

Book Review: Dispirited: How Contemporary Spirituality Makes Us Stupid, Selfish and Unhappy

by Blog Admin

July 27, 2013

*David Webster's book seeks to identify the toxic impact of spiritual discourses on our lives. Spirituality makes us confused, apolitical and miserable – whether that spirituality is from conventional religious roots, from a new-age buffet of beliefs, or from some re-imagined ancient system of belief, argues Webster. **Miranda Nell** finds that this is an accessible and provocative read, but is not entirely convinced by the author's conclusions.*

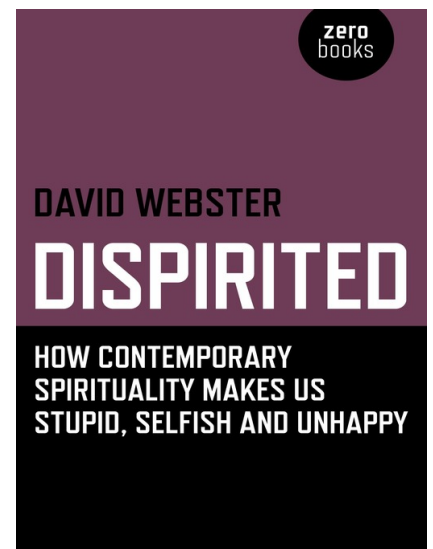
Dispirited: How Contemporary Spirituality Makes Us Stupid, Selfish and Unhappy. David Webster. Zero Books. June 2012.

Find this book:

Dispirited is a breezy little book that addresses a major issue in contemporary culture, and the diagnosis is easy enough to agree with. The superficiality of contemporary spirituality, of individualized belief systems, can be seen in minuscule ways like Facebook updates, and in much more significant ones, like marriage vows that are logically incompatible. The idea that truth has no weight or consequence and all that matters is a sense of personal preference has led to a world where the claim of belief is essentially meaningless.

Considering just how many weighty tomes there are on the topic of atheism and the problem of fundamentalist religion, it then seems surprising [David Webster](#) only took about 75 pages to make the point that vague new-age beliefs are no better and possibly worse than committed religious faith or reactionary atheism. It's not that the point isn't straightforward enough to state briefly, but that Webster does try to cover a wide range of components that intersect in the new-age movement, and it feels as if he could have written a more influential book. Still, perhaps what he has produced can start a conversation.

The basic claims are reasonable, but rather thinly explored, which results in an almost ironic situation. The point of Webster's book is that the prescriptions of modern spirituality are empty and vague, and to fix this problem, he provides a brief introduction to existentialism and phenomenology. But some of these vague self-help and spiritual ideas are themselves derived from just the kind of philosophy he is trying to share with the audience, and not in all that much depth. While his introductions to philosophy are certainly more profound than his synopses of spirituality, the potential for a vicious circle did occur to me.



kindle edition

amazon

In the opening Webster outlines what he calls the “dark trinity” of the spiritual movement and explains the central problems he sees: first, we have lost the ability to think critically; second, we have lost the motivation to instigate change, and third, we have been distracted from our own mortality. All of these are issues that religion can be accused of, but Webster argues that actually the spiritual and new-age movements are worse. Theologians, at least, are interested in proving their claims, the church has a history of being involved in social movements, and the consideration of death is part of most religious traditions. The spiritual approach, on the other hand, is leading down an aimless path. Spirituality rejects any critique or doubt and specifically calls for acceptance over confrontation and argument. In allowing for everyone to have their own truth, both the importance of understanding the nature of being and the social connectivity of reaching a shared comprehension evaporate. Finally, the inability to face the finitude of life allows for endless procrastination in the task of thinking about one’s life.

The book is written in a casual, conversational voice that is easy to follow, although not always well-defended. Webster offers continental ideas, but retains more of an analytic style. He likes to outline the upcoming issue by describing its three main types, for example, which can be useful in the short term but still not add to the overarching cohesion of the project as it ends up feeling like a series of lists instead of a thesis expanded. Also, he probably just belongs in that category of thinkers Aristotle would call more mathematical rather than those that might be called more poetic.

For me, this came up most obviously when he addressed ethical issues, as I disagreed with his neo-Kantian views. So while I happened to agree with many of his claims, when I had arguments it brought into relief the particularity of the view set out. For instance, one angle Webster takes up is in response to neo-pagan movements, which he calls out as false and superficial. The notion that people could claim all of nature to be sacred logically seems equivalent to none of it being sacred, by his view. A more poetic thinker might accept ‘sacred’ as describing a relationship between the person and nature, not a judgment about the quality of nature. For Webster, the issue is linked to his commitment to a deontological vision of ethics. He says “the pantheistic nature worship in much Goddess and neo-pagan thought is oddly anti-ethical” because our “true natural place is most profoundly expressed when we choose not to act like animals,” (p. 37). To a person interested in ethics outside of Kantianism or Utilitarianism, this might seem a bit flippant.

Another case that could do with expansion is the commentary on happiness. He asks “aren’t successful, arrogant, uncaring egotists often, actually, quite happy” (p. 57), and suggests that really we should work to ‘deserve happiness’ rather than have it. He notes in passing that the Greeks “wrangled” (p. 56) with this issue, but does not give extended attention to the relationship of virtue and eudaimonia in classic virtue ethics, where happiness is achieved by being the best person it’s possible to be. Again, Webster connects this to his interest in absolute ethics, believing that we should not be so focused on achieving happiness to start with. I would say the issue is deeper than that: it is a misunderstanding of what happiness actually is. Webster touches on this by blaming capitalism for the superficiality of the spiritual movement—being used to purchasing our satisfactions means we look straight at the end results we want and not at the big picture. I would follow on here and conclude that the focus on optimism and happiness as the first step is impatient. Imagining happiness as something we can activate is like a student who tries to buy a diploma. It’s not that the diploma is not important, but it is only real when it is a result of work. Otherwise, it will be a meaningless simulacrum. Happiness is an effect, not a product; it can only be achieved by aiming for “a good life”, not for happiness.

Webster ends the book by advising readers to take up a “post-spiritual” worldview and become philosophers, but since many of the problems he points out seem to plague atheists and religious people as much as the neo-pagans and eco-feminists, the story seems larger than the self-help section of the bookstore. The death of God that Nietzsche described over a century ago has hit us hard; contemporary spirituality isn’t making us unhappy, but it isn’t doing much to help.

Miranda Nell received her PhD from the New School for Social Research in 2012 and is currently teaching in Michigan. Her interests include aesthetic experience, the exploration of variety and flexibility in knowledge, and the importance of non-cognitive modes of expression. [Read more reviews by Miranda.](#)