of spiritual triumph in the face of nearly overwhelming crises”, and at the same time both stories have downsides, a tendency toward fundamentalism, an urge for orthodoxy, an inclination to privilege one religious story over another, all challenges in the awkwardness and the complexity of the faith journey.

The author completes this section of his book by profiling Barack Obama and his faith journey to community. He makes valid points in that Obama’s experience as a searcher makes him respectful of diverse religious values, and his religious journey led him from a global view to a specific faith. However, in this intense period of vitriolic, personal and political partisanship, an individual with a lower profile might have made the author’s case more effectively. Tea Party members, Fox News watchers, Christian fundamentalists, and even a few Catholic bishops may never read this book when they see President Obama is presented as a model.

In the final section of *Rescuing Religion*, John Van Hagen begins with an analysis of the power of narrative, using Paul as an example of creating a successful narrative. Paul's emphasis on empowerment through connection to Christ motivated Christian followers to virtue, obedience and faithfulness. Likewise, the author reminds us that as we look at our own stories, we are motivated to move forward in our life, even and perhaps especially when our stories include conflict and pain. The narrative can also become a force for harm and destruction, as we have seen a number of times throughout the history of the Church, partially, but significantly because among other things, the narrative is about power. Van Hagen cautions us that "The journey of faith is a challenge to live in a world of many narratives and to be careful about stories that claim too much".

He describes the value of rituals. He addresses the conflict between religion and science, the fallacies of both science advocates and religion advocates claiming superiority over the other, and urges sincere and meaningful dialogue between the protagonists on both sides, so each side can come to see the "limitations in their respective myths". He also describes the journey of Mikhail Gorbachev in his non religious, but certainly spiritual and psychological transformation as the leader of Soviet Russia, coming to realize the failure of the Soviet System. Using Gorbachev's story, Van Hagen describes the four stages of belief modification; appreciation of the belief, cognitive dissonance, assumption of responsibility for change, development of a more global solution. He and points to these stages as tools for all of us when we are confronted with substantial evidence challenging our long held beliefs.

In concluding this thoughtful work, the author urges us to carve out our own faith journey that can be sustained in this increasingly secular age. He reminds us that our religious pursuit should not cause us to fear science, and that we should learn to value myth as a way to move to religious thought. Finally, he challenges us to real faith, "to believe not just something beyond ourselves, but something so mysterious that our limitations as humans prevent us from describing it".

In *The Marginal Jew, Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, John Meier does not address the historicity of the resurrection, because he maintains that "it can only be affirmed by faith". By the same token, while there may be no discoverable evidence that Jesus perceived himself as God, I believe through Jesus we get a tiny glimpse of God, not the only way to glimpse God, but the operative way for me. I believe that through Jesus we learn how to live our lives, not the only way to learn, but the operative way for me. I believe that when I receive the Eucharist, God is with me, and I believe there are times when God's Spirit is with me. Do I understand all this? No. Isaiah, whoever he was, and whenever he wrote, tells us that God is hidden. Michael Novak, the Catholic philosopher, tells us that no one can comprehend God, but that incomprehensibility does not preclude faith. Is my faith steady and strong? Not always. Flannery O'Connor tells us that faith rises and falls like ocean tides, and that we should not think it will always stay with us.

John Van Hagen's well written, sensitive, risk taking book does not make me run from science or retreat to thoughtless literalism, but rather, provides a guide for me in my faith journey, gives me a greater appreciation of the spiritual value of scripture, offers comfort and support in responding to potentially disturbing biblical research, makes me more aware of the spiritual domain in all of

us, and above all, reminds me that the journey of faith is not without ambiguity, and the core of faith is not without mystery.

In *The Great Transformation, the Beginnings of our Religious Traditions*, Karen Armstrong points out that all the great religions began not out of a need for dogma, but out of a need for compassion. So if my favorite Old Testament passage, The Book of Wisdom, Chapter 3 (The souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them.....) was not written by Solomon, but by some unknown author 500 years later, it is no less comforting and no less a reminder of God's mercy and compassion. And if Jesus never specified how we should be serving others as described in Mathew 25, and if Jesus never said, "What you did for the least of my brothers, you did for me", it is no less compelling and no less a reminder of the Christian message of compassion and what we are called to in this life.

Throughout *Rescuing Religion*, we are aware of the author's experience and perspective as a clinical psychologist. He follows in the footsteps of another thoughtful and literate psychologist who over 100 years ago, understood the value and the potential pitfalls of religion. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James wrote, "I am no lover of disorder and doubt as such. Rather do I fear to lose truth by this pretension to possess it wholly".

Finally, John Van Hagen captures the spirit of Raymond Brown, who in *The Introduction to the New Testament*, describes his personal and professional research efforts as "following the principle of *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking intellectually respectable expression". In pursuing intellectually respectable scholarship, in striking a balance between science and faith, and in providing a comforting and structured approach to respond to the lack of scriptural historicity, the author has made a major contribution in rescuing religion.