Interview with David Tacey

Beyond the Spirituality Revolution 21st April 2012

EMcA: I've recently recorded a series of interviews with people about their spiritual journeys to date and it was striking how many of them spoke about the importance of your book [*The Spirituality Revolution: the Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality,* Brunner-Routledge 2004] to them. For some, it's no exaggeration to say that encountering *The Spirituality Revolution* was a defining moment for them. How aware were you that you were speaking for a far wider range of people than just the young people and students on whom you were focussing?

DT: I think at the time of writing I was more focused obviously on the young people of Australia, because they're my bread-and-butter. As an academic I engage on a daily basis with young people between the ages of, say, 18-25, and I was just monitoring their concerns and their inner lives as much as possible. I wasn't really thinking of a broader group; I wasn't thinking how people my own age, or even older, would be relating to the book, and if people of an older age have related to it, then that to me is a great bonus. Of course I wasn't really sure what I was doing when I started the book. All I knew was that I wanted to write about this, if you like, this movement in contemporary society. I did feel sure that it wasn't limited to my country because having lived and spent time in the United States, in New Zealand, in the UK, and also some time spent in Africa, I have noticed that it's a universal phenomenon and that's why I coined this term 'the spirituality revolution'. But it was interesting to see that a year after it came out, two of your British authors pinched the title and used it for one of their books [*The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, Blackwell Publishing 2005] so I found that a bit humorous, but they had a very different approach so although the books carry [very similar] titles, they really have very different contents.

EMcA: I know there are at least two people in our Gathering today who would describe reading your book as a defining moment in their own journey. Does it surprise you that it could have had such an important impact on an individual?

DT: It does surprise me to some extent, and I'm obviously moved and touched by that, and it's lovely to hear that feedback. As you know, I work in a university context where spirituality is kind of frowned upon, and regarded with a good deal of fear and almost contempt by people who don't quite understand what I'm talking about. So it's lovely to think that although I'm working in a university setting, that readers such as those you've mentioned do find points of connection with what I'm talking about, and I'm really pleased about that.

EMcA: Now despite the fear and hostility you've encountered in the academic world, the book was really very optimistic, very expansive in its tone and mood and vision, and yet at the same time, you were very careful to highlight the darker, more dangerous aspects of contemporary spirituality. Ten years on, do you feel your optimism was justified? Where would you say the Revolution is now?

DT: I think it is a slow revolution. As Robert Forman says in his terrific book of 2004, *Grassroots Spirituality,* and then there was the other book I just mentioned in the UK. And David Hay was doing something in his book *Something There: the Biology of the Human Spirit*, which is on the same theme ... so I think it is undoubtedly a universal movement, but I think it has stalled a bit at the moment. Everyone is so concerned about financial issues at the moment, especially in Europe, but also North America is concerned very much about its demise, and Australia is also very concerned about economic matters. So I notice that the spirituality revolution is still charging along, but it doesn't get a lot of support. I am an optimist by nature, and where I see signs of hope I see signs to justify optimism. But also, as I was writing the book, I was very conscious that the churches, at least the ones that I was in touch with, were not offering the hand of generosity toward the spirituality revolution. The Catholic church in particular, in Australia, was making

disparaging comments, saying things like *spirituality is a waste of time.* And the Cardinal in Australia made the comment that *spirituality is an unnecessary adjunct to faith*, which is still resounding in my ears.

And I thought, *No! No! – I'm not going to be any part of this morbid attitude.* So I deliberately wrote it with an upbeat tempo – hopefully I didn't overdo it, because it does have its problems, but I think it's a legitimate social movement and has a great and almost wonderful future.

EMcA: Do you think that future is possibly enhanced by the fact that the movement is, in a sense, being driven underground, because the froth-and-bubble has now lapsed, it's going to be the sort of hard-core perpetrators, if you like, who will carry it forward in a less visible way?

DT: Yes, I think some of the froth-and-bubble is what is often called the New Age movement. I'm not sure about in the UK – I haven't visited the UK for the last couple of years – but here in Australia, the New Age movement seems to have run out of steam to a large extent and I think that's kind of a good thing ... I mean, I'm a little prejudiced, but it takes it [spirituality] all too lightly and mistakes spirituality for narcissism, whereas spirituality ought to be the opposite of narcissism, and a way to break out of narcissism. And another thing, by the way, that's shifted since I wrote the book, that I've become more aware of, is spirituality operating in the established traditions, particularly at grassroots level, not so much at the level of Cardinals and bishops – there's not a lot of joy there for spirituality, though Rowan Williams is an exception. But at the grassroots level I'm noticing that communities and local parishes are actually getting much more interested and that's fascinating to me. It's as if it took the secular spirituality movement, which is what I was largely writing about in the book, to jolt the religious institutions into recognising the lack of, or the need to focus more on, spirituality in their own traditions. And I think that's kind of neat, as the Americans would say, that something outside the churches has actually stimulated the churches to more activity in this field.

EMcA: As far as I'm aware, your book was the first to highlight the seriousness of this particular spiritual path – the discipline and the conscientiousness of those involved – and I remember being very struck when you wrote that *Thy will be done, not follow thy bliss, is the hallmark of authentic spirituality.* Has your confidence in the seriousness of contemporary spirituality been vindicated in the last ten years?

DT: That's a really tough question, and a good question. One thing I think I can comment on is this: as spirituality becomes more popular, there is the danger that it becomes sort of normalised, and the sense of mystery, or sense of surprise in it, the sense of being encountered by another Voice, another Will, is in danger of being lost. And I guess that's what the churches have feared all along, frankly, and I can see now, in hindsight, why the churches have been so disparaging towards personal spirituality, because it can easily get derailed. We don't have too many checks and balances in place to make sure we get back on track, and yes, I think the hallmark of any authentic spirituality is definitely the phrase *Thy will be done,* NOT *My* but *Thy!* And as spirituality becomes more common and more popular, that difference between the personal will and the Divine will, I think gets lost or blurred. People talk about *my spirituality* you know, as if it's something that is entirely theirs, and it's not seen as a gift, or as coming from a sense of grace if you like. So the danger is in losing the special nature of it. We have to remember that the word *spirituality* comes from the word *spirit* and that *Spirit* is *Other* than the personal will, not just part of the personal will. So there has to be a sense of tension or dialogue and I see that being potentially lost in the popularisation process.

EMcA: You write in the book about the loss of lights and illuminations that the traditions used to provide, and the need to re-establish methods to bring in light and illumination to this more personal journey. What advice would you have for people who are committed to this new form of journey but recognise their need for lights and illuminations along the way – because it's often a very lonely, isolated pursuit, isn't it?

DT: Yes, it is, and it's ironic because most people define spirituality as connectedness. It's so ironic if our search for connectedness leads to disconnectedness, to alienation. And I have seen that in some of my students: they'll say *I'm on the spiritual journey* and I say *that's great, marvellous, and good luck to you*, but all of a sudden their lives are totally lonely and bereft. They haven't, perhaps, done enough in terms of finding community, finding friends, finding fellowship. But I think what Bernadette Flanagan is doing in Dublin is of interest to me – that's what she calls *The New Monasticism* – and one of the slogans of my work now is *Bring the monastery to the street.* We do need those techniques, those methods; we need all the help we can get, and the monasteries are full of these kinds of help, and it's very important that we try to encourage the monastic orders, and people associated with those orders, to share what they have with the general public as much as possible, because of the need for help, and signs of guidance and direction. I think that is happening, and it's interesting that in Australia a lot of Protestant churches – to my surprise – are very interested in the new monasticism. I jokingly said to a Baptist pastor the other day: *But you've never had a monastic background!* And he reminded me that we all share the same background, and that Christianity didn't begin in the 16th century and he sees the monastic tradition as something the Baptist church can draw on. Ray Simpson, from Holy Island, has been here a number of times and a lot of people are very interested in what he's got to say about the new monasticism.

EMcA: So would you say more generally that part of the future of contemporary spirituality is going to involve a re-negotiation with the tradition? A re-navigation of that relationship between the contemporary spiritual search and what the traditions have to offer?

DT: Yes, I do think that, and I also think we've been here before in the Christian tradition. If you look back again at the 16th century, that's the century which has been pivotal. That's the century when you had Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross coming up with their paths of interiority. You know, Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*, and then having some of that work drawn into the institutions by Ignatius of Loyola. And that's because at the time, the rise of science, the rise of education, the rise of the so-called intellectual enlightenment, made people query and doubt the received wisdom of the traditions and so in other words, I think that whenever there is a period of decadence, if you like, or dullness and deadness in the traditions, it is often the mystical pathways that serve to vivify and enliven those traditions. So, in a sense, I don't think there's anything new, really, about what we're experiencing at the moment. It's just that we have old, ailing institutions that need to be re-introduced to their own interior lives, and the fact, as I said before, that this seems to be happening through the experience of youth, quite spontaneously, and that youth who don't have any connection or affiliation, or even affection, for the tradition, are coming up with this – I find that quite marvellous. Like David Hay says in the UK, the spiritual urge is *ineradicable*, that's the word he uses a lot in his work, and I find that a very interesting and a very heart-warming word. You can't get rid of it, it's <u>there</u>. I don't want to say it's *hard-wired* – the Americans say it's *hard-wired* – I'm not sure about that because that's talking the language of science, but it's certainly innate. As Mircea Eliade would say: *it's innate*, and I do find that a source of optimism, and if the traditions can connect with that, that's marvellous.

EMcA: And this re-engagement with interiority – does it have an essential outworking in theology? One of the interesting strands in your book was that theology in the future would need to be – I think you used the word *theopoesis.* A developing, evolving theology, rather than a fossilised one. What is the relationship between interiority and evolving theology?

DT: Yes, I think there's an important relationship between them. I mean, it's evolving theology that makes sense of our experience. It was St Anselm who defined theology as *faith seeking understanding* and I think that continues today and I think your might say it's more *spirituality seeking understanding* that we need now, and I think that process – *theopoesis* – is very important. Karl Rahner started it, very much, in 1950s, 60s, 70s. Recently I've been getting steeped in the work of William Johnston, who was a Jesuit living in Tokyo, and spent most of his life living in Japan. His book, *Mystical Theology* [check title], seems to me to be very much a trail-blazer in terms of the kind of theopoesis that's needed in order to track what's going

on. I was lucky enough to meet William Johnston at a conference in Sydney and we spent a bit of time together and I could see that our paths were very, very complementary and very similar. But I do think that theology needs to be very alert of its responsibility to provide a discourse in which spiritual experience can be received into a framework of knowledge, so that it doesn't just remain a matter of personal experience, or even of faith, but also it actually does connect with knowledge – that's the role, I think, of theology.

EMcA: Our event today is called *Beyond the Spirituality Revolution.* How do you see the *beyond?* What, for you, is the future of spirituality?

DT: Well I think obviously it's going to take a long time. I was reading one of Jung's books recently, where he talks about the *undiscovered self,* and in his view the future shift in all this will take, he thought, between 400 and 600 years, and I thought, *Boy, that's a long time!* But I do think these shifts are long. We've been in a 500 year cycle now – it's a 500 year cycle governed by rationality and the so-called Enlightenment. Now we've definitely hit the post-Enlightenment phase, but it would be awful to think that it would take another 600 years to get back on track. But I think we're not going to see immediate transformation and so I do think we're going to need patience, and also a lot of hope, but I do feel the patterns of history will unfold and I do still feel optimistic, even though there's a sense of things perhaps stalling at the minute.