

Forman, Robert K.C. *Grassroots Spirituality: What It Is, Why It Is Here, Where It Is Going*. Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2004. 231 pp. \$29.90 (USD). ISBN: 0907845681.

[1] As an example of American religion reverting to localism since the 1960s, spokesman Robert Forman provides a useful model for understanding the influence of his baby boom generation. Focusing upon cultural trends variously conceptualized as the New Age, shadow culture, invisible, or silent religion, Forman simply reasserts the old binary opposition of religion and spirituality. With this distinction, he is interested in private beliefs, mental experiences, transforming or integrating psychological states of consciousness etc., as opposed to institutional forms of traditional religion. Moreover, Forman provides a handbook on how to “spiritualize the institutions,” from the workplace of the corporate executive, to the doctors office, all the way to the public school system, there are many practical suggestions offered in this direction.

[2] Grassroots Spirituality is predominantly an upper to middle-class phenomenon guided by mature elders of the counterculture. To put this in their own words: “Grassroots Spirituality may represent the maturation of the naïve, zealous spirituality of the sixties ... its attempt to integrate well-grounded spiritual principles into our society and institutions, represents the maturation of the guru movements” (117). This appears at odds with their understanding of the role of the teacher, but boomers have simply reinterpreted the term guru in their own terminology. As Forman notes, “Any guru for Grassroots Spirituality must always remain an unguru” (63). One of the more striking principles of Grassroots Spirituality is that one can participate in this movement without having to convert from their unique religious tradition, as evidenced by the activities of Forman himself, an ordained minister and retired professor of philosophy and religion at City University of New York. The irony of this dilemma is highlighted by the motto of the Forge Institute, a research and publications center founded by Forman and dedicated to the propagation of “Trans-traditional Spirituality.”

[3] The organization and institutionalization of Grassroots Spirituality is modeled on a basic structure: the internal dialogue must be “trans-traditional.” In this sense, Grassroots Spirituality clearly exemplifies American forms of postmodern cultural production. One dictum is provided: “It is not the seeking after God that divides, but the claim to have found God” (175). The principle of trans-traditional organization is that no one path can profess the truth. Self-help groups must be set up and facilitators may guide dialogue and processes of inner exploration and together everyone’s beliefs may be shared and contribute to a better understanding of one’s self. Since no one tradition dictates the market on truth, moreover, Grassroots Spirituality creates a homogenous context where all perspectives on truth may be sorted out for a more self-exalted feeling. In this context, descriptions of localism as heterogeneous postmodern religion resistant to homogenous centralization of power is totally reversed in a chance that baby boomers might finally be able to assert their own self-help brand of authority.

[4] Predominantly a grassroots movement of the aging baby boom generation, it is unfortunate that Forman fails to discuss their relationship with Generations X, Y and Z.

Nevertheless, it seems that this movement is more likely one of co-dependency, or baby boomers in dialogue with themselves and still searching for a truth that no one can claim: thou shalt not judge. Baby boomers “have had it with dogma ... there can be no dictated beliefs ... no hierarchical authorities telling them what to believe or feel” (175). In short, there are no teachers, but only friendly guides who can help us cultivate and understand our mental experiences. Teachers and students are on the same path, all learning together.

[5] Forman’s study of “Grassroots Spirituality,” what it is, why it is here, and where it is going, demonstrates no awareness of the ways in which this “movement” continues the Protestant discourse of denominationalism to its ultimate base but this appears to be the structural process at its roots. In spite of the decentralization of church authority in America, moreover, a typical denominational church still ideally functions as an institutionalized religion with local branches of authoritative traditions, not a place for offering local-level spirituality. One of the more contested elements of traditional discourse concerns the notion that truth is transmitted and legitimated through authoritative ancestor lineages. The emergence of local prayer groups, meditation circles, charismatic communities, neighbourhood church houses, etc., are all indicators of religion in America moving from modern to postmodern during the 1960s, but in reverting to local-level spirituality one is merely conforming to the denominational structure which has always determined the transmission of religion in America.

[6] The baby boom generation was just coming of age in the late 1960s. The widespread and widely acknowledged disaffection and disillusionment of this youth market may have led to a Christian revival in the historical conditions of another era, but this option was hardly viable for spiritual seekers of the 1960s. During this time mainline Protestant churches were dominated with “social gospel” and liberal views promoting social action in contrast to narcissistic focus upon personal growth and spirituality. Conservative and evangelical movements, on the other hand, shunned all relations with the new youth culture which it identified with psychedelic drugs, sexual promiscuity, and rock music. While anti-papacy trends had long been among the cultic milieu in America, the uncertainties reflected in the wake of the second Vatican council also meant that few baby boomers would turn towards the Catholic Church. In this context, one of the more significant contenders of support systems would prove to be the therapy cult and the human potential movement of self-actualization.

[7] By the 1980s, most baby boomers of the hippie culture were settled down with families of their own and it was unlikely that they would defect to a communal cult. With many seekers continuing their spiritual journey alongside daily activities, determining the ideological coherence of this generation has posed problems for cultural critics. On the other hand, Forman claims that part of the reason why the baby boom generation has remained disorganized is that they have been embarrassed to speak publicly about their spiritual beliefs and mystical experiences. Forman attributes this to the media as well as the general cultural attitude towards spiritual seekers. For example, he notes, many boomers have been called “flakes,” “hippy dippy,” “kooks,” “airy fairy,” “in la la land,” and flat-out “weirdos” by their friends and colleagues (13). For some inexplicable reason, however, this is no longer the case. Forman suggests the revival of interest in Buddhism

in the 1990s may be accountable. In any case, it is true that the influence and importation of Asian religion has inevitably affected the lives of boomers.

[8] One of the more important aspects in the legacy of religion in America is its ongoing resistance to institutionalization. Starting with Protestantism in Europe and continuing through the Great Awakening, down through denominationalism, the New Age counterculture and localism, resistance to institutional authority has indeed remained a significant challenge. The generation of the 1960s counterculture, on the other hand, has recently expressed greater interest in formal organization. Even though the underlying structure of denominationalism has remained hegemonic in the history of religion in America, the strength of this process is gathered directly by means of ongoing periods of “revival.” As Forman’s handbook demonstrates, American Grassroots Spirituality is now finding its own ways of institutionalization in the modern world. With Forman’s study as a guide, one could continue to explore the ways in which spirituality is now undergoing a process of de-privatization. In other words, the privatization of religion is in the process of being institutionalized in the public sphere. Grassroots Spirituality provides a rich amount of anthropological data signifying a need for greater analysis of the power relations of this discourse and the boomers who do indeed resist institutionalization in terms of traditional hierarchies of authority. Ethno-critical theorists will also find further examples highlighting the necessity for greater awareness of the ways in which non-Western concepts are appropriated for Eurocentric discourses of Orientalism.

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