



UNDER THE GREAT CROSS

The Spirituality Revolution

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David Tacey's The Spirituality Revolution: reflections on Australian religion and culture.

Who has not heard or seen Guy Sebastian (the 2003 'Australian Idol') perform on TV or in his Paradise Community Church in Adelaide? Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young people seem to be released into an ecstatic Christian faith by his music and style. The ABC TV *Compass* program on Sunday November 21st, 2004 featured Sebastian and the Paradise Church world. It was a strong public recognition for this kind of spirituality. It was also from this Adelaide Community that the Family First representative was successful at the 2004 Federal election.

Rachael Kohn, the ABC radio presenter, recently interviewed Nikki Gemmell, author of *The Bride Stripped Bare*, the novel that caused a stir in 2003. Gemmell, surprisingly, professed a rediscovering of Christian faith and of finding in London a way of expressing her faith through parish worship life and family.

Surprises of this kind at the level of popular culture are growing day by day. What lies behind them is the subject of David Tacey in his most recent book, *The Spirituality Revolution*.

In 2001, we gathered as friends and members of The Well-spring Community in Australia at Grose Vale, New South Wales, where one of our guest speakers was to be David Tacey. As it happened, we were unable to have Tacey present in the flesh, but were challenged and heartened by his contribution via an excellent video. At that time, we were reading his most recent book, *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality*. Since then he has gone on to offer this present serious and analytical study of religion and culture in Australia today.

Tacey is an Associate Professor at La Trobe University, in Victoria; and while he meets a quite often hostile reaction among academic colleagues simply because he takes religion seriously, he has found in his students a remarkable way of tapping into a younger generation's candid expressions of interest in spirituality. Tacey's new book is a valuable presentation

have imagined that we have outgrown the sacred; notions of soul and spirit are marks of a former era. But the truth, as he believes, is quite different. Spirituality is a major social phenomenon and requires immediate attention. Its power is needed to help us respond creatively to the spiralling outbreaks of depression, suicide, addiction, and psychological suffering in modern society. (p.3)

The question could be asked whether the spirituality revolution is the same thing as the New Age. Tacey says it is not. He sees the New Age as a specific and highly *commercialised* 'wing' of the new spiritual movement, as an exploitation of the new public interest in the spirit, rather than 'a creative response to it'.

Many of us, he suggests, would say that as a society we are not ready for this new sense of the spiritual. 'Most of our public institutions in Australia are secular and are not prepared for a revolution of spirit.' (p.4) The mainline churches do not appear to be taking up a dialogue with this new spirit of our time, partly because they have very conventional ideas about the sacred. Tacey suggests that the spirit, in contrast, is not confined to certain places or practices.

The spirituality revolution is also about finding the sacred everywhere, ... Things previously considered worldly or even unholy are being invested with new spiritual significance, such as the body, nature, the feminine, sexuality, and the physical environment. (p.4)

It is not an escapist movement, but 'a direct political and philosophical challenge to traditional notions of sacredness and the holy.' (p.5) Tacey goes on to say that it therefore belongs to the long line of democratic revolutions, and that it is a forward movement with an advance achieved paradoxically by revisiting and reconnecting with the ancient past.

The spirituality revolution is also not to be seen as a deliberate and systematic retreat from the strains and stresses of our contemporary society. Nor does it stem from the community's desire for absolute certainty, religious security, and nostalgic traditionalism post September 11, 2001. Tacey suggests, however, that the rising tide of fundamentalism, especially within Islam, Judaism

and Christianity does indeed use this path of retreat and security.

Rather, it is a transformation from within, 'the mystical ground of our being' that leads to life-giving currents offering an opportunity for healing and renewal. From this mystical source all belief systems emerge.

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Tacey started his own spiritual journey with the Christian West. As a child he lived in Melbourne and later the family moved to Alice Springs, Central Australia, where his experience of Aboriginal spirituality first began. Following his tertiary studies in Australia, he travelled to the United States to study psychology:

Religion had taught me to find God in heaven, Aboriginality had shown me to find the sacred on earth, and now I wanted psychology to reveal to me the possibility of finding the sacredness within. (p. 7)

Tacey suggests that no one path gives the full picture, and that his search has taken him into the wilderness of secular society, enabling him to find hints and clues along the way.

In his introduction to the chapter entitled: *The Present Situation*, Tacey comments that '[a] spirituality revolution is taking place in Western and Eastern societies as politics fails as a vessel of hope and meaning.' (p 11) It is, however, difficult to discern the fact that spirituality is rising since sources such as church life surveys are usually concerned about which 'denomination' or 'tradition' people belong to, and rarely ask questions about a *search for meaning*. Other ways need to be found to gauge whether people have spiritual interests or not.

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Over a number of years Tacey has surveyed students in one of his literature and psychology courses at La Trobe University. He reports a growing number of undergraduate students expressing personal concern for 'spirituality' yet only a few were indicating that they were following one of the major religions. For instance, in 2002, he surveyed 125 students, and of those 115 expressed a

personal concern for spirituality. But only about 10 belonged to a major religion. (p.14)

In a later chapter: Losing my religion, recovering the sacred, Tacey observes the pattern that the students he teaches commonly outline.

1. Natal faith: 'I was born into a religious family, and inducted into its faith traditions and institutions.'

2. Adolescent separation: 'I began to ask questions about faith in teenage life, questions for which I did not receive satisfactory or adequate answers.'

3. Secular identification: 'I gradually lost contact with my natal faith, and renounced my institutional affiliation. I may even have begun to denounce my faith tradition, referring to myself as secular, humanist, agnostic or atheist. Meanwhile, Mum and Dad had loosened their ties to religion, they still felt it was important, but did not necessarily practise it themselves, and they felt I could make up my own mind about religious matters.'

4. Secular disillusionment: 'I made the transition to the secular society, but still did not feel satisfied. The secular world said I was free, but I did not really feel free. I began to feel something was missing; there was a God-shaped hole in my life. The secular world says I need to consume more goods, take more holidays, or seek more entertainment, but somehow this seems unfulfilling.'

5. Adult 'secular' spirituality: 'I eventually developed my own 'secular' spirituality, free from religious influence, outside the church, temple or synagogue, and part of the 'resurgence' of spiritual feeling in today's society.' (pp. 106 – 7)

Tacey believes that this pattern is so typical that it might almost be referred to as 'archetypal', a contemporary experience that occurs universally. Or is it some new social myth, he asks.

It is Tacey's view that when we throw out religion, 'we throw out the language of the soul and spirit.' (p.115) We not only get rid of cultural baggage but in the case of a Christian background, 'throw out the baby Jesus with the bathwater.'" When one is examining one's early faith, it requires discernment and study, not an impatient rejection. Tacey suggests that when religion is discarded, it doesn't mean that the spirit and soul go away or disappear: it means that they are simply repressed into the uncon-

scious. A student writes of 'another life' within her life:

I was scared to acknowledge the sacred in case it meant the ultimate death of the subtle underlying apathy that protected myself, and all of us, from the shocking reality of the presence of mystery in our lives. (p.117)

Secular and private spirituality tends to isolate us from others and the wider community, because it goes on in our minds or in the isolation of our homes.

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In his chapter *Towards a new image of God*, Tacey reminds us of the problem of the language that is used about God. Whilst for several centuries the notion of God has been rejected by many scientists, and the return of God in scientific reflection is still highly controversial, 'Postmodernity has been friendly to the idea of God, partly because it has exposed the constructed nature of the scientific authority or 'objective' knowledge that killed God off in the first place.' (p.155)

The new image of God, however, will not be the same image that was jettisoned by scientific knowledge. 'He' may be considered to be 'she', since we no longer believe that God is a man but rather an archetypal idea. Tacey suggests that

all symbolic representations of the divine die, and society has to set about to renew and remake its sacred images. The new images must carry weight, significance, beauty and conviction, and they cannot simply be invented by human reason, but must well up from the spirit of the people and from the mythopoetic imagination. (p.158)

We must insist on a difference between the image of God and the essence or absolute reality of God, or between form and spirit, declares Tacey. (p.158) We are told that the sacred changes shape, but never dies. The spirit wants to take form and assume image and symbol, but then apparently loves to unravel it. What is sacred and solemn to the churches is no longer sacred and solemn to the spirit. 'True faith,' as the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard has said, 'was a leap away from fossilised beliefs into the

reach beyond religion to the spiritual core. (Wendy, 18, 2001)

It is subtle but evident that an inner yearning is rising within the younger generation to go back to their roots, back to the beginning, and this is what the new spirituality is about. (Marie, 18, 2001)

I aspire to be a religionless Christian. I want to get back to the essence of Christianity. For me, 'religion' gets in the way of Christianity. I want us to return to the simple message of the Gospel. (Danny, 18, 2001)

Traditional churches are now in a state very similar to the state of the church when Jesus was alive: elitist, devoid of the Holy Spirit, hierarchical. (Danny, 18, 2001) (pp 86 – 88)

In his section on *Nature and spiritual renewal*, Tacey notes the importance of eco-spirituality to many young people. He sees here something positive. He finds that their writings demonstrate a connection to the spirituality of nature. (p.181)

Tacey goes on to suggest that perhaps youth will learn to redefine 'progress' as beyond the level of materialism and environmental exploitation. Their search for eco-spirituality offers a quite new vantage point. (p.185)

Perhaps a sample of the testimonies of young people who have written about their experiences in nature might allow us to see the spirituality evident for these students. In a section entitled *The healing wholeness of the earth*, we read:

After an argument with my family, I went on a nature camp at a seaside park. One night, I walked along the beach, listening to the sound of the waves. The moon arose above the horizon, and I felt bathed in its healing light. A deep peace came over me, and I forgot about the strife at home. I felt connected with sea, sky and moon, and this filled me with joy. I have often tried to recapture this feeling, especially in times of difficulty or when problems arise. (Mandy, 19, 2000).

Looking out across the land from the hilltop, I felt a sense of holiness in the scene around me. I will always be thankful for this experience, and to nature for showing me my path and making me focus on the important things in life. (Lisa, 19,1999)

The age, wisdom, and endurance of the land had a big impact on me. I felt so peaceful, words cannot describe the feeling. It was spiritual for me. (Bronwyn, 18, 2000). (p. 186)

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The above quotations could be challenging to Wellspring members and friends. Most of us are mature-aged and find ourselves in different positions of belief and experience from these younger people. The question arises: What do **we** have to offer?

As Wellspring members and friends, it has been our privilege to discover the richness in '**the telling of our stories**'. The suggestion that 'we have to stop trying to pump religion into people's lives, and start drawing it out of people's lives', as Tacey has observed, makes good sense to us. It has been in the telling of our stories to each other as we gather in small groups that the spirit of God has been known to us in both the crises and the ordinary events of our lives. Here, the breaking through of the spirit has been a cause for celebration in our liturgies and in our conversations with each other.

Tacey concludes, after offering many criticisms, with expressions of deep concern for the future of both religion and spirituality:

If we care enough about religion, we have to be prepared to take risks and support the spiritual essence of religion in a new way. Clearly, religion must engage in what Walter Brueggemann, the American theologian, calls prophetic criticising, so that the spiritual life is allowed to be drawn out and shown to the world. If religion wants to have a future, it must allow itself to be seen not only as an institution, but also as a mystery that can feed and nourish the spiritually starving world. If religion wants to survive, it will have

to reach into itself, and reveal the mystery that forms the basis of its light and wisdom. (p.190).

Today, we must find ways to make our religion more spiritual, changing churches from places of devotional worship to 'centres of existential spirituality.' Another way of saying this is to say that "religion has to shift from moralism to mysticism with less emphasis on the God 'out there' and more emphasis on the God within." (p. 193) In a strongly worded argument about winning back our connections, Tacey says that:

The new attention being given to spirituality is not just some fashionable interest in esoteric matters, nor is it an escape from the real or an intellectual enquiry into human nature. It is an emotional and urgent reaction to widespread alienation, disempowerment and disillusionment. It is an almost panic response to the apparent lack of relationality and connectedness in contemporary life. To call for spirituality is to call for healing and reconnection. It is to acknowledge that our lives are fragmented, and that we hope for some mystery that will fit the broken parts together. (p, 215)

We only call for spirituality when our brokenness has reached a high point; and while a sceptical part of the mind sees that hope of spirituality as vanity and delusion, a deeper part of us sees it as 'the **wellspring** of personal sanity and public health.' (p. 215)
Very well chosen words!

References:

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