

Clive Hamilton.
The freedom
paradox.
Towards a
post-secular ethics.

Reviewed by Jonathan Marshall

Clive Hamilton's new book is perhaps one of the most important books to have entered Australian popular discourse in the last ten to twenty years. It should be read, but that does not mean it cannot be disagreed with, as disagreement is a tribute given to a work which stimulates thought and questions.

HAMILTON'S starting points are that affluence and freedom are not enough for a satisfactory life, and that following our desires leads to a loss of inner freedom. We can, he proclaims, only be free by following a moral code—this is the paradox of the title. He then may dismiss the relationship between morality and politics too quickly, rendering us isolate individuals. Our lives are shaped by the forces around us, whether these are conscious or unconscious. If we are trapped in a shallow consumerism which leaves us empty and depressed with little sense of direction beyond consuming more, then that is a social fact resulting from the kind of politics we, and the society, pursue – and pursue up to its destruction. When we resist the sirens, and help

The Freedom Paradox: Towards a Post-secular Ethics.

Clive Hamilton, Pub. Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2008.

others to resist, then our actions are political, and we might as well make this conscious.

After this introduction, the book moves into an exposition of some ideas of Kant and Schopenhauer. Using these philosophers he suggests that there is a radical difference between things as they are perceived or understood (the phenomenon) and things as they really are (the noumenon or things-in-themselves). While Kant proposes that we can never perceive noumenon directly, Schopenhauer argues that we do perceive our own existence and our bodies immediately, and thus have access to at least some noumenon through what he calls 'intuition'. Hamilton suggests that if this is the case then we can anchor our morality in the intuition which gives us experience of our common being. This movement serves to complicate the idea that morality depends solely upon 'Reason' or rational calculation, and retrieves the role of emotion. His aim would seem to be to separate spirituality and morality from doctrinaire notions of the divine. Later in the book he makes comparisons with Jung's theory of individuation, pointing out that in becoming autonomous we bind ourselves to our fellow humans, a development which Jungians sometimes forget. He also suggests that art moves us to the inner world, and that some artists can manage the marriage of heaven and hell, or the balancing of opposites within and without. At this point, he can suggest that the noumenon is beyond good and evil, and he mentions Van Gogh's work as showing the "elemental chaos of the noumenon" (p.233).

There are minor quibbles that could be made about his exposition – for instance why is it assumed that noumenon must be “characterised by unity and changelessness” (p.67)? Everything we know about them suggests that they are in flux and constantly interacting with other things so that they exist in relationship, not in themselves, and as mentioned above they can appear chaotic. Why is consciousness taken as a primary given, when it seems to be learnt and again in flux and development? However the main query to be put to the author is: if, despite everyone agreeing in general to the nature of phenomenon, our perceptions are structured by how we perceive and thus are not equal to the things-in-themselves, then why do we not equally assume that perceptions gained through intuition or meditative states are not also structured by how we perceive them? For example, a sense of noumenal timelessness may be a result of the perception, not of the perceived. A Jungian might suggest that our perceptions of noumenon

are structured by symbols and archetypes. This points to the main problem I have with his argument. Namely it does not seem to be the case that perception of the noumenon, mystical experience, or intuition, automatically leads to what Hamilton calls “metaphysical empathy”, and a universal and gentle morality. Our work does not stop here.

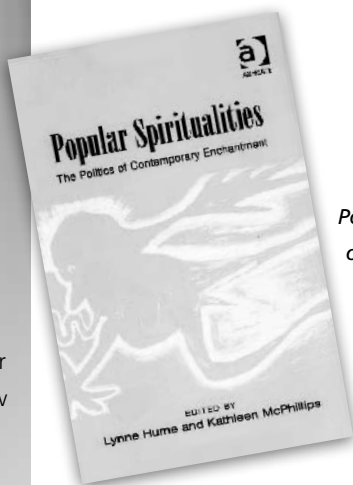
Even the vaguest familiarity with mystical experience suggests that we could have a Zen practicing and enlightened Samurai who would kill peasants he imagined might be being disrespectful. We have the mystics of Nazism. We have born-again ecstatic Christians affirming their right to endless wealth, guns, first strike and so on. If you shared the beliefs of the Bali bombers, then you might see their apparent happiness and good humour as evidence that they had indeed been touched by God and seen the true nature of things. These are not positions that most of us, including Clive Hamilton, would be willing to claim as examples of ethics the world needs more

of. If we reject such contacts with noumenon as unreal or delusory, that is because we are already making a moral decision. Therefore intuition of the noumenon cannot be the basis of that decision and these kinds of experiences show that mere contact with noumenon is neither necessary nor sufficient for a moral life.

The noumenon is part of our unconscious – we are literally not conscious of it, we are conscious of phenomena. Jung, to the objections of many, never separated out the super-conscious from the subconscious. This was because he recognised that the two can be intertwined, and we often approach the super-conscious through the symbols provided by the subconscious, and can thus meet monsters on the way. In the cases above, we could say that people have experienced the noumenon through the archetype of an uncontained Warrior or through a righteous Lord of Destruction, and hence their morality is the morality of war and intolerance. We might even postulate that their morality

came first and shaped how they perceived the 'ground of being'. If so, then Hamilton has indeed failed to find a basis for morality. The perception of universal sympathy, which he aims for, is only one possible result, and that sympathy, or compassion, may be limited to fellow believers. If this is so, then how do we encourage people to experience and act upon the knowledge that we are all in this together? Indeed, how do we know that this process of perceiving noumenon is both good and useful? How do we know that people won't twist it to serve their selfish or limited ends? How indeed, to ask one traditional question, do we know that God is good?

Answers, I suggest, can only be achieved if we work to discover how unconscious processes (of the psyche, the social and the ecology) structure our lives, and learn not only how to live with these processes, but with the realities and sufferings of life, without allocating blame to others and making them our shadow, and still managing to act in society. This is a political and collective therapy, and should not rush to conclusions before it has begun. Clive Hamilton's book is an important step in that direction and can be thoroughly recommended for all who wish to explore these issues.



Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment

Edited by Lynne Hume and

Kathleen McPhillips

Ashgate Publishing Company,

Aldershot, UK, 2006.

Reviewed by Jacinta Frawley

Popular Spiritualities is a collection of essays exploring the re-emergence of enchantment in the contemporary West. The decline in traditional religions is the starting point for a look at wildly divergent forms of spiritual expression, and most interestingly, a look in places that might traditionally be defined as soulless—popular culture, the internet, mind-altering substances, literature, fantasy, and political engagement.

KATHLEEN MCPHILLIPS, Senior Lecturer in the School of Humanities at the University of Western Sydney, was inspired to collect and edit the essays for her students, who were seeking ways to recognise and re-imagine contemporary spiritual and religious expression for their communities and themselves. Those drawn to C.G. Jung's thoughts on the search for meaning will also find much to engage their imaginations in this compilation.

The editors define enchantment as "the sensation when one experiences events or circumstances that produce a sense of the mysterious, the weird and the uncanny... re-enchantment brings back the imagination and the possibility of magic into our everyday lives" (xv). This is what Jung would have referred to as the numinous.

The essays explore very diverse expressions of contemporary spirituality, some bordering on traditional religious expression,