

1-1-1995

Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey From Bozeman to Banares, Diana J. Eck

Kathy J. Pulley
Kathy.Pulley@MissouriState.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pulley, Kathy J. (1995) "Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey From Bozeman to Banares, Diana J. Eck," *Leaven*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol3/iss2/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Book Reviews



Thomas Moore, **Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life** (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), paperback, 1994. Reviewed by **Constance M. Fulmer**.

Thomas Moore's **Care of the Soul**, one of the numerous spiritual self-help books now available, has just appeared on the best seller list of the **New York Times Book Review** for the fifty-second week along with his work **Soul Mates** and at least a half-dozen other books which promise "insights into achieving a fulfilling life." This phenomenal current interest in matters of the soul was the topic of the cover story of the November 28, 1994, issue of **Newsweek** entitled "The Search for the Sacred: America's Quest for Spiritual Meaning."

This demonstration of intense interest and personal need being expressed by millions of American readers can provide those of us who believe that we have spiritual meaning in our lives an unprecedented opportunity to share our faith. As the apostle Paul suggests, our lives should be letters that anyone can read demonstrating that our souls are enlightened by the presence of Christ and of God's living spirit (2 Corinthians 5).

The amazingly popular writer of these best sellers, Thomas Moore, lived as a monk in a Catholic religious order for twelve years, has degrees in theology, musicology, and philosophy, and he has ex-

perience as a psychotherapist. In **Care of the Soul** he takes his quotations from contemporaries of Plato, Renaissance theologians, Romantic poets, and Freud—and not from scripture.

Rather than dismissing Thomas Moore's message as incomplete or inappropriate for the Christian reader, perhaps we should consider the fact that, within the broader spiritual perspective of a profound recognition and dependence on the presence of the divine, much of what he says can apply to us. God's word can actually become for us a useful manual in providing care for our souls in the specific ways that Moore suggests. The books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and much of the "practical" instruction of the New Testament most definitely "instruct us in concrete ways we can foster soulfulness in our ordinary everyday lives" (xiv).

The scriptures also tell us, as Moore does, that "Fulfilling work, rewarding relationships, personal power, and relief from symptoms are all gifts of the soul" (xiv). We all need a deeper awareness that caring for our souls "requires a special crafting of life itself, with an artist's sensitivity to the way things are done" (xvii). Perhaps we also need more instruction in how to enrich these aspects of our own spirituality and more sermons which recognize that "the care of the soul is a sacred art" (xv).

Those of us who have "a religious sensibility" and "a recognition of the absolute need for a spiritual life" can certainly demonstrate more clearly a "specifically Christian" perspective without sacrificing

“the self-knowledge and self-acceptance which are the very foundation of soul” or without giving up what Moore calls “the salvational fantasy” (xvii). Instead, we can benefit from becoming more aware of experiencing “everyday sacredness” (214) as New Testament Christians. We should allow our spirituality to be a “way of sustaining mindfulness about religion that is inherent in everything we do” (214).

In reading *Care of the Soul* our spiritual lives can be strengthened by examining our hearts and providing honest answers as to whether the “charges” Moore makes against a “specifically Christian” viewpoint are true of us, and if they are, whether or not these attitudes are hindering the potential we have of inspiring others to lift themselves “out of the confines of the human dimension” and in so doing “nourish” their own souls (233). As Thomas Moore says, “care of the soul asks us to open our hearts wider than they have ever been before, softening the judging and moralism that may have characterized our attitudes and behavior for years” (17). Are we able to do this or are we among the people who “seem to be afraid that if they reflect on their moral principles they might lose their ethical sensitivity altogether”? (17) Or are we guilty of the attitude which Moore describes by saying, “the tragedy of fundamentalism in any context is its capacity to freeze life into a solid cube of meaning”? (236)

As we attempt to be more flexible in bringing others to Christianity, we need to recall Moore’s reminder that “it’s easy to go crazy in the life of the spirit, warring against those who disagree, proselytizing for our own personal attachments rather than expressing our own soulfulness, or taking narcissistic satisfactions in our beliefs rather than finding meaning and pleasure in spirituality that is available to everyone” (228).

We could benefit from thinking about church and religion in the two ways Moore suggests: “One is that we go to church in order to be in the presence of the holy, to learn and to have our lives influenced by that presence. The other is that church teaches us directly and symbolically to see the sacred dimension of everyday life” (214).

Constance M. Fulmer teaches in the Humanities Division, Seaver College, Pepperdine University, Malibu, California.

Diana L. Eck, **Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banares** (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).
Reviewed by **Kathy J. Pulley**.

“This book is about faith and the challenge religious diversity poses to people of faith It is a book that begins with the premise that our religious traditions are more like rivers than monuments” (ix). Like most of us late-twentieth-century folks, when Diana Eck left her roots in Bozeman to travel to Banares and other places, she discovered that her neighbors were no longer just Roman Catholics or Baptists, but they were Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and other religious types. So begins the first chapter of Diana Eck’s account of her own spiritual journey. By profession she is a scholar in the comparative study of religion at Harvard; but, as a Methodist who does not shy away from religious questions of personal meaning, Eck shares how her Christian beliefs have been shaped by her encounters with other faith perspectives in India and elsewhere. She explores how her own thoughts and beliefs about God, spirituality, life and death are both challenged and strengthened by her contact with those from other traditions.

“Is ‘our God’ listening to the prayers of people of other faiths? If not, why not? . . . if God is listening, what are we about” (166)? Although this question is not raised specifically until chapter seven, it is the central issue of Eck’s book. She claims that the greatest challenge ahead for the urban cities of the ’90s is not secularization as suggested by Harvey Cox’s book, *The Secular City*; rather, the biggest challenge is pluralism: ethnic, racial and religious. The pews of our city churches may show only limited evidence of being multi-cultural; and yet, in our daily lives our neighbors do have diverse identities. One example she cites is that ordinary church members are silently aware that neighboring Muslims pray much more often than they—what do those of us committed to Christianity say to such a neighbor, how are we to understand a strong faith commitment outside Christianity, and is our God different from theirs? Although we may not feel prepared adequately to address these issues, it would be irresponsible to deny that the questions are real and serious for our own Christian communities as we face the future. These questions may feel threatening at times but Eck’s book suggests approaches that at the least need to be heard and at the most, may provide valuable insights into how to deepen our own commitment while at the same time increasing our understanding of our neighbor’s commitment.

Interwoven into chapter seven is an objective overview of how religious pluralism has been dealt with traditionally; the three approaches being exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist. She favors a pluralistic approach but she has a strong opinion about what pluralism is and is not:

If people perceive pluralism as entailing the relinquishing of their particular religious commitments they are not interested. Neither am I. . . . If everything is more or less true, I do not give my heart to anything in particular. There is no beloved community, no home in the context of which values are tested, no dream of the ongoing transformation of that community. . . . The pluralist, on the other hand, stands in a particular community and is willing to be committed to the struggles of that community, even as restless critic" (195).

Even though the issues raised above are the foundation of Eck's work, the theologians amongst us may be interested especially in the doctrinal topics she addresses in chapters three through six. In these chapters she constructs what she means by ultimate reality, the incarnation of Jesus, and the mystery of the Holy Spirit in light of her own conversations and experiences with those outside the Christian tradition.

The most practical section is chapter six, which probes spirituality and the need for deepening spiritual discipline in our individual lives. She reminds the reader that there is a rich tradition of spirituality within the Bible and the history of Christianity, and her comments about several different works provide an excellent introductory bibliography for further reading. Eck's primary emphasis is that whether one is talking of Eastern or Western spirituality, it requires practice. "To learn to pray, one must practice (157)." And, the result of such practice leads to a transformed life, "It is not at all a matter of 'checking out,' but of being truly capable of checking in to life" (158).

The remaining chapters of the book (two and eight) deal with ecumenism. Chapter two surveys religious plurality in the United States since the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, especially as one studies immigration patterns from both Europe and Asia. Chapter eight concludes with a call for interreligious dialogue. Eck's premise in the last chapter is that the world is interrelated and will continue to be even more closely related in the future; thus, it is important for people of faith to involve themselves in understanding others and their religious commitments. Gandhi's attitudes and convictions serve as her guide for how we might go about greater understanding.

Eck's book is not flawless and it may be theologically disturbing to some; nonetheless, it is well worth reading. She brings a balance to conversations about religious pluralism and faith commitments that is rare. Eck is a scholar but her inclusion of personal narrative makes this work accessible, interesting, and challenging to anyone

who is genuinely searching for new paths for understanding and talking about multiple faith perspectives.

Kathy J. Pulley teaches religious studies at Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield, Missouri.

Stanley Hauerwas, **Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America**, (Abingdon, 1993).
Reviewed by **Mark Manassee**.

"No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America." And so begins Stanley Hauerwas's daring and critical book, **Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America**. Hauerwas affirms that the Church has lost out because of a reliance on the historical-critical method or literal approaches to Scripture. These methods assert that anyone with the proper training and 'common sense' can properly understand and find the meaning of a biblical text.

In contrast, Hauerwas insists that without the spiritual and moral transformation that comes from being part of the Church, one cannot properly understand scripture. Furthermore, it is only within the Body of Christ, gathered around the Lord's Supper, that the Church can truly exercise its role as teacher of the faith. The goal of the teaching office of the Church is not to find out what the biblical text meant but how the text and community of faith can shape people to live faithfully in the Kingdom of God. So Hauerwas states, "If Paul could appear among us today to tell us what he 'really meant' when he wrote, for example, I Corinthians 13, his view would not necessarily count more than Gregory's or Luther's account of Corinthians."

It becomes clear while reading Hauerwas that his main concern is not so much the scripture as it is the Church. By having "no creed but the Bible," private judgments have prevailed and people have come to the biblical text as private individuals to find the answers to their private needs. In contrast, Hauerwas says that Scripture never claims to be self-sufficient but only when it is joined to the Church are there the necessary ingredients brought together for faithful living before God. "God certainly uses Scripture to call the Church to faithfulness, but such a call always comes in the form of some in the Church reminding others in the Church how to live as Chris-

tians no 'text' can be substituted for the people of God."

Hauerwas decides to illustrate his case by 12 of his sermons or as he calls them, "sermonic exhibits." Since preaching is the discourse of the Church and the main form that the teaching office of the Church takes, the sermons are fitting. Readers will greatly enjoy and appreciate Hauerwas' sermons because they illustrate so well what he is proposing while challenging our assumptions about life in the Kingdom. For example, in "A Sermon on the Sermon on the Mount," he maintains that unless the Church is an explicitly pacifist community, it cannot rightly understand the Sermon on the Mount. Or in "Hating Mothers as the Way to Peace," he contends that if Christ and the Church are one's fundamental loyalty, then one will not use the defense of one's family as a basis for violence. It is in the Church and not the family that one learns peace.

Hauerwas' daring and extreme book is both challenging and hopeful to us in the Restoration Movement. It is challenging because it attacks fundamental assumptions that have been part of our

movement since Campbell. We have contended that democratic people with "common sense" can read the Bible on their own and reach the same conclusions about the meaning of the text. We have strained to find the original meaning of any particular text. And we have claimed no other authority or creed but the Bible. However, we may have done this to the peril of the Church. In our quest for knowledge, we may have left out the need for transformed lives to understand scripture and the role that the Church plays in transforming lives. American democratic ideals and nationalistic loyalties may have unknowingly moved our churches from faithful communities of the Kingdom to serving our presuppositions. It is those presuppositions that Hauerwas challenges. But it is also a hopeful book because it models and points out a road the Church can travel — a road not only leading to a cross, but also to the resurrection.

Mark Manassee serves as Campus Minister for the South National Church of Christ, Springfield, Missouri.