

TMTC NEWSLETTER

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Is There Anything New in Christianity?

A Critical Response to Tom Harpur

by A. James Reimer

*The following is a response to a June 17, 2004, lecture by Tom Harpur at Waterloo North Mennonite Church, Waterloo, Ontario. The event was conceived of by a group of friends of Conrad Grebel University College (CGUC). The fact that CGUC and TMTC identified with and in effect "sponsored" the event drew severe criticism from a number of sources, because of Harpur's unorthodox views and controversial claims, such as that Jesus of Nazareth never existed and that not one thing historic Christianity claimed to be true is new. The essential claims of early Christianity, according to Harpur's new bestseller *The Pagan Christ* (Thomas Allen Publishers, 2004), were all plagiarized from much earlier pagan religions, and the historic Christian Church has in fact been involved in a long conspiratorial cover-up of its indebtedness to pre-Christian*

sources. While I have serious difficulties with Harpur's claims and sources, I believe that we ought to be addressing the dominant cultural assumptions of our age, no matter how heterodox. Because Harpur's views are representative of a growing number of persons inside and outside the church—views that could be loosely characterized as a form of gnostic, new age spirituality—they ought to be critically engaged and challenged. It is in this spirit that I consented to be a respondent to Harpur at the June event. The following is the revised and shortened version of the written text on which my response was based. I do not deal here with the academic credibility and historical accuracy of the historical data on which Harpur's claims are based (I leave that to others), but address the "ideology" that drives Harpur's book.

Tom Harpur's life has been an intriguing "spiritual journey." He was once an Anglican parish priest and taught New Testament at Wycliffe College, an evangelical Anglican seminary at the University of Toronto. But in the early 1970s he left Wycliffe for the *Toronto Star*, where he embarked on a journalism career, during which he served as the *Star's* religion editor. Since his departure from Wycliffe, Harpur has attempted to uncover the common foundation of all religious and spiritual experience.

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Jim Reimer (L) and Tom Harpur respond to audience questions following Harpur's June 2004 lecture. Proceeds from the event went to TMTC.

Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Iran

by A. James Reimer, Director

Qom, known as the most "religious" city of Iran, was the location of phase two of an academic Shi'ite Muslim-Mennonite Christian dialogue, February 15-16, 2004, as part of a two-week visit. Eight North American Mennonites joined a similar number of Muslim scholars for an intensive but cordial two-day discussion at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, Iran, on the topic of "Revelation and Authority." This unusual interchange of ideas is jointly organized by the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre and the Imam Khomeini Institute. It is the culmination of an exchange program between Mennonites and Iranian Muslims, initiated by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and the Khomeini Institute, in 1997.

The dialogue, part one of which was held in Toronto in 2002, was overseen by the able leadership of Professor Aboulhassan Haghani of the Imam Khomeini Institute. This was religiously and politically a propitious time for our visit; it overlapped with the dramatic 25th anniversary celebrations in Teheran of the 1979 Islamic revolution and the subsequent parliamentary elections, events which received wide coverage by Western media.

Still tired from the flight, our group was probably the only Western delegation to be ushered into the stands to observe the celebrations, together with politicians, Muslim clerics and various dignitaries to see the festivities, and to listen to the President of Iran address the people. An estimated two million were thought to have been out on the streets of Teheran on that day. At the end of the two-week visit, on election day, two of us were briefly allowed into an election polling booth to observe the carefully monitored and orderly voting procedure.

The Imam Khomeini Institute generously paid the entire cost of hosting our group over the entire two-weeks, including tours of a model prisoner of war camp which is now a museum, the former American Embassy grounds, palaces of the former Shahs and the simple dwelling place of the revolutionary leader Ayatolla Khomeini (highlighting the contrast in lifestyle between the two), visits to the

beautiful Iranian cities of Kashan with its lavish pre-revolutionary homes, and Esfahan and its world famous 17th century square and market, exquisite ancient mosques, the old Armenian Christian Church, and the Zoroastrian "Temple of Fire."

Particularly memorable was a visit to the home of the late Murtada Murtazhari, an internationally known Islamic thinker whose many volumes of writings are currently in the process of being published as collected works. Drafter of the constitution of the Islamic Republic, and personal confidante of the Ayatollah Khomeini, he was assassinated only three months after the revolution by a faction not in agreement with his views. An international 25th anniversary commemorative conference on his thought is taking place at the University of Teheran in April 2004. The friendliness of the Iranian people was reflected in numerous ways, especially by the hospitality of the extended families and relatives of Yousef Daneshvar and Mohammed Farimani, Muslim doctoral students at the Toronto School of Theology.

Throughout the dialogue itself, the dominant motif was the relation of revelation to reason. Muslims see no fundamental contradiction between a high view of human reason (a gift from God) and a high view of revelation (the divine will as revealed through Gabriel to the Prophet Mohammad in the Qur'an). This is related to their positive anthropology, what Yousef Daneshvar referred to in his paper as the "human theomorphic nature (*Fitrah*)," namely, that human beings are naturally oriented toward the divine. The Christian doctrine of "original sin" has no equivalent in Islamic theology.

The Qur'an mentions the forbidden eating from a tree which has negative consequences for Adam and Eve, but it is not identified as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" as it is in Genesis 3. In Islamic thought the knowledge of good and evil is not negative but rather a positive, natural knowledge planted within the human conscience by God. All human beings have a tendency to sin but

this is not an inherited condition.

While human beings are not perfect, God expects them to use their reason to the fullest extent in determining what is right and what is wrong and to follow the path of obedience to Allah. God the all-merciful and all-compassionate One is ready to forgive directly those who repent, without any need for sacrificial mediation. In their high view of reason, freedom and human responsibility and their rejection of the more severe Protestant notions of original sin, Mennonite Christians have something in common with Shi'ite Muslims.

Most remarkable in the course of the dialogue was the respect which both sides showed toward each others' texts. Both have a high view of the authority of the sacred book. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is the wise, senior Muslim scholar, Professor Towfiqi, who has taught Christianity to Muslim students for some forty years. He knows the four Christian gospels by memory and referred to Jesus as "our Lord Jesus Christ" on a number of occasions. Towfiqi's expression did not imply the divinity of Jesus but represents the respect Muslims have for Jesus as a great prophet. Jesus is for them not God who died on the cross, but one who ascended and will return with their twelfth Imam (presently hidden) to establish an earthly kingdom of justice.

There are of course substantive and methodological differences in how Muslims and Christians interpret their respective texts. Muslims manage to achieve a much greater consensus on the fundamental meaning of the Qur'anic text than do Christians (including Mennonites) in their interpretation of the Bible. Rather than applying the western tools of historical-criticism to the Qur'an, Muslims "let the text stand" as God's literal, revealed Word, and then find a rich variety of mystical and spiritual levels of meaning in the text.

Apparent throughout the visit and the theological discussions was the growing level of trust between our two communities of learning. The proceedings of this dialogue will, *Insha' Allah* ("God willing" in Arabic), be published in the near future. The hope is that the dialogue will continue, with a third instalment in Toronto in two years time.

(see photo on page 10)

Should the U.S. Be in Iraq?

A TMTC-Sponsored Panel Confronts the Question

by Jeff Nowers

With violence in Iraq spiraling out of hand, TMTC organized a panel discussion that addressed the theological stakes of America's occupation of Iraq. The event was held on November 11, 2003, which also marked Remembrance Day—an appropriate date to reflect on the tragedy of lives being lost in armed combat.

The panel was comprised of a cross-section of TST faculty: Marsha Hewitt, Mary Jo Leddy, A. James Reimer, and Donald Wiebe.

Hewitt, a social ethicist teaching at Trinity College, noted a distinction between the question of whether America should have gone to war, on the one hand, and the question of whether America should continue to remain in Iraq, on the other. She maintained that the U.S. has a moral obligation to remain in Iraq to foster its reconstruction on the basis of democracy. This, Hewitt concluded, is what is owed the Iraqi people.

Leddy, a well-known Catholic activist and writer, made no distinction between war and occupation. She called for an end to the bloodshed fueled by the immoral monetary costs of the war. Only because of its distinguished hegemonic arrogance did America enter Iraq in the first place.

Reimer, TMTC's director, made a strong theological case against war and suggested that America be pressured by various groups, including churches, to ensure that Iraqis receive essential social services. Once these services are assured, U.S. troops should withdraw completely.

But it was Wiebe, the Trinity College philosopher of religion, who injected the most controversy into the discussion by calling for the U.S. to practice an "enlightened imperialism." America, he stated, has a humanitarian obligation to stay in Iraq

because the United Nations has shirked its own responsibilities. And though it is an "empire," the U.S. nonetheless has the right to protect itself from danger.

Approximately 40 students and faculty from a wide range of theological traditions attended the event, which generated a lively question-and-answer session. In the end, the panelists did not reach any consensus of opinion, but the event was an opportunity for them and for all in attendance to try to think *theologically* about the Iraq crisis. To that end, it was highly productive.

Jeff Nowers, who moderated the panel discussion, is completing a ThD in theology and ethics at Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology.



L-R: Marsha Hewitt, Donald Wiebe and Mary Jo Leddy look on as Jim Reimer comments during TMTC's November 2003 panel event on "America in Iraq."

Remembering Dr. Gerald T. Sheppard

by Derek Suderman

Gerald T. Sheppard, the dynamic professor of Old Testament at Emmanuel College (TST), passed away in November 2003 at the age of 57. He was truly unique—a brilliant scholar and a personable teacher, who touched the lives and challenged the thinking of many.

Jerry had a phenomenal mind. Following a bachelor's degree in science, he taught Greek and Hebrew as well as theology while studying full-time in the MDiv. program at Fuller Theological Seminary. He took just three years to complete a Ph.D. at Yale, studying under Brevard Childs who was in the process of formulating his "canonical" approach to the Bible (the basis for his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*). Following nearly a decade of teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Jerry joined the faculty at Emmanuel College in the mid-1980s.

Having grown up Pentecostal and attended Fuller and Yale, Jerry defied easy classification—he often said that his friends from Fuller couldn't believe he was studying at Yale, and those at Yale couldn't believe he had come from Fuller. He could understand, relate to, and effectively critique scholars (and students) from across the conservative-liberal theological spectrum. While deeply committed to scholarship, Jerry promoted and insisted upon the importance and legitimacy of lay interpretation.

Jerry had a passion for the Old Testament and continuously argued for its recognition as an essential part of Christian Scripture. His interest in wisdom literature and problems related to "canon" were complemented by research in the history of Christian and

Jewish interpretation, hermeneutics from the 17th to 20th century, and reading ranging from philosophy and sociology to art, aesthetics, and physics. Of course, his intellectual prowess did not extend to such mundane matters as finding his keys or using a photocopier—he was as brilliant as he was disorganized.

But Jerry was not just a sharp mind; he also possessed a keen wit and a mischievous sparkle in his eye. At Emmanuel's student orientation events, he would introduce himself as "I'm Jerry Sheppard; I teach most of the Bible" or "I teach the most important part of the Bible, since the New Testament is simply a circumstantial clause built on the main predication of the Old." In his younger years he had even been a stand-up comic for a campus student association!

For many of us, Jerry will be sorely missed as an engaging professor and an inspiring lecturer who made the Old Testament come alive. He could dissect and refute arguments thoroughly, and yet was helpful and encouraging in the way he graded papers. He greeted students with a warm smile as he welcomed them into his office—if they were lucky enough to catch him there. I miss trying to follow his train of thought in class as well as having lengthy (albeit one-sided) discussions in his office. Although he wrote scores of articles and several books, the written word lacks so much of the vitality and dynamism that was ever present in the flesh-and-blood Jerry.

Jerry always seemed to like the Rabbinic stories where people are described as going to study Torah in

the world to come after death. If so, I'm sure he fits right in, maybe even going toe-to-toe with Moses himself. I just wish he could direct a dissertation from there.



Gerald Sheppard (1946-2003) was an outstanding biblical scholar and dynamic teacher. He will be sorely missed by many TMTC students and by the TST community at large.



Over 300 people, many of them ardent Tom Harpur devotees, filled Waterloo North Mennonite Church to hear Harpur speak about his new book *The Pagan Christ*.

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In his most recent book, *The Pagan Christ*, he identifies this as “the eternal Christ within.”

My own “spiritual journey” has been the exact reverse of Tom Harpur’s. I began in the late 1960’s with scepticism concerning the historic, institutional church and creedal Christianity, and an emphasis on the inner, existential Christ. I was leader of a singing group which sang songs like “So shut the Bible up and show me how the Christ you talk about is living now” (Sidney Carter). Gradually, over the years, I have rediscovered the profundity of classical, institutional Christianity.

I would like to compliment Harpur for writing a book that people can understand, and that has obviously caught the imagination of many people. The tremendous response to his book, and to other books of a similar nature (e.g., Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*), is an indication of just how many people in our society yearn for a new spirituality. This desire for spiritual renewal follows the disillusionment with the previous age’s rational, historical and technical solutions to all problems. The massive, positive response to Harpur’s book suggests that his thought may be the new middle North American main-

stream.

I also want to compliment Harpur for his explicitly stated intention not to debunk orthodox Christianity but to get to the deeper truths. Here is what he says: “Once again it is absolutely critical to stress that my argument that the Christ of the Gospels had an antecedent in Egypt (and in many other places and cultures as well) is not part of any attempt to debunk orthodox Christianity. Nothing is further from my mind. My aim, instead, is to reveal the truly spiritual nature of the Christos archetype in all of human history and, ultimately, to explain what this will mean to us” (90). In fact, it becomes clear as one reads the book, that Harpur does in fact have a strong bias against historic, orthodox, institutional Christianity, particularly any form of so-called “fundamentalism” (a term which has become a shibboleth in our society for writing off virtually any group making strong confessional truth claims).

I have myself for more than two decades stressed the need to recover classical Christianity for Mennonites and contemporary Christians generally in an age where the classical imagination has been largely lost. My books *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for*

Christian Ethics (Pandora Press, 2001) and *The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Herald Press, 2003) are also, like Harpur’s, an attempt at retrieval. Except I want to retrieve exactly what Harpur appears to reject: the Christian confessions and creeds of the first five centuries. I do believe in the historicity of the Christian claims, and my students can get truly excited studying classical orthodoxy.

The question is: What is the nature of the deeper truth that Harpur seeks, what are the substantive claims being made? **The issue is really not who said what first, or how it was being said, but what was being said. And I believe Christians said something different.** Harpur claims that what went wrong with historic Christianity—and it’s never quite clear whether this happened right at the start or only in the fourth century with Constantine—is that it took the ancient myth of the “inner Christ” and literalized it, identifying it with one particular person, Jesus of Nazareth, who in fact never existed. Harpur’s knowledge of historical Christianity and its use of language is strangely limited at this point. Christians throughout the ages have used literal, historical, mystical, symbolic, metaphorical, allegorical and a wide variety of spiritual languages to interpret and communicate the claims being made about Jesus’ being and work. The fourfold method of interpreting the tradition (literal, allegorical, tropological, anagogical) was used extensively in the Middle Ages and continues to have validity today. Literal did not mean “literalistic,” which is a modern phenomenon, but a straightforward, common sense reading; allegorical indicated a spiritual and mystical reading; tropological a moral and ethical one; and anagogical a futuristic interpretation.

Harpur’s two alternatives—

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Alison Hari-Singh (L) and Monica Patel, assistant to Councillor Joe Mihevc, enjoy a conversation during January 2004 TMTC student luncheon. Alison and Monica quickly recognized each other from their years in high school together. Brian Cooper (L) and Néstor Medina look on in the background.



Toronto City Councillor Visits TMTC

by Néstor Medina

On January 22, 2004, Toronto city councillor Joe Mihevc met with TMTC students over lunch, and offered a sobering presentation of the relation between theology and politics.

Born in Canada in 1954 to Eastern European immigrants, his upbringing in a strong Catholic home—where peace, justice and faith were common themes of discussion—deeply shaped and continues to impact his political choices. His move into a political career was a gradual process. It was not until 1979 that he started to become keenly aware of political issues and labour unions. He also realized that he needed to reflect more carefully on his involvement. This led him to graduate studies at TST, which he completed in 1988. Under his mentor Gregory Baum he wrote his Ph.D. dissertation, titled *The Politicization of the Mennonite Peace Witness in the Twentieth Century*. Focusing particularly on the tragedy of the Holocaust, he examined the connection between Christianity and the history of anti-Semitism, where he learned the concept of “bad religion.” All of this, he asserts, helped him to see a direct connection between his faith commitment

and his involvement in politics.

For Mihevc, politics and theology are not antithetical. On the one hand, Christian life and spirituality must encompass the political world. Mihevc says that “politics is how one lives one’s spirituality.” Politics is where the day-to-day issues of life are encountered. On the other hand, to ask where is God at work in society allows someone like Mihevc to see the socio-political issues he deals with on a daily basis as he moves from “from one sacred space to another.”

Mihevc is convinced that current issues pressing the city of Toronto—hunger and homelessness, environmental challenges, religious and ethnic pluralism, participatory democracy, etc.—raise important theological questions that need to be addressed by various Christian communities. Christians, he argues, must be at the forefront of these debates, creating alternatives that bring about justice and equality among diverse peoples.

In Mihevc’s political work as a city councillor, the “preferential option for the poor,” the “cry of the

earth,” and a commitment to community formation—these are the core ethical-theological values that help him navigate and make informed political choices.

Néstor Medina is completing a Th.D. in theology at Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology.

Jim Reimer chats with Toronto City Councillor Joe Mihevc (R). Reimer and Mihevc were both graduate students at TST in the early 1980s.



Papers presented at the 2004 Graduate Student Conference

- **“Confusing Exegesis: The Descriptions of ‘Texts,’ Authorship and Editorial Activity in Psalm 51 and Beyond”** – Derek Suderman (Toronto School of Theology)
- **“To What Does the Bible Refer? On Metaphor and Analogy”** – Phil Enns (Toronto School of Theology)
- **“Tradition Overdone? A Re-evaluation of Tertullian’s *Prescription*”** – Don Springer (Trinity Western University)
- **“Origen on the Authorial Intention of Scripture”** – Jeremy Bergen (Toronto School of Theology)
- **“Erasmus and the ‘Christian Humanist’ Reception of Augustine”** – Hans Leaman (Yale University)
- **“*Solae Quae Scripturae*? Anabaptists and De-Canonization of the Apocrypha”** – Jonathan Seiling (Toronto School of Theology)
- **“Plato’s Reflexive Critique of Poetry”** – Matthew Klaassen (Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto)
- **“The Flooded Text: Finding Dry Land in *The Wings of the Dove*”** – Jacob Jost (University of Oxford)
- **“Desire, Mysticism and Depression: The Contribution of Psychoanalysis to the Reading of Religious Texts”** – Christina Reimer (University of Toronto)
- **“Reading the Moral Law: A Hermeneutical Approach to Religious Moral Epistemology”** – David Kratz Mathies (Boston University)
- **“Doing Without Precedent? Typology and Tyrannicide in John Milton’s *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*”** – Matthew Neufeld (University of Alberta)
- **“Reading with Daughters of Sarah and Hagar: Authority, Scripture, and the Christian Life”** – Malinda Berry (Union Theological Seminary, NYC)
- **“Visual Images as Text? Toward a Mennonite Theology of the Arts”** – Chad Martin (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary)

Menonite Students Gather for Graduate Student Conference

by Malinda E. Berry

From June 18-20, 2004, a group of thirty young scholars met on the campus of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary under the auspices of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre with support from Mennonite Education Agency (MEA) of Mennonite Church USA. Our goal was to mine the theme, “Religious Texts,” which we did through plenary paper sessions that spanned disciplines and themes. The conversation was truly interdisciplinary as we shared our work across our various fields of study; from history to theology to biblical studies to philosophy to ethics to literary analysis to psychology, we turned over many new stones and discovered new possibilities for our own work.

In addition to the paper presentations, another significant part of the conference was the evening we spent with a number of the Marpeck Deans (academic deans from U.S. and Canadian Mennonite colleges, universities, and seminaries) and a

representative of the Faculty Calling Project of MEA. Our conversation spanned a variety of topics and also provided us with both a sense of how each of our church-related schools have a unique character and the qualities of teaching faculty the Marpeck Deans look for in the hiring process.

As the conference drew to a close, we took time to think about the future. There was clear consensus that we need to have gatherings like these on a regular basis. We also noted that we would again welcome interdisciplinary conversation and hope for more participation from women. Overall, there was clear enthusiasm for the opportunity to exchange ideas, build friendships, and create community with other Mennonite-minded graduate students.

Malinda E. Berry is completing a PhD in systematic theology at Union Theological Seminary, New York City.



Participants at June 2004 Graduate Student Conference listen to a paper presentation. Clockwise from bottom right: Derek Suderman, Hans Leaman, Jonathan Seiling, Matthew Klaassen, and former Goshen College president Vic Stoltzfus.

Deepening TMTC's Academic Life

by Phil Enns

This past academic year TMTC convened a Fellows Group, which exists to provide opportunities for members to:

- present and test aspects of their academic work with a Mennonite group;
- collaborate across disciplines and approaches;
- explore the connections of scholarship and faith, particularly Anabaptist-Mennonite; identity, faith, practice and/or institutions.

The Group consists of members who have made a commitment to regularly attend meetings and to lead occasional discussions. While a critical mass are either Anabaptist-Mennonite and/or students of religion, it is open to graduate students and faculty who wish to be identified as Fellows of TMTC. This year the topics included:

- "The Significance of the Linguistic Turn for Theology: Saussure and Ricoeur on Meaning and Reference";
- "Martyrdom as a Problem and/or Solution in Mennonite-Roman Catholic Relations";
- "Christology in the Political Theology of Oliver O'Donovan";
- "Christological and Pneumatological Dimensions of Ecclesiology: Approaches to Reformation-era Historiography";
- "Psalms as 'Overheard Prayers'";
- "An Alternative Defense of Nonviolence: Beyond the Sermon on the Mount to Christus Victor";
- "The Wisdom of the Cross as a Resource for Our Peace Theology."

The Group meets once a month during the academic year. Meetings involve a summary of a previously distributed short paper and then lively discussion.

CURRENT TMTC-AFFILIATED STUDENTS AND THEIR AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION

Rene Baergen, Th.D. (Emmanuel College)

- New Testament: *Christian Origins; New Testament Socio-Cultural Context*

Jeremy Bergen, Th.D. (Emmanuel College)

- Systematic Theology: *Pneumatology; Ecclesiology*

Marcia Boniferno, Master of Pastoral Studies (Emmanuel College)

Oscar Carvajal, Th.D. (Emmanuel College)

- Christian Ethics: *Ecological Ethics; Liberation Theology*

Brian Cooper, Ph.D. (Wycliffe College)

- Christian Ethics: *Early Anabaptist Theology; Social Gospel Movement*

Yousef Daneshvar, Ph.D. (Regis College)

- Philosophy of Religion

Phil Enns, Ph.D. (Emmanuel College)

- Philosophical Theology: *Religious Language; Truth and Meaning; Wittgenstein; Kant; Kierkegaard*

Mohammed Farimani, Ph.D. (Regis College)

- Philosophy of Religion

Alison Hari-Singh, Th.D. (Wycliffe College)

- Systematic Theology: *Constructive Doctrine; Theological Ethics*

Susan Harrison, Th.D. (Emmanuel College)

- Theology

Scott Kindred-Barnes, Th.D. (St. Michael's College)

- Church History: *Reformation and Early Modern Christianity*

Matthew Klaassen, Ph.D. (Institute for Christian Studies)

- Systematic Philosophy: *German Idealism; Phenomenology; Critical Theory*

Néstor Medina, Th.D. (Emmanuel College)

- Systematic Theology: *Theology of Culture; Postcolonial Discourse*

Jeff Nowers, Th.D. (Emmanuel College)

- Systematic Theology: *Liberation Theology; Interdisciplinary Studies*

Christina Reimer, Ph.D. (Centre for the Study of Religion)

- *Psychology of Religion (Freudian School)*

Thomas Reimer, M.A. (Centre for Medieval Studies)

- *Aquinas; Heidegger*

Tim Reimer, Th.D. (Emmanuel College)

- Old Testament: *History of Interpretation; Canon and Hermeneutics*

Jonathan Seiling, Th.D. (Emmanuel College)

- Church History: *Early Modern Christian Thought; Modern Russian Religious Philosophy*

Jasmine Shantz, M.Div. (Wycliffe College)

Jonathan Slater, Th.D. (Trinity College)

- Systematic Theology: *Modern British and German Christology and Soteriology*

Derek Suderman, Th.D. (Emmanuel College)

- Old Testament: *Psalms and Wisdom Literature; Hermeneutics*

New Reimer Scholarship Established for TMTC Doctoral Students

The A. James Reimer Award at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre was recently established in recognition of Professor A. James Reimer and the program he established in advanced degree/doctoral theological studies at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC) in conjunction with the Toronto School of Theology (TST). The Award is to support advanced degree/doctoral theological students at TST who are associated with TMTC, and to promote theological education.

Nominations for the Reimer TMTC Award will be made by the TMTC Advisory Board. Nominations will be recommended to the Conrad Grebel University College Scholarships and Bursaries Committee.

The annual award will be approximately \$1,250.

Further contributions to the endowment are welcome and will be matched by the Ontario Student Opportunities Trust Fund.

Recipients will be nominated by members of the TMTC Advisory Board and chosen by the College Scholarships and Bursaries Committee giving preference to the following criteria:

- advanced degree/doctoral students who are currently enrolled at TST
- students who are actively involved in the life of TMTC
- students who qualify for Ontario Student Opportunities Trust Fund through the Ontario Student Assistance Program
- students who have demonstrated commitment to the life of the Mennonite Church and its institutions
- students who demonstrate solid academic ability (transcripts required).

Letters of application should be sent to the Director of TMTC by Sept. 15; the first award will be given in Fall 2005.

Bonhoeffer Tour: A Sold-Out Success



Members of the May 2004 Dietrich Bonhoeffer study tour stand before a newly erected Bonhoeffer Chapel in honour of the late German Lutheran theologian, executed by the Nazis on April 9, 1945, for his role in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. The chapel is located near the North-eastern German town Zingst, at a place called Zingsthoof, where Bonhoeffer secretly conducted an underground seminary for the Confessing Church in the late 1930s.

From May 6-20, 2004, some 28 participants joined a tour through select areas of Germany and Poland where Dietrich Bonhoeffer was once active. It was co-conducted by Jim Reimer, Director of TMTC, and Peter Frick, Professor of Religious Studies at St. Paul's College, University of Waterloo—both of whom are specialists in Bonhoeffer studies and research.

The tour, which was sold out, began in Berlin, the city where Bonhoeffer spent most of his time as a young adult, student, teacher, member of the resistance, and prisoner. It then moved on to Zingst, Finkenwalde and Koszalin (places important for Bonhoeffer's training of ministerial candidates for the Confessing Church), Breslau (the Polish city of his birth), and the concentration camp

Buchenwald (where he was incarcerated for a period of time before being transported to Flossenburg, where he was hanged).

The tour ended with a stay in the beautiful Bavarian environs of the Benedictine monastery Ettal, where Bonhoeffer spent time in the early 1940s writing and waiting for assignments from the Munich headquarters of the resistance.

NOTE: The next such tour is being planned for May 2006, the 100th anniversary of Bonhoeffer's birth. Almost half of the seats are already spoken for, so if you are at all interested, please email Jim Reimer (ajreimer@uwaterloo.ca) or Peter Frick (pfrick@uwaterloo.ca) as soon as possible.

Mennonites Travel to Iran for Dialogue with Muslims



From February 6-20, 2004, four Mennonites studying or teaching at the Toronto School of Theology, together with four American Mennonites, participated in a dialogue with Muslim scholars and clerics at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom.

Seated, L-R: Susan Kennel Harrison, Lydia Harder, Phil Enns (4th).

Standing, L-R: Roy Hange (2nd), Prof. Haghani (4th; Iranian organizer of the exchange), Jon Hoover (6th), A. James Reimer (7th), Mohammed Legenhausen (8th; Professor of Philosophy at the Khomeini Institute and English liason), Ayatolla Mesbah (9th; Director of the Khomeini Institute), and David Shenk (10th). Others pictured were important members of the Qom delegation participating in the discussions.

Hansulrich Gerber Heads “Decade to Overcome Violence”

On April 5, 2004, TMTC hosted Hansulrich Gerber in an informal dinner-lecture event. Gerber, who is based in Geneva, Switzerland, is currently directing the “Decade to Overcome Violence,” an initiative of the World Council of Churches (WCC), inspired by a Mennonite member of WCC, Fernando Enns. Speaking to a small group of students and faculty, Gerber talked about the origins and vision of the initiative; he also fielded questions about its future prospects.



L-R: Tom Yoder Neufeld, Professor of New Testament and Peace Studies at Conrad Grebel University College, asks Hansulrich Gerber a question. Jeff Nowers and Jeremy Bergen look on.

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either his own mythic/spiritual reading or Christianity's false, literalistic reading is a fallacious polarity and misrepresents the historical Christian interpretation of founding events. His claim that very early on the Christian tradition deliberately falsified the evidence and literalized Christ simply does not bear up under historical scrutiny. The creeds were considered "symbols" of the faith. There was always a recognition by the theologians that the mysteries being talked about were ineffable and the language being used to talk about these mysteries was infallible, human and inadequate. That there has been much distorted literalism among the masses and even among the keepers of the tradition is of course true, but here Christianity is not unique. This happens in every concrete historical religion; but then such concrete, historical religion is exactly the object of Harpur's critique.

So the issue is not who said what first, and how it was being said, not whether or not Christians were the first or the only ones to say something. If in fact what Christians claim to be true was held by the Egyptians and the Persians and the Aborigines thousands of years earlier, so much the better, but the parallels need to be carefully examined. What is the truth that is being proclaimed? What is at stake is a comprehensive way of understanding all of reality. Let me outline as clearly as I can what I take to be the orthodox Christian claim and then see if it corresponds with Harpur's claims concerning the "inner Christ" myth.

First, Christians confess faith in the trinitarian nature of God. Within the eternal unity of God, there is an eternal plurality: God as mysterious, and unbegotten origin of creation (personified as Father), God as Word or Wisdom as the forming and shaping principle of creation (personified as Son), and God as Spirit, the life

giver—all three are to be distinguished from finite creation itself. *Second*, God is understood as creating the material and bodily world good although not divine; human beings are created in the image of God (have limited freedom) but are not intrinsically divine. *Third*, the material world, including human beings, is thought of as distorted, fallen, but not intrinsically evil; it is in need of redemption. *Fourth*, Christians believe that from the beginning God says "Yes" to His creation despite its misuse of freedom and grandiose self-deception; in Jesus the Christ (including the whole Jesus phenomenon—prophetic anticipation, conception, life, teachings, miracles, death, resurrection, ascension, the experience of forgiveness and power by the earliest Christians and subsequently) the nature of God's Yes is made plain. There is no logical reason why this "Yes" could not be revealed elsewhere, even in other religions. But is the divine "Yes" the same in other religions, that is, does it come in the form of the forgiveness of sins and the command to love the enemy? *Fifth*, Christians experience the Spirit of God as empowering a new humanity living in the context of new communities—not mythic communities, but literal, concrete, historical, institutionally-organized new communities that live in this world anticipating the transformation and redemption of the whole material world.

One could go into other aspects of the Christian claim but I have given what I consider to be the barest outline. These are not rationally or scientifically provable claims; they are "confessions" about how one understands God as ultimate reality, the visible and invisible world, the human condition, the solution, and the goal of time and history. Whether Jesus of Nazareth ever literally existed or not, aside—and I do believe

that there is far more evidence that he did exist than that he did not—there is no denying historically that by the mid-first century there were numerous literal, historical communities of believers who believed that Jesus of Nazareth had existed, had died, and risen, groups of believers who thought of themselves as quite literally the body of Christ.

How do these deeper truths of the Christian message mesh with what Harpur finds in Egyptian and other ancient myths? The deeper truth of all ancient Egyptian, Persian and other religions, including Christianity at its origins, says Harpur, was "the eternal Christ within." Harpur calls this the esoteric spiritual truth which was later turned into a literalized exoteric falsity, due to the "greatest cover-up of all time." The eternal Messiah or Christ takes "place in the life of every person at all times," he says (40). Here is what Harpur claims: "But, and this is of tremendous significance, the thoroughgoing studies of ancient religions done over many years by the scholars I refer to here have established with the utmost certainty that incarnation—the indwelling of God or divine essence in the human, every human—is the central teaching of all ancient belief systems everywhere. It became clear to me as I investigated further that ancient cultus focused all their efforts upon the cultivation of the god within man. This, in the final analysis, is the nucleus of the only true Christianity" (35).

There is no doubt that there is in the biblical text and earliest Christianity, especially as found in some of the Pauline texts as well as the Gospel of John (Harpur's favourite) an emphasis on the internal reality of Christ. However, the dominant theme in the Bible and also in the period of classical Christianity is that

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this internal element is never a form of depreciation of the external, physical and material world. This is what the whole debate about the two natures of Christ was all about. The church's assertion about the fully human and fully divine nature of the Christ was not an argument about the isolated nature of Christ's individual make-up but about the equal importance of the inner spiritual and outer material world. The Church's Christology determined its anthropology (the Christian view of the human person), its ecclesiology (doctrine of the church), and its view of creation generally.

The reason why the biblical authors and the early church argued so strongly against the so-called heresies (like Gnosticism) was because the proper balance between the spiritual and material was being jeopardized. The primary threat came from Gnosticism which thought of Christ as an inner, mythic, secret spirituality and depreciated the physical and material. The incarnation, virgin birth, miracles, death, resurrection of the Christ may have all been present in older mythologies. But they were spiritualised to the detriment of material, physical existence. To write off the history of Christian theology, life and practice subsequent to the first years as a vast conspiracy and cover up, in which the spiritual inner Christ is literalized and historicized, is to miss the whole point of the early Christian insistence on the importance of material and historical reality.

The passion with which early Christians fought against Gnostic heresy (and Harpur explicitly attempts to rehabilitate a form of Gnosticism) was precisely because they viewed the incarnation differently—not solely a Christ within but a Christ among human beings in the form of a new literal, historical, concrete moral and ethical community. This is not a corruption of

a myth which Christianity plagiarized from older pagan religions, it was a transformation of that myth into a concrete reality, which represented a new and different view of humanity.

To the extent to which laws were passed against pagans, their temples closed, and they were persecuted (which was the disastrous consequence of the Constantinian shift in the fourth century), historic Christianity went wrong. But this had nothing to do with Christianity's transformation of the so-called myth of the inner Christ into a "literal," concrete, historic Christian community, which saw itself quite "literally" as being called to love the enemy. Violence is of course one of the central issues in all of this. The problem of the Constantinian age was not a literalization and cover up of the spiritual roots of Christianity but the opposite. It was a cover up of the literal claims being made by early Christians that in the incarnation of Christ the non-violent purposes of God with the world had been quite literally and concretely revealed in this particular life and these events. With Constantine these literal truth claims about not killing became spiritualized. To internalize Christ has historically meant precisely the covering-up of the literal call to follow Jesus the Christ in rejecting all forms of physical violence. The prophetic Jewish demand to love God and neighbour, including the stranger, widow, poor, and orphan, becomes in Jesus quite literally radicalized, now also including the enemy. These are not solely spiritual, inner truths; these are literal, concrete, historical truths.

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