NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Fasting from authority and its 'reverse miracles'

Arlene Montevecchio | May. 19, 2010

IN THE ABSENCE OF GOD: DWELLING IN THE PRESENCE OF THE SACRED
By Sam Keen
Published by Random House, $23

Sam Keen?s latest work calls us to recover our original experiences of the sacred in order to transcend both the tired traditions of world religions and the overwhelming myths of modern consumer culture. Keen?s book speaks to those chronically dissatisfied persons who seek something beyond the confining fundamentalisms of religion, atheism, and what Keen calls ?American exceptionalism.?

Who are they, these ?chronically dissatisfied?? A 2009 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey indicates that ?one-third of Americans say they regularly (9 percent) or occasionally (26 percent) attend religious services at more than one place.? Keen?s argument that ?we cannot easily locate God in the house of our longing, yet we remain haunted,? will ring true with that one-third, and with the increasing population of spiritual-but-not-religious types. Likewise, his countercultural attitudes regarding justice, peace and environmental sustainability may motivate ?those of us who are unable to believe in the miracles, mystery and authority offered by institutional religion yet are unable to thrive in the spiritual poverty of our economic ideology.?

Keen?s third way recommends a return to ?elemental emotions? such as wonder and awe, gratitude, anxiety and dread, joy, grief and mourning, reverence, empowerment, vocation, empathy and compassion, sacred outrage, hope, trust, and humility.

When we fast from authority, from cultural norms, from the naming of the unknowable God, we can conjure our own narratives of sacred encounter, creating ?what philosophers call a phenomenology of the experience of the sacred.?

While he claims that our own spiritual epiphanies should be shared to create communion, he ultimately upholds the primacy of the individual, as many postmodern philosophers and emerging theologians do.

I believe Keen is too optimistic about humans? ability to make meaning in isolation without the guidance of others, and he is too pessimistic about the corruption of traditional religion. He writes: ?In the beginning of the Christian era it was said that spirit became flesh. But then Spirit became Word (logos), and words became sacrament, which in turn became the basis for the church. The farther Christianity moved from its original event, the more powerfully theology established its dominion over the living spirit. The creed makers performed a reverse miracle: They turned wine into water.?

It is true that every religion, philosophy, spirituality or ideology can wander drastically far from its original intent. However, it can also be argued that ?the creed makers? took their own experiences in dialogue with the community to make meaning of the signs of God present in human history. Keen?s tension between the individual and institutional tasks of identifying, ritualizing and naming religious experience is not easily navigated and can confuse the reader. While his writing is infused with his own personal mysticism and

anecdotes, it is also peppered with quotes from philosophers, theologians, sacred writings, poets and practitioners, all drawing on ancient wisdom of established traditions.

Keen can make the most difference in today?s world when it comes to the need for faith-based, collective responses to social problems. In a recent *Newsweek* article titled ?Harvard?s crisis of faith: Can a secular university embrace religion without sacrificing its soul?? scholars debate the role of religion in a contemporary liberal arts curriculum. To challenge Harvard?s lack of a religion requirement for undergraduates, some might ask Keen?s key questions for a post-9/11 world with a growing gap between rich and poor: ?Without some vision of the sacred, what will be the source of compassion, sacrifice and mutual care, without which there can be no commonwealth? How will we discover values that transcend the selfish interests of the ego, the family, the tribe, the corporation and the nation??

He does later add that it was religious, not spiritual traditions that produced the revolutions of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Dorothy Day, to name a few. Their individual quests for the sacred led to communal quests for justice.

What Keen provides is a hopeful, though at times contradictory, look at the restlessness with which we all struggle to find something greater than ourselves. Whether we abandon authority, or blend practices from multiple traditions, or encounter elemental emotions in nature, relationships or everyday experiences, examining our own narratives can lead us to greater communion with a seemingly absent God and all of humanity at this critical moment.

[Arlene Helderman Montevecchio is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School. She writes from Erie, Pa.]

Source URL (retrieved on *08/29/2016 - 23:07*): https://www.ncronline.org/books/2012/09/fasting-authority-and-its-reverse-miracles