

JOHN VAN HAGEN

RESCUING RELIGION

CAN FAITH SURVIVE ITS ENCOUNTER WITH SCIENCE?

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FOREWORD

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In this eminently readable and deeply informed book, psychologist Dr. John Van Hagen invites his readers to face the crisis of cognitive dissonance brought on by advances in archeology, biblical studies, and historical science. Many of the old bible stories can no longer be responsibly understood as records of real history, whether that be the stories in Tanakh (the Jewish bible) about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or about Moses and the Exodus. Likewise, regarding the Christian gospels, professional biblical research, most often conducted by believing Christian scholars, calls into question core traditional beliefs concerning Jesus, his life, his message, his miracles and self-understanding, and most importantly, what happened historically after he died. The crisis brought on by what Van Hagen calls globally “the new information” certainly does undermine central doctrines of contemporary Western religions, especially Christianity, but it can also serve as an impetus to forging new communities of authentic believers and non-believers alike.

First, the Bad News about the Good Book. Tradition biblical archeology as carried out, for example, by William F. Albright, Roland de Vaux, and Kathleen Kenyon typically used Tanakh (the Jewish scriptures) as a handbook guiding their search for biblical remains. Today, however, archeologists, both Israeli and American, both religious and non-religious, have reached a consensus in their research that there is no good historical evidence in the material record to support traditional biblical stories about the call of Abraham and the covenant God made with him (allegedly between 2000 and 1500 BCE), or about the story of Joseph and the famine that brought the Israelites to Egypt (allegedly during the Hyksos period, 1720-1550 BCE), or about Moses leading the twelve tribes out of Egypt (supposedly after 1300 BCE), or about Joshua’s conquest of Canaan (allegedly after ca. 1100 BCE). On the contrary, they find much of the material evidence argues against the historicity of these inspiring scriptural tales.

Likewise, the best contemporary Christian scholarship on the New Testament argues that Jesus of Nazareth (whose historical Aramaic name was Yeshua) was understood by his contemporaries as a charismatic and very human prophet intent on a user-friendly reform of the Judaism of his day. Yeshua had no intentions of founding a new religion that would have himself as its center, would be open to Gentiles, and would eventually be called Christianity. (Nor did he have in mind the apostolic succession of bishops, so dear to Roman Catholics and the Anglican community.) His preaching was focused on Jews, not Gentiles, and on a benign reinterpretation of Halakha (Jewish law and traditions), in part along the lines of his quasi-contemporary, rabbi Hillel (110 BCE? – 10 CE), and in part in terms of much more radical trajectories.

On the basis of scientific-historical investigations of the Christian scriptures, these Christian scholars argue that Jesus did not think he was the Messiah (the Christ) – in fact, he likely rebuked those who claimed he was. Least of all did he think he was God, the equal of his Father in heaven, the way he is presented in the relatively late gospel of John (ca. 100 CE). Jesus preached not himself but what he called “the kingdom of God,” by which he meant God’s gracious empowerment of the least fortunate: the impoverished, the social and religious outcasts, the unclean. He called for *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), not “repentance,” as the word is usually translated, but rather a radical conversion to a life of justice and mercy. As regards his alleged miracles, Catholic scholar John P. Meier, after an exhaustive analysis of the four gospels, argues that of the thirty-two miracles attributed to Jesus by the evangelists, only twelve (that is, 38%) have *any* kind of historical event underlying them, and not necessarily a miraculous event.

Some Christian scholars, like Dr. Van Hagen, argue that Jesus looked forward to a cosmic, apocalyptic in-break of God to establish his kingdom on earth. Others make the case for a prophetic Jesus who was eschatological (“the time for conversion is *now*”) but not apocalyptic (“the end is nigh!”). In either case, the portrait of the historical Jesus limed by these scholars cannot be brought into line with orthodox Christian doctrines about Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity who took on human flesh to redeem humankind from sin. And worst cut of all, contemporary Christian scholars (except for some conservative hold-outs— notably, and sadly, Bishop N.T. Wright) find no evidence that Jesus’ “resurrection” (better, in Greek, his being metaphorically “awakened” or “stood back up on his feet”) was a historical event that took place at a certain enclosed tomb three days after his execution.

Dr. Van Hagen’s book, which he says is aimed at “skeptical believers,” probes this sore point of cognitive dissonance, the mental space wherein the believer is caught between traditional orthodox doctrine and the historical information that clashes with it. In the first two parts of his book Van Hagen ferrets out what he calls the “story behind the story,” that is, the historical facts on the ground as they have been construed by contemporary historians, facts that underlie but conflict with the elaborate, allegedly historical but more often fanciful and even mythical “alternative histories” created by the biblical writers.

He finds that it is more often the case that biblical “history” is a creation of religious myth rather than these stories being a record of “what really happened” (von Ranke). In other

words, the bible creates its own “history”—an alternative history—as an antidote and corrective to what actually happened to the Jews. Following the best scholarship on Tanakh, Van Hagen argues that although many books of the bible purport to recount events that took place as far back as the Middle and Late Bronze Ages and the early Iron Age (roughly 2000 to 900 BCE), most of what we know as the Jewish bible was written and/or edited only during the period of Persian domination of the Jews (538–333 BCE),.

Among these creative constructions of an alternative “biblical history” was the story of the covenant that YHWH/Adonai made with Abraham, who was promised that (at the very least) the land of Canaan, including modern Palestine and Gaza, would be the possession of his descendants. These writings and redactions, Van Hagen shows, were ways that the Jews of the Persian period, who were still reeling from the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Babylonians but were now living under Persian protection as the occupants of Yehud (the delimited area around Mizpah and Jerusalem), created a grandiose master-narrative of their monotheistic covenant with the High God. They wrote their ancestors and themselves into a larger story, in fact an alternative universe of “salvation history,” which included Joshua’s triumphant conquest of Canaan, and David’s and Solomon’s subsequent rule over an expansive kingdom. In this way they were able to satisfactorily explain to themselves their current suborned situation. They could imagine that their God would remain faithful to his covenant with Abraham, and thus they could look forward to the restoration of a large Jewish kingdom theocratically ruled by a Davidic warrior prince sent to them by God. This was an exemplary case of the losers rather than the winners writing history.

And the early Christians did much the same thing when, as in Paul’s letters or in the four gospels, they produced religious narratives that tied their martyred prophet into the Jewish expectation of a messianic savior. In their post-mortem religious hermeneutics Yeshua became *first* a martyr who witnessed to God’s kingdom, *then* God’s deputy, the “Son of Man,” who would soon return to usher in God’s kingdom on earth, *later still* as the salvific prime minister of his Father’s kingdom—and *finally* as the divine equal of God and as existent from before time began. It would be hard to think up a grander narrative than that: the redemptive incarnation of God himself that ties together, forever more, heaven and earth, time and eternity, the divine and the human.

In Van Hagen’s telling, there is an analogy between how, on the one hand, both the Jewish and the Christian communities forged new identities in and through the crises – and, on the other, cognitive dissonance between historical fact and myth-making faith that besets believers today. There is, moreover, a strong evolutionary motif running through this book, often conjugated with the theme of therapeutic resolutions to personal and social crises. And that ties into another story that Van Hagen has to tell: about the way the peoples of the book, both Jewish and Christian, through a process of hermeneutical imagination and creativity, found new and healing meanings for themselves and their communities by creating narratives that reinterpret the present and re-imagine the future.

Van Hagen urges upon us such a hermeneutical-historical, even mythical reconfiguration of both our religious and non-religious lives. “If we are to evolve,” he writes, “we need more than reason; we need a mythical view that inspires us to face the crises of our time.”

Some myths, of course, can be deleterious. To take one example, the warrior myth of Joshua subduing the cities of Canaan would have the God of the Israelites directing, or at least approving of, mass executions—virtual genocide—against the ethnically and religiously “other.” Likewise, the book of mythical salvation history called *Against Heretics*, which Irenaeus, the Christian bishop of Lyon, wrote ca. 180 CE—a story that survived well into the twentieth century—excludes from salvation, and condemns to hell, those who *claimed* they were Christians but did not subscribe to Irenaeus’ master-narrative of salvation and therefore were condemned to hell. Myths, in short, *can* be dehumanizing and even murderous, as we can see from the Christian myth of Jews as murderers of Yeshua.

But Van Hagen calls not so much for a new “myth” as for a *humanizing story* that includes everyone, and nature as well, in a community dedicated to life, more life, and a better life for all. He sees this “new creation” as a process of self-discipline and individual responsibility for the sake of the common good, a process that, like life, is often ambiguous and awkward, but one that values each one’s own tradition while recognizing the value in other traditions.

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What does all this have to do with religion today, especially Christian religion? Van Hagen’s vision is broad. He sees the challenge for the churches today as

not simply to accept evolution [in all senses] but to see it as part of the process of faith, for individuals and also 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. We can once again strive to create a new kind of community, one in which serious differences are tolerated for the sake of that larger good. In such a revitalized version of Christianity, both its members and the larger society would be challenged to develop moral behavior that might enable us to survive as a species. We are all, Christians and non-Christians, part of a unique cosmic process in which change is the only constant and extinction is always a possible outcome.

Notice that the book is entitled *Rescuing Religion*, not *Rescuing God*. Van Hagen carefully stays on this side of a possible natural-supernatural divide. The narratives he suggests we shape, and the rituals he suggests as therapeutic, are not necessarily focused on a supernatural self-revealing God but can be secular as well. The criterion is simply: do they advance the common good and one’s own health? The value systems he valorizes in the book include those of the atheist and the agnostic, both the secular and the sacred, without any appeal to or commitment to a divine God. He counsels a spirituality that is not just religious but non-religious as well. The last part of the book is dedicated to sketching a set of civil virtues that he would have both believers and non-believers sign on to. In all these chapters one very much hears John Van Hagen the seasoned therapist, never judging, never imposing on his interlocutor, but helping the patient to slowly break through the false stories that impede full human flourishing.

God, as we know, is on the ropes these days, at least in some public squares, battered by the often simplistic arguments of the current run of village atheists. One of the virtues of Van Hagen's book is that he gives God a rest, allows him the (endless) sabbatical that the Bible says God chose for himself on the seventh day of creation. The core of that story is the empowering of human beings for a rich and satisfying life in community and in this world, without a Deep Back-up, a God-of-the-gaps whom one could invoke in times of need or crisis. God-on-sabbatical, in short, doesn't answer his phone or read his email.

The God of Judaism and Christianity is the first and best secular humanist: he creates the *saeculum*, the secular order that he declares to be "very good," in effect *sacred*, and he turns the whole show over to humankind, to manage for better or worse, without appeal. The God of Judaism and Christianity is no longer "at home," at least not where one would expect find a respectable God. In one story, God has poured himself out without remainder into the world and its people. In another, he has left us quite alone and, like Godot, will never come back again. We're bereft of all gods, and left with the task that makes religion look like child's play: the task of humanizing ourselves and others.

John Van Hagen has taken the usual markers of religion—creed (or story), code (or ethics), cultic practices (prayer and liturgy)—and dissolved them into what he calls *communitas*, a community of cooperation, imagination, story-telling, justice, and yes, maybe even love. In *Rescuing Religion* he has shown one possible way of rescuing ourselves.