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After Heaven, Spirituality in America Since the 1950s (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

After Heaven, Spirituality in America since the 1950s, by Robert Wuthnow (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998). 277 pp. Reviewed by Syd Hielema.

Robert Wuthnow's *After Heaven, Spirituality in America* since the 1950's provides a powerful and provocative assessment of Christianity in the US in the latter half of this century. Wuthnow, Director of the Center for the Study of American Religion at Princeton University, walks decade by decade through this period, perceiving patterns in each that fit within a larger shift from what he calls dwelling-oriented faith to seeking-oriented faith. His methodology is simple: after he and his team interviewed hundreds of subjects concerning their faith lives he correlated patterns that he observed in their responses with patterns evident in the culture at large (as reflected in various cultural analyses and best seller lists). While such a method might succumb to caricature and oversimplification, Wuthnow is both sufficiently careful and nuanced to avoid these pitfalls. As a result, *After Heaven* offers a profound description of American Christianity, and it is no surprise that *Christianity Today* awarded it second place on its list of best books of 1998.

Wuthnow states his primary thesis up front:

I argue that a traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places has given way to a new spirituality of seeking -- that people have been losing faith in a metaphysics that can make them feel at home in the universe and that they increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom. (3)

He perceives dwelling spirituality as dominant during the 1950's. The home, the local church, and country were all considered secure dwelling places of faith and thus functioned as institutions which ordered peoples' faith lives. Personal appropriation of faith occurred within the stability of these institutions and thus they commanded loyalty and allegiance. During this decade the phrase "one nation under God" was added to the pledge of allegiance and "in God we trust" to the currency. This dwelling spirituality was primarily characterized by stability; vexing questions did not dominate people's faith lives. Instead, clear boundaries delineated who people were and what they ought to do.

With the 60's a gradual shift away from this paradigm to a seeking model begins. While Wuthnow's decade by decade description is fascinating, I will only survey the overall shift here. Seeking spirituality is focused on the well-being of the inner self, and all the dimensions of one's faith life must serve the needs of this primary end. Thus, the shift from dwelling to seeking incorporates shifts from institutional loyalty to satisfying

one's needs, from traditional orthodoxy to an eclectic, ad hoc 'whatever works for me' creed, from doctrinal settledness to an emphasis upon mystery and the questioning of all presuppositions and teachings, from faith as a phenomenon defined outside of myself to an inner-directed emphasis, from clear understandings of reality to fluid and amorphous understandings, from knowledge about the divine to fleeting, feeling-driven experiences of the divine.

If this brief summary tempts one to see Wuthnow's analysis as a shift from the good old days of solid Christianity to a contemporary new-age wishy-washiness, one would be most intrigued by his commentary on 'orthodox' Christianity today. He perceives the same dynamics there as he does in the new age movement, albeit with a biblical veneer. "Rather than trusting in Christ, the believer learns from Christ to trust the power within" (152). Faith does not challenge a person to become transformed in opposition to one's culture; instead, faith gives one the strength needed to survive and even thrive within a frenetic, consumeristic culture. The major thread that runs throughout Wuthnow's analysis is that American Christians do not challenge the assumptions and practices of their culture, but use their faith to enable them to triumph amidst the high demands of the culture. In his view, the proliferation of small group bible studies in the last decade also illustrates this trend: "these groups did not demand very much; instead they gave people an opportunity to grope with their decisions, to hear others groping, and to come away feeling better about themselves for having looked chaos in the face and said, 'I can stand it'" (103). Wuthnow believes such groups did more to foster a Reaganesque vision of life than a foundationally Christian one.

Though 50s dwelling spirituality was characterized by an impersonal superficiality, *After Heaven's* account of a shift describes an equally superficial and impotent seeking spirituality which has come to serve as a tool of consumerism. "Americans did not have to sacrifice comfortable life-styles as long as they paid attention to how they felt about their lives" (79). The current intrigue with angels reveals that "Americans are turning to the 'middle beings' instead of working on the more difficult relationships, namely with God and with our neighbors" (137). Thus, while the shift Wuthnow describes is very significant, both models which he outlines are accommodationist, helping Christians and

those of other faiths fit comfortably into the non-Christian culture.

I could see both myself and the Reformed community mirrored in *After Heaven*, and the sight was unsettling. I struggled with Wuthnow's strictly sociological methodology which would not consider the possibility that the Holy Spirit may work through various culturally-derived means to further the Kingdom of God. He assumes that culturally influenced practices automatically lead to compromised practices, an assumption which is surely reductionist. Because the Christian faith is this-worldly, it inherently walks that fine line between appropriate, Spirit-led contextualization and compromised impotence. The early church employed the household structure of its day, transforming it to serve the gospel while also tolerating certain compromises (such as slavery) in order to survive in that context. Because he does not distinguish between contextualization and accommodation, Wuthnow's critique becomes imbalanced. Small prayer groups may be partially—but surely not entirely—accommodationist.

In spite of this imbalance, his critique deserves a close hearing. All of the trends he describes are present (to some degree) in the Reformed community, perhaps even more so than in other communities because ethnicity and the church/home/school triad have allowed us to cling to the dwelling paradigm a bit longer while we also are being shaped by the seeking paradigm. Wuthnow's analysis raises some interesting questions. Could it be that the identity confusion among us concerning what it means to be Reformed has more to do with the erosion of the dwelling syndrome and less to do with the loss of a vibrant, Scripturally-informed tradition? Could it be that the rise of parachurch influences such as Promise

Keepers and Willow Creek (and their derivatives) in our circles is illustrative of a shift to the seeking mode of faith? Might Wuthnow's two models shed light on larger cultural dynamics at work within our worship wars?

After Heaven's final chapter outlines Wuthnow's alternative to these two models, which he calls "practice-oriented spirituality." His proposal reads like seeking-oriented spirituality with deeper commitment and rootage in any tradition (doesn't much matter which) mixed in. By intentional commitment to a tradition one overcomes the superficial eclecticism of 'if the spiritual shoe fits, wear it,' and living out a tradition's practices of devotional discipline and service in one's daily life provides coherence, defined as "a consistent, fully integrated life of piety, such that one's practice of spirituality becomes indistinguishable from the rest of one's life" (198). Wuthnow's third way is unsatisfying ultimately because it is creation-based rather than Christocentric: "the point of spiritual practice is to electrify the spiritual impulse that animates all of life." (198) This creational foundation allows him to cite an evangelical Christian, a Muslim and an eclectic practitioner of Eastern mysticism as healthy examples of his alternative.

Fortunately the last chapter is incidental to the heart of the book, functioning more as an appendix than a conclusion. The rest of the book provides a tremendous service to the Christian community, challenging it to step outside of its daily busyness and engage in serious self-examination. His creation-rooted understanding of religion—which leads to his universalism—has also convinced him that one's faith is thoroughly interwoven with the entirety of life, a conclusion which makes him an engaging conversation partner for Reformed Christians.

N.F.S. Grundtvig: An Introduction to his Life and Work, by A. M. Allchin (London: Darton Longman Todd, 1997). 336 pages. \$39.95, hardcover. Reviewed by Jon Andreas, Ph.D. candidate in educational philosophy, University of the Orange Free State (Bloemfontein, South Africa).

N.F.S. Grundtvig was a scholar, poet, hymnwriter, teacher, and pastor. Growing up in rural Denmark at the end of the eighteenth century, his faith was nurtured by pious parents and an old-fashioned Lutheran church. As a first-rate medievalist and theologian, he fought against the preeminent rationalism of his time, preferred the language of images, and emphasized the interconnectedness of faith and culture. His writings have had far-reaching implications, especially in education, and his hymns remain favorites in many circles. This book by Professor Allchin—which includes the translations of many of Grundtvig's poems, hymns, and sermons into English—is part of an ongoing project to expose this man's thought to a much wider audience.

This book is divided into three parts with the first third serving as a biography. Grundtvig's most prominent childhood memories include the idyllic green gardens of his native country and the connection with the believers of ages past through the traditional liturgy of his old country church. These two themes – the celebration of God's creation and the unity of the church throughout history in the common bond of worship – play an important role for the rest of his life. While other pastors throughout Europe were delivering sermons that more closely resembled seminary lectures, Grundtvig was weaving poetry into his messages, capturing the imagination of the children in his congregation, and punctuating the worship service with the hymns he had written.