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A review of William Irwin Thompson's *Beyond Religion: From Shamanism to Religion to Post-Religious Spirituality: Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Lindisfarne Books, 2013. 89 pp. \$15.00. ISBN: 978-1-58420-151-9*

Is religion supposed to fit its time and place, or is religion a storehouse for eternal truths, true for all times and places? The Western religions tend to present themselves as the latter. Christianity does not teach that if an individual feels personally compelled to believe in Jesus as the unique savior of all humanity, s/he may do so, but there is no harm in preferring some other savior, or no savior at all. That might be how moderns tend to approach their religious choices, but it is not how the religions present themselves. Islam does not teach that there is only one God, but if some feel so motivated it is fine if they want to pray to Goddesses and spirits, or claim that there is no God at all. Emphatically not, these religions teach that there will be a monstrously heavy price to pay if we differ from their ontological pronouncements: eternal torment in hell after we die.

But this is true of the big, organized religions that are thousands of years old. In the post-modern era, all bets are off. The purveyors of the old dogmas no longer have anywhere near the power they once had to demand - and get- absolute obedience from the masses. Too many people have begun to think for themselves. The floodgates have opened, bringing in hundreds of options for the spiritually minded. But as liberating to some as those fountains of possibility have been, others have felt profoundly threatened. After all, if these truths are not absolute and unalterable, then are they arbitrary. Were they ever true to begin with? It is the sheer terror some traditionalists feel in the face of uncertainty that sends them stampeding back into the safe bosom of their mother church, where they can enjoy at least the illusion of eternal warmth and security. But for many post-moderns, this pretty picture no longer stands as an unshakable beacon of uncontested truth pouring down from heaven.

It is this drama playing out globally in our time that drew poet and "cultural philosopher" William Irwin Thompson to opine on the deep impact this paradigm shift has had on the consciousness of post-moderns. Thompson brings a singular wit and insight to the subject, even if his work, *Beyond Religion* may be ultimately unsatisfying. His aim here is big, nothing less than "to provide the context and tools to create a new planetary culture" (viii). He says that the traditional religions provide "comfort food" (xvi) to the masses, who crave a "story" that will make them feel safe in the face of a "big and scary world" (xvi). But those "ontological terrors" (xvii) have been exploited by religious elites who have lorded over humankind long enough. Post-moderns have grown up. As Thompson puts it, "Kids know that their parents are fibbing about the tooth fairy and grown-ups know that their priests are fibbing about the virgin birth" (xvii).

He paints an unforgettable portrait of his own Catholic up-bringing, whose "force-fed truths" he began to doubt as early as age seven (5). Though never molested by a priest, he describes the confessional booth as "phone sex" (2) for the priests who were clearly getting a thrill out of suggesting all kinds of dirty infractions to the schoolboys on the other side of the partition. He describes cruel

punishments that went well beyond the sharp wrapping of knuckles (5). Not mincing words, he proclaims that the Catholic church is “rotten to the core” (8).

To be sure, he recognizes the many thousands of truly compassionate souls within the Catholic church and all other religions, who are working diligently to improve life for the downtrodden. But he did not witness this compassion first hand. Remarking that the priests and nuns who taught him seemed always to be angry, as if they were sitting on top of a volcano of resentment and repression. He says they represent fundamentalism in the Catholic version, paralleled by hard-liners of other traditional religions, including scientific fundamentalism, which reduces all spiritual experience to brain-based, mechanistic or chemical processes (18). “Fundamentalism is the metastatic cancer of consciousness, a malignant growth of mind that displaces a healthy sense of humor, ambiguity, compassion and tolerance” (xvii).

The real thrust of Thompson’s work comes when he turns to how post-moderns have liberated themselves from tradition. He runs through a quick history of religion from the era of shamanic power and animism, recaptured today in what he calls “cultural retrieval” (46,78). In our age we are moving past the era of the “alpha male dominance” (26). “Appropriately, this post-religious movement has no single leader but is an emergent domain in an ecology of consciousness in which diversity is its most striking feature and strength” (30). He cites four prominent examples, Einstein, who was not a leader of a movement but a partner in a “fellowship of geniuses,” Yogananda, who founded a Fellowship of Self-Realization and proclaimed that “the era of the guru and disciple is over” (36), and Aurobindo and his Tantric partner the Mother Alfassa, who also purposely named no successors of their movement, and who recaptured for post-moderns the sacred feminine, the Wise Woman, once the counterpart of the shaman.

Fellowship then, is the centerpiece of Thompson’s vision of the post-religious future. Reactionary forces cannot stop this sea change. He says, “in cultural evolution, those who do not take the . . . quantum leap upward can slip down into an evil caricature of the old culture . . . (like) those who did not take step upward offered by Chartres, the Sufis and the Cabbalists of the Zohar . . . slid down into the Catholicism of the Inquisition” (45). Thompson cites Jean Gebser’s concept of “efficient and deficient forces” (85). New “efficient,” that is, effective, forms of spirituality render the old forms “deficient,” causing their most fervent believers to become angrily reactive as they sense their bulwark against the terrors of existence cracking. The old deficient systems have become “toxic dump(s) . . . witnessed in recent terrorist attacks around the world” (84). “The explosion of religious violence is a sign of the medieval religions’ death not their rebirth” (86). Thus, Thompson proclaims “the end of the age of religion and the beginning of a unique/universal . . . adventure of consciousness that is based upon individual experience and not upon priestcraft, rigid dogma and collective forceful indoctrination” (85).

For all his envisioning of a grand future where deficient religion has been overcome, this book, in the end seems to fall short. Thompson’s work lacks a

certain cohesion and scholarly attention to detail. He tends toward careless pronouncement of opinion as fact, and proclaims rather than argues. Too often he leaps around, wanders off the track, and even rambles. At times his visions of a possible future get a bit wild (79). But more importantly, the reader is left to wonder in the end, exactly where all this is leading. His vision remains vague, a grand but dreamy apparition. Despite the claim to be providing “the context and tools to create a new planetary culture” (viii), in the end we have only bits and pieces of context and few actual “tools”. We are left feeling unfulfilled, as if we’ve glimpsed a floating mirage of a post-religious spiritual future with only cursory mention given to outcroppings of it, as in his examples of Einstein and Aurobindo.

But perhaps this is to insist too much on specifics of what and how. Even if we are left feeling the book is a bit light, Thompson’s achievement still stands. He expresses an authentic vision of how religion is evolving in our time past its worn-out categories. His exploration of religion and post-religious spirituality is optimistic and intriguing. His strongest point may be to have placed as the centerpiece of the new spirituality, the phenomenon of fellowship, the full embrace of diversity and the sacred feminine as full equals in partnership. We post-moderns, he claims, are giving birth to the new egalitarian paradigm that will render obsolete the absolutist, male enclaves of power-elites that still attempt to dictate what each of us must believe and how we must act. In the new era, spirituality is as unique as each individual is, as each one follows only the “guru within” (44) and is spiritually empowered beyond the reach of any priest or imam. Post-moderns participate in a fellowship of equals standing before a wide-open range of possibilities. This and many other elements make Thompson’s book, despite its flaws, an important and worthy contribution as a witness to the evolution of consciousness, spirituality and culture in our time.

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