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THE FUTURE OF THE RELIGIOUS PAST

Hent de Vries, General Editor

In what sense are the legacies of religion—its powers, words, things, and gestures—disarticulating and reconstellating themselves as the elementary forms of life in the twenty-first century? This sequence of five volumes publishes work drawn from an international research project that seeks to answer this question.

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The Sacralization of the Self

Relocating the Sacred on the Ruins of Tradition

Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman

There is no doubt that the new buzzword in the contemporary religious landscape is “spirituality.” Indeed, entering “spiritual OR spirituality” in the Internet search engine Google produces no fewer than 84 million hits—more than “catholic OR catholicism” (73 million), much more than “protestant OR protestantism” (16 million), and not many fewer than “islam OR islamic OR muslim” (121 million). Those 84 million hits even exceed the numbers found for “porno OR porn” (31 million) and do not fall far short of those for popular search terms such as “soccer” (109 million), “sex” (189 million), and “football” (221 million).

What is spirituality? Traditionally, the concept is used to refer to the experiential dimension of religion. This spiritual dimension is—and always has been—present in all of the world religions and even defines well-discernable subtraditions within each, ones that emphasize religious experience rather than doctrine (e.g., Sufism in Islam, Tantra in Hinduism, Kabbalah and Hassidism in Judaism, and Gnosticism in Christianity). Whereas in this traditional understanding of spirituality religious experience remains tied to “external” and “transcendent” conceptions of the sacred,¹ contemporary spirituality is characterized by a release from those ties. Commonly regarded as the outgrowth of what emerged as the New Age movement in the 1960s counterculture, contemporary spirituality is self-referential—it is a spirituality standing on its own two feet, broken from the moorings of particular religious traditions.² In short, contemporary spirituality refers less to a dimension than to a particular type of religion.

Sociologists of religion tend to associate contemporary spirituality loosely with “privatized religion,”³ “new religious movements,”⁴ “client and audience cults,”⁵ “unchurched religion,”⁶ and so on. Those concepts may, however, refer to anything vaguely religious, so long as it

can be set apart from traditional Christian doctrines and so long as a churchlike organization is absent. To put it bluntly: those concepts are clearer about what they do not refer to—that is, church-based traditional religion—than about what they do refer to. And although sociologists of religion often use the concept of spirituality equally carelessly and intuitively, Paul Heelas and others have demonstrated convincingly that it can be given a much more precise meaning—defining it positively by what it is, rather than negatively by what it is not, so to speak.⁷

Therefore, before we move to two theoretically vital empirical issues, we want to address the conceptualization of contemporary spirituality as a type rather than a dimension of religion. We develop this conceptualization by means of an empirically informed critique of widespread but misguided ideas about contemporary spirituality. After this conceptual clarification, we address a first empirical issue that is vital for theoretical debates about secularization, namely, whether the decline of the Christian churches in most Western countries during the last few decades has been accompanied by a spread of this type of spirituality. We demonstrate that this is, indeed, the case: what we are witnessing today is a theoretically challenging process of religious change rather than a decline of religion *tout court*. We then move on to our second empirical question, whether spirituality is as socially and publicly insignificant as sociologists of religion typically hold it to be. We offer an empirically informed critique of this virtually unchallenged theoretical dogma. By way of conclusion, we not only briefly summarize our arguments but also point out key issues for future sociological research into spirituality, as we see them.

The Sacralization of the Self

In most of the sociological literature, spirituality—or New Age, to the extent this label is still applied today—is used to refer to an apparently incoherent collection of ideas and practices. Most participants in the spiritual milieu, it is generally argued, draw upon multiple traditions, styles, and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages. Spirituality is thus referred to as “do-it-yourself-religion,”⁸ “pick-and-mix religion,”⁹ a “spiritual supermarket,”¹⁰ or “religious consumption à la carte.”¹¹ Adam Possamai even states that we are dealing with an “eclectic—if not kleptomaniac—process . . . with no clear reference to an external or ‘deeper’ reality.”¹²

Accounts such as these are found over and over again in the social-scientific literature and have attained the status of sociological truisms. They basically reiterate Thomas Luckmann’s influential analysis, published about forty years ago in *The Invisible Religion*, according to which structural differentiation in modern society results in erosion of the Christian monopoly and the concomitant emergence of a “market of ultimate significance.” In such a market, Luckmann argues, religious consumers construct strictly personal packages of meaning, based on individual tastes and preferences (“bricolage,”

“eclecticism”). Kelly Besecke rightly observes that “Luckmann’s characterization of contemporary religion . . . is pivotal in the sociology of religion; it has been picked up by just about everyone and challenged by almost no one.”¹³ Nevertheless, although Luckmann’s characterization is not completely wrong, it is definitely superficial in that it overlooks the remarkable ideological unity and coherence of today’s spiritual milieu.

Research carried out by Stef Aupers confirms the contemporary theoretical consensus, in that spiritual practitioners combine various traditions in their courses.¹⁴ One may use tarot cards in combination with crystal healing and Hindu ideas about chakras; another may combine traditional Chinese medicine, Western psychotherapy, and Daoism into another idiosyncratic concoction. There is no reason to deny the prominence of bricolage and eclecticism in the spiritual milieu. Yet the received idea that these are the principal characteristics of contemporary spirituality is quite problematic. Indeed, *all* spiritual practitioners interviewed by Aupers deny that the particular traditions on which they base their courses are at the heart of their worldview. They argue, as the Dutch spiritual center Centrum voor Spirituele Wegen puts it, “There are many paths, but just one truth.” According to this *philosophia perennis* or “perennial philosophy,” derived from esotericism and especially from Blavatsky’s New Theosophy,¹⁵ all religious traditions are equally valid, because they all essentially worship the same divine source. The following quotes from spiritual practitioners can serve as an illustration:

I feel connected with the person of Jesus Christ, not with Catholicism. But I also feel touched by the person of Buddha. I am also very much interested in shamanism. So my belief has nothing to do with a particular religious tradition. For me, all religions are manifestations of god, of the divine. If you look beyond the surface, then all religions tell the same story.

For me it is easy to step into any tradition. I can do it with Buddhism from Tibet, with Hinduism, and I can point out what is the essence of every religion. . . . I am dealing with almost every world religion. . . . There is not one truth. Of course there is one truth, but there are various ways of finding it.

More fundamental than bricolage, in short, is perennialism: the belief that diverse religious traditions essentially refer to the same underlying spiritual truth. Accepting this doctrine, people experiment freely with various historical traditions to explore “what works for them personally.” But what is the nature of this single underlying spiritual truth? Paul Heelas’s answer is the following:

Beneath much of the heterogeneity, there is remarkable constancy. Again and again, turning from practice to practice, from publication to publication, indeed from country to country, one encounters the same (or very similar) *lingua franca*. . . . This is

the language of what shall henceforth be called “Self-spirituality.” . . . And these assumptions of Self-spirituality ensure that the New Age Movement is far from being a mish-mash, significantly eclectic, or fundamentally incoherent.¹⁶

In the spiritual milieu, Heelas argues, modern people are essentially seen as “gods and goddesses in exile”:¹⁷ “The great refrain, running throughout the New Age, is that we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated . . . by mainstream society and culture.”¹⁸ The latter are thus conceived of as basically alienating forces, held to estrange one from one’s “authentic,” “natural,” or “real” self—from who one “really” or “at deepest” is: “the most pervasive and significant aspect of the *lingua franca* of the New Age is that the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the ‘Self’ itself is to experience ‘God,’ ‘the Goddess,’ the ‘Source,’ ‘Christ Consciousness,’ the ‘inner child,’ the ‘way of the heart,’ or, most simply and . . . most frequently, ‘inner spirituality.’”¹⁹

A mundane, conventional, or socialized self—often referred to as the ego and demonized as the false or unreal product of society and its institutions, is contrasted with a higher, deeper, true, or authentic self that is sacralized and can be found in the self’s deeper layers. In the words of some of the spiritual practitioners interviewed by Aupers:

I experience god, the divine, as something within me. I feel it as being present in myself. I connect with it as I focus my attention on my inner self, when I meditate. . . . It’s all about self-knowledge, being conscious about yourself. . . . It has nothing to do with something that’s outside of you that solves things for you.

I think spirituality is something that lives inside of you. It has a lot to do with becoming the essence of who you are and being as natural as possible.

I am god. I don’t want to insult the Christian church or anything, but I decide what I’m doing with my life. . . . There is no “super-dad” in heaven that can tell me “You have to do this and that, or else . . .” I am going to feel!

This, then, is the binding doctrine in the spiritual milieu: the belief that in the deeper layers of the self one finds a true, authentic, and sacred kernel, basically unpolluted by culture, history, and society, which informs evaluations of what is good, true, and meaningful. For evaluations such as those, it is held, one cannot rely on external sources, authorities, or experts, but only on one’s inner voice: “What lies within—experienced by way of ‘intuition,’ ‘alignment,’ or an ‘inner voice’—serves to inform the judgements, decisions, and choices required for everyday life.”²⁰ As such, spirituality entails an epistemological third way of “gnosis,” rejecting religious faith as well as scientific reason as vehicles of truth. Rather, it is held that one should be faithful to one’s inner voice and trust one’s intuition:

According to [gnosis] truth can only be found by personal, inner revelation, insight, or "enlightenment." Truth can only be personally experienced: in contrast with the knowledge of *reason* or *faith*, it is in principle not generally accessible. This "inner knowing" cannot be transmitted by discursive language (this would reduce it to rational knowledge). Nor can it be the subject of *faith* . . . because there is in the last resort no other authority than personal, inner experience.²¹

This reliance on an inner source boils down to the idea that a sacred and authentic self lies hidden in the self's deeper layers, in short. Like traditional forms of religion, such a sacralization of the self underlies a well-defined "doctrine of being and well-being,"²² or a "theodicy of good and evil."²³ It is logically tied to an understanding of social institutions as evil. Modern bureaucracies, for instance, are generally regarded as alienating, nonsensical, inhumane, and without soul, while excessive identification with career, status, and prestructured work roles is regarded as a major source of personal problems. More generally, *anything* artificially and externally imposed is understood to be a cause of alienation from one's "real self." The subordination of the self to pre-given life orders is held to result inescapably in frustration, bitterness, unhappiness, mental disorder, depression, disease, violence, sick forms of sexuality, and so on. The sacralization of the self that characterizes contemporary spirituality, in short, goes hand in hand with a demonization of social institutions to produce a clear-cut dualistic worldview.²⁴

The emergence of a pluralistic "spiritual supermarket" has blinded many sociological observers to the commonly held dogma of self-spirituality—the belief that the self itself is sacred. It is this doctrine that accounts, paradoxically, for the staggering diversity at the surface of the spiritual milieu and simultaneously provides it with ideological unity and coherence at a deeper level. If it is believed that the sacred resides in the deeper layers of the self, after all, what else should we expect than that people will follow their personal paths, experimenting freely with a range of traditions in a highly heterogeneous spiritual milieu? The diversity of the spiritual milieu *results from* rather than *contradicts* the existence of a coherent doctrine of being and well-being, in short.

The Spiritual Turn in Late Modernity

Conventional theories of secularization assume that the decline of the Christian churches is accompanied by a widespread turn to a secularist worldview, in which a calculative and rationalist outlook replaces belief in a transcendent God. The late Bryan Wilson, for instance, writes that "In contemporary society, the young come to regard morality—any system of ethical norms—as somewhat old-fashioned. For many young people, problems of any kind have technical and rational solutions."²⁵ Karel Dobbelaere, to give another example, claims that "People increasingly think that they can control and manipulate

'their' world. They act more in terms of insight, knowledge, controllability, planning, and technique and less in terms of faith."²⁶

Such a shift toward a calculative-rationalist worldview is more typically assumed than convincingly demonstrated, however. Indeed, given secularization theory's prominence in the recent past, there are embarrassingly few studies that systematically map the actual worldviews of the unchurched. More than that, research into cultural change in late modernity points out quite convincingly that "A diminishing faith in rationality and a diminishing confidence that science and technology will help solve humanity's problems . . . advanced farthest in the economically and technologically most advanced societies."²⁷ The idea that the decline of the Christian churches in most Western countries goes along with a shift toward a calculative-rationalist outlook may be no more than a myth, then—a myth that is sustained by the one-sided research attention to the decline of the Christian churches, seriously neglecting the systematic study of the worldviews of the unchurched. "Few attempts have been made to look at the other side of the equation, at what has been called the 'left-over,' if one may say so," as Hubert Knoblauch rightly notes.²⁸

There is no doubt that self-spirituality features prominently among the range of worldviews that the unchurched may embrace. An analysis of survey data collected among a representative sample of the Dutch population points out that the binary distinction of Christians versus nonreligious does not hold. Instead, three religious types can be distinguished: Christians, nonreligious, and New Agers, that is, those who endorse the idea of self-spirituality.²⁹ Although, contrary to what is often believed, survey research of this type cannot give an estimation of the percentage of a population that identifies with self-spirituality, it can definitely help to answer more important questions.³⁰ What it does permit, after all, is systematically comparing: (1) those with a high level of affinity with spirituality, but not with Christianity; (2) those with a high level of affinity with Christianity, but not with spirituality; and (3) those with low levels of affinity with either. This produces something that is, from a theoretical point of view, more important than *absolute* counts of those categories' presence in the general population, namely, evidence about their *relative* presence in particular demographically or ideologically defined categories.

When one makes this type of comparison, one finds that those with Christian affinities accept authority and traditional moral values more strongly than either the nonreligious or the New Agers. Apart from the fact that women are overrepresented among the New Agers, the profiles of the latter two categories are quite similar. The nonreligious and the New Agers are both characterized by a rejection of external authority and traditional moral values, stemming from their relative youth and their high levels of education.³¹ These findings are confirmed in a more recent paper that reports an analysis of data from the *World Values Survey* (1981, 1990, and 2000) for fourteen Western countries: their low level of acceptance of traditional moral values is responsible for the spiritual affinities of the younger birth cohorts and the well educated.³² Summing up these findings,

we may speculate that a spiritual turn to the deeper layers of the self has been stimulated by a process of detraditionalization that has accompanied the decline of the Christian churches and doctrines.³³

It is, of course, not very difficult to understand why detraditionalization stimulates a spiritual turn. The decline of tradition is no unambiguous blessing, after all. Robbed of the protective cloak of pre-given and self-evident answers to questions of meaning and identity, late-modern selves are thrown back upon themselves in dealing with these questions. This constitutes an especially serious problem for those who feel (for whatever reason) that they need solidly founded answers. This prevents them from adopting a postmodern sense of irony, contingency, and playfulness, accepting the relativity and perhaps even arbitrariness of all constructions of meaning and identity. Being unwilling or unable to embrace such a position, and no longer accepting the traditional pre-given solutions, either, late-modern selves are haunted by nagging questions: What is it that I really want? Is this really the sort of life I want to live? What sort of person am I, really? Confronted with questions such as these, only personal feelings and intuitions remain as touchstones for true meaning and real identity. As we have seen, this is precisely the key tenet of self-spirituality: the conviction that true meaning and real identity, those holiest of grails, can only be derived from an internal source, located in the deeper layers of the self.

The Social Construction of Self-Spirituality

Received sociological wisdom suggests that this process of searching the depths of one's soul remains a strictly private affair without any wider social significance. Steve Bruce, for instance, argues that the idea of socialization into spirituality makes no sense, because "the transmission of diffuse beliefs is unnecessary and it is impossible."³⁴ As we have seen, however, the spiritual milieu is remarkably more doctrinally coherent—and hence less diffuse—than Bruce and others assume. It is important, therefore, to study the roles played by socialization and problems of meaning and identity in the process of becoming involved in the spiritual milieu. To do so we have analyzed the biographies of a small sample of spiritual practitioners, strategically selected for their origins in business life. How and why did they make the remarkable shift from "normal" jobs, such as clerk, president-director, or manager to the spiritual world of shamanism, aura reading, tantra, and channeling? More specifically, what roles do socialization and problems of meaning and identity play?

In obvious contrast to the way Christian identities are typically adopted, only one of those respondents developed an affinity with spirituality due to parental socialization during his formative period. Contrary to Bruce's suggestion, however, this does not mean that socialization plays no role at all, although this process only started after practitioners

experienced identity problems. Excessively identified with the goals set by the companies they worked for, with their prestructured work roles and well-defined task descriptions, they increasingly felt alienated. This raised questions of meaning and identity: What is it that I really want? Is this really the sort of life I want to live? What sort of person am I, really?

The case of Chantal, who now works in the spiritual center Soulstation, is exemplary. She studied economics, rapidly made a career in the business world, and, she explains, completely identified with her work. Looking back, she states that she was "marched along the paths set out by society" and adds, "I studied marketing and sales, but had never learned to look in the mirror." Like most others, she points out that her identity crisis began after an "intruding conversation" with a consultant:

I was working at MCR, a computer company, and I was the commercial director. A big team, a big market, and a big responsibility for the profits. Much too young for what I did. But that was my situation: You did what you had to do. Then I was invited by a business partner to visit a consultant. I sat there talking for two hours with that man. It was an inspiring visit and suddenly he looked at me intrudingly and said: "I hear your story. It sounds perfect, looking at it from the outside, but where are you?" In other words: "The story is not yours. It is the standard 'format' of the company you are presenting. But where is your passion? What makes you Chantal instead of Miss MCR?"

The latter question marked the beginning of an identity crisis:

I thought: "Shit, I have no answer to this question, and I have to do something with that." The result of this conversation was a burnout that lasted almost a year. That's a crisis, you know! In the evening hours I started to do coaching sessions, I started thinking about the question Who am I, really? You start to look in the mirror. And then, at a certain moment, you can no longer unite your private life with your position at work. It's like your skis are suddenly moving in opposite directions. And that's definitely not a comfortable position: before you realize, you're standing in a split.

The suggestive metaphor of "standing in a split" between the demands of business life and private life applies to most of the respondents. The process of soul searching that follows should not be misconstrued as a strictly personal quest for meaning. Although a latent sense of unease or discomfort may well have been present beforehand, it typically became manifest only after a conversation with a consultant or coach. Remarks such as "He touched something within me," "Something opened up," or "The light went on" indicate that due to this contact latent discomfort becomes manifest and triggers a process of searching the depths of one's soul. What follows is a process of socialization, in which

three mechanisms validate and reinforce one another: (1) acquiring a new cognitive frame of interpretation, (2) having new experiences, and (3) legitimating one's newly acquired worldview. These mechanisms, Tanya Luhrmann demonstrates in her study on neopaganism, are the driving force behind an "interpretive drift": "the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone's manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity."³⁵

Initially, the process of soul searching has a secular character. Motivated by their identity crises, respondents start describing their selves in vocabularies derived from humanistic psychology. Emotions are valued positively, but are not yet defined as higher, spiritual, or sacred. Although they generally start out with humanistic psychological self-help books and courses, they eventually end up doing more esoteric types of training, such as shamanism, aura reading, and the like. Daan comments on his relentless participation in various courses as "a sort of hunger that emerges in yourself. You start to nourish and feed it. And so you hop from course to course." By satisfying their hunger in the spiritual supermarket, the respondents acquire alternative frames of interpretation, new vocabularies and symbols to interpret and label their experiences. They learn to label weird, out-of-the-ordinary experiences as spiritual and, in turn, these experiences validate the acquired frame of interpretation. In the words of Luhrmann: "Intellectual and experiential changes shift in tandem, a ragged co-evolution of intellectual habits and phenomenological involvement."³⁶ The story of Marie-José provides a good illustration:

We were walking on a mountain. . . . And I was just observing, thinking what a beautiful mountain this is and suddenly everything started to flow within me. This was my first spiritual experience. . . . I felt like: "Now I understand what they mean when they say that the earth is alive." I began to make contact and understood that I am like the earth, a part of nature, and that my body is alive.

The formulation "Now I understand what they mean when they say" illustrates that knowledge precedes experience and, perhaps, shapes the specific content of the experience. A similar story is told by Chantal. During her stay at Findhorn, she learned about the existence of auras, chakras, and streams of energy inside and just outside the body. This resulted, she explains, in "spiritual experiences":

When I was there, someone said: "You have a healing energy around you and you should do something with that." Well, I had never heard of these two words, "healing" and "energy." So I was like: "What do you mean?" She said: "I'll give you an instruction." After that, I started practicing with a friend of mine. I moved my hand over her body, and I indeed felt warm and cold places. And I felt sensations, stimulation. Then I became curious.

Chantal began to delve deeper into the matter of healing and increasingly felt streams of energy around people. After a while, she started actually to see these fields of energy:

After this I began to see auras, colors around people. At that time I still worked at this computer company and—after three months [at Findhorn]—I returned to the office. During meetings I was really staring at people, like, "I have to look at you, because you have all these colors around you." I was still confused. And this brought me to the books of Barbara Brennan. . . . When I read these books, I thought "I have to go there." And so I did.

In the process, respondents freely internalize a spiritual conception of the self and radically reinterpret their personal identities in conformity with it. On the one hand, a new image of the self in the present emerges: undefined emotions and experiences are now understood in spiritual terms, and the new identity is understood as profoundly spiritual. On the other hand, they start to rewrite their biographies: they break with their past identities, now understood as one-dimensional, alienated, or unhappy. As one respondent says: "I now know that I was structurally depressed without being aware of it." Statements such as these exemplify the cultural logic of conversion: they have "seen the light" and now reinterpret their past lives as "living in sin." Like classical conversions, they follow the logic of "Then I thought . . . , but now I know." The more our respondents become immersed in the spiritual milieu, the more these considerations are reinforced, eventually to reach the point of successful socialization, "the establishment of a high degree of symmetry between objective and subjective reality."³⁷

Having left their regular jobs and started new careers as trainers and teachers in the spiritual milieu, our respondents, unsurprisingly, regularly encounter resistance and critique. They are well aware that they are seen by many as "irrational," "softies," or "dreamers," and that their way of life is perceived by many as "something for people with problems." How do they deal with these and other forms of resistance? A core element in their legitimation strategy is a radical reversal of moral positions: they argue that it is not themselves but the critical outsider who has a problem, although he or she may not be aware of this. Following the doctrine of self-spirituality, resistance, critique, and moral opposition are taken as symptoms of a deeply felt anxiety that cannot (yet) be directly experienced. Critics, our respondents argue, project an unresolved inner problem on the outside world. In the words of Marie-José: "People who have such strong resistance secretly have a strong affinity with spirituality. Otherwise they wouldn't be so angry. They just can't break through their resistance. Obviously they have a problem. Why else would you make such a fuss about something that doesn't concern you?"

Marco, who, among other things, works with the Enneagram (a psycho-spiritual model to increase self-knowledge), explains his strategy in dealing with resistance and critique during his courses as follows:

Of course, in my trainings, I regularly meet people who show resistance, but I can easily trace that back to their personality. Then I say: "You see, this is your mechanism of resistance that is now emerging." . . . Then I say: "I can fully understand you, I know the reasons why you are saying this." Then they say: "It is useless debating with you!" I say: "But what can I do about it? . . . It is part of the type of person you are, as explained by the Enneagram."

Our interviewees normalize their positions and pathologize criticism by outsiders by reading it as a symptom of psychological fear, anxiety, or insecurity, in short. As a consequence, the "inside" group is portrayed as courageous and free (because they choose to face their "demons"), while the "outsiders" are labeled as alienated because they are disconnected from their deeper selves.

The process of socialization unfolds as follows. First, latent feelings of alienation become manifest after a conversation with a consultant, raising problems of meaning and identity: What is it that I really want? Is this really the sort of life I want to live? What sort of person am I, really? Second, during the process of soul searching that follows, one is socialized into the ethic of self-spirituality, with knowledge and experience shifting in tandem. And third, after successful socialization, standardized legitimations are deployed, further reinforcing the ethic of self-spirituality. It is striking to note that, perhaps apart from the latent feelings of alienation that trigger it, the process is basically identical to that revealed by Howard Becker in his classic study on marijuana use. In that case, too, acquired knowledge underlies the recognition and positive evaluation of experiences, just as in both cases "deviant groups tend . . . to be pushed into rationalizing their position"³⁸ by means of standardized legitimations so as to neutralize critique from outsiders, while in the process, reinforcing the adopted way of life for insiders.

Bringing "Soul" Back to Work

"Sociologists rarely study spirituality in the workplace," Don Grant and his co-authors rightly observe.³⁹ This is probably due to the received wisdom that spirituality lacks public significance, remaining confined to "the life-space that is not directly touched by institutional control" and failing to "generate powerful social innovations and experimental social institutions."⁴⁰ But the very rarity of studies of spirituality in the workplace precludes any premature conclusion that spirituality fails to affect our "primary institutions": modern work organizations. If "it appears to sociologists that spirituality cannot take root within secular bureaucracies, it may be because their theories have not yet allowed it," as Grant and his co-authors, rightly note.⁴¹ Indeed, notwithstanding common claims to the contrary, it is difficult to deny that spirituality has in fact entered the public domain of work organizations.

Since the 1980s, business organizations have become interested in spirituality, and spirituality has begun to turn toward business life.⁴² Renowned management magazines such as *People Management*, *Industry Week*, and *Sloan Management Review* publish articles on the opportunities of spirituality for business life on a regular basis.⁴³ Indeed, on a basis of 131 in-depth interviews and 2,000 questionnaires in American companies, Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton demonstrate that employees and managers feel a great need to integrate spirituality into business life. In *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America*, they conclude: "This age calls for a new 'spirit of management.' For us, the concepts of spirituality and soul are not merely add-on elements of a new philosophy or policy. . . . No management effort can survive without them. We refuse to accept that whole organizations cannot learn ways to foster soul and spirituality in the workplace. We believe not only that they can, but also that they must."⁴⁴ Most of the spiritual ideas, initiatives, and practices that are applied in business life can be labeled as self-spirituality: "The inner-individual orientation is what most people, including the majority of our respondents, mean by spirituality."⁴⁵

Examples of large companies that have become interested in spirituality are Guinness, General Dynamics, and Boeing Aerospace—even the U.S. Army has adopted spiritual training.⁴⁶ It is hard to tell to what extent spirituality affects American business life, but there are some indications. John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene refer to a survey held among five hundred American companies, at least half of which had at one time or another offered "consciousness-raising techniques" to their employees.⁴⁷ They estimate that companies in the United States spend at least four billion dollars on spiritual consultants annually, which is more than 10 percent of the total of thirty billion spent on company training every year.⁴⁸

Since the 1990s, the shift of spirituality toward business life has become clearly visible in the Netherlands, too.⁴⁹ A prime example is Oibibio in Amsterdam, founded in 1993. Oibibio's business department offered courses in spiritual management, such as Team Management and the Soul and Management in Astrological Perspective, to keep companies "ready for battle" in times in which "dynamic streams of production, services, and information increasingly put pressure on organizations and managers." They make the following claim in their flyer: "Our trainers are builders of bridges: they speak the language of business life and know how to pragmatically implant the spiritual philosophy in your organization; they do so in cooperation with your employees."

Oibibio's bankruptcy in the late 1990s did not result from a declining market but rather marked the birth of many other, more successful spiritual centers, such as Metavisie, Soulstation, Being in Business, and Firmament. Metavisie, probably one of the largest players in this field, claims to have offered in-company training to seventy-five of the one hundred most renowned companies in the Netherlands. The list of clients on their Web site comprises more than two hundred national and international companies and agencies, among them many of the major Dutch banks and insurance companies (ABN Amro,

ING, Generale, Rabobank, Aegon, Anev, De Amersfoortse, Centraal Beheer, Interpolis, Zwitserleven and Delta Lloyd) and IT-companies (Cap Gemini, CMG, Compaq, Getronics Software, High Tech Automation, IBM Nederland, Oracle, and Baan Software). Internationally renowned Dutch multinationals, such as Ahold, Heineken, and telecom company KPN, are also on the list, as well as remarkably many government-sponsored institutions, such as the national welfare organization UWV-GAK and the University of Amsterdam, and the Ministries of Finance, the Interior, Trade and Industry, Justice, Agriculture and Fisheries, Transport and Public Works, Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs, and Housing, Regional Development, and the Environment. This is, indeed, convincing evidence that spirituality is penetrating the public sphere. What, then, is the goal of the spiritual in-company training in all of these organizations?

Interviews with founders of spiritual centers and an analysis of those centers' Web sites reveal that these trainings aim primarily at breaking down the typically modern separation between the private and public realms, trying to impose the logic of the former on the latter. This complies, of course, with the ethic of self-spirituality: the centers aim to make rationalized business environments less alienating and more open to "authenticity" and "spirituality." By doing so, it is argued, they seek for a win/win situation or, in Heelas's words, "the best of both worlds."⁵⁰ Authenticity is held to result in both well-being *and* efficiency, and spirituality in happiness *and* profit, while "soulful organizations" are portrayed as successful. To give just one example (from the Web site of Soulstation): "People who develop personal mastery steadily become more capable to live their authenticity. In such a situation, one can put all one's natural talents in the world and do what one is really good at. The more authentically one lives, the more effective one's actions are. Authenticity therefore has a large impact on productivity within organizations" (www.soulstation.nl). Although bureaucratization may pose all sorts of practical obstacles to the introduction of spiritual practices in the workplace,⁵¹ this should not blind us to the fact that it also drives attempts to bring "soul" back to work—to break with "alienating" bureaucratic organizational structures and pre-given work roles. Indeed, the "best of both worlds" approach that dominates the concomitant discourse suggests that tensions between bureaucratic demands, on the one hand, and opportunities for spiritual practice, on the other, may in fact be less severe than is typically assumed. Organizational goals are typically taken for granted and remain strictly instrumental, after all, while the "inner lives" of employees are considered valuable assets that enable firms and organizations to strengthen their positions in highly competitive and demanding environments. Although it is hard to deny that spirituality has entered the public realm of work, then, what is badly needed is good ethnographic research into whether and how tensions between bureaucratic demands and spiritual practices emerge and, if so, how those are dealt with on an everyday basis.

Conclusion: Relocating the Sacred in Late Modernity

There is no doubt that in most Western countries the Christian churches have declined during the last quarter of a century. During the same period, however, the belief has spread that a true, authentic, and sacred kernel, basically untouched by socialization and informing evaluations of what is good, true, and meaningful, lies hidden in the deeper layers of the self. This spiritual turn has advanced farthest in precisely those countries in which the churches have declined most, due to the erosion of traditional moral values that has accompanied this decline. What we are witnessing today, in short, is less the disappearance of the sacred than its dramatic relocation from a Christian heaven to the deeper layers of the self.

This finding, based on data collected among the general populations of late-modern Western countries, confirms the argument of Heelas and his co-authors in their recent *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Their extensive "body counts" in the spiritual milieu and the Christian congregational domain in the city of Kendal, United Kingdom, also demonstrate that a decline of the Christian churches and an expansion of spirituality are taking place. This turn to the deeper layers of the self is highly significant from a theoretical point of view. It has a range of implications not only for classical sociological theories—for example, Max Weber's about the disenchantment of the world⁵²—but also contemporary ones about postmodernization and reflexive modernization.⁵³

Whereas the theoretical significance of the spiritual turn can hardly be overestimated, then, the quality of sociological research into spirituality leaves much to be desired. To put it bluntly: much of it is sociologically naïve and immature. This applies not only to the research of those who are overly sympathetic to spirituality and hence cannot resist the temptation of "going native," as our colleagues from anthropology say. Perhaps surprisingly, it equally applies to the work of those who are highly critical of spirituality.⁵⁴ Because of his own tendency to criticize other people's ideas about spirituality as "bad sociology" or "nonsociological," Steve Bruce perhaps provides the best example.⁵⁵ Attempting to hammer home the radical individualism of the spiritual milieu, he writes:

Findhorn, one of Europe's oldest centers of New Age thought and teaching, *requires* of those who take part in its various forms of group work that they confine their talk to "I statements." The point of this is to establish that, while each participant has a right to say how he or she feels or thinks, *no-one has a right* to claim some extra-personal authority for his or her views.⁵⁶

Those observations do much to underscore the radical individualism of the spiritual milieu, to be sure. But simultaneously, and ironically, they do more than that. They also

demonstrate how this very individualism operates as a socially sanctioned obligation of personal authenticity, revealing precisely the social significance of spirituality that Bruce denies. His failure to capture and satisfactorily theorize this ambiguity of the spiritual milieu's individualism causes Bruce to overlook that people are socialized into compliance with the doctrine of self-spirituality.

What Bruce has to offer, then, is merely a sociologically naive reproduction of New Age rhetoric about the primacy of personal authenticity, rather than a mature and critical sociological analysis. The assumption that people all by themselves develop their strictly personal and authentic spiritualities is obviously sociologically naïve, since "as good sociologists, we all know that there is no such thing as an isolated individual."⁵⁷ Kelly Besecke also criticizes the received conception of "privatized religion," arguing that it results in a conception of religion "as almost an exclusively psychological phenomenon, with very limited and indirect social consequence."⁵⁸ As has been demonstrated above, spirituality is in fact less unambiguously individualistic and less privatized than most sociologists hold it to be.

The conception of spirituality embraced by Bruce—and by most other sociologists of religion—inevitably coincides largely with the self-image of the spiritual milieu. It is hardly surprising, after all, that the spiritual practitioners interviewed by Heelas and his co-authors also deny in every possible way that the doctrine of self-spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted, and reinforced: "Time and time again, we hear practitioners rejecting the idea that their relationships with their group members or clients have anything to do with prepackaged . . . ways of transmitting the sacred."⁵⁹ But even if spiritual practitioners do not tell "their group members or clients what to think, do, believe, or feel,"⁶⁰ they do tell them that they should take their personal feelings seriously, that a one-sided reliance on thinking at the cost of feeling is detrimental, and that one should follow one's heart. The task to be taken up in the years that lie ahead, in short, is a radical sociologization of research into spirituality. What we need is research that critically and systematically deconstructs emic rhetoric to document how, precisely, spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted, and reinforced in the spiritual milieu and how, why, and when it is introduced in the public domain.⁶¹