

**Post-Christian spirituality:
Misconceptions, obstacles, prospects**

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Abstract (long version, 221 words)

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Abstract (short version, 125 words)

According to the received view in sociology of religion, post-Christian spirituality is radically privatized, individualized, and fragmented, and does as such lack a coherent worldview or ideology. A more specialized literature exposes this notion as a misconception, however, so that it is possible after all to measure post-Christian spirituality by means of a standardized unidimensional scale. For this literature conveys seven logically interrelated ideas that are central to the worldview of post-Christian spirituality: 1) perennialism; 2) bricolage; 3) immanence of the sacred; 4) aliveness of the cosmos; 5) holism; 6) self-spirituality; 7) experiential epistemology. These seven notions have been operationalized into Likert-type items that together form a reliable and unidimensional Post-Christian Spirituality Scale that can, among other things, be used in health-related research.

The Post-Christian Spirituality Scale

Present-day sociologists of religion and religious studies scholars in the West jot down remarkable answers to fairly elementary interview questions. ‘Are you religious?’; ‘No, I am not. I am quite interested in spirituality, though.’ Or: ‘No, I am not religious; I want to follow my personal spiritual path’. Or even: ‘No, I am not religious, *because* I want to follow my personal spiritual path’. Another example of a nowadays often-heard and profoundly new response pattern: ‘Do you believe in God?’; ‘No, I do not, but I do believe that there is something’. Many Westerners apparently no longer understand God as a person and creator who needs to be believed in and obeyed, but rather as a diffuse and vaguely defined ‘something’.

Answers like these puzzle anyone raised with the notion that religion is about church-based belief in a God who has created the world and revealed the truth. They appear to occur more frequently in Western Europe than in North America, arguably due to historically informed differences pertaining to religion and freedom. For while in Europe religion has always had to carry the historical burden of oppression, persecution, and lack of freedom, the first colonists that landed on the Atlantic shores of North America had precisely fled religious strife in Europe to build a new society based on ideals of religious freedom (e.g., Woodhead, 2004, p. 94-95).

The answers cited above indicate that especially in Western Europe the traditional language of ‘religion’ has increasingly given way to one of ‘spirituality’, with many today disliking the former and embracing the latter. ‘Spirituality’ is in effect no longer primarily understood as the opposite of ‘materiality’ (as in ‘spirit and matter’), but rather as the opposite of ‘religion’ (Huss, 2014). So while Christian religion has surely lost much of its former appeal and legitimacy in Western Europe, it has hence not simply given way to secular non-religiosity, but also to a type of spirituality that those concerned wish to

distinguish sharply from Christian religion. This process of religious change is typically theorized nowadays as a shift from ‘religion’ to ‘spirituality’, often identifying the latter with ‘New Age’ and conceiving it as ‘post-Christian’, ‘alternative’ or ‘holistic’ (e.g., Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). In this contribution, we use the label ‘post-Christian spirituality’.

This post-Christian spirituality differs profoundly from Christian religion as the West has known it for centuries. It embraces a conception of the sacred as a diffuse spirit or life force that permeates and unifies all of the cosmos and that can only be personally experienced, which causes external sources of religious authority to be rejected as illegitimate. Sociologists of religion have traditionally taken it to be radically fragmented and individualized, suggesting that unlike Christian religion it lacks a coherent and unifying worldview. If this were indeed the case, it would be impossible to study it by means of a standardized scale to fathom identifications with it. We explain below why this notion of an absence of a coherent underlying spiritual worldview is flawed, however, and discuss in detail what the latter looks like, and how it informs our Post-Christian Spirituality Scale.

This Post-Christian Spirituality Scale is important because it enables a recalibration of religious research to major changes that have occurred on the ground. For most students of religion in the West, particularly Western Europe, agree nowadays that Christian religion has declined significantly since the 1960’s, while post-Christian spirituality has become increasingly widespread in the same period (e.g., Campbell, 2007; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). The latter has its historical roots in the so-called ‘counterculture’ of the 1960’s and 1970’s (e.g., Roszak, 1969), which witnessed a massive increase in interest in post-Christian spirituality and oriental religions (Campbell, 2007; McLeod, 2007; Sebald, 1984). The interest of the Beatles in the teachings of the Maharishi Yogi (‘The man who brought transcendental meditation to the world’) and their visits to his ashram in Rishikesh, India, constitutes a case in point. Even though post-Christian spirituality has meanwhile lost much

of its former socially critical edge, it even today echoes the characteristic countercultural rejection of external authorities and its foregrounding of the inner world as an entry to genuine freedom and liberty.

Much like the counterculture of the 1960's and 1970's itself, the dissemination of post-Christian spirituality since then is first of all a western phenomenon, sparked by typically western cultural discontents about alienating modern orders. Indeed, the turn to post-Christian spirituality signifies a shift from a western dualistic worldview towards a monistic or holistic eastern one, i.e., an 'Easternization of the West' (Campbell, 2007). Yet, due to western modernity's spread to non-western countries, post-Christian spirituality has also begun to spread to countries like Japan (Mullins, 1992; Shiroya, 2017), Nigeria (Hackett, 1992), and South Africa (Oosthuizen, 1992).

The profound transformation of the religious landscape of the West that has resulted from the spiritual turn since the 1960's calls for a scale for post-Christian spirituality to complement existing scales for the measurement of traditional Christian beliefs. For such a scale is not only vital for mapping the corollaries and consequences of post-Christian spirituality, not least in the realm of health and health care, but also for systematically testing contemporary theories of religious change. For today's long-standing international survey programs like the European Social Survey (ESS) and the European and World Values Surveys (EVS, WVS) feature an overly narrow and Christian-informed conception of religion, which biases research findings towards decline of religion rather than religious change. Their questionnaires are in effect more useful for recording the dissolution of the Christian religious formations of the past than for mapping the newly emerging ones. They maneuver much of contemporary religion out of sight, arguably its most rapidly expanding part (Houtman, Heelas, & Achterberg, 2012). The unfortunate absence of a good scale for post-Christian spirituality has forced students of religious change to rely on second-best

options. One is comparing the young and the elderly to then interpret any differences found as ‘cohort effects’ that indicate religious change rather than ‘life cycle effects’ that have emerged across the life course (Houtman & Mascini, 2002). Another solution – if that is what it is – is to make use of overly crude and unreliable measures that leave much to be desired (Houtman & Aupers, 2007).

Theoretical basis

Religion beyond church and sect

The widespread misconception that post-Christian spirituality lacks a coherent worldview stems from the deeply ingrained identification of religion with either ‘church’ or ‘sect’, two categories introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century by the sociologically inclined Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1992 [1912]).

Troeltsch’s church model posits the existence of just one church that envelops all members of a community and understands itself as intimately bound up with the latter. Becoming a church member is hence not a deliberate personal act: one is ‘born into’ a community and its church and in principle stays a member until one’s final days. This model of religion moreover features a priesthood that has privileged access to the sacred and hence mediates between God and the community of believers. The priesthood organizes communal gatherings, takes care of the appropriate performance of religious rituals, socializes rank-and-file church members and new priests, and is entrusted with administering the sacraments to believers. Due to the priesthood’s privileged access to God, the church model of religion assumes religious hierarchy: the priesthood is understood as more or less sacred in and of itself and hence as less worldly and profane than rank-and-file church members. Empirically speaking, the Roman Catholic Church comes closest to this first model of religion as defined by Troeltsch.

It is to this model of religion that the Protestant Reformation revolted by underscoring the authority of God, and God alone. Protestantism is thus characterized by a marked contrast between on the one hand the world and the church and on the other an all-powerful God who has revealed the truth, so that His Word, as contained in the Holy Bible, constitutes the only valid source of religious authority. Protestants in effect cannot rely on church authority in telling them how to live but have the Bible as their only guideline. Here, religion is hence not about being a loyal member of a church and a community, but about obeying God – being a pious believer according to His commandments rather than those of the church. The sect model in effect features a critical rejection of the social environment in which the sect finds itself, because measured against God's strict commandments the world as it is inevitably falls short.

While modern students of religion have favorably received and widely adopted Troeltsch's church and sect types of religion, understanding the two first and foremost as types of religious organization, his third 'cult' type of religion has traditionally been neglected. This accounts for the many misapplications of the sect category back in the 1960's and 1970's, when the latter was frequently used to refer to newly emerged non-Christian cults ('If this is not a church, then it surely must be a sect') (Campbell, 2002 [1972]); Streib and Hood, 2011). In Troeltsch's understanding cults differ profoundly from both churches and sects, however, because unlike these they are fleeting phenomena: they are typically short-lived; they have no clear organization, the typical form being an egalitarian group or social network; they lack clear hierarchy and leadership; they lack strict religious doctrines; and they know no strong boundaries between insiders (members) and outsiders (non-members).

Campbell (2002 [1972]) points out how this very fleetingness makes the study of just one single spiritual group or practice in isolation of others quite meaningless. What needs to be studied instead, he maintains, is the wider milieu of religious heterodoxy in which cults

find their home, which he refers to as the ‘cultic milieu’: “Cults must exist within a milieu which, if not conducive to the maintenance of individual cults, is clearly highly conducive to the spawning of cults in general. Such a generally supportive cultic milieu is continually giving birth to new cults, absorbing the debris of the dead ones and creating new generations of cult-prone individuals” (2002 [1972], p. 121-22). In this understanding, cults relate to the cultic milieu like icebergs to glaciers: while the former are inevitably fleeting and will eventually melt away altogether, the latter are persistent and periodically spawn new icebergs.

Post-Christian spirituality as mystical religion

Troeltsch identifies cults with a variety of mystical religion that has completely broken away from, and boasts disdain for, the institutional and doctrinal features of religion (see also Daiber, 2002), just like the post-Christian groups in today’s spiritual milieu do (Campbell, 1978). Indeed, observers of post-Christian spirituality have pointed out how the latter “(reject) voices of authority associated with established orders (...), even rejecting ‘beliefs’” (Heelas, 1996, p. 22), to the effect that “prescriptions of others, of tradition, of experts, of religious texts, and all such external sources are not considered legitimate” (Adams & Haaken, quoted in Heelas, 1996, p. 22). As a mysticism that has broken away from religious institutions and doctrines, post-Christian spirituality entails “a religious principle in its own right divorced from a containing frame-work of dogma, ritual or ecclesiasticism” (Campbell, 1978, p. 149), indeed “a distinct religion in its own right with a distinct system of beliefs” (Campbell, 1978, p. 147), which understands itself as “the true inner principle of all religious faith,” as Streib & Hood (2011, p. 448) put it.

Post-Christian spirituality hence constitutes a religion stripped of its institutional and doctrinal aspects: a promise of and a quest for ‘pure’ religion and ‘real’ sacrality that posits a spiritual realm that can neither be captured in human-made institutions, nor reduced to

religious doctrines and dogmas. Conceiving of pre-given religious (and non-religious) orders and doctrines as hidebound, short-witted and suffocating, it rejects church religion as authoritarian and as demanding blind obedience and conformity, and it dismisses sect religion's doctrinariness as a dogmatic and narrow-minded escape from reality. Boasting ideals of breaking free from such constraints, post-Christian spirituality does hence not incite its adherents to 'ascetically' define themselves as active 'tools' in the hands of God (subordination to God and engaging in a life devoted to the active pursuit of His demands), but rather to 'mystically' think of themselves as passive 'vessels' of the divine that need to open themselves up to the sacred to ultimately become one with it: "the creature must be silent so that God may speak" (Weber, 1963 [1922], p. 326).

The point, in short, is that post-Christian spirituality cannot be defined in terms of membership, loyalty, or affinity with a particular spiritual group or practice, but only in terms of a lasting commitment to the spiritual or cultic milieu as a whole and to the spiritual worldview that underlies the latter and provides it with ideological unity. This is precisely where the intellectual significance of the quantitative study of post-Christian spirituality lies: it enables students of spirituality to move beyond the idiosyncrasies of particular spiritual groups and practices and study affinity with the underlying spiritual worldview that the various groups and practices have in common.

Literature Review

A spiritual turn in the West?

The intellectual significance of the quantitative study of post-Christian spirituality has increased sharply in the wake of the crisis of secularization theory since the 1980's. Before that decade the latter constituted sociology of religion's theoretical flagship, predicting a decline of the social significance of religion, which basically meant Christian religion back then. A cluster of loosely connected theories rather than a coherent and monolithic theory in

and of itself, secularization theory among other things predicts increasing numbers of people to become less and less religious (e.g., Bruce, 2002; Casanova, 1994; Dobbelaere, 2002; Tschannen, 1991; Wallis & Bruce, 1992). From the 1980's onwards this thesis of religious decline has become increasingly challenged by the claim that since the 1960's religion has not so much declined, but rather transformed profoundly.

Contemporary students of religion have observed that “religious life (...) is not so much disappearing as mutating” (Davie 1994, p. 198), entailing a “turn away from worlds in which people think of themselves first and foremost as belonging to established and ‘given’ orders of things which are transmitted from the past” (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005, p. 3). Others even go so far as to observe “a fundamental revolution in Western civilization, one that can be compared in significance to the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the Enlightenment” (Campbell 2007, p. 41). In her book *Religion in Britain since 1945*, probably better known under its subtitle, *Believing without Belonging*, Davie (1994) asserts that what we have been witnessing in Western Europe since the 1960's is not so much a decline in religion, but rather a decline in church affiliation. The result is widespread “unattached religion” (Davie, 1994, p. 199) and hence a “mismatch between (...) religious practice and (...) levels of religious belief” (p. 4). The implication is that standard accounts of secularization as a decline in religion are “getting harder and harder to sustain” (p. 7), because it is in fact “more accurate to describe late-twentieth-century Britain (...) as unchurched rather than simply secular” (p. 7).

In keeping with its subtitle Davie's book has typically been interpreted as offering a theory of the de-institutionalization of Christianity, according to which people do not cease to hold Christian beliefs, but increasingly do so without affiliating with churches (e.g., Voas & Crockett, 2005). Her book however also hints at an alternative theory that is basically identical to Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) and Campbell's (2007) accounts of a turn

towards post-Christian spirituality in the West. For writing about ‘believing’ and ‘belonging’, Davie points out how in Britain “(religious) feelings, experience and the more numinous aspects of religious belief demonstrate considerable persistence,” whereas “religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment display an undeniable degree of secularization” (Davie, 1994, pp. 4-5). This is in effect a theory about a turn towards post-Christian spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Campbell, 2007), so a theory about de-Christianization rather than de-institutionalization of Christianity. It is not a theory about people leaving the church, while sticking to their Christian beliefs, but about people turning away from Christian religion towards post-Christian spirituality with its characteristic rejection of religious institutions, religious doctrines, and religious beliefs alongside its equally characteristic foregrounding of personal spiritual experience.

Post-Christian spirituality as fragmented and individualized privatized religion?

One of the major shortcomings of studies of post-Christian spirituality in sociology of religion is its incessant portrayal as radically individualized and privatized. This interpretation can also be traced to the traditional neglect of Troeltsch’s ‘cult’ category, because he defines the latter precisely by the absence of the institutional bulwark of the church and the absence of the firm religious doctrines of the sect (see Woodhead, 2010, for a critical discussion). The typical reference in justifying this interpretation is Thomas Luckmann’s *The Invisible Religion* (1967), one of the most influential books in postwar sociology of religion. In his book, Luckmann identifies the one-sided focus on churches, church attendance, and allegiance to official church doctrines as the major shortcoming of post-classical sociology of religion. For in his understanding the decline of the Christian churches does not simply mean the end of religion, but rather the emergence of a ‘market of ultimate significance’, with religious consumers shopping for strictly personal packages of meaning, based on individual tastes and preferences. Many studies of post-Christian

spirituality echo this account of post-Christian spirituality as merely reflecting individual choices that differ from one person to the next, made on a pluralistic ‘market of ultimate significance’. The late Bryan Wilson’s work about secularization, equally prominent in the sociology of religion, for instance, similarly characterizes post-Christian cults as “[representing], in the American phrase, ‘the religion of your choice,’ the highly privatized preference that reduces religion to the significance of pushpin, poetry, or popcorns” (1976, p. 96). Post-Christian spirituality, in short, has again and again been portrayed as strikingly different from Christian religion: as strictly personal, ephemeral, uncommitted, shallow and superficial, as a radically privatized ‘do-it-yourself-religion’ (Baerveldt, 1996) or ‘pick-and-mix religion’ (Hamilton, 2000), as ‘religious consumption à la carte’ (Possamai, 2003), as a ‘spiritual supermarket’ (Lyon, 2000), and as in effect more ‘fuzzy’, less culturally coherent, and less religiously ‘real’ than good-old Christianity (see for a critique: Woodhead, 2010).

Indeed, Kelly Besecke (2005, p. 186) does not at all exaggerate when she concludes that “Luckmann’s characterization of contemporary religion as privatized is pivotal in the sociology of religion; it has been picked up by just about everyone and challenged by almost no one.” She is however also correct in pointing out Luckmann’s debatable conceptualization of the ‘private’. In his hands the latter becomes “really a catch-all word for everything that falls outside of (...) primary (economic or political) social institutions (...) or (...) specialized religious institutions” (Besecke, 2005, p. 186). As much as Luckmann’s book is to be praised for widening the scope of modern sociology of religion beyond the study of firmly institutionalized Christian religion, it as such also needs to be critiqued for forcing religion onto the Procrustean bed of a distinction between the institutional and the private realm. This neglects sociology’s traditional third option, i.e., the cultural realm as exemplified by Emile Durkheim’s (1995 [1912]) classical account of religion as a discourse informed by distinctions between the sacred and the profane (Alexander & Smith, 2005). Such a cultural-

sociological approach raises the question of whether post-Christian spirituality is really as ‘privatized’ and ‘individualized’ as the theory of religious privatization takes it to be.

The short answer is ‘no’ and the most straightforward way to elaborate it is to start with what is typically invoked as ‘proof’ for its ‘privatized’ and ‘individualized’ character: its radical pluralism in at least two respects. On the one hand there is the sheer diversity and fragmentation of the spiritual or cultic milieu, which consists of a colorful collection of variegated groups and practices, “(ranging) from aromatherapy to Buddhism, circle dancing to the Alexander Technique, naturopathy to reiki” (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005, p. 24). On the other hand there are the characteristic individual practices of bricolage and spiritual seeking: those involved do not identify with just one particular group, practice, or idea, but rather combine a whole range of them, more often than not with rapidly fleeting interests and preferences. This does however not justify the claim that post-Christian spirituality lacks a coherent, unifying, and underlying worldview. More than that: not only *does* post-Christian spirituality boast such a worldview, but the latter even more so *accounts for* the omnipresence of bricolage and spiritual seeking in these circles, as we will explain below. This worldview consists of seven logically interconnected tenets that all assume, validate, and legitimate each other and do as such epitomize precisely the coherence that has so often been denied. So what are these tenets, then?

Perennialism

Central to the worldview of post-Christian spirituality is a profound relativizing of the doctrinal and institutional idiosyncrasies of existing religious traditions. These particularities are understood as inevitably human-made and invented, as distracting from what religion is (or rather: should) ‘really’ be about: engaging in a personal contact with the sacred (Roeland, Aupers, Houtman, De Koning, & Noomen, 2010). Articulating ideals of ‘pure’ religion and ‘real’ sacrality, the spiritual worldview thus posits the primacy of a realm that can neither be

captured in human-made institutions nor be reduced to religious doctrines. Post-Christian spirituality does as such not unequivocally reject religious traditions, but rather understands them as placing too much emphasis on ritual conformity and institutional and doctrinal side issues. Religious traditions are hence understood as referring ‘deep down’ to one single identical and universal spiritual source, even though in some instances the latter has been buried more deeply away than in others. Good examples of the former would be orthodox strains of Protestantism or Islam with their marked emphasis on literal belief in the Bible or the Quran as God’s revealed Word. Good examples of the latter are oriental religions like Hinduism or Buddhism, which provide more opportunities for personal spiritual experience (think of meditational practices). Religious traditions are in effect not only understood as basically, ‘deep down’ referring to the same spiritual source, but also as more flawed and misleading to the extent that they define themselves as different from, conflicting with, and superior to others.

This notion that what religious traditions have in common is more important than what sets them apart is known as “polymorphism” (Campbell, 1978, p. 149) or more typically ‘perennialism’. *Philosophia perennis* or ‘perennial philosophy’ teaches that all religious traditions are equally valid because they ultimately all worship the same divine source (‘There are many paths, but there is just one truth’). As one of the spiritual trainers quoted by Aupers and Houtman puts it: “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” (2006, p. 203).

Bricolage

What many sociologists of religion have missed is how this perennialism incites the very practices of bricolage that have so often been misinterpreted as ‘proving’ the non-existence of a unifying spiritual worldview. For if all religions are understood as ‘deep down’ identical and interchangeable, one should, logically speaking, feel free to draw on different religions in a way that makes sense personally. Indeed, what matters then is precisely to prevent oneself from getting stuck to just one single religious tradition and starting to believe that it is superior to all others, because this would fly in the face of the doctrine of perennialism as discussed above.

Diffuseness and immanence of the sacred

The single identical and universal spiritual source that all religious traditions are basically held to refer to is here not the God of the monotheistic, Abrahamic ‘religions of the book’ (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). The latter conceive of the sacred as a person-like entity who has created the world and as such precedes the latter rather than being part of it. Needless to say, this traditional western ontology of the sacred is more strongly present in some traditions than in others. As indicated above, it is especially prominent in orthodox strains of Judaism, Protestantism, and Islam, which conceive of God as radically transcendent so as to espouse a sharp dualism between God and the world. This is why religious traditions like these are seen as least attractive in the spiritual milieu. Jewish Kabbalah, Christian mysticism (e.g., Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Francis of Assisi), and Sufism in Islam can count on much more sympathy, precisely because of their refusal to conceive of the sacred as radically divorced from the world. This applies even more to oriental religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, which foreground the diffuseness and immanence of the sacred even more.

By means of an alternative ontology of the sacred, the spiritual worldview distinguishes itself from these monotheistic traditions of the West, especially from their more

orthodox and dualistic renditions. The sacred is here not conceived as a person-like transcendent God who has created the world, but rather as a diffuse impersonal spirit, life force or energy that is – and always has been – present in the world and the cosmos rather than residing in a separate realm of its own.

Holism

This conception of the sacred as an immanent and diffuse spirit, life force or source of energy implies that the latter connects and unifies ‘everything’. Even though the world’s apparent dualisms and fragmentations (e.g., between body and mind, self and society) may suggest otherwise, the worldview of post-Christian spirituality hence holds that invisible unity exists at a ‘deeper’ level because the omnipresent spirit or life force connects ‘everything’. Due to this, the spiritual worldview differs profoundly from the radically dualistic and disenchanting Protestantism that according to Max Weber (1978 [1904/05]) paved the way for modernity from the sixteenth century onwards (see also Berger, 1967, pp. 105-125). Making the divine more radically transcendent than it had ever been before, this orthodox Protestantism purged the world of the sacred and transformed it into a soulless ‘thing’ without any room left for magic or mystery.

Aliveness of the cosmos

The understanding of the sacred as an omnipresent spirit or life force does not only underlie the notion that ‘everything is connected’, but also robs the world of its status as a mere soulless and inanimate entity. In marked contrast to radically dualistic religious traditions like orthodox Protestantism (e.g., Calvinism) or orthodox Islam (e.g., Salafism), the holism that post-Christian spirituality boasts also incites an understanding of the cosmos as being alive and in effect in a continuous state of change and evolution.

Self-spirituality

The holistic notion that ‘everything is connected’ also applies to the self and the sacred, because human beings are basically understood as a sort of ‘knots’ in a field of spiritual energy. The sacred is here in other words conceived as permeating the deeper layers of one’s own consciousness, too, so that unlike the transcendent God of Christianity it resides ‘within’ rather than ‘without’. Writing about New Age, Paul Heelas (1996) refers to this innerness of the sacred as ‘self-spirituality’, which is the notion that due to its omnipresence the sacred can also be found within as a sort of ‘natural’ or ‘spiritual’ self that lies hidden underneath the ‘mundane’ or ‘conventional’ self: “(The) most pervasive and significant aspect of the *lingua franca* of the New Age is that the person is, in essence, spiritual” (Heelas, 1996, p. 19). In the deepest layers of one’s own consciousness the ‘divine spark’ – to borrow a term from ancient Gnosticism – is hence held to be smoldering, waiting to be reconnected with and to succeed the socialized self: “The inner realm, and the inner realm alone, is held to serve as the source of authentic vitality, creativity, love, tranquility, wisdom, power, authority and all those other qualities which are held to comprise the perfect life” (Heelas, 1996, p. 19).

This is what the spiritual path to salvation – post-Christian spirituality’s soteriology if one prefers – is all about: liberating oneself from the entrapments of the false self that is basically nothing more than what society wants one to be, but that should not be mistaken for who one ‘really’ or ‘at deepest’ is, who one is ‘by nature’: “The great refrain, running throughout the New Age, is that we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated (...) by mainstream society and culture” (Heelas, 1996, p. 19). Following the spiritual path to salvation hence requires the neglect of authoritative ‘external’ sources of meaning and authority, like holy texts, religious elites, and even scientific experts. In deciding what to do and what to abstain from one is rather encouraged to listen to one’s ‘inner voice’: one’s

personal feelings, intuitions and emotions, understood here as emanations of a spiritual self that needs to be taken seriously because it defines who one ‘really’ is.

Experiential epistemology

Post-Christian spirituality’s characteristic ontology of the sacred hence also informs its equally characteristic epistemology of personal experience. What is true and what is not is here not a matter of ‘belief’, but rather results from a sort of ‘inner’ knowing, often referred to as ‘gnosis’: “According to (gnosis) truth can only be found by personal, inner revelation, insight or ‘enlightenment’. Truth can only be personally experienced (...)” (Hanegraaff 1996, p. 519). Needless to say, this marked emphasis on the significance of personal feelings and intuitions in the pursuit of spiritual truth also incites the very practices of bricolage that have so often been misinterpreted as ‘proving’ the non-existence of a unifying spiritual worldview.

A coherent spiritual worldview

To summarize the foregoing, the point is not that post-Christian spirituality is not individualistic, but rather that it embodies an individualism that is collectively embraced by those concerned. With some exaggeration one might say that its characteristic individualism constitutes a sort of ‘dogma of non-conformity’ that is uncontested in these circles, so that it entails a collectively shared and coherent spiritual worldview that incites those concerned to take their personal feelings seriously and to embark on strictly personal spiritual quests. While this surely encourages practices of bricolage and results in the characteristic diversity and fragmentation of the spiritual milieu, these features do hence not at all ‘prove’ the absence of a coherent spiritual worldview. In a fashion that is as interesting as it is paradoxical, it is rather the other way around: it is a coherent spiritual worldview that incites, provokes, brings forth, and hence ultimately accounts for bricolage, diversity, and fragmentation. As Aupers and Houtman have put it: “The diversity of the spiritual milieu

results from rather than *contradicts* the existence of a coherent doctrine of being and well-being” (2006, p. 206; emphasis in original).

This worldview of post-Christian spirituality consists of seven notions that are logically interrelated and that do in effect assume, validate, and legitimate each other:

1. *Perennialism*: the notion that ‘deep down’ all religions are identical and interchangeable;
2. *Bricolage*: the notion that one needs to feel free to draw on different religions in a way that makes sense personally
3. *Diffuseness and immanence of the sacred*: the notion that the sacred is present in the cosmos as an impersonal spirit, energy, or life force;
4. *Aliveness of the cosmos*: the notion that the cosmos is not inanimate but alive;
5. *Holism*: the notion that the sacred connects everything within the cosmos;
6. *Self-spirituality*: the notion that the sacred resides within rather than without the self;
7. *Experiential epistemology*: the notion that experiences and emotions are emanations of the spiritual self within.

Method

Our scale for the measurement of post-Christian spirituality consists of seven Likert-type items that capture the seven notions discussed above (see Appendix A). Some items were not entirely new but resemble items in previous studies. For example, the item measuring the *diffuseness and immanence of the sacred* can be found in a slightly altered form in the WVS, in the EVS, in the Religious and Moral Pluralism (RAMP) survey, and in CentERdata’s ‘Who Designs the Best Telepanel Study’ of 1997. The RAMP survey also contains, in a slightly modified form, the item measuring *self-spirituality* (see Heelas & Houtman, 2009; Houtman et al. 2012), and CentERdata’s ‘Who Designs the Best Telepanel

Study' of 1997 also includes the item measuring *perennialism* (see Houtman & Mascini, 2002).

Our Post-Christian Spirituality Scale was included in a large online survey conducted in the Netherlands in the fall of 2008 by CentERdata, a Dutch institute for data collection and research based at Tilburg University. CentERdata maintains a panel of respondents that is representative for the Dutch population aged sixteen years and older. Of the 2,423 panel members who were invited to participate 87.5% actually did so (N = 2,121), with 85.9% (N = 2,081) completing the online questionnaire as a whole. The sample consisted of 1,135 males (53.5%) and 986 females (46.5%) with an average age of 51 years ($SD=16.13$), a mean monthly net household income of € 2,733 ($SD=3,852$), and an average educational level¹ that lies in between 'higher general continued education/preparatory scholarly education' and 'middle-level applied education' ($M=3.63$, $SD=1.53$). More than four out of ten respondents (N = 895, 42.2%) considered themselves 'religious', more than half of the sample did not (N = 1,080, 50.9%), and a small minority did not know (N = 113, 5.3%). A quarter of the sample considered itself 'spiritual' (N = 530, 25%), nearly two-thirds of respondents did not (N = 1,375, 64.8%), and again a minority did not know (N = 183, 8.6%). The majority of the sample did not identify with a religious denomination (N = 1,023, 48.2%), just over a quarter considered themselves 'Catholic', slightly more than a fifth 'Protestant' (N = 438, 20.6%), and a small minority (N = 92, 4.3%) selected 'other'. The seven items, all with a five-point Likert-type scale, were not asked successively in the questionnaire, but scattered across a larger battery of statements on religious and spiritual matters. The response categories ranged

¹ 1 = basisonderwijs (i.e., elementary school); 2 = VMBO (i.e., preparatory middle-level applied education); 3 = HAVO/VWO (i.e., higher general continued education/preparatory scholarly education); 4 = MBO (i.e., middle-level applied education); 5 = HBO (i.e., higher professional education); 6 = WO (i.e., scientific education).

from (1) ‘agree strongly’ through (5) ‘disagree strongly’, with a category (3) ‘neither agree, nor disagree’ in the middle, plus a separate ‘don’t know’ category.

Results and Psychometric Properties

The Instrument Structure

To evaluate the construct validity of the Post-Christian Spirituality Scale, the seven items were factor-analyzed with SPSS 22 using principal components analysis without any rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.84, which is well above the suggested minimum of 0.60, indicating that the items are measuring a common factor. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(21) = 3092.356, p < .001$), indicating that the correlation matrix can be submitted to factor analysis because it contains coefficients that differ significantly from those that could be obtained by chance (Tobias and Carlson, 1969). Subsequently, only one component was extracted with an Eigenvalue greater than 1 ($\lambda = 3.475$), explaining almost half of the variance of the seven items (49.6%). Inspection of the component loadings shows that all variables are highly correlated with the common component with loadings ranging between 0.587 and 0.831. These results indicate that the structure of our scale is indeed unidimensional. Using pairwise deletion instead of listwise deletion increases the sample size from 1,285 respondents to 1,648 – 1,856 respondents, but does not change anything substantially, hence the results are robust.

Reliability

Reliability analysis yields a strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.83). All inter-item correlations are positive and range from 0.26 to 0.76, with an average of 0.41. The lowest correlation was found among the items *bricolage* and *aliveness of the cosmos* ($r = .26$). Cronbach’s Alpha does not increase any further if one of the items is deleted from the scale.

Construct and Predictive Validity

The Post-Christian Spirituality Scale has been used previously by Van Bohemen, Achterberg, Houtman, and Manevska (2012, p. 165) in a study that analyzed the same 2008 CentERdata to explain differences in environmental consciousness between Christian dualists and those adhering to post-Christian spirituality. They distinguished three conceptions of nature, two of them dualistic with roots in Christianity (i.e., *dominion* and *stewardship*) and one of them monistic or holistic and based in post-Christian spirituality (i.e., *eco-spiritual*). *Dominion dualism* refers to conceiving nature as something that humans can master, or rule over, with “no other purpose than serving mankind,” (p.165) whereas *stewardship dualism* entails that humanity has a responsibility to take good care of nature “rather than to use and exploit it for its own benefit” (p.166). *Eco-spiritual monism* on the other hand sees nature as inherently or intrinsically sacred (p.168; 171).

Now with respect to convergent and discriminant validity, theoretically speaking our Post-Christian Spirituality Scale should be related to neither dominion dualism nor Christian dualism, which is indeed the case as we observe correlations of $-.04$ (n.s.) and $.10$ ($p < .01$), respectively. Furthermore, and unsurprisingly, our Post-Christian Spirituality Scale was positively related to *environmental consciousness*, *stewardship*, and *eco-spirituality* with significant correlations of $.21$, $.27$, and $.62$, respectively ($p < .01$). For comparison, Christian dualism was unrelated to *environmental consciousness* ($r = -.04$, n.s.), (much) more weakly related to *stewardship* and *eco-spirituality* ($r = .17$, and $.20$, respectively ($p < .01$)), and more strongly to *dominion dualism* ($r = .32$, $p < .01$). In addition to these zero-order correlations, Van Bohemen et al. (2012, p. 172) factor analyzed² the fourteen items measuring *dominion*, *stewardship*, and *eco-spirituality* and found three separate constructs. They performed the

² Principal components analysis with varimax rotation.

same analysis³ for the thirteen pooled items measuring post-Christian spirituality and Christian dualism and indeed found two distinct constructs (p. 174).

Utility of the Post-Christian Spirituality Scale

Research into post-Christian spirituality in sociology of religion and religious studies tends to be qualitative and there is an urgent need to open up this field for quantitative analysis by means of a reliable and valid scale for its measurement. Such quantitative studies do exist, to be sure, but they are rare, and their measurement of post-Christian spirituality often leaves much to be desired. One strategy that is often used is seeking recourse to respondents' self-definitions as 'spiritual but not religious (SBNR)', which in effect leaves completely open what the spiritual worldview of those concerned actually looks like. Another strategy is use of the response category 'I believe that there is some sort of impersonal spirit or life force' from a question with four response options (the other three categories being, 'I believe in a personal God'; 'I don't know whether a personal God or an impersonal spirit or life force exists'; 'I don't believe in either a personal God or an impersonal spirit or life force') (e.g., Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Houtman & Mascini, 2002). While there is no reason to doubt that such crude binary variables are correlated with the Post-Christian Spirituality Scale, they leave quite unclear what else the spiritual worldview of those concerned entails and they especially make it difficult to distinguish liberal Christians from those identifying with post-Christian spirituality (see Heelas & Houtman, 2009). Including our Post-Christian Spirituality Scale in future survey research, especially the large and long-standing international survey programs (e.g., ESS, EVS, WVS, ISSP) would therefore make it possible to more systematically and convincingly test theories of religious change like those proposed by contemporary students of religion (e.g., Davie, 1994; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Campbell, 2007).

³ Principal components analysis with varimax rotation.

Critique of the Post-Christian Spirituality Scale

One thing to reconsider when our Post-Christian Spirituality Scale is going to be included in future surveys are the possible response categories. Currently, they range from 'agree strongly' through 'disagree strongly', with a category 'neither agree, nor disagree' in the middle, plus a separate 'don't know' category. This separate 'don't know' category resulted in relatively high proportions of missing values for all seven items (range 11% - 21%, mean 15%). The reasons why respondents choose this response option are doubtlessly multifarious, but the most obvious one is that one has really no idea what the statement is about. It may however also have been used as an easy way out by those who were not very motivated to think extensively about the most appropriate answer. Alternatively, it may reflect truly agnostic attitudes, even though in that case the option 'neither agree, nor disagree' could also have been chosen. Simply combining the 'don't know' with the 'neither agree, nor disagree' answers does not seem appropriate and the same holds for removing both categories altogether so as to force respondents by means of a four-point Likert scale to either (strongly) agree or (strongly) disagree, even if they are in fact undecided or have really no idea what a statement is about. In sum, for future use of the scale it seems worthwhile to reconsider the response options to be used, as an average of 15% missing values is generally considered to be quite high.

Secondly, it is evident that more studies into the predictive validity of the Post-Christian Spirituality Scale are needed. In keeping with the principal focus of this book, it may be applied particularly fruitfully in health research, especially the less well-trodden path of physical health. For one of the major changes in the world of health care in the West is the increased role of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), much of it based on a post-Christian holistic worldview. CAM in effect sits uneasily with the body-mind dualism that informs the double-blind medical trial with its dismissal of the placebo-effect as a mere

“nuisance variable” (Crum & Philips, 2015, p. 6; Raaphorst & Houtman, 2016). The notion of the placebo-effect is however awkward, because while it acknowledges that cultural worldviews have consequences for health outcomes, it simultaneously defines these outcomes away as somehow ‘less than really real’ (Houtman & Achterberg, 2016). It as such “(exposes) the paradoxes and fissures in our own self-created definitions of the real and active factors in treatment,” as Harrington (1997, p. 1) puts it.

The very existence of placebo-effects and the deeply felt biomedical urge to experimentally wipe out and discredit them invite path-breaking research into physical health that gives adherence to post-Christian spirituality its due. Particularly adding the latter as an active variable to an otherwise experimental research design appears promising, if only because it transforms the conventional research question ‘Does it work?’ into a more nuanced and culturally sensitive ‘For whom does it work?’. That CAM therapies typically fail in conventional double-blind medical trials does after all not mean that they are also ineffective for those who adhere to post-Christian spirituality – indeed, the very notion of the placebo-effect already suggests otherwise. Similarly, those who embrace a dualistic worldview that treats mind and body as radically disconnected are more likely to benefit from traditional biomedical therapies than those who adhere to post-Christian spirituality do. Studying these and other health-related consequences of (dis)belief in post-Christian spirituality calls for culturally enriched experimental research (Houtman & Achterberg, 2016).

Multicultural applications

The Post-Christian Spirituality Scale has thus far not been used extensively in empirical studies, the only exception being Van Bohemen et al. (2012) mentioned above, so we cannot compare the psychometric properties of the scale between countries. However, what we can do is a within-country comparison to validate the multicultural applicability of the scale using the 2008 CentERdata from the Netherlands. We compared males and females,

and we recoded age, educational level, and net monthly household income into three equally large groups, resulting in youngsters (16-43 years), the middle-aged (44-59 years), and the elderly (60-93 years), lower (elementary school + VMBO), medium (HAVO/VWO + MBO), and higher educated (HBO + WO), and low (€ 0–2,029), medium (€ 2,031–2,996), and high earners (€ 3,000 +), respectively. We performed the same factor and reliability analyses as those for the sample as a whole for each of these subgroups and in all instances found one-factor solutions with adequate factor loadings and a strong internal consistency, indicating that the psychometric properties of the scale are stable for various demographic groups within the Netherlands.

The theory predicts that our scale is applicable in at least all Western countries. Even though it captures a basically non-dualist Eastern worldview (Campbell, 2007), the marked western, individualist bias in at least some of the items leaves it an open question whether it is also applicable in South-East Asia. Given that post-Christian spirituality has meanwhile spread to Nigeria (Hackett, 1992) and South Africa (Oosthuizen, 1992), it may however be applicable in at least some African countries.

Conclusion

Much of the sociological literature understands the omnipresence of practices of bricolage (i.e., the notion that one needs to feel free to draw on different religions in a way that makes sense personally) and spiritual seeking (i.e., constantly exchanging groups or practices for others) within the spiritual milieu as an obstacle to the standardized measurement of post-Christian spirituality. We have shown that this is a misconception because these very practices are in fact called for by a shared underlying spiritual worldview or ideology. We have therefore constructed a brief Post-Christian Spirituality Scale that consists of seven Likert-type items to measure the latter. It is unfortunately too late now to use this scale to systematically map the processes of religious change that have occurred in the West in the

past few decades. Yet, it can still be used to map the processes of religious change that are taking place in the future, as we see no clear reasons why the turn towards post-Christian spirituality in the West would suddenly come to a halt. Furthermore, the Post-Christian Spirituality Scale can obviously be used for many other purposes, not least an assessment of how post-Christian spirituality relates to various types of moral and expressive individualism that foreground the self rather than the social order (e.g., Höllinger, 2017). As explained above, particularly promising applications can also be found in health research, especially in studies of whether and how particular worldviews spark or undermine the placebo effects that are evoked by various types of medical treatments.

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Appendix A

Post-Christian Spirituality Scale in English

Samira van Bohemen, Peter Achterberg, Dick Houtman, and Katerina Manevska

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement using the scale below.

1 = strongly disagree

2 = disagree

3 = neither disagree nor agree

4 = agree

5 = strongly agree

6 = don't know⁴

1. Personal spirituality is more important than allegiance to a religious tradition.
2. Every person has a higher spiritual 'self' that can be awakened and enlightened.
3. There is some sort of spirit or life force which permeates all life.
4. The divine does not originate outside, but within every person.
5. The one and only true religion does not exist, but there are truths that one can find in all religions of the world.
6. The cosmos is a living entity.
7. The entire universe springs from one universal spiritual energy.

⁴ Researchers using the scale for statistical analyses are recommended to treat the 'don't know' answers as missing values, or perhaps leave out the 'don't know' category altogether (see also the section 'Critique of the Post-Christian Spirituality Scale').

Appendix B

Post-Christian Spirituality Scale in Dutch/Flemish (Nederlands/Vlaams)

Samira van Bohemen, Peter Achterberg, Dick Houtman, and Katerina Manevska

Wilt u voor elk van de onderstaande uitspraken aangeven in hoeverre u het er mee eens dan wel oneens bent?

1 = helemaal mee oneens

2 = mee oneens

3 = noch mee oneens, noch mee eens

4 = mee eens

5 = helemaal mee eens

6 = weet niet

1. Persoonlijke spiritualiteit is belangrijker dan trouw aan een religieuze traditie.
2. Elke persoon heeft een hoger spiritueel 'zelf' dat gewekt en verlicht kan worden.
3. Er bestaat een soort geest of levenskracht die overal in aanwezig is.
4. Het goddelijke bevindt zich niet ergens daarbuiten, maar binnenin ieder persoon.
5. Hoewel de enige ware religie niet bestaat, zijn er wel waarheden die je in alle religieuze tradities kunt terugvinden.
6. De kosmos is een levend geheel.
7. Het gehele universum komt voort uit één alomvattende spirituele energie.

Appendix C

Post-Christian Spirituality Scale in French

(Echelle sur la spiritualité post-chrétienne en français)

Liza Cortois (KU Leuven) & Paul Cortois (KU Leuven)

S'il vous plaît, indiquez dans quelle mesure vous êtes d'accord ou en désaccord avec chaque proposition en utilisant l'échelle ci-dessous.

1. Pas du tout d'accord
 2. Pas d'accord
 3. Ni en désaccord ni d'accord
 4. D'accord
 5. Tout à fait d'accord
 6. Ne sait pas
-
1. La spiritualité personnelle est plus importante que l'appartenance à une tradition religieuse.
 2. Chaque personne a un soi spirituel qui peut être éveillé et éclairé.
 3. Il existe en quelque sorte un esprit ou une force vitale qui imprègne toute la vie.
 4. L'origine du divin ne se trouve pas à l'extérieur, mais à l'intérieur de chaque personne.
 5. Il n'y a pas une seule religion ayant le privilège exclusif de la vérité, mais il existe des vérités qu'on peut trouver dans toutes les religions du monde.
 6. L'univers est un organisme vivant.
 7. L'univers entier provient d'une énergie universelle de nature spirituelle.