


2007

Heelas, Woodhead, Seel, Szerszynski, & Tusting's "The Spiritual Revolution" - Book Review

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Recommended Citation

Pilgrim, Gay (2007) "Heelas, Woodhead, Seel, Szerszynski, & Tusting's "The Spiritual Revolution" - Book Review," *Quaker Studies*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/quakerstudies/vol11/iss1/12>

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HEELAS, Paul, WOODHEAD, Linda, SEEL, Benjamin, SZERSZYNSKI, Bronislaw, and TUSTING, Karin, *The Spiritual Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 224. ISBN 1-4051-1959-4, Paper, £15.99.

A great deal has been written about the declining influence of religion in Western societies and increasing secularisation, but it is now being noted that, even as

traditional Christianity (in Western culture) appears to be slipping away, there has been a rise in 'spirituality', the sacralization of 'ordinary life'. This is evidenced by commonly used and taken-for-granted vocabulary amongst the public at large, the widespread availability of books about the innumerable practices which constitute aspects of this 'spirituality', and easy access to practitioners and teachers of these practices. However there is no agreement as to the overall significance of this new 'spirituality'. Some argue that it is merely the 'last gasp and whimper of concern with the sacred in the West' (p. 2), others that it is 'more significant than the Protestant Reformation' and that Christianity will ultimately be 'eclipsed by spirituality' (p. 2).

The latter is a large claim, and the authors of this book set out to investigate whether or not it can be said that the West is, actually, undergoing a 'spiritual revolution'. They posit that a 'spiritual revolution' can be said to have taken place when 'holistic' activities that are perceived and understood as being spiritual, attract more people than do traditional (Christian) religious activities. This definition is robust enough to allow it to be tested empirically, and a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods are employed, incorporating longitudinal studies together with new research specifically set up for their purposes. They wanted to discover both 'what' and 'how much' is going on. They ultimately conclude that what is actually taking place isn't 'either/or', but rather co-existence, and they develop a theory to explain both the decline of religion and the growth of spirituality in terms of a single process, which they call the 'subjectivization thesis'; a theory based on what Charles Taylor (1991) has called 'the massive subjective turn of modern culture' (p. 26).

It is a fascinating, though not always an easy, read. The style of writing is very accessible, but I found myself floundering when trying to remember the difference between the terms they use to delineate the nuances between different types of associational activity; whether of the traditional religious sort (which they call the 'congregational' domain) or the 'holistic' spiritual milieu. An appendix laid out for quick reference would have been very helpful.

The book offers a detailed analysis of what gives significance and meaning to peoples' lives from both the perspective of the 'congregational domain' and the 'holistic milieu'. They found the 'congregational domain' is about 'people being guided by higher authority to find fulfilment in a common good', whilst the "'holistic milieu"...serves to help people live out their interior lives in their own unique ways'. They examine the shift from individuals being part of a greater collective enterprise through whom meaning and purpose is gained, to the individual as the sole arbiter of what gives life meaning and authority. They discuss widespread cultural change within institutions such as teaching, health care, and increasingly work culture, to demonstrate the move towards the importance of personal fulfilment, of 'being true to myself', 'becoming' and 'well-being'—what the authors term subjective-life. Their work is detailed and thorough, but I would have liked more visuals in the form of charts and graphs to aid understanding and provide an overview.

This research explores in the macro what I believe has been taking place within the Religious Society of Friends in the micro. They class Quakerism as a 'religion of experiential humanity', that is one that accepts that God is not only external, but can be part of an individuals' unique experience. It is true that this understanding is the foundation from which Quakerism grew, but over the centuries the transcendence of God has diminished, while the importance of individual experience has developed. To date, the value of community and collectivity, what the authors term 'associational activity', continues to be highly regarded, although recent research by Rosie Rutherford (reprising Ben Pink Dandelion's PhD study) indicates that this is changing, at least in terms of Friends viewing themselves as primarily belonging to a national body. Nevertheless, relationship and connectedness remain central to Quakerism and as such, given that the authors are clear that subjective-life spirituality is not about self-serving selfishness, but rather self-seeking connectedness, it could be said that Quakerism offers a bridge between traditional religion and contemporary subjective-life spirituality. Certainly the analysis of subjective-life 'types' mirrors the make-up of Britain Yearly Meeting (being predominantly middle class, middle aged, female and in the 'caring' professions).

The authors argue that given the subjective-life turn of Western culture in general, those organisations that offer the opportunity for personal development and growth are likely to flourish, whereas those that don't will continue gently to decline. This raises a question. Contemporary Quakerism does provide a 'form of the sacred which caters for the cultivation of subjective-life', but it continues to decline. However, there was a brief period during the late '80s when numbers rose, only starting to decline again around 1990. [It would appear that this period was also when the 'holistic milieu' emerged, though the authors offer no explanation as to why this might be.] My own research took place in the mid-'90s, and I concluded that if the traditionalists (what I term 'inclusivists') chose not to exert themselves, then British Quakerism would metamorphose into something closely resembling what these authors term the 'holistic' milieu. It is not yet clear what the changes taking place within Britain Yearly Meeting will give rise to, but it is notable that over the last five years or so, the annual gathering of Friends has been less well attended even as it has become more explicitly 'religious'. If the authors of *The Spiritual Revolution* are correct, this is unsurprising.

In order to reach a conclusion as to whether or not a spiritual revolution is taking place, it was necessary to attempt to measure the relative strengths of the 'congregational domain' as against the 'holistic milieu'. It was decided to equate yearly congregational attendance figures with the yearly attendance figures in the holistic milieu (in Kendal), but what such figures cannot show is whether it is the same people attending, or whether there is a constant roll-over. They do not take account of movement, in-and-out, of either group, and in terms of establishing what impact a brief or occasional encounter has in the long term, number crunching isn't helpful. However, to do it any other way would have made the research impossibly huge, and the results obtained, set alongside the ethnographic data, doubtless give a reasonably clear indication of what is happening.

Secularisation and sacralization have largely been seen in opposition to one another. To view them as part of the same process and to develop a theory based on that conclusion is stimulating and exciting. The subjectivization thesis not only offers an explanation, but also a tool from which to continue testing whether or not a spiritual revolution has occurred, or is occurring. Is it by chance that the authors have ended up with what might be viewed as an 'holistic' theory?

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