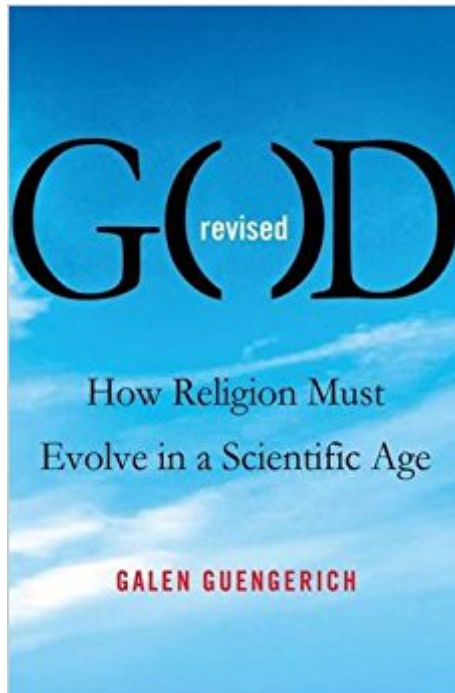




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God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve In A Scientific Age



Synopsis

Over the past few decades, the ever-expanding scientific knowledge of the universe and the human condition, combined with the evolution from religion-based to personal morality, has led to a mass crisis of faith. Leaders of most Protestant and Catholic religious traditions, which include nearly 80 percent of Americans, have watched their memberships stagnate or dwindle. Over the years, philosophers and scientists have argued that science has in fact "killed" God, and that if we believe the facts science has presented, we must also accept that God is fiction. Others, holding fast to their long-standing doctrines, attempt to justify their beliefs by using God to explain gaps in scientific knowledge. Having left an upbringing in a family of Mennonite preachers to discover his own experience of God, Galen Guengerich understands the modern American struggle to combine modern world views with outdated religious dogma. Drawing upon his own experiences, he proposes that just as humanity has had to evolve its conception of the universe to coincide with new scientific discoveries, we are long overdue in evolving our concept of God. Gone are the days of the magical, supernatural deity in the sky who visits wrath upon those who have not followed his word. Especially in a scientific age, we need an experience of a God we can believe in—•an experience that grounds our morality, unites us in community, and engages us with a world that still holds more mystery than answers.

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Guengerich articulates an approach to religion that embraces community in its widest, most inclusive sense and does not dig in its heels when religious texts come in conflict with science. A

rare and civilized antidote...â • â •Matthew Chapman, Writer/director of "The Ledge," author of "40 Days And 40 Nights," co-founder of ScienceDebate, and great-great-grandson of Charles Darwinâ œâ |intellectually richâ | lucid, compelling, and accessibleâ |â • â •Gary Dorrien, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Professor of Religion at Columbia University, and Author of the 3-volume series The Making of American Liberal Theologyâ œâ |brilliant synopsis of a big idea from revelation to relativityâ | In this provocative read, the deity survives the Enlightenment intact enough to remain persuasive in a secular age. God Revised offers God an excellent chance to remain viable.â • â •David Levering Lewis, Two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of W.E.B. DuBois, and Author of God's Crucible: Islam and the making of Europe, 570-1215â œIn God Revised, Galen Guengerich ambitiously, modestly, provocatively and lyrically calls for nothing less than the transformation of religion. Part irresistible memoir, part erudite theological exegesis, part dazzling cultural history, this unique work makes the idea of finding "a god we can believe in" feel necessary, relevant--and most of all, thrilling. God Revised is an adventure that will enrich you, and stay with you.â • â •Wednesday Martin, Columnist for Psychology Today and author of Stepmonster: A New Look at Why Real Stepmothers Think, Feel, and Act the Way We Doâ œGuengerich speaks for those of us who reject both the unbelief of atheism and the hyper-belief of traditional religion. He eloquently argues that "the reason religion is necessary, after all, isn't so we can find salvation for the next life, but rather so we can find meaning and purpose in this one." With wit, wisdom and compassion, Guengerich will convince you that this is how to live a godly life in the 21st century.â • â •Elisabeth Robinson, Author, The True & Outstanding Adventures of the Hunt Sistersâ œIf you've ever thought of yourself as spiritual but not religious, as so many have, this is the book for you. Galen Guengerich masterfully illuminates what it means to be both, taking on rabid skeptics as readily as entrenched believers. The result is a book that both re-casts the concept of God and restores our faith in the human.â • â •William F. Schulz, Former Executive Director, Amnesty International USAâ œGalen Guengerich has written a book so comprehensive, personal, inquisitive, rational, and emotional that no reader can walk away from it without having to rethink faith, deepen spirituality, affirm science, and live as a better citizen of the world.â • â •C. Welton Gaddy, President, Interfaith Allianceâ œGuengerichâ |offers a discursive meditation on how religion can fit into a scientific worldview. He rejects a supernatural, all-knowing God, yet still finds the need for a faith that gives life meaning.â • â •Publishers Weekly

Rev. Dr. Galen Guengerich serves as the senior minister of All Souls in New York City, one of the largest and most prominent Unitarian Universalist congregations in the nation. He attended

Princeton Theological Seminary, and earned a PhD in theology at the University of Chicago. His sermon "The Shaking of the Foundations" appeared in Representative American Speeches 2001-2002 as one of seven responses to September 11, alongside former President George Bush and former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

Over fifty-six years of involvement in the church, my Christian faith has become heterodox, and not orthodox. The word "God" does not mean, to me, a supernatural being, perhaps a puppeteer. And doctrines which say that God creates failed humans and then punishes them makes absolutely no sense. My faith has more in common with the experience of God in life and in the connections among all beings. Christ did not die for my sins, he lived to show me how to live. I have struggled with reconciling my deep involvement with the Christian church and my personal faith, finally finding a community of faith which encourages me to grow and struggle with my own spiritual quest. (Ironically, it is within the doctrinal Presbyterian denomination--surprise. If I had not found this group, I would likely have moved to a Quaker community or Unitarian Universalist--like this author.) Now along comes Dr. Guengerich and provides me a theological outline, reminding me of all those theologians and philosophers from Tillich to Schopenhauer to Whitehead whose work I studied and was mystified by in seminary. (Yes, I do have a masters in theology from a reputable seminary. LOL) His book is not a blueprint so much as grand map of the territory waiting for the reader to fill in the details or move a few of the lines to conform with our own spiritual reality. Reviewers who claim that the author doesn't believe in God are only expressing the limitations of their own vision of "God" and of what that word might mean. Guengerich actually takes God quite seriously, much more so than those conservatives who decry him. This is the book I have wanted for years. Not everything Guengerich says is correct; not every idea shines like gold. But if an individual reads this book and then takes the time to think about the ideas and polish them carefully, that person may find that the gold is there. I have.

I would class this as one of the best contemporary works on theology from a liberal religious perspective. Which might sound to some like faint praise, but there are other such books, some of which are quite good. There's a lot in the book, but what particularly struck me as valuable was Guengerich's discussion, in his penultimate chapter, of the need to ground our ways of living in what he calls an "ethics of gratitude". I read about an "ethics of gratitude" in a short sermon by Guengerich a few years ago, and my initial reaction was quite negative. Gratitude didn't seem like a sufficiently rich emotion in which to ground a way of

life. But I've changed my mind after reading this book, which spells out in more detail what Guengerich means. As Guengerich points out, the Greek word *ethos* refers to one's character and how it shapes one's actions by shaping one's attitude towards the world. His *ethics of gratitude* is trying to respond to a challenge: how do we find an emotional underpinning for developing a character that makes us the best we can be, which in the original Greek understanding, would be becoming a person with *arete* (*having the specific excellence of a human being, virtuous*). As he describes it, the Christian approach to this question grounds ethics in love. And this is surely a good guide to right action. Letting all that you do be done in love is good advice. But the Christian approach is emotionally undergirded by the notion that some sort of more or less personal God loves you. Your character and actions of acting out of love towards others and the universe is supported by the notion that God loves you. I think the challenge that Guengerich is trying to address is how to support one's ethical beliefs and behavior if it is no longer possible to believe in a personal God. (Guengerich still believes in a God, but it's Spinoza's God, a natural God, not a supernatural God.) If there is no personal God, then where is this love that supports one's own character and actions? Guengerich's alternative is gratitude. The universe/nature/the world may not personally love us, but we have reasons to be grateful towards it, anyway. Each of us is here by mere happenstance. It's a miracle that the Big Bang occurred, that the various natural forces happened to be such as to make a long-lived universe with something other than hydrogen and helium possible, that intelligent life evolved on this planet, and that by chance each of us happened to be born. It's also amazing that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it tends towards justice, the saying of Theodore Parker that was given prominence by Martin Luther King, Jr. This is the essential insight and accomplishment of the Enlightenment: it is now clear that there is progress in human development, and that the human species is evolving towards a future that is more prosperous, more enlightened and tolerant towards others, and less violent. Prior to the Renaissance and then the Enlightenment, human beings thought of history as being cycles going nowhere in particular, or maybe even deteriorating from some past *Golden Age*. It now seems more likely that we are evolving in a good direction, although not at a steady pace, and not without considerable pains. As Guengerich argues, we have reasons to be personally grateful that we are so fortunate as to live in this world. And if we are personally grateful for our good fortune, then this motivates us to want to share our good fortune with others, to try to do our part to move the world in the direction it seems best it go in, and to help all others as well as ourselves to

develop the human potential that it seems we are so lucky to have. In other words, we can feel an emotional sense of personal gratitude and good fortune towards nature, the human world, our friends and family, and the entire universe, even if there is no personal God. And that emotional sense of being grateful for what is and the ideal towards where it seems to be headed can help support developing the character to live a more ethical life.

Guengerich finds a brilliant path that includes a path from traditional religious beliefs and how to bring them into the modern age and modern science and how we must have religion to be whole. There are passages that touch me so deeply as to bring tears of joy and recognition, that this is true. For example: "Faith requires a leap of the moral imagination to connect the world as it is to the world as it might become". His definitions of Courage and the ethic of gratitude are now models and inspiration for me.

I gave *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age* 5 stars because it described better than I can articulate many of my current thoughts and beliefs on God, religion, and theology. After reading it I embrace my identity as being a religious person, not just a spiritual person. Like Galen Guengerich I have found my religious home in Unitarian Universalism. I highly recommend it especially those who struggle to merge their past religious experiences with their present rational thoughts.

He makes an excellent, well-documented argument for a vibrant religion in the 21st century. If simple common sense is not enough to call you back to a meaningful, intelligent religion, then Guengerich's extensive references to literature both contemporary and ancient may open your eyes. Even though I don't entirely agree with all of his conclusions, in the main I'm solidly with him. The writing is passionate, but literate.

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