

Something There: The Biology of the Human Spirit, David Hay, Darton, Longman and Todd 2006 (ISBN 0-232-52537-0), xiv + 255 pp., pb £15.95

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By comparing spirituality today with sexuality in the Victorian era, zoologist David Hay takes on the daunting and, perhaps, thankless task of the empirical study of spiritual experience. He makes the case that those ineffable experiences, variously called spiritual, transcendent, or religious, are universal to the human species. As such, they are associated with a human biological process which is present in us all and which is given expression through the languages and images of our unique cultures. Acknowledging that he comes from a position of faith, Hay offers an insightful analysis of the reasons why spiritual expression is so often suppressed in Western European and American culture. Hay concludes by offering suggestions on how spiritual awareness can be revived in our society.

Hay's book is a masterful interdisciplinary blend, engaging and approachable, which will be of interest to anyone who cares about the spiritual state of the Western world. Hay demonstrates a keen knack for history, placing his book within the context of previous studies from fields as diverse as the psychology of religion, neuroscience, and theology. Much as William James did with *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (The Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion, 1901-1902), Hay presents statements from a number of persons on their unique spiritual experiences. A portion of Hay's book could be described as a modern version of *The Varieties* in that regard, and Hay does offer some modest classification. However, unlike James, Hay discusses his participants' statements within a cultural and historical framework.

Hay's major contribution in this work is his movement toward an understanding of the biological process associated with spiritual experience. Together with his colleague

Rebecca Nye, Hay interviewed a number of children to elicit spiritual expression. Children were chosen for the study on the assumption that they would be less inhibited in their expression than their parents. From an analysis of the children's statements, Hay introduces the term 'relational consciousness.' Relational consciousness is seen as the primordial biological process which, through the agency of culture, leads to religious and spiritual expression.

A second major contribution is Hay's analysis on the spiritual state of the Western world. Once again, Hay weaves multiple strands from history, philosophy, psychology, and economics into a compelling tapestry which illustrates why so many of us are embarrassed by our spirituality and unwilling to discuss it. Tracing developments from the Renaissance to the present, Hay describes our spiritual state in a way which will resonate in the hearts of Western readers. Based on this history, and coupled with the idea of relational consciousness, Hay then offers a step-by-step solution to the problem that could potentially form the basis of a new spiritual enlightenment.

The book's major weakness is in failing to address key points in the formation of the concept of relational consciousness. These issues may have been addressed in the original research, but this is not clear from the present text. Given the importance of this concept to the conclusions of book, it is a regrettable oversight. In the development of this concept, Hay and his colleague have encountered pitfalls common to the development of any psychological assessment tool.

The constructs chosen for measurement -- awareness of the here-and-now, awareness of mystery, and awareness of value -- were selected only partly on the basis of their association with spiritual understanding. They were also chosen on the basis of association with features of childhood psychology and on the basis of their avoidance of specifically religious language. This raises the issue of validity, which could have been addressed in a brief paragraph.

Two core categories emerged from the responses of the children: one relating to an 'unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness' and another expressing the manner in which the child 'related to the material world, themselves, other people, and God.' These two separate outcomes were then combined into the summary construct 'relational consciousness.' It is not clear from the text if a factor analysis was performed. This leaves open the question of whether the researchers were justified in offering one construct or if the data support two constructs. It could be that some children express their spirituality through heightened awareness, while others express it through relatedness. Indeed, this finding would be consistent with differences observed between spiritual persons, for example, between those who focus on prayer and meditation (faith?) and those who focus on service to others (works?). The text as written is innocent of this issue.

Hay's historical account of the rise of individualism in the West is brilliant. His criticism of it, however, does deemphasize ways in which individualism has elicited spiritual formation, while emphasizing ways in which it has suppressed it. This, perhaps, is more of an American viewpoint than a European one. A segment of the American readership will view individualism as a strength that has allowed the formation of multiple spiritual associations to develop throughout the United States. Even groups that form for nonreligious purposes, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, speak of a strong spiritual core. This multiplicity of expression is seen by many Americans as central to the pursuit of spiritual truths.

It would not be difficult to address these issues in a future publication. Despite these concerns Hay has produced a solid and important book, advancing a field of study in which original and important works are rare. His suggestions are reasonable and practical. Those in positions of spiritual leadership throughout the Western world would be wise to consider Hay's recommendations.