



# Re-Imagining God

*The New Believers: Re-Imagining God*

by Rachael Kohn; Harper-Collins; 2003

Reviewed by Ian Crumpton of Christchurch

Rachael Kohn, a keynote speaker at the 2005 conference, is a religious journalist with a strong academic background. Her book is a survey of contemporary developments across the world's major faiths and across the world.

She begins with the "re-invention of the self" exemplified by Frank Baum – writer of "The Wizard of Oz" – and his theosophical views, typical of New Age religions, which see themselves as more evolved than traditional believers; not religious, but searchers after truth, seeking, not God, but the essence of God. She contrasts Carlyle's interest in the heroic figure with Mill's emphasis on the moral and legal justice underpinning social change.

The chapter on "Re-writing the Bible" describes the work of Robert Funk and the Westar Institute, continuing the Enlightenment questioning of much of the traditional interpretation of Scripture. Such doctrines as the Virgin Birth, the bodily resurrection, indeed all supernaturalism and divinisation of Jesus are stripped away, as accretions of tradition. The heading "Re-writing" the Bible is misleading. It is more a re-interpreting, an application of critical historical method to the text. The work of Geza Vermes, Rudolph Bultman, John Dominic Crossan, and the popularising work of John Spong are all evaluated. Spong's "New Christianity," she claims, bears little relationship to the faith of the New Testament. In Kohn's view, Spong's "God beyond theism" amounts to little more than a radical call to love.

"Returning to the mother" begins by describing the work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton: "The Women's Bible" of 1895. Twenty-three women scholars contributed articles. The work was linked to women's current political aspirations. Kohn then traces the slow progress of women in social, political and religious life. She notes the distinctive nature of female ministry.

"Restoring the Earth" describes the powerful "eco-theology" development, including attempts to re-interpret the Bible in the light of an ecological concern, and the work of people like David Suzuki, Thomas Berry, and Matthew Fox. Kohn sees value in their work as "providing an opening to environmentalism through the back door of the church" (p.67). She regards scientists like James Lovelock, with his "Gaia" hypothesis, as the movement's most authentic spiritual innovators.

New trends in Judaism and Buddhism are discussed, showing how each has developed to meet the spiritual needs of the west, People like Stephen Batchelor re-package the faith for western consumption.

The kabbalistic mystical tradition of Judaism has been important (p.112): we are immersed in a “sea of miracles.”

“Re-souling Psychology” begins with analysis of Freud’s rejection of religion as “obsessional neurosis”; by contrast, Jung valued the mythical “collective unconscious”, while rejecting with Freud, religion that trades on fear and guilt. “Spiritual psychology” was developed by Robert Sardello and others, some like Thomas Moore (p.132), blending Buddhism and psychology. “Removing Morality” discusses Neale Donald Walsch’s popular series: “Conversations with God” They might be summed up in one phrase: “Go with the flow.” His is a doctrineless, freewheeling approach to being who you are. Don Cupitt, Kohn claims, casts faith in the same vein, but employs a more academic style. There is not one true morality, but many ethical systems. “Life-style rules.” In Nietzsche’s terms, morality is dead: nihilism is the permanent human condition (p.143). Zen Buddhism has honed this way of living to a fine art: “Living with the nothing.”

“Re-claiming Moral Sense” Looks at the changing attitudes towards animals in the light of modern behavioural studies. We see ourselves much more as part of the animal kingdom, not over-against it. Our perceptions, attitudes, morality, and complex relationships are evolving. The rise of science over the last two hundred years has dampened belief in the supernatural. J.B. Haldane, for example grasped the fact that the miraculous accompanies many religions, but does not constitute them. Religion’s real power is in the persuasion of its ethic, for which it does not need recourse to miracle or supernaturalism. It is the stronger when grounded in contemporary understanding.

If the bulk of this book is analytical, detached, and journalistic, it is in the last two chapters that Rachael summarises and comments on contemporary trends in religion.

“Redeeming Religion from Itself (cults don’t think)” Religiously inspired terrorism, Kohn says, shows just how important and precious are the religious reforms secured in the West over hundreds of years. Critical scrutiny must be applied to religions, as to other areas of life. Education and the cultivation of the mind is vital. if this is to happen. The movement that formed to promote “The Fundamentals” of faith tried to return to what was seen as the essentials of faith. Modernists were re-formulating faith in the light of modern scientific and philosophical understanding. Schweitzer saw faith residing in human understanding; saw the danger of the dead hand of bureaucracy in religion: “Christianity cannot take the place of thinking, but must be founded on it..” A combination of rational thought and faith was essential, he thought. “Reverence for life” was the hallmark of his faith – as indeed it is of Cupitt’s. Hans Kung picked up the task of articulating a religious agenda for our time: In 1993 he launched his “New World Ethic for Global Responsibility.” He was seeking to express something all could agree to. He came up with: autonomy of the person; self criticism as necessary for religious dialogue; and a theology of peace... in short, a humanistic advocacy.

But the modern religious scene, Kohn points out, is dominated by a spirit of sectarian hatred, currently spreading most strongly through the Islamic world. It is similar to the spirit which underlay Nazi attitudes. What Kohn fails to point out is that this attitude should be no surprise. It clearly results from decades of colonial exploitation and playing off factions against each other. Religious life is always in danger of descending into an anti-human system which it insulates itself from thinking and progress. And in the West, Kohn points to such moral collapses as that of Enron and World.com; the moral lapses of some religious leaders, and the double standards that hold up certain ideals of business or family life, when the reality is something else. There is considerable dissention within many religions today. And groups will use interfaith events as a stage on which to present a sanitised face to gain more broad acceptance.

Despite all these weakness, Kohn sees religious faith as a vital part of the human scene, of most value when accountability, mutual respect, sacrifice and courage are all part of its expression.

*Ian Crumpton*