

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Shadow Culture: Psychology and Spirituality in America*

Eugene Taylor

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One hundred and fifty years ago, rapping, knocking, table tipping, automatic writing and utterances of mediums deep in trance bringing messages from the "spirit world" spread in epidemic proportions. Millions of Americans believed that such occurrences established the existence of life after death.

In 1886, the great American psychologist and philosopher William James headed the Committee on Hypnotism and the Committee to Investigate Mediumistic Phenomenon for the American Society for Psychical Research. The society was constituted to study psychic phenomena and the mind-body question. James conducted exhaustive experiments on hypnotism and clairvoyance. Although his studies did not prove whether or not there was life after death, they were important for both psychology and psychophysiology. For psychology, because James had empirically demonstrated the induction of a legitimate alternate state of consciousness that was unlike both sleep and the normal waking state and could be replicated in the laboratory. For psychophysiology, because he demonstrated that in an "exceptional mental state," the human organism was capable of controlling normally involuntary body processes and even of heightened powers of perception, memory, attention and cognition. This implied the existence of the subconscious which could govern thought and action, leading to contemporary psychotherapy. Also, it suggested that human potentiality was vaster than commonly imagined.

Events that led up to these investigations were associated with the American spiritual revival called the Second Great Awakening. Eugene Taylor, author of *Shadow Culture*, is eminently qualified for the task of describing the history of this event and phenomena related to psychology and spirituality in America. He is an excellent writer, and in dealing with controversial personalities, behaviors, theories and beliefs, he appears neither mocking nor gullible. Taylor has graduate degrees in psychology and Asian studies as well as a Ph.D. in history and philosophy of psychology. Several extremely important books in this field have been produced by him. They include *William James on Exceptional Mental States, the 1896 Lowell Lectures* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1984) and *William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margin* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

Many parallel themes run through the present publication. One that is central traces the history of discovery and re-discovery of the conflict between the dominant culture and the alternative reality tradition that is prevalent in religious awakenings. Taylor portrays the dominant culture as "outward, rational, reductionistic, dominated by the senses, and driven by the letter of the law" (p. 12). The alternative reality tradition is "inner, contemplative, ascetic, and mystical, believing itself to be the true aristocracy of the spirit from which the letter of the law derived" (p. 12). The psychological mechanism which fosters constructive action is a "profound, persistent and continuous alteration in consciousness that allows the person to, in effect, live in two cultures at once-- one, the dominant culture of normative science and mainstream religion; the other, a shadow culture of mythic and visionary proportions" (p. 13).

Taylor's story begins with the First Great Awakening, around 1720. The Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards was at the center of an emotional religious revival. Edwards' theological mission was to provide an answer to the "conflict between the highly subjective lived experience of spiritual awakening and the objective description of reality presented by rational theology and empirical science" (p. 28). The result, however, was mediumistic trance of mass proportions induced by his experiential evangelism. Using guided fantasy, he instructed his parishioners to imagine being burned in hell for eternity. This was the price of a sinful life. Under the spell of such imagery, while overwhelmed with convincing motives to do good, the twin wings of fear and hope carried hundreds to religious conversion. When the number of converts visiting him for counseling grew unmanageable, Edwards organized them into small groups where they shared their experiences with others.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, enormous crowds, eager for socializing and excitement, as well as curiosity for things of the spirit, quickly overflowed the capacity of small communities. The famous camp-meeting was born. First hand accounts give an idea of the effect of group and of charismatic preaching. William McGreeley, pastor of Muddy River Church in Logan County, Kentucky, observing such a meeting, said,

No person seemed to wish to go home - hunger and sleep seemed to affect nobody - eternal things were the vast concern. ... A very great number of people of every age, I believe from 10 years to 70, were struck down ... they fell in the camps, on their way home, and after they got there.

Converts reportedly jerked, whirled, danced and even barked like dogs. Without warning, some who had not appeared to have been affected suddenly fell, as if shot dead, remembering nothing afterward. On awakening, they gave passionate sermons. Elder Barton Stone wrote,

In less than twenty minutes scores had fallen to the ground." Pale and trembling, "some attempted to fly from the scene panic-stricken, but they either fell or returned immediately to the crowd, as unable to get away. The meeting lasted on the spot until late at night, and many found peace in glorification of the Lord. (Cleveland, 1916)

With the intention of living relevant lives, beyond conversion experience, many utopian social experiments were launched during the First Great Awakening. The Ephrata community of celibate monks and nuns in Pennsylvania is an example of a sensible balance of "inner vision" and constructive behavior. They were contemplative and vowed poverty, seeking self-realization through a life-style of hard work and purity of mind and body on what they called the "Way of Peace." They were extremely successful in business, distributed bread, ran schools, were very close with Native American tribes and generally improved the world around them. The Society of Friends (called Quakers because they "shook and trembled before the Lord") were another example. And the Shakers, a former Quaker sect wherein members would shake upon entering trance, another.

One hundred years later, the Second Great Awakening also involved tens of thousands of people in mass revival meetings. Religious conversions involved being "taken by the spirit," speaking in "tongues," uttering prophecies, having visions-- even group visions. Also, many more utopian experiments in Christian socialism were inaugurated. The Oneida Community, Icarian Society, Amana Colony and the Mormons were among the most well-known.

First, Second, and Third "Great Awakenings" are categories that Taylor uses to divide and trace his project: "the shadow culture" in America. Bringing this subject to public awareness is extremely valuable. Furthermore, if the field of vision is enlarged, one may see that mediumistic trance, at the heart of such awakenings, has functioned from the times of Ancient Greece up to the present, and continues. Some 35,000 supplicants were said to journey daily to the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, purifying themselves to receive the prophecies of Pythia in trance at the oracle. During the First Awakening in America, a parallel phenomenon was taking place in Great Britain with John Wesley. Even between the First and Second Awakening in America there was the so-called Great Revival in the West. During the Second Awakening, shaking in trance spread throughout Native American tribes in the Pacific Northwest. In fact, if one considers trance possession as the subject, of which religious revival is one manifestation, the field accommodates even more examples. For example, in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century ecstatic dancing suddenly appeared in Germany. With no explicit religious purpose, though not without producing revelations, what was called the "St. Vitus dance" spread to Belgium and other parts of Europe. Even innocuous events apparently triggered such "mass hysteria's." In 1787 in Lancashire a woman put a mouse down the neck of a female co-worker in a cotton factory. The victim, who was terrified of mice, entered a violent convulsive fit lasting 24 hours. The next day three more entered a similar state. By the fourth day twenty four persons, including a man who exhausted himself restraining the others, were similarly effected. Even two children were among the victims. Accompanied by a rumor that 'cotton poisoning' was the cause, the malady spread to nearby factories. The application of electric shocks relieved symptoms of those affected and halted the contagion (Sargant, 1957). West African spirit possession, especially as practiced in Haiti and Brazil provide current examples of medium possession as well as the presence of organized (and apparently constructive) social structures based on trance.

The upshot of this brief review is that trance phenomena are not passing anomalies to be brushed away with ad hoc explanations for each instance. The phenomenon is widespread, over time and across cultures, and should be reckoned with as such. Furthermore, susceptibility to trance is not limited to the "weak willed." There might even be relatively few people who are *not* susceptible to what William James (1890) called the "relatively lower phases of [mediumistic] possession," such as playing a musical instrument, "in which the normal self is not excluded from conscious participation in the performance, though their initiative seems to come from elsewhere." Thus, instead of asking, "Are spirits real?" (which is a dead-end to understanding what are largely subjective experiences), one might ask, "What constructive purpose, if any, do these phenomena serve?" It is difficult to believe that, as the

American researcher of trance Arnold Ludwig (1966) has observed, it is merely to provide subjects for night-club hypnotists that humans have developed the capacity to enter trance.

Indeed, as Taylor points out, although the emotional and visionary effects of the great awakenings have always been annulled by fear and ridicule from the society's established interest groups, they were not to be considered pathological. In the opinion of the American religious scholar William McLoughlin, they occurred at "critical disjunction's in our self-understanding" (p. 19), were revitalizing, therapeutic and cathartic. According to him, "Through awakenings, a nation grows in wisdom, in respect for itself, and into more harmonious relations with other peoples and the physical universe" (p. 20). Also, William James, with his characteristic balanced judgment and good sense, took the position that, "We cannot offhandedly dismiss even the claims of any religion, including those of spiritualists and mental healers, if by their beliefs they contribute to making the world a better place to live" (p. 177).

Since the role of trance in fomenting personal religious experiences and communal experiments was a continuation of phenomena already established, perhaps the value in the Second Awakening, as Taylor observes, was in its fruits: for example, the emergence of the Transcendentalists. A loose, unorganized group, they shared a view that "mere reason alone could not suffice to explain the whole" of existence and that the divine could be known "directly through the inward contemplation of nature" (p. 64). Ralph Waldo Emerson promoted self-reliance, Henry David Thoreau, a literature of place; John Muir, conservation. Always in the background of transcendentalist thought and action were the teachings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Thus, John Chapman (a.k.a. Johnny Appleseed) carried around tattered chapters of Swedenborg which he loaned out to families while he planted apple trees all along the American frontier. Other transcendentalists were Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne who explored the dark side of the unconscious. Hawthorne developed a literary psychology, close to psychosomatic medicine. There was also Margaret Fuller who celebrated the American woman with a psychology of the feminine. And, James Freeman Clarke who championed sensible education. His viewpoint, as Taylor puts it, was that "Nature is always holistic, teaching all the faculties at once, while we are too analytic .... We educate only a part of the person" (p. 93).

Taylor describes the transcendentalists' distinction between reason and understanding.

The function of reason, they claimed, was not the discovery of truth, but that of arranging, methodizing, and harmonizing verbal propositions in regard to it. Understanding, however, was much larger. It was the cultivation of reason, emotion and intuition in the same person; it was the perfection of the higher self, the discovery of the divinity within. (p. 64)

Events which grew out of the Second Awakening make up most of the book. Taylor describes the history of homeopathy, phrenology, mesmerism, spiritualism, theosophy, Christian Science, as well as William James's introduction of Freud and Jung to America, the Americanization of psychoanalysis, the influence of the Hindu and Buddhist gurus. Esalen, humanistic and transpersonal psychology and what some believe to be another great awakening begun in the 1960s are also discussed.

The ideals of personal self-expression, an intuitive approach to self-knowledge, understanding and mastery of exceptional mental states, the integration of mind and body and a spiritual reverence for the land are part of a constructive message suggested by Taylor's writing. Every psychologist, counselor or anyone who intervenes in the experience of others in an attempt to facilitate healing or personal growth should be thoroughly familiar with the contents of this book and their implications.

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