

The Spiritual Self¹

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It's January 2008. I'm walking out of a large Liverpool supermarket and pass the magazine and tobacco concession. Something catches my eye: amongst the arrangement of daily newspapers, magazines and periodicals there is a large, brightly coloured display stand promoting a new magazine. I am drawn to the neon orange signage, stylish font, and the promise of free gifts. My heart quickens as I pick up the shrink-wrapped glossy and survey the contents. Breathless, I read on: I will be taught how to summon angels (using the free angel power cards), balance my chakras (with the aid of the crystal chakra bracelet), decipher my dreams (using, one supposes, a combination of the enclosed dream catcher and dream dictionary), and find guidance with the (also enclosed) I-Ching coins. I will be able to learn how to meditate, 'start afresh for the new year', discover my life number and explore my psychic powers. And all of this in the first issue...

A confession: I bought the magazine. It's sitting next to me as a type this. I bought it not because I am a sucker for free gifts (although I am), or have a particular desire to discover my life number or be guided by angels, but because I believe this an exquisite and compelling example of one of the most significant phenomenon of our time – the explosive growth of spirituality in 21st century culture.

The new spiritual landscape is not monolithic; it is a colourful and heterogeneous environment characterised by themes of inwardness, pluralism, subjectivity, personal

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experience and creative expression.² Contemporary spirituality is often framed in opposition to organised, or institutional religion. As Sandra Schneiders observes this contradistinction is ‘often expressed in statements such as “I am a spiritual person (or on a spiritual journey), but I am not religious (or interested in religion).”’³ Spirituality is ‘celebrated by those who are disillusioned by traditional institutional religions and seen as a force for wholeness, healing, and inner transformation... [it] provides a liberation and solace in an otherwise meaningless world’.⁴ Life in a globalised era is fragmented, lacks depth, and is dominated by the constant demand to be economically efficient and ever more productive. Spirituality is seen as counterpoise to that nihilistic, reductive trend - the universe is regarded not as a ‘dead mechanism, but a living organism permeated by a spiritual force’.⁵ The spiritual self exists in a holistic relationship with other selves and the universe as a whole – a vast, organic nexus of interconnectivity. Spirituality sings a hymn of praise to the self: no longer need the quest for meaning be mediated by the ‘dead hand of the church’.⁶ We, and we alone, take on this responsibility. Where traditional religion involves subjecting ourselves to a higher, transcendent authority, the new spirituality ‘invokes the sacred in the cultivation of a unique subjective-life’.⁷ The transcendent authority we defer to – our higher power – is now intensely personal. The ‘God of our own understanding’ is precisely that – whatsoever we choose to make divine.

This may sound like a healthy state of affairs – spirituality as a form of creative resistance to the oppressive forces of organised religion and a recuperative tonic for life in a meaningless world. However, if we scratch the surface of the contemporary

² See Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Babyboomers and the Making of American Religion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1999, esp. pp. 3-45.

³ Sandra Schneiders, "Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum", *Spiritus*, 2003, pp. 163-64.

⁴ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, 2005, p. 1.

⁵ Wouter J. Hanegaaff, "New Age Religion and Secularization", *Numen*, 47:3, 2000, p. 291.

⁶ Carrette and King, 2005, p. 1.

⁷ Paul Heelas *et al.*, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality*, Blackwell, London, 2005, p. 5.

spiritual self – if we go beyond the rhetoric of individualism and positivity we find the situation is a little more complex.

First, the very concept of ‘spirituality’ is problematic - it is a term that is surrounded by ambiguity and confusion. Scholars have claimed it is a “fuzzy” concept that embraces obscurity with passion’,⁸ and that it is simply a ‘necessary pseudoconcept we don’t know how to replace’.⁹ Even within the disciplines of religious studies, conceptions of spirituality are nothing if not diverse.¹⁰ As Burton-Christie points out, ‘questions concerning the very meaning of the term spirituality, as well as what constitutes the primary subject matter of the field and the most useful methodological approaches for interpreting spiritual experience remain highly contested’.¹¹ To talk of spirituality as if it were a specific category with clearly defined boundaries is disingenuous; it is a term that encompasses such a diverse collection of ideas, beliefs, and behaviours that it is arguably meaningless.

Second, whilst contemporary spirituality has surface associations with the sacred and the divine, this glorification of the spiritual is intensely materialised. The eruption of new religious movements and spiritualities has been catalysed via the market colonisation of the religious sphere by the aggressive, unrestrained forces of free-market capitalism. Cultural elements from non-Western, non-Christian cultures and faith traditions are appropriated and transformed into consumable products and services for the lifestyle sector of the Western economy. In the early 21st century the principal pathway to pursue ‘spiritual meaning and cultural identification [is] through acts of purchase’.¹² The world has become a cultural supermarket and Western consumers can buy their way to spiritual enlightenment. The close relationship

⁸ B. Spilka, "Spirituality: Problems and directions in operationalizing a fuzzy concept", *American Psychological Association annual conference*, 1993, p.1.

⁹ Gustavo Vinay, "'Spiritualita': Invito a una discussione", *Studi Medievali*, 2, 1961, p. 706.

¹⁰ Brian J Zinnbauer *et al.*, "Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36:4, 1997, p. 549.

¹¹ Douglas Burton-Christie, "Spirituality: Its Uses and Misuses", *Spiritus*, 7, 2007, p. 74.

¹² Lisa Aldred, "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality", *American Indian Quarterly*, 24:3, 2000, p. 329.

between spirituality and consumerism calls into question some of spirituality's ideological claims.

Third, whilst life-long spiritual practices of traditional religion are orientated towards some transcendent object and dissolution of the boundaries of the self, many forms of contemporary spirituality appear simply to develop a more *effective*, a more defined self. It appears that the *telos* – or goal - of modern spiritual life is simply to become a better producer, better consumer, or better citizen. The machinery of government has subsumed spirituality, aided by humanistic psychology's regimes of empowerment, self-actualisation, and human potential. As Carrette and King suggest, Maslow's famous 'hierarchy of needs' can be read as a 'hierarchy of capitalist wants' for the privileged Western elite. This subsumption explicitly separates spirituality from its roots in faith and tradition and recasts it as a function of the psychological self. 'After Maslow, spirituality became the new addiction for the educated, white middle classes ... this was a spiritual message for a culture of excess and one that rejected the shared expression of communal religious faith'.¹³ Spirituality is put into service of the very forces it is commonly assumed to oppose. Disguised by a seemingly innocuous language of emotional health, self-efficacy, and wellbeing, spirituality becomes a means to discipline and normalise the modern workforce and yield increasingly optimal modes of efficiency and productivity.

This brief critical look at the modern spiritual self should elicit some healthy scepticism and cause us to question some of the assumptions that surround spirituality contemporarily. In fact, a reflective, critical approach to the spiritual journey is a common characteristic of traditional religious life. On one hand, spirituality appears to 'be an escape route from the demands of committed faith, a throwback to self-indulgent pietism, and religious experience tailored to the consumer. It turns the life of faith into a shopping excursion in the Great Mall of the Spirit, where everyone gets to pick up whatever gives them some religious feeling and the assurance they are "spiritual"'.¹⁴ On the other hand, rejecting the formality and dogma of traditional

¹³ Carrette and King, 2005, pp. 77, 76.

¹⁴ William C. Spohn, "Spiritual Practices: The True Test of Spirituality", *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 40:1, 2001, pp. 277.

religion, spirituality helps engender a sense of divinity and wholeness in a globalised world stripped of all meaning bar neoliberal ordinations of free enterprise. The problem here, as I hoped have illustrated, is that spirituality has become locked in a symbiotic relationship with apparatuses of production and consumption that religious life has traditionally (though not always) tended to subvert.¹⁵ In this dynamic cultural and economic *milieu* it is difficult to distinguish between authentic expressions of spiritual practice and empty, eviscerated religious products of the spiritual marketplace. We should exercise our right to purchase with care.

¹⁵ The relationship between religion and capitalism is not newly observed. See, for example, Max Weber's classic *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Charles Scribner & Sons, New York, 1958.

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