

2008

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Grey Austin

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Schuman, Sam, "*Wholly Spirit: Searching for a Plausible God* by C. Grey Austin" (2008). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. 68.
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Wholly Spirit: Searching for a Plausible God by C. Grey Austin

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Long before NCHC had a paid, professional staff, Grey Austin was one of a small group of legendary executive secretary/treasurers (along with Jean Philips, John Portz, Lothar Tresp, Bill Mech, and Earl Brown, Jr.) who kept our organization functional and solvent. He served in that capacity in the 1970s and was also the president of our organization early in the following decade. Those of us in honors “of a certain age” recall Grey as a thoughtful, quiet, gentle, skilled leader and manager. Some of us, too, will never forget his characterization of honors leadership: being an honors director, he said, is like being a little boy who has wet his pants—it gives you a nice warm feeling, and you hope nobody notices! Fewer of us, perhaps, knew that Grey was a Methodist minister, who had left the ministry for academe shortly after he completed his seminary studies. Now Grey has written a book about his spiritual journey with the gently punning title *Wholly Spirit*. His book, too, gives one a nice warm feeling, and a good deal more in addition, and I hope lots of readers **do** notice.

Spiritual autobiography is an ancient genre, certainly going back as far as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, and still lively at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Austin’s meditations and ruminations remind us why. A good work in this tradition may help us to find answers, certainly, but more importantly it can illuminate questions which we wish to ask ourselves. More exactly, a book like *Wholly Spirit* can, through the honesty of its intellectual and spiritual seeking, give us permission to face our own spiritual puzzles and doubts. It can and, in this case, does empower us to raise issues and ask questions which it often turns out we wanted to ask all along but were afraid to confront directly.

As one would expect of its author, Grey Austin’s writing is not brutally but gently direct and honest. This is as much a recounting of what Grey has come *not* to believe as an iteration of his faith; it casts the clear light of logic on a spiritual landscape, and, for Grey, it turns out that many of the presumed features of that landscape were mere shadows. So, he concludes, reason has led him to abandon any belief in a God who is the creator of the universe and, hence, outside it. He cannot put credence in a Divinity who answers personal prayers or prefers one human religion to another.

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At the same time, Grey's meditations reveal an intensely spiritual person, one who seeks meaning in his life, and in life itself, and one who cannot accept an entirely mechanistic universe. A short book-note such as this cannot do justice to the complex theological and psychological convolutions of Grey Austin's search for a "plausible God." His metaphysical travels do not follow a straight and simple superhighway: there are turns and U-turns, dead-ends, surprising moments of illumination (one of which follows an injudicious indulgence in an overly rich dessert that leads to an inquiet night of thought and meditation), and much mystery. He moves towards a theology of wholeness and a sense of unity and oneness in the universe which seems to him "wholly spirit."

These are, obviously, big issues—the biggest. But Grey Austin's style is ruminatory and humane. *Wholly Spirit* certainly demonstrates that one can deal with the big issues without getting a big head. The book is leavened with touches of kindly humor. It is also impressively scholarly, with a 23-page annotated bibliography of rather astounding breadth. Grey has certainly ranged across Eastern and Western religious traditions and ventured into many of the non-theological disciplines (psychology, physics, etc.) in his searchings. The "A"s in his "Index of Names" are: Aristotle, Karen Armstrong, Louis Armstrong, Augustine of Hippo, and Augustus Caesar! In this respect, his book is an emblem of the kind of thinking that liberal learning can bring to the illumination of multifaceted investigations.

Finally, I would note that *Wholly Spirit* is not a book a young person could have written. Grey Austin's religious quest has been a long one, and he writes from the wise perspective of decades of thought. But, in the directness, wit, and clarity of that thought, Grey demonstrates that he still has a consciousness as lithe and energetic as that of a first-year honors student.

Wholly Spirit is available through amazon.com, at bookstores, and at www.greyaustin.com

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