

# Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism

*Text: Genesis 1:1-23; Revelation 21:1-7*

Richard A. Rhem  
Christ Community Church  
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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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The Reading From the Present comes from the book *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism* by David Ray Griffin, and that title of the book is the title to this sermon. David Ray Griffin is a philosopher-theologian who concerns himself with finding a way to express the faith, to experience God in a world which has become disenchanted. He quotes the German scholar Max Weber, who says that it is modern thought that has disenchanted the world. The more we know of all of the science and technology, the more we discover, the more we understand, the less mystery and the less magic there is— the less enchantment there is.

I have been saying to you that I would love to create a new sense of enchantment for you in your spiritual life experience. The word “disenchantment” is cited by David Ray Griffin, although now I find it popping up all over the place. Griffin says that the consequence of that disenchantment is that the world is no longer believed to contain any inherent meaning or normative values around which human beings should orient their lives. That is serious. There has been a reaction to that, and Griffin says the majority of those who have reacted say that the mistake was to leave the supernatural God, the Creator, who was the foundation of morality. But David Ray Griffin disagrees and says:

My title, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism*, signals that this is not my view. Completely rejecting supernaturalism, understood as the belief in the possibility of occasional interruptions of the world’s most fundamental causal order, I present a world-view that, although saturated with values, is fully natural. This world-view does involve a form of theism, but it is a fully naturalistic theism, according to which divine influence is a natural dimension of the world’s most fundamental causal order, never an interruption thereof.

In so many words, David Ray Griffin is trying to speak of God as one who is immanent in the process of reality of which we are all a part, and not a God external to reality who now and again dips in, pulling a string or shifting a gear or tweaking that natural process. He wants us to have a vision, an understanding of the totality of reality, which is a naturally moving event, an ongoing event, laced

through with the mystery of God. But this is not the God of the old tradition who snapped his fingers and let it all come into being, guiding it providentially through the whole process to an end that God had set. That conception, that old orthodox conception, is one that has run aground on the shoals of modern knowledge. Consequently, we have a world that is in large measure, in terms at least of the leading intellectual voices, a world that is devoid of God, and so devoid of mystery—devoid of wonder. Griffin's intention is to recapture that which the old system was able to communicate, but in terms of a story that is resonant with our present human experience.

So I invite you to think together with me about it, to see where we are. Although it seems that science has laid bare the reality of which we are a part, the scientists say the more we know the more the mystery grows, and the gap between what we know over against what we don't know is tremendous. But scientists continue to look and to study and to uncover, and it is a dramatic process. In the process information has trickled down and the world has become, in many respects and for many people, disenchanted. It becomes a mechanism, a machine. It is bloodless, spiritless.

The consequence of the scientific method and the empirical method and the pursuit of the natural sciences is that, in some quarters and with some leading voices, the conclusion has been reached that matter is all there is; there is nothing more. There is no such thing as spirit. There is a naturalism that is materialism, which is atheism in so much of the modern world as a consequence of modern thought, and I think Max Weber probably was right in his observation. His life stretched into the twentieth century and he was a towering scholar. He looked at the whole modern experiment and said it had left us with a disenchanted world.

Science is powerful because it produces results. It sends airplanes into the sky and rockets into outer space and men to the moon. That compelling power makes the one who would speak of spirit or religion or the spiritual life tremble in their boots before the amazing accomplishments of the sciences. Of course, to deny spirit, to deny a sacred dimension to reality is not going to work very long, because we are people who desire meaning. We are more than the physical body that houses us, and so there has been reaction.

One of the phenomena of the last century is the rise of Pentecostalism. In his book *Fire from Heaven*, Harvey Cox documents the global expression of Pentecostalism, which is the immediate experience of God, God the Holy Spirit, an immediate experience of the holy. If you watch any late-night television, you will see on occasion some Pentecostal services where there are thousands and thousands of people. Hands are raised, people come forward, and they are slain in the Spirit. If I would describe it a bit unkindly, I would call it an emotional orgy. But, as a matter of fact, it is a spiritual, emotional fix, and it is a global

phenomenon. It simply points to the fact that the human animal is more than simply a physical body.

The other reaction that we are perhaps more familiar with is Fundamentalism, which is a militant mind that would reverse everything to a former paradigm, to a former understanding. The old way. Of course, you cannot go home, but this militant Fundamentalism is in reaction to the myth of science that claims that there is nothing beyond what you can touch and taste and handle. The reaction to that has become violent in our day. Thus, there is Pentecostalism and Fundamentalism. The problem with the old tradition and with Fundamentalism is the literalization of our biblical stories.

It was appropriate that the scripture lesson was read by the choral readers this morning. There was a touch of theatre. There was a little bit of drama, which points to the fact that Genesis 1 is a poem, and it is a myth of origins. That beautiful picture of the city of God and the union of heaven and earth in Revelation, again, is a marvelous image. The way it was read enables us to sense that there is something more going on here beyond a literal description of reality.

Let me try a little experiment this morning. Let's think of the whole cosmic process of billions of years. Let us think of it as a river of being unfolding, the River of Being unfolding. If you go down to the end of Washington Street in Grand Haven, you can see a map of the Grand River with its various tributaries winding their way here and flowing out into Lake Michigan. Let us just think about the Grand River as the River of Being. As the river nears Grand Haven, the human species arises. The human being becomes conscious, self-conscious, conscious of the other; community grows; the mind develops. Let's picture that budding human phenomenon on a houseboat on the Grand River, plopped right there in the middle of the river. They don't know how they got there. They have no sense at all of that river on which they have streamed. They don't know where they are going, either.

The analogy breaks down with the Grand River, because you know the Grand River empties out into Lake Michigan. But the River of Being is being formed as we move on. The human project is right on the threshold of the unfolding drama, and we don't know where it's going. But people need to have a sense, a sense of where their houseboat came from and where it is going. And so people create stories, stories of origin and stories of ultimate destiny.

The Genesis story is such a myth. Where did we come from? Why are things the way they are? What does it mean? That vision of Revelation—where is it all going to end? What is it going to be? Whence have I come, whither am I going, what does it mean in the meantime? Those are the kind of stories that you have in Genesis. They are the kind of stories you have in the Bible. They are the kind of stories you have in every religious expression of humankind and in every circumstance and every geographical location. They are the same questions.

Ultimate questions. Because we're human. Because we wonder about that. How did it begin? Where is it going? What does it mean?

The River of Being continues to unfold. Along the way, the human being continues to think, to experience. He or she gains some knowledge and has a beginning sense of history. One day the mechanically minded among them develops a helicopter, and they go up and trace that river, study the course over which they have come. It's fifteen billion years of river, and they say, "O, my God! Look at the Big Bang! Look at the billions of years it took for this meandering stream to reach this point. Look at what we are a part of and where are we going!"

Well, we can make some projections; we can speculate. But the scientific mind begins to take over and experiment. Pretty soon we have the scientific method, which I described a moment ago, with testing and inductive reasoning. In the midst of the human story we develop a very potent myth that this is all there is. And we cannot deny the stuff on which science has based this information. That knowledge is hard knowledge, although it continues to be adjusted. Scientists continue to refute themselves in order to find a better understanding.

But why would we fight knowledge? Isn't it ridiculous that there is a Fundamentalist Christianity that is heralding Creationism in the twenty-first century? Isn't it interesting that there is a more sophisticated stealth bomber approach with this Intelligent Design idea, trying to get God back into the equation?

So what is it we need? And where are we? Well, let me suggest that the Genesis account of creation is still profound. I can read it and understand it and appreciate it. I understand the profound insights that were coming to expression there, and I can understand the longing for that holy city and the union of heaven and earth. Those are images and they continue to be fruitful images. They continue to inform us in the River of Being where we are traveling together in our particular little houseboat. But don't you think that it would be better if we could find a way to incorporate all that the sciences lay bare for us, all of that knowledge, with a sense of the holy and the sacred woven through it? Wouldn't it be better if our River of Being was not simply matter, not pure materialism as opposed to any God-presence, so that it does not lead to atheism, but rather to an understanding of God in terms of the human experience which is common to us all in our day? Wouldn't it be better if we embraced a naturalism without supernaturalism, a reenchantment without supernaturalism, a God-presence without the engineer tweaking things from above, dipping in here and there?

I did mean to tell you about my friend Bud who is critically ill, but still with us. Last evening was a bit difficult and so I was called in. He has not yet awakened, and the day before the family gathered around him. One of his daughters is an ordained pastor. She put together a beautiful healing service, just for the family.

They read scripture and said prayers and they anointed Bud with oil, oil for healing.

Does that work? Yes, I think it works. Can it heal? Yes, I think it can heal. Is there something miraculous about that? No, not really. But the love and the care of those who are concretely present with a ritual involving anointing and touch will trigger whatever is possible to be triggered in terms of the healing potential of that body.

If you go into the room, you will find computers of every sort—banks of them. Medical science can tell you everything about the blood, liver function, kidney function, the dialysis process, the breathing tube. They can tell you everything about neurological function, blood pressure, temperature, all of that. It is amazing. You want to talk miracles, that is a miracle. And I'm thankful for every one of those machines, every one of those tubes and wires, and every one of those competent medical personnel who can calibrate it all in order to sustain life. But when you know all the statistics, when you know everything about that body that is lying there, you still don't know anything about the human being.

I could always get Bud to laugh, particularly when I would talk a little Dutch to him. So I shouted a little Dutch in his ear, and I got just a little flicker of the lip, a little recognition, a little communication. That is so much more than all of the statistical data that you could offer me. Yet there is no conflict whatsoever. For when science has done everything it can do, and I want it to do everything it can do and in the best possible way, then it still has not answered the question of who are we, because that's a human question. That's a spiritual question. That is the transcendent dimension that hovers over the tapestry of the natural connections and causal relationships and all of the processes that make up what we call nature.

What we need is a new story. I can still preach from Genesis meaningfully because I understand what they were getting at, and it was a profound word. But when you are in the River of Being, and Being continues to unfold, and you have just begun through your intellectual capacity to understand something of the past, you realize that you are the consciousness of the process now, and you are the voice of this process. It is unfolding before your very eyes, and your stories of origin and ultimate destiny were told as tales way back there. Look where you are now. Are you going to absolutize an ancient story that was profound, a profound myth with deep understanding? Are you going to say that it has to be literalized and it has to be the template over which I look at my world today?

No. That story isn't sacred. It's marvelous! There has never been Eden; there has never been Paradise. There has never been a moment of perfection from which we "fell." The story, according to everything we can learn and know, is the story of emergence, of spirit, spirit seeking to soar while still anchored in the mire.

Human beings—what marvelous creatures we are! Look what we can do. Look what we can create. Look at the beauty we can create. Look at the love we can make. Look at the joy. Look at all of the wonder of the world, the human world, and all of the hell we create. We are emerging creatures full of ambiguity, torn in two directions, knowing the life of the spirit, still very much of the flesh, fleshly.

I need a story, a new story that will honor the integrity of creation and that process, that tapestry into which our lives are woven. I need a story with all of life's meaning and all of its wonder and beauty, but a story that sees it all with enchanted eyes, knowing that there is more than meets the eye, knowing that it is all permeated with God-presence, with the Creator Spirit, the spirit that seeks to come alive in us. For you see, the Christian story at its heart is the story of incarnation, that God became human.

In the beginning was the word, God spoke the word, creation came forth. In the beginning was the word and the word was God, and the word became flesh. The word became human. In the River of Being unfolding at some point, God became human and the human became the vehicle of divinity, the voice, the soul, the spirit, the instrument through which the whole process is made divine by the God who is present, not apart from it.

Thank God for the richness of all we know and the mystery that beckons us still, and in the meantime, that sense of community in which we experience life together, enchanted.

Griffin, David Ray. *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism— A Process Philosophy of Religion*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001.

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