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Book Review

The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality, by David Tacey. New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004, 250 pages (References, Further Readings, Index). ISBN 1-58391-874-4.

This is not a book written by a philosopher (the author, David Tacey, is an associate professor of English at La Trobe University, Australia), nor is it written to stand up to serious philosophical analysis. Curiously, however, the work may nevertheless hold some interest for progressive philosophers of religion as a portent of things to come in their discipline -- or, indeed, as the author maintains, a state of affairs that even now shapes their field in subterranean ways. Tacey's contention is that "religion" in the traditional sense is in a rapid state of decline and that it is in the process of being replaced by "spirituality," the nature of which the author seeks to illuminate. Should this be true, of course, then at some near date in the future standard university courses on the philosophy of religion will need to omit, de-emphasize or reinterpret many of the standard elements that now constitute such a presentation -- the existence of God, the nature of God, God and morality, and so on -- and turn instead to a consideration of ... what? Those who read the book will find no unambiguous answer to this question, but they may discover much that will stimulate them regardless.

Tacey's central premise is that "We are entering a new aeon, governed by a new ethos and a new spirit. The secular period has peaked and is drawing to a close. The dry, arid wasteland of the modern era is being eclipsed by something new, and it is still too early to determine exactly what it is" (16). Part 1 ("The Present Situation") in this four-part volume seeks to elaborate this view. We have outgrown, according to Tacey, the values and assumptions of mechanistic science, humanism, and liberal democracy, while secular society's reliance on rationality alone has resulted not in social progress but rather global war and environmental destruction. Still, the principal dangers lie within, for the cult of materialism has left the human spirit starving for meaning, sustenance and purpose. The self has been taught to perceive itself as essentially disconnected from the beings and environment by which it is surrounded, and it is left with little more to do in life than to pursue its own egoistic wishes for gratification and power. Its hunger for a meaning and purpose to life greater than simple maximization of self-interest are left unattended by the world-view of contemporary society. Individual, personal growth -- "spirituality" -- is neglected, while instead the growth of the economy seems to be the sole topic of official, establishment concern.

Ordinarily, traditional religion would offer an antidote to this plight, and we should be witnessing a return to its values, promises and reassurances in unprecedented numbers, but the reverse is occurring: church attendance has been steadily declining for at least a half-century, and the young in particular seem increasingly uninterested in the reality and relevance of a supernatural deity. Tacey contends that a growing multitude of people find the cosmology of traditional Christianity

objectionably otherworldly and patriarchal, while the institution itself has become unacceptably dogmatic and elitist, a captive of the social establishment, out of touch with individual interests. Tacey focuses on secular education in particular as engaged in a covert, if unintentional, conspiracy to deny the personal depths and repress the spirituality of its captive audience, the result of which can only be the growing alienation of individuals from each other and their world. As over against this, Tacey argues that the task of education should be not merely the training of one's intellectual capacities, but the culture of the whole person -- the development of the inner life of students, as well as the enhancement of their connectedness to the social and natural world.

Part 2 of the work ("Youth Spirituality") focuses on the movement "from below" of those who are searching for meaning in their existence, experience of the sacred and direction for their lives. These are especially the young, those who have not accepted the false gods of wealth and status as substitutes for a life lived in spiritual wholeness, but who want to regain personal contact with ultimate cosmic forces and live in active relationship to them. Tacey describes them as wanting to regain the universal spiritual wisdom that once guided humankind, but which has now been discarded as empirically unverifiable and therefore invalid. Because they seek in vain for spiritual guidance from established religion and secular society, they have embarked upon their own inward voyages of spiritual discovery, and by no means have their efforts gone unrewarded. Whereas even by the middle of the nineteenth century Matthew Arnold had announced that the "sea of faith" was nearing low tide, leaving a "drear and naked" world, Tacey believes that we have now arrived at the opposite situation: "We are at high tide again" (21) -- hence the title of the book; we are now surrounded, he contends, by "A Spirituality Revolution."

In Part 3 ("Discernment") of the book, Tacey attempts to define more exactly the content of this revolution. The tone changes from sociological generalization to intellectual investigation: what exactly, he asks, constitutes "spirituality" and how is it to be achieved? Tacey offers many suggestions on these points, but this reader does not find them integrated in any systematic way, nor is Tacey inclined to regard them in a critical light. These suggestions are offered in rather random succession, and Tacey is not concerned to consider their truth content or possible objections to them; even their very meaning seems self-evident to Tacey, but will not to many readers. He appears to address himself exclusively to fellow believers and enthusiasts, content to synthesize "spiritual" claims and notions from heterogeneous sources, but not appearing to appreciate that they are not as immediately obvious or coherent as he assumes. He alludes superficially to one or another in passing, but consistently fails to analyze or develop them in depth, let alone consider the question of their mutual compatibility. Proponents of "spirituality" may find all this useful, and in a limited way it may be, but more demanding readers will find much frustration here.

At times Tacey seems to be arguing for what in the past has often been called pantheism: he declares that those embarked on the spiritual quest discover the spiritual significance of "the body, nature, the feminine, sexuality and the physical environment" (4); "the sacredness of life, nature and the universe" (38); "ecology, nature and the physical world, or the stars, planets and stellar cosmology" (80). This cannot, he observes, but lead them into a clash with traditional religion and its gradual abandonment:

Youth culture's quest is for a mystical and creation-centered theology, and this clashes with Western religion's fall-and-redemption theology. This theology has typically emphasized evil and sin, a critical separation from the body, negative attitudes toward

sexuality, and a suspicion of nature as the arena of paganism and the devil. Youth spirituality appears as a “natural” expression of religiousness, that is a spontaneous response to the presence of the sacred in creation, and it does not always appreciate the metaphysics of a religion that appears to be unworldly and dualistic.... Because youth see the world as essentially good and creation as graced, they do not often recognize the moral or spiritual urgency at the heart of Judeo-Christianity, namely the need to be saved from the world by a redeemer or messiah who grapples with evil and triumphs over it in life, death and resurrection (84).

Tacey’s sympathies are wholly with the young in this debate, insisting that traditional religion has overlooked the immanence of the divine, i.e., the sacredness inherent in creation, the body and the instincts. Given this failure, he emphasizes the final inevitability and legitimacy of the present “spirituality revolution” among those seeking an alternative path to the sacred, quoting Sandra Schneiders in witness: “Religion is in trouble, spirituality is in the ascendancy [and everywhere we hear] justification among those who have traded the religion of their past for the spirituality of their present” (106).

At many other points, however, Tacey appears to want to turn away from the natural world he has just deified and emphasize instead the introverted nature of the spirit, now placing a mystical emphasis upon “the God Within.” Here the way to God is through the depths of the self, and we thus read Tacey endorsing Karl Jung’s notion that “there is something eternal at the core of the personality” (83). Tacey, who engaged in post-graduate study of Jung with the noted Jungian psychologist James Hillman, frequently holds forth on the nature of spirituality in Jungian fashion:

[Formal religion is guilty of] forgetting that God resides in the inner man or woman and can be discovered there through self-reflection. Religion’s emphasis on the world and social service needs to be complemented by a new mystical emphasis on the cultivation of the inner life (148).

We have to go in search of God again, and discover the primordial religious experience in which God can be located and found. Another way to put this is to say that religion has to shift from moralism to mysticism, with less emphasis upon the God “out there” and more emphasis upon the God within.... We have to find God in a new place, and the most convincing place of all will be our human hearts.... As Meister Eckhart wrote in the 14th century, when God disappears from culture, we have to learn to give birth to God in the soul (193).

Additionally, both of the above versions of “spirituality” are further conflated with still another candidate -- what is often termed “the social gospel”: true worship of God to be found in service of the poor and the needy, the attempt to ameliorate the social injustices of the world. Tacey observes that youth spirituality is engaged, concerned with the welfare of the world: “They see spirituality as the basis for a new or renewed sense of human responsibility and social justice..., a cure for racism, ... an antidote to domestic violence and civil unrest” (66). For those who become spiritually awakened, social responsibility becomes a sacred imperative, and through it we are impelled to “go outside ourselves and serve others and the world.... The genuine spirit calls us to break our addiction to bliss and to attend to the needs of the other” (147).

Yet in still other places Tacey takes a much softer line on the nature of “spirituality,” appearing to mean not much more than an enhanced capacity for self-awareness and emotional development, with an occasional peak-experience or personal epiphany in the bargain. Thus modern literature, with its narrative of the inner workings of the self and its enhanced contemplation of the meaning of experience, becomes a prime focus of those concerned with the dynamics of spirituality. The inspiration at this point seems to owe very much less to Jung than to the humanistic psychology of, say, an Abraham Maslow. Thus, “Our experience of spirit today appears to break doctrinal rules in its holistic rather than perfectionistic strivings; in its quest for human authenticity, body-mind integration, psychological health, ecological integrity and sexual wholeness” (128). There is little to object to here, but in the recent past all these have been conventionally regarded as definitive characteristics of *emotional* rather than “spiritual” development. Some may object that in his quest to constitute a critical mass of individuals sufficient to justify the claim that a “spiritual revolution” is occurring, Tacey has here seriously watered down the very notion of spirituality.

On the other hand, Tacey can be equally passionate about the fact that spirituality depends upon transcendence of the human: “The spirit does not exist for our own edification and enjoyment, on the contrary spirituality has traditionally emphasized that we exist to glorify and serve a transcendent reality beyond ourselves” (141). According to Tacey, the spirit depends for its being upon something greater than ourselves, which overpowers us and takes away control of our lives. It addresses the “Sacred Other” and obliges us to follow its will, a command that can destroy our lives: “genuine spiritual awakening is always followed by a centrifugal movement away from the self towards the world and the transcendent” (148). Furthermore, and paradoxically for some in the face of all his denunciations of traditional Judeo-Christianity, Tacey continues to identify himself personally as Christian and identify the transcendent as “God.” He distinguishes, however, between the God of old-style, supernaturalist religion and the God of contemporary spirituality. “Let us agree that the old image of God is dead and buried. The conventional image of God as a supernatural deity who has an objective existence is a human invention, that education and science can no longer sustain.... We need to discover God anew” (156). In order to do so Tacey then turns away, in effect, from traditional Judeo-Christianity theism to traditional Hindu philosophy, stating:

The new God is everywhere and in all things, or to be more precise, all things are in God (*pan-en-theism*). While pantheism reduces God to the shape and size of material things, panentheism allows for the transcendental dimension by recognizing that God is greater than things, while also present in them. Spirituality is not tortured by questions about the existence of God, or about proofs for God’s existence, as theology and metaphysics so often are. Spirituality does not ask for proofs, because the proof is in the experience itself (164).

Part 4 (“Concluding Reflections”) of Tacey’s work insists that our personal, social and environmental fragmentation will cease when modern spirituality succeeds in reminding us of the presence of God in all things; that is, of the universal reality and effects of the spirit. “To call for spirituality is to call for healing and reconnection. It is to admit that we are divided and long to become whole” (215). The essential teaching of spirituality is that of respect for the sacred, and the modern is one of the few civilizations that have not been based on respect for the sacred, a fact from which we now derive the consequences:

We suffer a moral and ethical decline, because we have privileged the human fragment

or part above the divine whole, and it is only connection to the larger sacred whole (however we like to envisage it) that brings natural morality, responsibility and justice. Emphasis on the part, the fragment, can only bring selfishness, greed, immorality and exploitation, the very things that destroy civilizations and bring about their downfall (217).

My reservations about *The Spirituality Revolution* have been sketched above: at worst it sometimes seems a farrago of questionable and vague assertions deriving from pop-psychology, self-help and New Age texts, designed to make us feel that the world is better than it seems, that there is hope when in fact there may be none, that a change in perspective can solve everything: in short, to give us ungrounded metaphysical comfort. Possibly the best antidote to all this remains Freud's *The Future of An Illusion*, with its sobering and profound analysis of religious wishful thinking and the human capacity for self-deception. Additionally, as further suggested, many assertions that are presented in this work as simply different aspects of some single underlying thesis may in fact be mutually exclusive, depending on their characterization and direction. At no point is the real tension between these assertions explored, or even recognized. Ideas are piled upon each other in confusing ways; very little is examined in depth or connected logically to what precedes or follows. Thus, the most vehement critic of this book might be all too ready to dismiss it as simultaneously glib, superficial, uncritical, inconsistent, and nebulous: a popularization of the most inferior sort.

I, however, am not that critic: I do find redeeming value here both in the questions it raises and the answers it offers (though I do not agree with many of them). Though I am often not satisfied with the means by which it transacts its business, I do accept that the business it proposes is meaningful and addresses some of the vital concerns of our time, which can indeed be considered in differing ways. There may be substantial truth in the premise that reason, science and secularism cannot in themselves solve the problems of the age and that some return to a more holistic, ecological, compassionate or "spiritual" ethos is imperative – indeed, that this very transformation is occurring under our noses at the moment. Tacey's work, however problematic, does succeed in capturing the essential convictions and orientation of a new generation of "postmodern" seekers and seers. But, in turn, whether the ultimately optimistic assumptions about persons and nature brought to these questions by representatives of a revived "spirituality" are any more satisfactory is equally debatable. Is there a universal power beyond that discoverable by the empirical sciences, and if so, is that power worthy of human worship and the exaltation that the word "God" brings? Or may it be, on the contrary, that the great philosophical, psychological and literary pessimists are right, that the cosmos is in the final analysis truly cruel, horrifying and absurd? (Cf. Nietzsche's depiction of "Dionysian man" in *Birth of Tragedy*: he looks boldly into the essence of all things, and now that he sees the true horror and absurdity of existence, he is nauseated and can no longer live -- save as the miracle of art revives him.) Surely, these are "spiritual" issues that contemporary philosophy of religion should be considering more directly.

I am personally convinced on any number of grounds that Tacey is right in believing that the traditional God of Judeo-Christianity is -- again with Nietzsche -- dead, and that new forms of religiosity/spirituality, with myriad roots in world cultures and historical periods, are in the process of replacing Christianity. How they are systematically related and how valid their differing claims may be is only in the first stage of being sorted out by the intelligent and informed persons in the midst of these movements and those interested in them, though not, unfortunately, in the

philosophy classrooms that might also contribute fruitfully to the process. The great majority of students and serious-minded people in society regard philosophy as irrelevant to the problems of actual living and the most vital questions of personal truth and value by which we live from day to day; by academically ruling out of bounds from the outset the profound questions raised by “spirituality” as Tacey presents it, philosophy does its best to prove them correct.

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