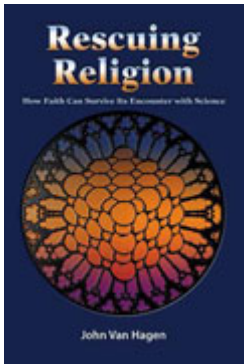


Living out faith amid the world of science

Thomas J. Nolan | Nov. 28, 2012



RESCUING RELIGION: HOW FAITH CAN SURVIVE ITS ENCOUNTER WITH
SCIENCE

By John Van Hagen

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Reviewed by THOMAS J. NOLAN

We live in a world where scientific minds continue to unravel complex ideas in a way history has never before seen. Amid all of this, faith and religion risk becoming trivialized as, for example, research shows that much of the Bible is not historically accurate. The question in the life of a believer naturally becomes: How could there be a God when science could prove that the stories in both the New and Old Testaments contradict scientific fact? Simply put, how could anybody believe in such things as talking serpents or walking on water?

In *Rescuing Religion: How Faith Can Survive Its Encounter With Science*, psychologist John Van Hagen addresses what some would see as faults in both Jewish and Christian Scripture. He demonstrates how these are less errors than a natural way people in another time, people living in a different storytelling tradition, dealt with the situations they encountered.

For Van Hagen, a former Catholic priest with a doctorate in clinical psychology from Adelphi University, it is not about taking the Bible as an accurate account of history, but rather understanding and appreciating when, where and why the texts were written.

Van Hagen uses three modern examples of faith journeys that help readers put into perspective the way in which faith could be lived out amid the world of science. He focuses on Viktor Frankl's successful Jewish faith journey despite experiencing life in Nazi concentration camps, where one could easily lose all hope in any greater meaning. The example of Frankl demonstrates the need for one to search for some type of meaning in life, even in the absolute toughest of circumstances.

The author uses the example of President Barack Obama's efforts as a young person to find community. Belonging to a community, Van Hagen feels, is a way in which people today could also find and live within a strong faith environment. Lastly, Van Hagen uses the example of Mikhail Gorbachev's personal experience of

cognitive dissonance. Gorbachev was able to alter his fundamental understanding of the situation in the Soviet Union to allow his subsequent actions to contradict that prior understanding.

In the same way, Van Hagen says, we must be able to accept science even in times when it may cause such a dissonance in our faith lives. All of the science in the world that affects our daily lives should not affect our own religious journeys. Rather, it should be an integral part of our lives and complement our belief systems.

It is through a better understanding of the intention and purpose of Scripture that we could understand where the stories come from, and what purpose they served when they were written.

By taking a look at our own psychological and theological minds, as well as the minds of the writers of both the Old and New Testaments, we can accept the truth of science in the world while growing in our faith. Van Hagen asserts that a change in a thought process from historical to mythical will not be simple or quick. However, *Rescuing Religion* allows one to think in a different way. It uses some of the greatest psychological and theological minds of our time to begin to change the understanding of faith.

Van Hagen gives an interesting take on the psychology of the authors of the Bible to explain why the stories were created, a lens through which many theologians generally don't look.

This book definitely sheds light on a modern struggle, but speaks to an audience already aware and embracing what some would call a conflict. Unless one is fundamentalist or ultraconservative, the issue of how to balance science and religion is nothing new. It is something that has been on the table for decades. Any book like this would likely outrage the extremists who read the Bible as fact. This is the audience that needs to read such a book in our time, but they are not the ones who would pick it up off the shelf. This book is a modern *Origin of Species*: something realistic and accepted by the educated, but not even an option for the ultraconservative. The doubting faithful in the modern world would benefit the most from *Rescuing Religion*.

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