

Book Review by David Tacey - The Bulletin The New Believers by Rachael Kohn

Rachel Kohn's book is a breath of fresh air ... a work on religion with insight, wisdom, wit - and appropriate irony.

It is a delight to read a book on contemporary trends in religion and spirituality that is sober and wise. Much writing in these areas is full of exaggeration because the trend is towards the discovery of a miraculous "God within". The closeness of the human to the divine often results in inflated discourse and impossible claims about the potentials of the self. Take this fruit, intones the seductive voice of the New Age, and your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil (to quote Genesis 3:3).

Many of us are so removed from tradition that the evil wily serpent is not even recognised when he comes wearing new robes, offering the gift of godlikeness to the masses. But Rachael Kohn is alert to the delusions that masquerade as truths in the marketplace of religious products. She has a fine ear for discerning authentic from false notes in the slightly crazed world of contemporary belief. Today's believers are faced with a bewildering array of options. Kohn surveys developments in Judaism, Christianity, and western Buddhism. She explores popular culture, ecological theology, wicca and paganism, cults, spiritual psychology, and best-selling books that urge readers to reclaim their divine nature. The author maintains a state of equanimity as she presents material ranging from the sublimely wonderful to the seriously delusional. Her patience is admirable; however some popular gurus receive the full force of her ironic wit.

The decline of religious traditions has exposed the individual to new possibilities and dangers. "God is dead" was the chant 100 years ago, but the new belief is "God is alive, enchantment is afoot." God is democratised and taken away from the elites, but God is profaned by this new proximity. A host of American illusionists, from Joseph Campbell, through Jean Houston and Neale Donald Walsch, are keen to tell us what the new God thinks and feels, and even what he says. The new familiarity with God has taken away restraint and decorum, and - judging from book sales - millions of us are falling under the spell of the new illusionists.

The vitality which arises from the closeness of God could revive the world's traditions. But many new believers are not concerned about tradition, only about what they can get out of God as a personal resource. Kohn is suspicious of the rush for spirituality if it neglects society, morality and tradition. Readers of her book will understand anew why the traditions have long kept the secret of the God Within under lock and key.

It is an open question whether we have achieved the necessary maturity to receive news of an inner divine source. Whether the urge to explore the inner world comes from the true God, or from the serpent, depends in part upon how we respond to this task. If it gives rise to a "gold rush" mentality, where morality is forgotten, and the common good is lost in an orgy of power, then the new belief is polluting and destroying. If we can be restrained in our choices, maintaining a sense of social responsibility, then the new belief might lead to social renewal. Rachael Kohn hopes moral order and propriety can provide some containment to our rampant spiritual hunger.

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