



DORIS MITSCH

Coming Back To The World

Timothy Conway On Engaged Spirituality

an interview by ARNIE COOPER

Timothy Conway grew up in the LA entertainment industry — his father was a Hollywood literary agent — but his real passion was sports. Basketball and football were his religion from an early age. When a series of knee injuries took him out of competitive athletics at the age of sixteen, he grew greatly depressed. (It didn't help that he was reading the existentialists for a high-school literature course.) Then, just a few months before his seventeenth birthday, Conway had an experience that knocked him out of his depression and set him on a different path.

"Looking out from my backyard," he writes, "over the San Fernando Valley, near Mulholland Drive, I was flooded with grace and the presence of God." He knew at once "that we are literally made of God's love." From that moment on, everyone and everything seemed sacred to him.

Having been raised Catholic, Conway considered becoming a priest, but it was difficult for him to reconcile his mystical experiences with the views of the Church establishment. Luckily, his high-school math teacher, "a little old Italian Jesuit," was happy to hear him question the conventional belief that human beings are separate from God. "Father Colossimo took me aside one day in the big rectory of Loyola High School and, looking both ways to be sure no non-mystics were in earshot, said, 'Yes, Timothy, in the mind of man there is separation between man and God. But in the mind of God —' he paused again to be sure the coast was clear — 'it's all God!'"

Conway began to read the Gospels, Teilhard de Chardin, and other eminent Catholic mystics to help him understand his religious awakening. He ultimately outgrew what he calls the "limited theology" of traditional Roman Catholicism. He also outgrew his conservative view of global politics, opening his mind to the shadow side of U.S. domestic and foreign policy. At the University of California, Santa Cruz, Conway began to explore Eastern philosophy, devouring everything he could find on the Advaita Vedanta tradition and different schools of Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, and Christian and Jewish mysticism.

At the age of twenty, Conway suffered a major loss: the death of his younger sister Kathy. Independent of him, Kathy had also chosen a spiritual path, turning away from a possible modeling career to explore nature, mysticism, and music. Within a few years, she had given away nearly all her possessions and was caring for an old blind man in rural Maui, Hawaii. Conway went to visit her there. They hiked to the east side of Haleakala Crater and then down to a campsite on a grassy promontory overlooking the coast, where they spent a day meditating. At midnight, under a full August moon, Kathy went swimming alone in the ocean below, and a strong riptide apparently took her out to sea. Her body was never found. Kathy's death was heart-wrenching for Conway. But it also reinforced for him the crucial importance of mysticism in his life: the understanding, which he and Kathy shared, that all things are sacred.

Six years later, in 1980, he spent time as a monk in northern



TIMOTHY CONWAY

Burma under the Buddhist master Taungpulu Sayadaw. After that, he traveled throughout India as a lay aspirant, meeting many of that country's great spiritual teachers.

Conway is the author of *Women of Power and Grace: Nine Astonishing, Inspiring Luminaries of Our Time* (Wake Up Press). In his upcoming book, *Healing Our World: Urgent Solutions for Pressing Problems* (the first installment in a trilogy), the forty-eight-year-old educator and scholar proposes that the many ills afflicting our world today demand more from us than just a mystical spirituality. We also need an "engaged" spirituality, one that extends its concerns beyond our personal spiritual development.

Conway has a Ph.D. in East-West Psychology from the California Institute of Integral Studies. He has taught for many years at Santa Barbara City College's adult-education program, as well as Pacifica Graduate Institute, Antioch University, and other schools. He can be reached at t.conway@ix.netcom.com.

Conway and I spoke for several hours one morning last fall in his Santa Barbara condo, where he lives with his wife and two cats. Images of the world's saints and mystics looked down from his walls as our conversation ranged from cutting-edge physics to the television comedy *Seinfeld*. What struck me most, however, was how calm I felt in Conway's presence.

Cooper: In your upcoming book, you say that, in former times, one could get by with just an individual spiritual practice, but that in today's world it's not enough.

Conway: There are two kinds of really powerful, transformative spirituality. One is mystical spirituality, or the full, inner awakening from egoism to transpersonal awareness. The other is engaged spirituality, working for the public good or collective welfare, out of a deep sense of solidarity with all sentient beings. The problems in the world today are so immense, grievous, and dire that we need both kinds of spirituality, not just an individual, inner mystical spirituality.

Cooper: You emphasize the need for engaged spirituality in today's world. Was it not necessary in the past?

Conway: For tens of thousands of years, humans lived in nomadic tribal societies and took care of one another, sharing edibles gathered from the forests and grasslands and game from the hunt. Tribes worked together to ensure that everyone had clothing and shelter. To remain viable, tribal societies had to be small. Most comprised twenty to fifty people, perhaps as many as 150 in an unusually large group. Some of the hunter-gatherers who survived into modern times — for instance, the Australian Aborigines and the African San Bushpeople (who now, sadly, appear to have been extinguished by the encroaching modern world) — still have no private property and cause virtually no environmental damage. They are among the happiest, most loving people on earth. So a distinct form of engaged spirituality wasn't needed among tribal peoples. They

simply took care of each other.

With the appearance of agrarian culture some ten thousand years ago and the subsequent rise of the great civilizations, a very different human society emerged. There was division of labor, and societies became stratified into classes. But in a lot of early agrarian societies, people still took care of each other and made sure that virtually everyone was fed, housed, and clothed. As time went on, though, the politics of most societies grew terribly corrupt, which led to great pleasure for the privileged and much misery for the masses.

In time, engaged spirituality would be promoted by all the great religions: in the ethic of lovingkindness and generosity among the Buddhists and Hindus, for example, or in the Christian enactment of agape love, or in the Jewish tradition of *tzedek*, or “social justice.” It’s not widely known today, but around the time of Christ, many Jews were Hellenized Jews, people raised in Greco-Roman culture who converted to Judaism in part because of this wonderful idea of *tzedek*. Judaism offered a more meaningful social and religious experience than the fragmented Hellenistic world of the Mediterranean mystery schools and their remote, often fickle gods.

I should mention, though, that engaged spirituality could be found even in the Hellenistic world, among the justice-minded Cynics — Diogenes and his followers. Many New Testament scholars now see Jesus as having been, in some respects, the Jewish equivalent of a Hellenistic Cynic: someone who speaks truth to power, identifies with marginalized persons, and chastises those who would exploit, oppress, or ignore them. Early Christianity made numerous converts because of its “social gospel.” Christians took care of widows, orphans, and destitute persons. When the Roman Empire started to break down, it was the Christian communities that created a welfare safety net, if you will. Later, in the medieval world and beyond, you find Catholic orders trying to improve the lot of the downtrodden, especially in urban areas.

Under the social and economic dislocation of colonialism in the Third World and of the Industrial Revolution in the developing First World, more and more people began to fall through the cracks. Both colonialism and industrialism spawned horrific social-justice crises. Some of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Holiness movements in American Christianity, like the Church of the Nazarene and the Salvation Army, emerged in response to these crises and emphasized an engaged social gospel of service and charity.

In Asia, Buddhists and Hindus began working more for political, social, and environmental justice in the second half of the twentieth century, and these movements are growing more influential: for instance, saving trees and ecosystems from deforestation and damming, and young girls from the trade in slave prostitutes. In Latin America, from the 1960s onward, you find the powerfully progressive Liberation Theology movement, based on late-nineteenth-century doctrines from the Vatican that express an explicit “preferential option for the poor” and favor workers in management-labor disputes. The Vatican has enunciated this social gospel of solidarity for more than a hundred years.

Cooper: Is the Catholic Church still focused on social justice?

Conway: Pope John Paul II, who is so conservative on Church doctrine and lifestyle choices, repeatedly preaches a progressive social gospel of economic justice. Most Americans are unaware of this, because almost all of his economic teachings are censored in the mainstream U.S. press, but just go to the Vatican website or read the news-wire reports when he gives a speech. He frequently promotes a very radical economic doctrine: that the goods of the earth were created by God and destined for the good of all, not just for the privileged few. That’s the official Catholic “universal destination of goods” idea, enshrined in the catechism.

In the revised version of the Roman Catholic catechism, released in 1994, the chapter focusing on the Seventh Commandment, “Thou shalt not steal,” goes far beyond telling individuals not to steal; it talks about institutional thievery and corporate mistreatment of workers and the environment. Pope John Paul II explicitly condemns the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which, along with groups like USAID and British AID and all the other “official foreign aid” agencies (not to be confused with wonderful private aid groups like Oxfam, Catholic Charities, Friends Service Committee, and Direct Relief International), form a system designed to exploit poor nations. In his book *The Lords of Poverty*, Graham Hancock, former East Africa correspondent for the *Economist*, lambasted these groups for the most wanton forms of stealing. They are the reason why half of humanity toils in poverty, one-fourth in dire destitution.

Cooper: What are some of the forces taking us in this direction? Do you blame technology?

Conway: Fear, greed, and lack of empathy are the primary forces driving us in this direction. And technology is part of the problem, in that it allows those with the better weapons to prey upon the vulnerable and steal their lands and resources. From the mystical point of view, we 6.2 billion human beings, and countless other nonhuman sentient beings, are being challenged to question the illusion of our egos and awaken from the dream of “me” to our true identity as Divine Spirit.

Cooper: And what’s going to lead us to that realization?

Conway: Pain, anguish, and a sense of absurdity or meaninglessness often drive us to awaken as a last resort. At a certain point, people find life so intolerable that they reject the traditional conception of an external, “puppet master” deity. As Protestant theologian Paul Tillich said back in the 1950s: when God is up there and we’re down here, we’re under his thumb. As conditions worsen, this rather sadomasochistic view of the deity eventually becomes intolerable.

Seven hundred years ago, Meister Eckhart urged that we “go beyond god to God.” We must go beyond the dysfunctional theism that puts God up there in the clouds, lording it over us. I would also say that there’s no real solace or ultimate spiritual satisfaction in pantheism, either, which is the idea that God is nothing more than the sum of all aspects of nature.

Beyond mere theism and pantheism is what has been called “panentheism.” A few twentieth-century theologians have tried

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to introduce this concept in the West. It's really the perennial wisdom of the great mystics, which declares that "God is beyond all and yet within all; God is transcendent and yet also immanent."

The mature panentheistic view says that God alone *is*. God plays all the parts in the phenomenal drama of existence. Like a single actor moving about onstage to create various characters, God is exploring all kinds of experiences: pleasure, pain, loneliness, popularity, fear, longing, resentment, euphoria. As some saintly Hasidic rabbis courageously stated, God is the Jewish families going off to the ovens in the concentration camps, and God is the Nazis sending them to their deaths. God is the suffering Iraqi children dying of cholera, typhoid, and diarrhea because sanctions have deprived them of clean water and basic medicines, and God is the U.S. State Department and White House officials who keep these murderous sanctions in place. All are guises of the one God. God plays all the possible roles — from enlightened beings to the most unenlightened dictators and death squads. So many different possibilities — and not just human, but also animal, plant, fungal, bacterial. All played by this one Spirit. This nondual view answers the problem that Paul Tillich saw, of all creatures suffering at the whim of an almighty Creator who's putting them through their paces. No! If you feel pain, this is God's pain. God is here, finding out what it's like to be "you," experiencing this grievously troubling situation, just as God is experiencing what it's like to be George W. Bush, or Saddam Hussein, or a cancer patient, or someone who just won the Lotto. What an amazing play of divine creativity and courage and poignancy.

Cooper: So what act are we in? How does the play end?

Conway: From the mystical view, it doesn't matter. When you're living timelessly in the Now — not the *nunc fluens*, the now that flees, this illusive moment [snapping his fingers] that

vanishes every millisecond, but in the *nunc stans*, the now that stays, God's eternal Now — the question doesn't come up.

At another level, many faiths see existence as a story with a beginning and an end. The ancient Hindus, who have a more cyclical, nonlinear notion of time, divided the human story into different Yugas. Supposedly, right now we're in the Kali Yuga, the dark age of environmental ruin, societal breakdown, and hideous abuses. As to when the Kali Yuga ends and a more benign era comes, no one really knows. God knows.

Cooper: Mystical spirituality has been your main emphasis in your teaching for the past twenty years. Could you talk a little more about it?

Conway: Mystical spirituality, as practiced and described in the Eastern and Western sacred traditions, would have us transcend ego and selfishness and discover this absolute Being-Awareness that stands prior to self. We're always tested, though, because the ego can work in subtle, insidious ways. I have found that, in areas where I thought I was ego-free, the ego still shows up: selfish, grasping, judging. But we can cut through all of that and return "home" without any binding attachments or aversions. Most mystical traditions use this metaphor of "the great return." Mystical spirituality is about coming home to God. This fulfills the First Commandment of the Torah, as quoted by Jesus: "Love the Lord thy God with thy whole soul, heart, mind, and strength." The mystical Sufis of Islam speak of passing away or being annihilated in all-consuming remembrance of, or return to, Allah. The Hindu sages speak of losing the sense of a separate, mortal self and realizing your original identity as the Divine: *Tat tvam asi*, "That thou art," or *Aham Brahmasmi*, "I am Brahman." Taoist mystics speak of the ultimate return (*fu*) to one's primordial nature as Tao. And so on.

Engaged spirituality means spontaneously working for the collective welfare out of a deep sense of solidarity with all sentient beings. It also involves inward activity of healing prayer or blessing. It fulfills the Second Commandment of the Jewish Torah and Christian Gospels: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." An equivalent can be found in all other sacred traditions. It's basically a radical empathy with "the other," who at that point is no longer other, but a manifestation of the one Self, the nondual divine reality of Spirit. When one is the totality of manifestation — all beings, all forms, all events — how can we not be deeply involved with our human brothers and sisters and all our fellow creatures on the planet?

So, while mystical spirituality is about the true "I," engaged spirituality is very much about the "I" that is "we." We need both modes, simultaneously, for a full, balanced, deeply alive spirituality.

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