



---

Review: [untitled]

Author(s): Robert S. Corrington

Reviewed work(s):

The Spiritual Quest: Transcendence in Myth, Religion, and Science by Robert M. Torrance

Source: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), pp. 212-215

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1465836>

Accessed: 22/02/2009 19:58

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=oup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

the story of this segment of modern religious history—one which is so central to the field of religious studies itself.

Most psychologists and psychoanalysts will say that getting to know an analysand's deeper, unconscious motives and conflicts requires a great deal of time spent with that person. When such an endeavor is done from "secondary sources" the concern is that only a partial image can be constructed, hence a significant amount of speculation is entailed to fill out that image. In the play of this speculation all manner of self-serving ideas may creep in. This is the inherent weakness of *post hoc*, biographical psychology. Nothing in Santaniello's psychological speculations dispels these concerns. They attribute far too much to certain experiences as causes of certain ideas or writings, and they are aimed at showing how Nietzsche's misogyny contributed to his thought. The latter notion has been widely dismissed as a superficial reading of Nietzsche. Santaniello's speculations do not offer any viable challenge to this consensus. As a psychologist of Nietzsche, Santaniello has nothing new to offer.

Among theologians there has developed a trend, which Santaniello follows, of describing Nietzsche as a "religious thinker" or as having "theological ideas." If one says something *about* religion, one is not therefore "religious." By itself, this would be nothing more than bad logic. However, it is closely connected to an attempt to render Nietzsche's criticisms of Christianity innocuous and even to appropriate them on behalf of that tradition. Certainly theologians are free to use whatever ideas they wish. When they begin to attribute their own ideas to their sources, however, this becomes disingenuous and bad scholarship. Santaniello is not nearly as guilty of this as are many contemporary theological appropriators of Nietzsche, but by constantly referring to his "religious" and "theological" ideas she comes dangerously close.

Fortunately Santaniello is a far better scholar than she is a psychologist. The greatest success of this work is the wealth of historical information she presents. Her connections between Nietzsche's texts and his contemporary opponents make a real contribution to the exegesis and scholarly understanding of Nietzsche in general. The book is clearly written and very thorough in its documentation. One could quibble endlessly with her specific interpretations of Nietzschean texts, but her overall strategy of reading them in relation to Nietzsche's contemporaries is quite successful. Consequently this work makes a very real and welcome contribution to both philosophy and—perhaps more importantly and far less typically in studies of Nietzsche—to the history of religious thought in the late nineteenth century.

Tim Murphy  
University of California, Santa Cruz

*The Spiritual Quest: Transcendence in Myth, Religion, and Science.* By Robert M. Torrance. University of California Press, 1994. 384 pages. \$35.00.

In a compelling and wide-ranging analysis of the multiple forms of transcendence found in human cultures Torrance makes a strong case for the ubiquity of

a kind of triadic movement beyond static and antecedent structures toward a transfiguring vision that transcends the opposites that hold the self in check. He concludes his detailed historical studies of earlier cultures by using Peirce's semiotic theory to show how meanings are generated or undergone in time and how all signs and symbols point beyond their media of expression, e.g., language or iconic images, toward an elusive object. He makes masterful criticisms of the binary system of Saussure and its perhaps bizarre reincarnation in post-structuralism and deconstruction. In a deft series of strokes he exhibits the power of Peirce's triadic semiotic of sign, object, and interpretant, and the unveiling triad of icon, index, and symbol. The latter triad is tied to Peirce's three primal categories of firstness (possibility and pure quality), secondness (brute dyadicity and binary interaction), and thirdness (intelligible mediating structures that exhibit concrete reasonableness).

For Torrance, one primary aspect of Peirce's perspective, in addition to its triadic and open-ended semiotics, is its commitment to the growth of meaning in the future, in the "would be" or infinite long run. In a clear sense Peirce is the philosopher of transcendence under the conditions of biology and evolution. Torrance rethinks the current neo-Darwinian synthesis, which stresses random variation and natural selection within a given environmental niche, to show how some form of novelty and creativity emerging at the edges of disequilibrium can also be a motor force for evolutionary growth. The organism is "an open autoregulatory system" (22) that is capable of "self-transcendence" (22). Random variation thus has some help in the intrinsic striving of the organism for a more encompassing exploration of the natural sign systems that form the immediate *umwelt*. There are strong anti-entropic energies in biological systems, although they must, of course, steal their energy and order from outside the system, making them open to an enhanced field of semiosis (a field that is now being explored under the rubric of zoösemiosis).

Torrance extrapolates from this modified neo-Darwinian model the fact that consciousness expresses forms of transcendence that are nascent or potentiated in preconscious structures. Within the human order (the domain of anthroposemiosis) language functions as the most powerful form of semiotic transcendence. In a very subtle analysis of Chomsky's transformational depth structures, Torrance affirms some, but not all, aspects of Chomsky's perspectives on creativity and the infinite possibilities that can emerge out of finite rules and their internal constraints. Yet we are urged to go beyond the implicit Cartesianism (a kind of internal essentialism) of Chomsky toward a pragmatic understanding of dialogue that opens out genuine otherness and reveals the "openness, adaptability, and freedom" (43) inherent in the use of language. On the deepest level, language goes beyond the reiteration of origins and makes something like an open future possible.

Making the bridge between this conceptual material at the beginning and end of the book and the historical analyses that form the heart of the text, we see how any human culture that can be named works out of the generic semiotic structures that appear in biology and language. When we enter more fully into human history, the issue of the unconscious comes to the fore. One of the best

descriptions in the book is Torrance's unfolding of Freud's model of the tensions between the ego and the id and how this model might be used to shed light on the more static or even regressive forms that ritual can take in the public sphere (24-31). There is a relation between the return of the repressed in the transaction between consciousness and the unconsciousness, and the need for an invariant and closed system of ritualistic behavior that ties community members to static conditions of origin.

Unfortunately Torrance fails to use the most compelling alternative model that can illuminate ritual return, as well as the vision quest that comes out of the more individualistic paradigm of the shaman. Here I am thinking of Jung's archetypal psychology (far more empirical and phenomenological than Freud's), which only gets a superficial and rather inadequate analysis in the book. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious is written off as if it posited a pseudo-reality that "is everywhere and nowhere if it exists at all" (283, n.2). The irony is that Peirce's semiotic theory works beautifully with Jung's archetypal theory, and their intertwining promises to generate one of the most powerful paradigms in the fields of cultural studies and anthroposemiosis. This is especially the case where Peirce's concept of the dynamic object correlates in certain distinctive cases with Jung's notion of developmental archetypal images. Peirce's simile of the psyche as a "bottomless lake" has strong family resemblances to Jung's concept of the collective unconscious. This new paradigm will make it much easier to understand the evolutionary progression from ritual to myth to the vision quest of the shaman.

For Torrance, ritual, especially as expressed in the more static agricultural societies, has fewer openings onto transcendence than do the various vision quests that appear in the hunter-gatherer societies that must, by definition, remain open to changing environments. While rituals can allow for conflict and change, the focus is on the eternal conditions of origin. For the more migratory hunting groups the shifting realities of weather and mobile food sources call for a mythological framework that honors the kind of mobility found in the animal kingdom. Torrance provides many vivid and even terrifying descriptions of the forms that the vision quest can take. He contrasts the more static role of the priest in an agricultural society (shades of Freud) with the role of the shaman in the hunter-gatherer society. Of course, the latter society can have priests as well, and there is often a tension, related to social class, between these two paradigms and what they each want for themselves and for their group (129). Yet there is almost something like an evolutionary progression from the ritual-bound priest to the roaming shaman who can go to the land of the dead, often with the help of an animal spirit, and return again to help the living. A linking reality is that of myth which can transcend ritual because it is open to an oral, and hence linguistic and future oriented, expansion into uncharted terrain.

What are the antecedent conditions for shamanhood? It is clear that it is not an inherited position, unlike membership in a priestly cast. There must be a unique event that singles out the potential shaman. This often takes the form of a severe illness that requires a strenuous regimen, perhaps of fasting or even self-mutilation (such as the cutting off of digits). Powerful dreams are often sought as

well (something that, of course, fascinated Jung who probed into the inner dynamism of the shamanic dream). The shaman-to-be is elected by a force that is non-human and is called upon to enter into the deepest secrets of the universe. This vision quest is not a mere initiation ritual or a rite of passage but something that takes on personal form and refuses to promise some kind of predictable outcome. By responding to the invading spirit the potential shaman is also agreeing to walk a road that no one else has ever walked before. This is not to say that there aren't striking parallels between these quests, both tribally and geographically. But it is to say that the quest, whatever its mythological clothing (series of interpretants), will involve something like a triadic structure of separation, transition, and incorporation. This triad is also found in the more open-ended rites of passage that allow for the prospect of an individual quest, even if the return of the repressed often keeps such a quest well reigned in.

The vision quest, which has its ultimate roots in our genetic coding, comes to fullest flower when it reaches into a narrative structure that participates in thirdness (again, Peirce's concept of concrete reasonableness). This link between the quest and thirdness allows for an indeterminate goal in an open future. Insofar as developmental thirds punctuate the quest for transcendence, meaning that enters into the objective orders of the world can unfold and become available to the community. In this sense, the shaman is the questor who brings the mediating power of thirdness to a community that usually longs to return to the maternal power of firstness or that remains caught in the stasis of oscillating seconds.

In the end, Torrance is to be commended for welding together an astonishing amount of cultural material. His theoretical elaborations, with the exception of his misunderstanding of the importance of Jung in this field, are wise and masterful. The pulsations of the quest, what makes us *animal querens*, are traced semiotically from their barely noticeable origins in genetic coding to the flower of narrative in modern and even postmodern culture. This is a book that is eminently worth reading and will certainly advance inquiry into the innate potencies that open out meaning in time and place.

Robert S. Corrington  
Drew University School of Theology

*Philosophic Historicism and the Betrayal of First Philosophy.* By Carl Page. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. 235 pages. \$35.00.

Page undertakes a defense of "First Philosophy" against the "betrayal" perpetuated against it by "philosophical historicism," the first being always capitalized and the second only when grammatically required. "Betrayal" is sensationalist and imprecise, but the other terms in the title are carefully exegeted in the course of the book. Although Page addresses only philosophers in this penetrating study, his concern being the subjugation of philosophy to history, his insights are also applicable to the study of religion where, *per impossible*, philosophical historicism may be as rampant as in philosophy.