

## REVIEW

Andrew Cohen, *Being and Becoming: Exploring the Teachings of Evolutionary Enlightenment* (Lenox, MA: EnlightenNext, 2010), ISBN 978-1-883929-52-7 (pbk), 150pp. \$19.95.

Reviewed by: Mike King. Mike King is a freelance scholar and author of *Postsecularism: The Hidden Challenge to Extremism* (2009).

Email: [mike@jnani.org](mailto:mike@jnani.org)

In this review of Andrew Cohen's *Being and Becoming* I will limit my description of the book's contents in favour of locating its significance for the study of spirituality and in placing it in its context.

In the research for my MA in Studies in Mysticism and Religious Experience at Canterbury, I devised a simple scheme for categorizing the objects of study: primary text, proximity text, secondary text and tertiary text. In this scheme a primary text is either written by the spiritual exemplar (mystic, theologian, messiah, prophet, guru, saint, etc.) or is a transcription of what they had said or done; so, for example, *The Fire of Love*, or the writings of Krishnamurti, or the *Enneads*, or the 500-volume transcriptions of Osho's lectures would qualify. A proximity text is one written by someone close to the exemplar, usually a disciple, so for example Mahendranath Gupta's *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, or Porphyry's life of Plotinus or Xenophon's life of Socrates would qualify. A secondary text is one written by a scholar in the field; while a tertiary text is a scholarly work drawing on secondary texts rather than primary or proximity texts.

From this perspective I would suggest that *Being and Becoming* and Cohen's other works should be assessed as primary texts. Cohen is not an academic but a teacher of enlightenment, basing his authority on the claim of personal experience, rather than scholarship. Having said that, he has had a long-standing and productive relationship with scholars of enlightenment and the spiritual–religious scene in general. This has manifested itself both in his dialogues with scholars such as Ken Wilber, Georg Feuerstein, Stephen Batchelor and Gary Lachman, to name just a few, and in his editorship of the highly regarded journal *What is Enlightenment?*, later renamed as *EnlightenNext Journal*.

Cohen's *Being and Becoming* is divided into two major parts, reflecting the division in the title. The 'being' part is, as he says, a relatively traditional presentation of classical enlightenment teaching, while the 'becoming' part is what he offers as radically new: nothing less than a new enlightenment, far beyond what was taught, for example, by the Buddha. It is a short book, and a useful introduction to Cohen's thought. As far as I understand, it is made up mostly of excerpts from talks, which often give passages a living dynamic quality, and the feeling that Cohen draws afresh to convey his insights rather than relying on a static form of words. Also included is the core of his enlightenment teachings which he has formulated a long time ago as the Five Tenets of Enlightenment, though recast for this volume.

Cohen readily acknowledges his location in the Indian tradition of Advaita Vedanta; his master Poonjaji having been in turn a disciple of the master Ramana Maharshi. Hence it is no surprise to find the 'being' part of the book has a strong resonance with that tradition, though considerably refracted through Cohen's own personal experience. There is not space here to explain why, but his exposition has always passed my own tests for authenticity.

I believe that religious studies gained a foothold in the academy – as it emerged from its academically scorned parent, theology – on the basis that it was a phenomenological discipline with no remit to adjudicate between rival truth claims. In other words it has no business trying to decide whether a teacher like Cohen is enlightened or not. I think, however, that the study of spirituality should move out from its parent – religious studies – by re-examining that assumption. Again, there is not space here to suggest the *how*, but only the *why*. Put simply: the primary text, or the primary phenomenon represented by a teacher like Cohen, will always be with us, always new, and always a challenge. We need to develop a critical approach to this material that does more than just record its existence.

The 'being' part of Cohen's book represents a fairly traditional challenge to our scholarship, suggesting we assess it within a serious study of the phenomenon of spiritual enlightenment. To pick a couple of statements at random, Cohen says of enlightenment: 'the cognitive faculties of the human mind cannot grasp its infinite nature'. On the same page he states: 'the observer and the observed are one and the same'. A thorough cross-referencing of such statements with those of teachers in various enlightenment traditions would, I think, quickly show that Cohen is extremely sure-footed on this ground.

The 'becoming' part of this book is a more serious challenge to scholarship in the field, and also brings with it a fiercely contemporary set of issues. In his introduction to the book Cohen says: 'to put it simply, enlightenment

is evolving. It is no longer found only in the bliss of timeless *Being*; it is also found in the ecstatic urgency of evolutionary *Becoming*.<sup>7</sup> It is in the unfolding of this simple statement that we find the challenge on which Cohen elaborates over a larger set of engagements with his public. He claims to have discovered a new form of enlightenment, which builds on the old, but involves a full participation in the world of form, action and evolution. I have watched this idea grow as Cohen moved from a teacher of enlightenment, to a teacher of impersonal enlightenment to a teacher of evolutionary enlightenment. The 'becoming' part does not *feel* quite as sure-footed as the 'being' part of his teachings, but that is to be expected for so radical an innovation as 'evolutionary' enlightenment.

The shift in Cohen's teachings has always reminded me of similar shifts in other religious contexts, most notably the development of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition out of the Theravada tradition, while in the Christian world the objections of the Catholic Church to the Quietists of the seventeenth century also seemed to have a similar motivation. The eighteenth-century Zen Master Hakuin was told that he would be better off reborn in the suppurating body of a mangy fox, than in the body of an *arahat*. In the earlier tradition *arahat* meant 'enlightened one' or 'buddha', and was the peak of spiritual achievement, while the Buddha often used the term 'bodhisattva' to describe a mere aspirant on the path. For Hakuin's interlocutor however, the bodhisattva had become a higher ideal than the *arahat* (*much* higher, as his image of the fox suggests). How did this reversal arise? I would suggest it is because the enlightened ones are suspected of *doing* nothing, just keeping all that enlightenment to themselves. Is this what is going on in the development of Cohen's teachings?

Possibly, but there is another key issue at work here: the discoveries of modern science, in particular that of evolution, which neither the Buddha nor the sages of the Mahayana tradition knew about. Cohen's argument is that spirituality for the twenty-first century has to take such insights of science into account. Here is where a very Western tradition is at work, one which includes the thought of luminaries like Hegel, Richard Maurice Bucke, Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin. These are spiritual thinkers for whom it is a given that the world is evolving *spiritually*, not just physically. But why *should* this be a given at this point in time, when the idea would have been ridiculed in the West up to the time of Kant, and never occurred to any sage of the East? (Aurobindo's source was Hegel, so I count him as a Westerner in this respect.) Was it really the impact of Darwin's work? Perhaps, but a more important cultural shift had taken place earlier with the Enlightenment, when two interrelated ideas emerged: that of *progress* (hitherto a derided or empty concept) and that of *history*. More specifically,

history as the carrier of progress now had *meaning*, and this became a central tenet not just for the spiritual followers of Hegel, but also for the political followers of Marx. The last crucial element in this emerging cultural brew was the revival since the Reformation of a very old idea: Hebraic teleology (i.e. the idea of the end-time, of the Messiah, of Judgement Day). Hegel was born out of this brew, and the conditions were also laid for the populist counterpart of his thought, the New Age.

This makes clear for me the challenge laid down by Cohen: to accept his thesis one has to buy into this rather recent and localized cultural heritage. The very reason I study things like Buddhism, Neoplatonism, Shinto and shamanism is to give me critical distance from this heritage. Also, as a trained scientist, I am not at all sure that spirituality *can* be informed by the advances of science. So I would have to buy into that too. And yet ... perhaps this is my failing, not Cohen's. There is not space here to go further into this debate, but I have the feeling that it is perhaps the most crucial one of our age, and nowhere today do I find the evolutionary case put in more challenging and persuasive terms than Cohen's. *Has* enlightenment evolved? This book demands a response.