

Lucy Bregman. *The Ecology of Spirituality: Meanings, Virtues, and Practices in a Post-Religious Age*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014. 190 pages. \$29.95.

The word *spirituality* yields an overwhelming number of definitions. Each of these definitions ramifies according to a desire for wholeness—a yearning for meaning and purpose capable of unifying a holistic vision of life. In her book *The Ecology of Spirituality: Meanings, Virtues, and Practices in a Post-Religious Age*, Lucy Bregman wades into this murky semantic swamp in the service of grounding the word in terms of professions and practices. It is well worth the read.

Bregman opens by tracing the genealogy of spirituality. She argues that “even if spirituality is a new category needing new definitions, it is also itself a legacy of other areas and activities and theories about human nature. Those who offer seemingly fresh and original definitions of spirituality do not appear to have pondered the strengths and weaknesses of this ancestry” (28). In particular, Bregman sketches the movement from what she labels a “two-poled definition” of spirituality—one that accounts for both the inward, subjective dimension of individuals and the outward, objective focus upon an object of apprehension and aspiration. She argues that rather than getting lost in the divisive rhetoric between secular versus religious understandings of spirituality, analyses that attend to the occlusion of one pole over another will yield more fruitful understandings of the core differences between definitions of spirituality.

Accordingly, Bregman moves toward articulating the *practice* of spirituality. This chapter will offer much in terms of dialogue with contemporary homiletics, suffused as it is by the drive toward understanding preaching as a practice of the church *à la* Bourdieu and MacIntyre. Bregman is right to note that the turn to spirituality in contemporary culture is simultaneously a turn from merely *believing* in something to actually *doing* something. This seemingly straightforward assessment is vexing, however, when one considers the one-dimensionality of much contemporary spirituality. Said differently, when spirituality is understood as innate, universal and inescapable—when one *has* spirituality, when one *is* spiritual—it makes little sense to think of spirituality in terms of practice; when one already *is* one has no need to *become*.

Bregman takes St. Theresa of Avila’s spiritual practices as a privileged example of the *practice* of spirituality, as movement or progress toward that which transcends the inner self: God. Drawing from the work of Alasdair MacIntyre as a complement to her argument, she shows that every practice implies a lack, a void of knowledge. Bregman’s assessment is worth citing in full:

All the practical pieces on “enhancing our spirituality” promoted today tout techniques that derive from and depend upon ancient disciplines such as yoga, meditation, contemplative prayer practices, and so on. . . . But they do not, repeat, do not grow directly from the definitions of spirituality as “the search for meaning” or “sense of connection.” . . . There is no conceptual continuity between the contemporary definitions of spirituality (one-poled, dependent on the inner self) and the practices that now fascinate many of spirituality’s advocates, along with many of the more traditionally religious (41).

Chapters four through six articulate what Bregman calls “the intellectual ecology of spirituality.” Helpfully, she makes her case from three discrete fields of knowledge: psychology, religious studies, and sociology of religion. In chapters seven through nine, Bregman presents what she

labels “niches for spirituality.” These are locales wherein spirituality has found a home: health care, the workplace, and recreation. Bregman provides us with a well-written and cogent account of contemporary spirituality. By tracing both the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of the term, she presents a balanced account of the term and its usage between the spiritualism-as-narcissism camp and the spiritualism-as-eschatological/utopian deliverer.

My only critique is that I found the book short by two chapters. I would have appreciated a chapter on the intellectual ecology of spirituality vis-à-vis *theological studies*. Perhaps her fondness for a Tillichian paradigm of understanding the religious dimensions of spirituality is to blame for this oversight, but ignoring the field of theological studies is glaring in a treatment on spirituality. A second chapter that would have helped me would examine the church (or at least houses of worship in general) as another “niche” for spirituality. Churches are places in which practice and belief are united—more or less holistically—and where the religious and the spiritual are blurred. In a book aiming to clear up “the confusions, conflations, and murkiness of these issues” (166), I can think of no domain where the conversation gets more muddled than in ecclesial discourse.

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