

# Religion

## Religion today is 'watered-down theology' says professor

In the 1990s, the age-old paradox of religion and freedom is worth reconsidering, says University of Guelph philosophy profes-

sor Jay Newman. Newman, the author of *On Religious Freedom*, the fourth in a series of volumes on religious

commitment and its social influences, maintains that much of modern Christian thought has become "a watered-down theology" with little of a "genuine" religious nature left.

"Today, many people are confused about religious freedom," says Newman, who recently finished a term as president of the Canadian Theological Society.

Religious liberalism, commendable when it is well-motivated, too often ignores the importance of tradition, he says. The question then becomes: "Can religion become freer without being deprived of its tradition?" For Newman, the answer lies in a more cautious religious liberalism rooted in tradition and scholarship.

He also questions the commitment of Canadian institutions in promoting respect for the rights of others to practise religion. In Canada, the bitterness of the debate over religious freedom - in such issues as separate school funding and the saying of the Lord's Prayer in public schools - suggests that "we haven't ade-

quately established a clear conception of religious freedom."

Newman argues that Canadians need to think harder about their civil liberties, especially during the current constitutional debate. Unlike the United States, where freedom of religion forms the foundation of its freedom, Canada does not enjoy a comparable cultural tradition of civil liberties.

"We need to think of the philosophical and ethical issues that arise with respect to why we allow people religious liberty instead of accepting it as a slogan from our new constitution," he says.

In his book, Newman explores the nature of freedom in terms of western Christian thought by drawing extensively on sacred and theological works. He begins with an examination of the ideal of religious freedom and of the principal ways in which religion is both a hindrance to freedom and a source of freedom. He goes on to examine the nature and value of religious liberty and the relationship between religious and political institutions.

As his starting point, Newman discusses the conflicting conceptions of the relations of religion to freedom. Many great thinkers argue that religion prevents freedom by enslaving people to dogma and religious leaders; others have argued that religion

brings order to the unlimited freedom in people's lives.

Another side of the argument is that "only through religion can people be free" because religion is the source of freedom, says Newman. He notes that many of the great images of freedom - the Exodus from Egypt in the Old Testament and the teachings of Christ in the New Testament - are derived from religious scriptures.

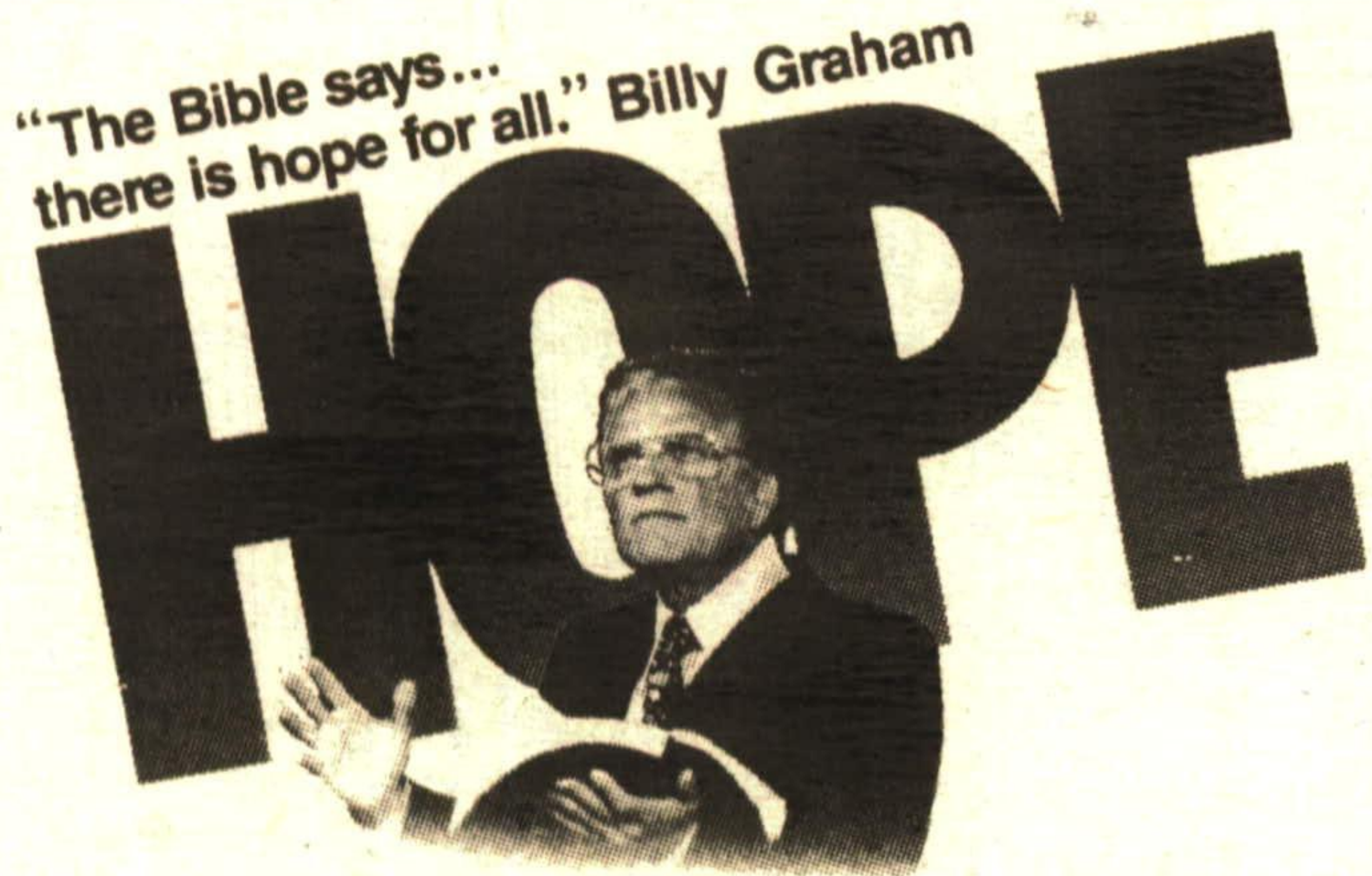
"There are two sides to the coin," he says. "Religion is an obstacle to freedom and it may also be the ultimate foundation of freedom."

Religion poses a threat to freedom when it is used for manipulation by powerful religious leaders or by secular institutions, he says. In the latter case, these institutions (such as politics, media and universities) attempt to control religion by propaganda and even oppression.

"Orthodox elements that dominate any established religious group often restrict or threaten personal freedom," he says.

Newman, who has studied religious freedom for 25 years, believes people have an obligation to promote a world where lives can be lived with freedom.

His earlier books on the theme of religious commitment include *Foundations of Religious Tolerance* (1982), *Fanatics and Hypocrites* (1986) and *Competition in Religious Life* (1989).



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