

# COMMON DREAMS

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## CONFERENCE PAPER



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**KEYNOTE PRESENTATION**

*A New Template for Religion*

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## **A New Template for Religion**

In February this year Australian scientists, using a radio telescope at the Parkes Observatory in western New South Wales discovered a cluster of about 800 hidden galaxies behind the Milky Way – a third of which had never been seen before. The report noted that our galaxy is being drawn to this cluster at a speed of two million kilometres an hour.

Two million kilometres an hour!! Hold that in mind for a few moments. Scientists estimate that most galaxies contain about 100 billion stars. And how many galaxies in our universe? The current estimate is between 100 – 200 billion. Hold that in mind also: 100 billion galaxies each with 100 billion stars hurtling through space at unimaginable speeds.

Let's hold also that galaxies like the Milky Way probably have about 17 billion earth size planets. In the grand schema of galaxies, stars and planets, planet Earth rates in comparison with it all as little more than what a speck of dust is to hundreds of millions of planets. A speck of dust. If this speck of dust and everything on it were to disappear, the rest of the universe would not blink.

It becomes even more significant when scientists then alert us to the fact that all the known matter in the universe, all those galaxies, stars and planets, make up less than 6% of the universe's composition. Dark matter and dark energy make up the other 94% - called "dark" because scientists can deduce these realities exists, but they cannot detect them.

So, here we are on this speck of dust– and we think we know what "God" is?

It is not only any understanding of "God" that becomes problematic within this scientific data. Christians now have quite a list of topics that have become problematic against such a background: revelation, Jesus, salvation, worship, prayer, sacraments. At the very heart of the "Christ" religion now looms the problematic question– how can we justify elevating a Jewish prophet to becoming the Christian notion of "the Christ", the triumphant cosmic figure way out in front of us, God-himself, leading creation to its glorious fulfillment? In the light of what we know today it seems too grandiose, too far ahead of ourselves in religious thinking to keep maintaining that the "Christ" is the be all and end all of the universe's existence.

All institutional Christian understanding of these supposedly religious essentials were shaped in a worldview that was pre-scientific, ignorant, limited, and now extremely outdated. Religion based on that worldview is like trying to use an original Macintosh floppy disc for a present day Apple Mac.

My professional background and expertise are not as an academic theologian, but rather in the arenas of spirituality and processes of adult faith formation.

Three key questions need to be raised and answered in any process of adult religious faith formation:

What are you asking me to imagine?  
Where did that imagination come from?  
How does that image or picture of reality fit with what I know of reality today?

Let's start with "GOD"

We have understandings from Scripture, creeds, doctrine and liturgy of a personal being essentially located "somewhere else". If we examine the

prayers we were taught and the prayers commonly used in Christian liturgy, the notion of a heavenly deity who demands to be worshipped, who listens in, who sometimes responds, who is in control of everything that happens, is cemented not just in imagination but as a picture of reality beyond questioning.

But that floppy disc early days theological operating system doesn't fit with what we have on hand to work with today.

I don't know what "GOD" is – no one does, really. I'm one of many people who do not like to use the word "God" anymore because it is so misleading, so tied to outdated ideas about the universe and planet earth's place in it universe

Our pointers to this greatest of mysteries need to be expanded beyond the biblical and doctrinal and liturgical and prayerful notions of a personal deity. Our pointers may best be found in notions such as "ground of all being", or "source and sustainer of all that exists", and in universal realities such as energy and consciousness. In other words, we need to take seriously that this mystery is indeed everywhere.

What we must work with today is this mind-blowing, ever-expanding knowledge about the age and size of this universe – which compels us to have a mindblowing and expansive notion of whatever we think "GOD" might be.

At the very least we should acknowledge that we are not dealing with a reality that can disconnect from our tiny piece of the cosmos, intervene from somewhere above us, and play mind-games with the human species.

What the pointers do is re-enforce the long-established religious belief that this mystery is everywhere. Here is Gregory of Nyssa in the 4<sup>th</sup> century:

*For when one considers the universe, can anyone be so simple-minded as not to believe that the Divine is present in everything, pervading, embracing and penetrating it?*

A significant feature in Christian tradition has been a sharp divide between the mystics, on the one hand who in keeping with the above quote, speak the language of presence, relationship and intimacy; and on the other hand we've had the theologians focusing on disconnection and the need for someone to reconnect – and turning that "someone" into a God because that's the only way reconnection and renewed friendship with a heavenly God and forgiveness for whatever human fault caused the separation can be achieved.

The time for such theological thinking is over. It makes no sense any more. It is time to state this publicly, clearly and unapologetically. It is time to stop defending non-sensical images and to move on to the challenges that face us as we wrestle with the pointers we have to today to the greatest of all mysteries.

Let us ask our three questions now about revelation. In doing so we will also expand our understanding of the greatest of all mysteries operative throughout the universe.

## REVELATION

What were we all led to imagine as a picture of reality, a picture basically unquestioned even in the great reforming movement of Vatican II?

Christians have been expected to imagine an external deity who disconnected from humanity, chose the Hebrew people to be his "chosen people" to fulfill his plans on earth, and when they failed, sent his son from heaven to reveal God to us and to open the way to heaven for us.

An essential aspect of the revelatory process was God himself choosing particular people to reveal his thinking and his opinions on a wide range of topics.

Almost thirty years after Vatican II, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) continued to present the same fanciful imagination:

*To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more. (#106)*

That image of reality only has any credibility when locked into imagining a male deity intervening from the heavens. But if we now believe we are dealing with a Mystery present and operative all throughout the universe, then our understanding of “revelation” and “inspiration” changes quite dramatically and has monumental consequences.

Revelation of the great mystery we are dealing with comes rather from the ground up, from what is all around us, rather than from elsewhere.

The great mystery we are trying to comprehend is embedded in everything that exists.

Everything that exists gives expression to it; and it is given expression according to what is there to work in and with.

Here, on this small planet in a cosmic no-where, this mystery has been given earthly expression for four and a half billion years, and we can marvel at what is possible when the conditions are just right – life in abundance.

And this abundance of life produces the human species.

In telling the contemporary story of the emergence of the human species, the significant theological shift is to move from imagining an external deity directing its emergence - to taking seriously and imagining this creative, energizing, mysterious reality being embedded in the human as it is in everything that exists.

And since this great mystery comes to expression in accord with what is there to work in and with at any time, in any place, we would expect to find an evolutionary development in human awareness of this great mystery present in everything.

The big mis-take in human evolutionary theological thinking was to mis-place this grounding reality and put it into the heavens in the form of gods and then to develop the need for human middle-management to deal with the gods.

In a time when people thought gods ruled the world from above, the Hebrew people developed the notion of one almighty deity. Within the framework of this notion of a personal deity ruling over the world they developed the most inspiring religious understanding of themselves as a people selected by this God to create “God’s rule” on earth by creating a society characterized by justice, compassion and peace.

With the development of their structured, institutional religion came the distractions of power, political influence, wealth, and straying from the goals set before them. Then prophetic voices of great wisdom and insight were raised to keep this religion on track.

Inevitably, these voices were couched in the religious thinking of the times when God was perceived as a heavenly deity who intervened in human affairs and made his thoughts known

through human messengers. So we read and we hear, “This is what the Lord God says...” “This is that God wants...”

But this is the floppy disc version. We need a new template and a new operating system if we are to make sense of this great wisdom and insight in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yes, the wisdom and insights are real, not to be cast aside, but they are to be understood and appreciated now as being embedded in the speakers and writers, not coming from outside or coming down to them from heaven. The mystery, the source of this wisdom, call it “GOD” if you wish, is embedded in humans.

While Amos and Hosea and Isaiah and Ruth and Naomi were giving expression to this great mystery in human words and actions, the same was happening all around the world, in all peoples, in all cultures, in all places, as men and women gave human expression the best they could to this presence and power and mystery within them. While Jeremiah was speaking and acting and allowing this embedded reality to have its way in and through him, the same phenomenon was happening in the aboriginal people who lived here on the land on which this building stands. Revelation is no longer a matter of one people hearing and giving human expression to this “GOD” reality – it is a matter of acknowledging this reality everywhere, in all people, at all times, and putting an end to exclusive institutional or cultural claims to access to this mystery.

I used the word “monumental” earlier in reference to consequences in changing our understanding of revelation. I’ll mention four briefly.

One.

Most Christians are familiar with the response, “*This is the Word of the Lord*” to Scripture readings. The “Word of the Lord” has to be understood now

as metaphor or as figurative language, and as such has to be expanded to include all human wisdom.

Two.

The writings of Paul have to lose their mystique as never-to-be-questioned “Word of the Lord”. Let us pull Paul back somewhat to being a first century Jewish theologian and treat his writings as such, in the same way we would explore the writings of any theologian of any religion. In other words, stop the text proofing from Paul to end all discussion about the resurrection, about “the Christ”, about the end times, about the sending of God’s Spirit from heaven, about God’s eternal plan of salvation, about justification, about God’s wrath, about salvation.

Three.

The day is over when a religion can put revelation in a box and say, “No more”.

Four.

The “Christ” religion in its many official formats closes its thinking to a new understanding of revelation because this thinking calls into question institutional identity claims and theological thinking based on the understanding that God disconnected from humanity and that its “Christ” restored connection. I believe the “Christ” religion generally is more concerned with theological ideas that protect and preserve its institutional identity than it is with open and honest theological thinking in light of reality.

## **BEING HUMAN**

Awareness of the everywhere nature of revelation brings awareness of the wonder of being human. Today we can tell the scientific story of our beginnings in the explosion of a giant star four and a half billion years ago and the long journey of

every atom in our bodies from the stardust formed in that explosion, through transformation after transformation to who and what we are today. There are atoms in our bodies that were once in dinosaurs, carbon atoms that were once in the Buddha, in Jesus, in Constantine.

What is it to be human? We are stardust become human. We are a life-form that gives the universe a way to reflect on itself.

Each one of us has the gift of a lifetime to give human expression to whatever drives the universe and the evolutionary process that drive the development of life on earth.

We have only one chance to do this, just one lifetime.

This scientific story will be the foundational for religious thinking and imagination for future generations.

Religious thinking will hopefully use and build on that story and come to the inevitable conclusion: wow, there's another, even more astonishing, dimension to the human story: to be human is to give human expression to the great mystery that sustains and holds everything in existence. Wow, we all give "GOD" a way of coming to human expression!

Many Christians would object on hearing this. That would protest that only Jesus did that!

## **JESUS**

So let us tell the story of Jesus with an updated view of the world in which we live which, in turn, gives us a new understanding of who Jesus was and what he tried to do. At least it's new in contrast with all the Christology I every learned and all the Christology institutional Christianity has credalised.

Instead of telling the story about Jesus as if God had disconnected from humanity and withdrawn friendship and forgiveness, as if Jesus alone had "the Spirit of the Lord God" within him, and that the Spirit of God was waiting for something momentous to happen on earth before descending onto selected humans, let us tell a story of the great mystery, "GOD", embedded in all humans.

Since this great mystery is truly in people, we would expect insight into its presence among all people would rise to the surface in gifted men and women. I liken it to the way Mozart gave expression to music. Wasn't his brilliance an expression of this great mystery in the human species? Likewise with Jesus and his religious insight. In the language of his religion and time he was able to say, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me," as he knew it had been in many prophetic men and women before him. But his insight went further: he knew, to use again language and an idea familiar to him, that "the breath of God" was everywhere and in all people.

Jesus looked around his world and saw it dominated by violence, military power, greed, fear and suppression. With this Spirit in him and knowing the dream of his religion to create God's rule on earth, he must have wondered whether this was the best possible world. Is this the best we can do?

And with the Spirit in him and knowing the ideal behind the Torah was to make people God-conscious in their everyday activities, he must have wondered how *he* could be so God-conscious and so many people around him were not. How come people could not see and experience what he saw and experienced? What was blocking awareness of the Spirit of the Lord God within them?

Jesus was driven by the Jewish dream of establishing "God's rule or kingdom", but how could this dream be realised in the reality he encountered? How could he make a difference?

Clearly, he chose the option, a faint hope, maybe, but in reality the only option with any hope in the long term, of going to the populace, the “crowd”, and trying to help them become aware of the “Spirit of the Lord God” in them. He did this by addressing their fear of God and their sense of distance from God. He wanted to affirm a presence, a power in them. His task was to convince people that there was more to who they were than they realized. He wanted to empower them through this conviction to take responsibility for making the world a better place. He was driven by this dream and the task it presented. The way he saw it, there was nothing more urgent than people grasp and work with the Spirit within them. Yes, it was like a small seed, but it had to start somewhere.

I doubt that Jesus ever thought he would see his dream realized in his lifetime. Human experience tells us that it can take decades for significant religious and social change to take place. I think Jesus worked on the “Go home and think about this” principle of educating people as he told parables and gave clear teaching on how God’s rule could be implemented. I think Jesus was looking well ahead, to what could be in place when the Roman Empire would end and people would be looking for a more satisfying way of life.

There is nothing in Jesus’ preaching about a God whose forgiveness was conditional on some dramatic human event. There is nothing about a God disconnected from people.

There is no concern whatever about saving people from God’s “wrath” or getting to heaven.

There is nothing about Jesus needing to be anointed by God in heaven to become the central figure in a cosmic story about salvation and God directing the universe to its final conclusion with this heavenly “Christ” as the point of finality. Jesus focused on this world, the desperate need for

people to make it a better place, and a Way this could be accomplished.

He paid the price for attempting to empower people so they might question and challenge the religious, social, and political status quo that blockaded the “kingdom of God” from being realised.

The future for any group that gathers around the Jesus’ story has to return to and focus on these basic issues if its members are in any true sense to be called followers of Jesus.

## **WORSHIP**

No long ago in Canada I conducted a weekend for a progressive UC community.

The audience was very on-side with what I presented. At the end of the weekend, I asked some of the community leaders, “Why, with such a progressive community do you have the large sign outside the church, ‘WORSHIP HERE 10:00 am SUNDAY?’” I was met with puzzled looks, as if to say, “Why wouldn’t we have this sign?” I asked some questions:

*Worship whom?*

*For what reason?*

*What do you imagine is at the other end of your worship?*

*A deity taking notice? Taking some delight in homage being paid?*

*Is your Sunday gathering for God’s sake?*

*Where did this imagination come from?*

These days I don’t get invitations to Roman Catholic parishes, so I don’t get the chance to pose the same questions about “the Mass” and what Catholics imagine it is all about.

Personally, I would stop using the word “worship”. The notion of worship belongs to an old paradigm,

an outdated template for religion. Likewise for “the Mass”.

I prefer to use “liturgy” or “service” for a new template

I like the interpretation, from its roots, (*leit, people; ergon, work*), that “liturgy” is the “work of the people”. This understanding of liturgy generally expands beyond ritual to mean participation in a sacred or divine action.

What’s the “work of the people” and the “divine action” we might now have in mind?

Our task is to gather around the story of Jesus, to understand its full implications for human interactions, to let it reveal to us the truth of who we are, to challenge us to commit ourselves to being the best possible human expressions of the Great Mystery, and to do this as faithfully and as courageously as Jesus did.

This has nothing to do with reception of a sacred object; or with priesthood with special powers; or with being “fed” at the altar;

It certainly has nothing to do with Jesus shedding his blood for the sins of the world.

It has nothing to do with singing songs to or addressing prayers to a listening deity.

What it has to do with includes:

*Remembrance* of Jesus and of others who shared his vision *Awareness* of the presence/power within us *Commitment* to working for a better world.

## PRAYER

So, what about the songs we sing and our liturgical prayers and the prayers we vocalize and in our small faith-sharing groups?

What are we being asked to imagine when we ask God to listen, when we thank God, when we address God with personal pronouns? We know where this imagination comes from. The question is how does this imagination resonate with abandoning notions of a God in the heavens.

By all means let us sing hymns and address prayers to “God” that suggest this divine Being is listening in and taking note, but let us do so mindful that the words are metaphor, poetry, not to be taken literally, but as a means of giving expression to movements in our minds and hearts, such as longing, pain, gratitude, joy etc.

And then, let us embrace one of the key challenges that faces us today: to shape prayers (the hymns may take a lot longer!) that affirm a “Presence” within and among us, that develop our awareness of this great mystery here with us in our everyday lives, and that challenge each of us to give the best possible human expression to it.

In practice, stop addressing prayers to “God”! Stop doing it. All it takes is the determination not to begin any vocal prayer as if we are speaking to God. Try it, and see what happens. I resolved to do this 15 years ago. It resulted in my book, “Praying a New Story” which was included in *Spirituality & Health* magazine’s list of “BEST Spiritual Books” in 2004 year.

With regard to their own private prayer, many people ask me, “If I let go of the idea of praying to God, how do I pray now?”

Early in the 8<sup>th</sup> C, a Syrian monk, born and raised in Damascus, known as “the golden speaker”, St John Damascene, gave the church words that have been carried down through the centuries:

*Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God.*



So let us substitute “great mystery” or “power” or other words for “God” and the definition still holds. But now we understand it to mean raising and minds and hearts to a presence here, all around us; in the depths of our being.

So a key word with regard to personal prayer is awareness.

The task, the goal of my personal prayer is to deepen my awareness that I humanly embody this great mystery.

My personal prayer is not for God’s sake; it is for my sake; it is meant to change me.

Someone recently asked me: can prayer change the world? I responded that prayer is intended to change us, and if it does that, then we can change the world. Otherwise we become trapped in the religious-cop-out version of prayer: let’s leave the fate of the world in God’s hands.

I think Jesus had the same conviction about personal prayer. It’s what motivated his ministry to “the crowd”. He wanted people to become aware of the power and the presence within them and use it to change the world. That was his dream. What a pity this fundamental stance of Jesus has been buried beneath a layer of prayer asking God to “deliver us from evil”. That’s not God’s task; it is our task.

## RELIGION

In the past 25 years, the major shift in my theological thinking and in my prayer life has stemmed from a growing – and a completely new – appreciation of what it means to be human. Much of my appreciation is grounded in the scientific story of our origins in stardust and the four billion years of atoms undergoing transformation after transformation until these 60 trillion atoms stand

here before you and enable me tell the story of who and what we really are.

Now that’s a truly remarkable story. But what I find just as remarkable is to have discovered that throughout human history the other side of this story – without the great scientific story we have today to back it up – has emerged. Call it “enlightenment”; call it whatever you will, but there has been this constant awareness, insight, revelation, in religious and non-religious people of an awareness of a power, an awesome reality beyond our imagination, within and among us, a presence that binds everyone and everything.

Eight hundred years ago, Rumi, the great Muslim scholar, teacher and poet said it well:

*“You are the fearless guardian of  
Divine Light,  
so come, return to the root of the  
root of your own soul...”*

*“Why are you so enchanted by this  
world when a mine of gold lies  
within you?”*

*Open your eyes and come, return to  
the root of the root of your own  
soul.”*

Here is the proper focus for religion, today and in the future. Here is where religion can get beyond dogmatism, thought control, claims of exclusive access to the divine, and disregard for common decency. Jesus is not alone in urging men and women to “return to the root of the root of your own soul” and use what is discovered there to create a profoundly better human community.

And here is why the “Christ” religion needs to change dramatically its thinking about Jesus: he is not and was not a god-figure essentially different from the rest of us because only he could gain access to God’s dwelling place. Rather, he presents a movement, a presence, a great mystery, a reality

that is within every woman, man and child. That is the good news that needs to be proclaimed and acted upon.

## CONCLUSION

Thirty years ago I wrote that I were to recommend one book for Catholics to read it would be Karl Rahner's *The Shape of the Church to Come*, written in 1974.

Rahner is regarded as one of the greatest RC theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While much of his writing is too academic for the people I had in mind, this book is a gem from such an academic.

I'll conclude with several quotes from this book as a way of bringing together all that I've spoken about today:

*"Our present situation is one of transition ... to a Church made up of those who have struggled against their environment in order to reach a personally clear and explicitly responsible decision of faith. This will be the Church of the future or there will be no Church at all."*

*"It seems to me that the courage to abandon positions no longer tenable means asking modestly, realistically and insistently, whether it is always possible to take with us on this march in to the Church's future all the fine fellows whose out of date mentality is opposed to a march into an unknown future ... we shall also estrange, shock and scandalize not a few who feel at home only in the Church as they have been accustomed to see it in the past."*

And, he writes,

*"If we are honest we must admit that we are to a terrifying extent a spiritually lifeless Church."*

He lamented the failure of the Church generally to address the life experience and questions of the faithful.

And along with this failure, he said we fail to proclaim Jesus vigorously. We neglect, he wrote, to start with "the experience of Jesus" and we talk about Jesus and God "without any real vitality."

Rahner's words inspired me 30 years ago when I was naïve enough to think that institutional Roman Catholicism could and would change. The ensuing 30 years have taken me on a journey I could never have envisioned, not in my wildest dreams! I'm not so naïve now, but his words inspire me today to work for a more relevant, dynamic, realistic faith or spirituality, faithful to what Jesus really believed and was ready to die for.

Theologically, we are living through the time of the greatest theological shifts ever. The template used for the past two thousand years is now outdated. The new template offers the opportunity for vitality, for a way ahead for religion, for engagement with peoples' lives and questions, for engagement with the exciting scientific knowledge we have on hand, for wonder and appreciation for being human, and a way to bring the message of Jesus – and other men and women of spiritual insight – to a world that is in desperate need of a new religious template to heal the harm and divisions caused by religion.

I must say: I love working with this new template.

Thanks to the many people who made this Conference possible, for bringing us all together, and inviting us to share the excitement, the challenges, the possibilities, and the dreams a new template offers. You have richly blessed us. Thank you.