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Books in Review

Belonging To The Universe

New Age Mush

Belonging To The Universe. By FRITJOF CAPRA and DAVID STEINDL-RAST. *HarperSan Francisco. 217 pp. $18.95.*

Reviewed by Charlotte Allen

IN 1975, Fritjof Capra, an Austrian emigré physicist and systems theorist, published *The Tao of Physics*, an effort to find parallels between scientific principles and the insights of Eastern spirituality. He later became a guru in his own right, specializing in ecology, in Berkeley, California. Eastern religion has for almost two centuries been the Grail Forest for many a Western intellectual as Western philosophy, already unhitched from its medieval tether to faith, has stalked through the arid terrain of scientism, positivism, and various kinds of materialism, including the Marxist. Christian divines preached the Gospel of Progress and the Social Gospel. There was little to satisfy the hungry heart and the yearning imagination. Not surprisingly, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, untouched by the Western obsession with rationality and offering extraordinary insights into the numinous, have appealed to Europeans and Americans who have no other faith but cannot resign themselves to being atheists.

The Eastern trail these dissatisfied Westerners went down has sometimes led back home, at least part of the way. So it was that Capra, a lapsed Catholic, had his baby daughter baptized-not at a church but at the San Francisco Zen Center-in a ceremony presided over by David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk with a doctorate in psychology and the coauthor of this book. Capra's residual fascination with the religion of his youth, all in a barmy California setting, reminds one of some of the Beats: Neal Cassady, who could not entirely shake off his childhood Catholicism, and Jack Kerouac, who returned to the faith before his death. It was Thomas Merton, who converted to Catholicism via a friendship with a Hindu holy man, who actually accomplished the sought-after fusion; he used insights from the East to nourish an authentic (and orthodox) Christian mysticism. Merton might well have been a saint, but the Trappist monastery where he lived and prayed also became a must stop on the hippie tourist trail during the 1960s.

Belonging to the Universe is a three-way dialogue on science and Christianity among Capra, Steindl-Rast, and another Benedictine, Thomas Matus, at Esalen, the Big Sur-based hot springs that are the Delphi of California spirituality (Steindl-Rast and Matus belong to the Camaldolese Benedictine community at Big Sur). The book jacket calls Steindl-Rast "a contemporary Thomas Merton," but to paraphrase a recent vice presidential contender, you're no Merton, Brother David. If Merton was otherworldly, Steindl-Rast, a veteran of the New Age conference circuit, is the essence of conventional, complacent, wordy worldliness, ever eager to latch onto the latest trend and the latest jargon. The two monks' aim, says Steindl-Rast, is to prune away the dry scholasticism that has tended to choke the sense of mystery out of Christianity, all the while "affirming God's infinite otherness." What they actually do is cook Christian doctrines down to bland New Age mush.

IS CHRIST'S RESURRECTION a stumbling block for the hip? No problem, answer the Benedictines. "That's not theology," says Matus of Jesus' Easter victory over death. "No responsible theologian is going to dredge that up today." The Resurrection, he says, was just a mental "experience" the disciples underwent because they couldn't bear the thought of "a wonderful, lovable person . . . being subjected to capital punishment on the basis of ambiguous allegations." Yeah, and He didn't have a jury trial, either. The Eucharist? Forget the Body and Blood of Our Lord. The Sacrament of the Altar is merely a huggy-bear "celebration of our ultimate belonging," avers Steindl-Rast. This is not restoring the sense of mystery to Christianity but systematically removing it. When Capra asks for bread, they give him tofu.

The guiding inspiration for this exercise is not Christ or even Buddha but Thomas Kuhn, author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. *Pace* Bush aide James Pinkerton's charming misreadings (he sees Kuhn's "paradigm" theory as an endorsement for school choice!), Kuhn's 1962 book was actually a reductionist, historicist exercise that for Capra and the Benedictines ought to represent Western rationality at its dead-end worst. In Kuhn's view, all metaphysical speculation, including the religious, is merely a function of whatever scientific thinking (or "paradigm") happens to be in style. The cosmologist Heinz Pagels accused the influential Kuhn of stopping serious work in the philosophy of science dead in its tracks for a generation. Inexplicably, or perhaps all too explicably, Capra and the Benedictines embrace Kuhn's relativism lock, stock, and barrel. Just as Newton's physics are "old-paradigm" compared to Einstein's, they say, traditional Christian beliefs are fit only for "children" and "fundamentalists" in this post-Newtonian age.

Steindl-Rast and Matus packagea "new-paradigm" Christianity for Capra's consumption (to his credit, he never sounds entirely sold). Although freighted with many two-dollar words ("noetic," "epistemic"), this updated faith is actually as drearily predictable as a Newtonian equation, consisting of vague beliefs in universal oneness and a praxis in which liberation theology and recycling bottles play a large part. The monks also boast of the "non-sexist" Psalms they chant at the monastery-very new-paradigm.

As often happens with the new ideas of the day before yesterday, this old whine in New Age wineskins is already laughably dated. *Belonging to the Universe* ends on a hoot, with the embracing, in the name of "world federalism," of Mikhail Gorbachev and assorted Sandinistas-Maximum Leaders of the People apparently still in office when the book went to the presses. Perhaps Steindl-Rast and Matus need a rest from jet-setting spirituality. Perhaps their Father Abbot (or Person Abbot, or whatever they call him) ought to reassign them to cheese-making duties at the monastery for a while.

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