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## Something Old . . . Something New

By Ron Allen

We are not just a *modern* society anymore. We are what social commentators and historians call, *postmodern*. The Modern era began with the Enlightenment of the 18th century. It was founded on the reliability of human reason. Only that which was open to observation and testing by the scientific method could be taken as fact. Other sources of authority were questioned. People looked increasingly to science rather than religion for answers to life's problems.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, society in developed lands became increasingly secular. People who went to university in those countries were educated in a knowledge paradigm biased against the idea of an invisible sacred reality. God died. Social institutions began to operate out of a view inherently skeptical of a supreme moral source.

The Modern Era saw the birth of states where God was expelled. Even in America, God became less needful for development of public policy. He was nevertheless allowed to flourish in regions of private belief. All the while we went from strength to strength industrially, technologically, and economically. Modernism achieved a rare thing in history: civilization based on the irrelevance of God.

Now something has changed. Optimism about the future, a

hallmark of Modernism, has evaporated. In the last half of the twentieth century, the modernist house of cards began to collapse. The most intellectually cultivated nation of modern Europe, Germany, began to behave irrationally. Its violent ideology and inhumane methods defied human progress.

Then Marxist dogma took hold in large blocs of world population. In turn, it too proved regressive. Toward the end of last century, only one world power was left standing to promote and defend the ideals of freedom and liberal democracy.

The scientific rationalism that produced the Modern Era is being questioned today. More and more people are refusing to take for granted the pronouncements of scientists and social engineers. Science has given us many wonderful things. But science has also given us the power to blow the world to bits. Is this advancement?

How reasonable is the science that makes our air unfit to breathe? How rational is economic rationalism in light of the widening gap between the rich and poor? How civilized are we if we spend more of our resources on weapons in order to maintain and defend an unfair status quo? How intelligent is it to reduce cities to rubble with our ordnance?

These and many other questions inhabit the postmodern mind. Cynicism is taking hold. That social evils will be overcome by new technologies is no longer an idea with much traction.

Add to this the fact that science, which rejected the idea of God, is now being surpassed by so-called 'new science.' Researchers in quantum physics, astronomy and biology are overturning former scientific facts. Faced with the limits of their knowledge, many scientists are contemplating mystery (or God) once more. As these new discoveries make their way down to ordinary people, they are beginning to realize that the secular universe of absolute certainty was, and is, illusory.

As well as a shifting of the ground in science's understanding of the universe, another god of the age, the free market economy—itsself a product of modernism and the engine of its material comforts—has shown itself to be fickle and unworthy of trust.

Post-moderns are finding less and less to believe in. They have become disenchanting modernists. The modern era

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# EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

*“For in the gospel the righteousness... a righteousness from God is revealed... (Romans 1:17).*

When the twentieth century began, it was taken for granted that right and wrong were categories based squarely on the existence of God. Today in Europe, Australia, and increasingly in North America, religion and morality have undergone a divorce. Not only is religion discredited in the public domain, it is widely regarded as the enemy of right and the cause of much that is wrong.

Chief among factors behind this shift is the rise and dominance of scientific explanations of the universe and its life forms. Socio-biologists now believe they can account for moral sensibility by referring to mental mutations that have proved useful over long periods of time, in a law of survival of the fittest. In his book, *‘Evolutionary naturalism,’* author Michael Ruse says that values of right and wrong are “no more than adaptations such as eyes or noses.” He further states that a better understanding of biology might well incline us to go against morality.


Ideas like these increasingly inhabit the minds of writers, artists, moviemakers, lawmakers, teachers, doctors and many ordinary folk living in our suburbs. More voices are being heard, assuring us that questions of right and wrong are matters for private opinion. A public official sends lewd pictures of himself to a woman, a fellow professional. Who is to say he does wrong?

But it’s more complicated than that. The press learns that what the public official has been up to. He is ‘outed’ in the

media. He vehemently protests. He says it is wrong that he should be judged in public for what he calls a private text message, and wrong that others do not agree with him.

In the long-running debate on abortion, it is argued that what a woman does with her own body ought not to be called wrong. What *is* wrong, however, is for someone to put a contrary view based on belief in God. Now *that* is wrong!

Though so many have stopped believing in an objective basis for right and wrong, they have not been able to stop themselves from behaving as if such a final standard for morality really does exist. It is one thing to rule out ultimate categories for right and wrong, but no one is prepared to live as if that is so. It is probably more true to say that no one *can* live without objective absolutes. Human lives are stamped with, and drenched in, moral considerations in which individuals expect their community to understand and accept. Those who disallow the assertions of religion are quick to replace them with their own dogmas. Effectively, they argue that it is wrong for anyone but themselves, to speak of right and wrong.

Inasmuch as we cannot, and will not, live without appeal to some external moral arbiter, we require an all-embracing, universal ‘rightness’ to live out of. This most urgent need of ours has been met in the gospel. God, who is always right, has revealed his ultimate rightness to us in his Son, Jesus. To believe this is to escape from darkness into light. To reject it as nonsense is to inhabit a madhouse where nothing is prohibited. 

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repressed spiritual meaning. Now, as the secular gods demonstrate their impotence, people are marooned in a world with no transcendent value to hold to. All the while, technically constructed meaning wears thin and becomes unconvincing.

If a postmodern humanity does not readily accept authority—be it science, politics or social—it is equally reluctant to accept ideas advocated by religious bodies. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, religious movements responded with vigor as they saw their belief systems eroded by modern scholarship. If the modernists

thought to deal in certainties and absolute facts, so would they. They strenuously defended what they saw as the ‘fundamentals’ of their faith. And the concept of fundamentalism was born.

At the same time, religious denominations began to flourish and build bigger and bigger corporate headquarters, with massive bureaucracies. They modeled themselves on American businesses. There were training centers, career paths and marketing divisions. A Presbyterian churchman said: *“Our church is like General motors, only we sell faith.”*

Faith became a commodity; memberships and revenues a mark of success. Post-moderns have come to notice much →

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Good News Unlimited magazine also seeks to keep readers up-to-date on all aspects of GNU’s ministries. This includes news on national and international radio broadcasts; public seminars, congresses, and Bible schools within the USA (as well as

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about religion that resembles the economy and the industrial landscape in general. As a result, much of the religious environment is no place for a sensitive creature; no place for anyone with a heart.

Religious creeds, like the canons of the free market, are set in stone. They are not for questioning. Institutional religion has succeeded, like the secularism of modernity, in creating another desolate scene where the deeper currents of human awareness have nowhere to flow. Longings for something personal and affecting are met with doctrinal certainties. The search for guiding principles to assist in negotiating complex moral dilemmas are handed a law which says: 'Thou shalt not.' People "ask a fish and receive a stone" (Luke 11:11). What they want is personal engagement with supreme goodness.

Humans fall short of being truly serviced by things and stuff, by methodologies and expert know-how. Secularism, as well as faith institutions, has failed post-moderns since they are bereft of spiritual meaning. We search for enchantment but find technology. We look for transcendence but discover ideology. Though we desire ultimate communion, we are handed another program, new techniques, forms, codes of practice; more faceless instructions to follow.

Our age is one of secular gurus and religious practitioners offering the human race a world without a soul. There is staleness, oldness at the heart of things. The theme of the times is: "I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

Two millennia ago, Paul, the Christian evangelist, wrote these words to the church in Rome: "By dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Romans 7:6). Similarly, in the following chapter: "Through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2).

Note that Paul conceives of 'oldness' and 'newness.'



Oldness is a corollary of law or written codes, while newness belongs to Spirit. Moreover, law is linked with bondage, release from which is effected by Spirit, which in turn is characterized by freedom.

Paul lives in this freedom, but it wasn't always so. There was a time when he was the law's prisoner in an existence defined

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Friday, Sept. 11—7:15 pm

Saturday, Sept. 12—2:30 pm & 3:30 pm

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by death. The Spirit of life liberated him. For Paul, the 'Spirit of life' is none other than the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of God; the same life-giving Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. Whereas previously, everything in Paul's life was determined by law, now, everything is determined by Jesus Christ with whom he lives in intimate fellowship.

He calls the law the 'written code.' This is one of the things that make it 'old.' It's what makes *all* law old. Policies, instructions, precepts, handbooks and manuals are external. No matter how elevated the ideal enshrined in any of these, it always comes to persons as an imposition from without. It is inflexible, doctrinaire, and absolute. It's hard to have a personal relationship with a law. Anyone who has tried to commune with a catechism or a church doctrinal statement or the DMV safe-driving guide, will know the truth of this.

Paul came to appreciate law's inability to elicit a personal response. He saw its failure as even more serious than that. Far from making people docile and amenable to duty, law makes contact with the ego as its antagonist. 'Sinful nature' uses law to further its *own* agenda. Law throws fuel on ego's fire. It heats the belligerent furnace so that it "seizes the opportunity afforded by the commandment" to get its own way. Ego uses law to get around law, to subvert the law. Rather than curb evil's power in human life, laws, blueprints or procedural formulae become tools for it to exploit. Whether it is the creeds and criterions of religion, or the shibboleths and orthodoxy of scientific rationalism, law is not a trustworthy star by which to steer human life.

Law prejudices the subject against Spirit because of its focus on what is visible. Its interest lies in material norms, culturally constructed values which facilitate approval in peer groups. For example, it is literally dispiriting for a divorced individual in a congregation where divorce is impermissible except in cases where the adultery of a partner is proven. It is dispiriting for a gentle and delicate male person to exist in a society that punishes males who do not fit an aggressive/sexually predatory male paradigm. It can be terribly dispiriting for a university student with faith in a God to whom she

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# Contemplation

by Albert Nolan



Today, there is a powerful movement throughout Christianity, one of returning to the Catholic tradition of contemplation and meditation.... This new movement has been deepened and developed by the discoveries of the new cosmology and by the merging spirituality of the ecological movement. Contemplating the grandeur of God in the marvels of an expanding and evolving universe, of which we are such a tiny part, adds a new dimension to the experience of wonder and awe... Contemplation is a conscious attempt to dispel all the illusions we have about ourselves, about others, and about the world. It is a search for truth about ourselves, about others, and about the universe we are part of, which is at the same time a search for God.

Being conscious of God's presence is different from the intellectual assertion that God is everywhere. Nor is it simply a matter of feeling... It is sometimes described as "unknowing" or recognizing that we don't know. God is the great unknown. In the end, we have to throw out all we thought we knew about God to make contact with the great mystery, not through our thoughts and feelings but through an experience of wordless wonder and awe.

-Albert Nolan: HOPE IN AN AGE OF DESPAIR,  
pp. 25-27. 

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regularly prays, to be told that she will not go far in her studies while she clings to fairytales like that!

Law is old because it is so certain; it is never in doubt about itself. Everything is 'as plain as the nose on your face.' There's no need to wonder, to cogitate, to seek with all your heart and with all your soul and with all of your mind. What's the matter with you anyway? It's all there in black and white. Just do it! There's no mystery with law—and that's a problem because the rest of the universe is steeped in mystery. Humans are mysterious. The enthrallment of falling in love is largely due to unfathomed mysteries detected by lovers in each other. Mystery is a spiritual property. A God not mysterious would mean nothing to us. Our own existence is puzzling. Duty is often not clear-cut. We long to find through mystical contact, connection with consummate external authority to affirm and sustain us in our limitations. In short, we look for value that is truly new because it comes to us via Spirit.

Law has oldness because it resists change. "This is how we have always done it; it was good enough for my father so it's good enough for me." When secular law—when social or public policy or scientific convention will not change, society loses because the human condition is never static; it is always in flux, always in motion. When religion sees itself as exceptional—beyond the need to change—it becomes idolatrous.

Famous Swiss psychiatrist, Karl Jung said: "All true things must change and only that which changes remains true." Law is not the domain of imagination. Without the imaginative Spirit people stay imprisoned in ideas, customs, duties and taboos that have lost their relevance.

They no longer work in the world that has come to be.

Law is old because it cocoons men and women in a time bubble where they cling to practices which are increasingly detached from the moral challenges of contemporary society. Spirit is on the side of the future. The future belongs to Spirit. Law as the presiding human ideal is too wooden to transmit life. Spirit, on the other hand, has fluidity or 'flowingness.' Like the wind it "*blows wherever it pleases*" (John 3:8). No one knows where the Spirit will lead next. It is of the essence of newness.

Spirit, not law, has the adaptability and nuance to totally engage with the personal complexity and intricacy of intersecting human lives.

Some Indian Nations of North America have a conception of Supreme Being they call *Wakan Tanka*. It comes into English as Great Spirit or, more correctly, Great Mystery. The Indians thought of Great Spirit as being very close to them in their nature, in the seasons, and in the details of their lives.

An Indian gentleman from one of the Californian Nations told me that the One I call Jesus, he calls Great Spirit. He was on the same page as Paul. For him the Great Mystery took shape in Jesus of Nazareth, and that is the faith celebrated in these pages.

What a wonderful faith it is! The most important component of reality is not anything we can construct or manipulate. It is Spirit, a Spirit with thoughts, intentions, imaginings, emotions, passions and desire akin to our own; yet broader and grander than ours. In coming to know Jesus, we resonate in the depths of our being with the Great Mystery. We are in contact with that which is ever new. We have found "Him whom my soul loves" (Song of Solomon 3:4). 