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Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and its Challenge to the Religious and the Secular

BOAZ HUSS

ABSTRACT *The present article examines spirituality as an emergent new cultural category that challenges the binary opposition of the religious and secular realms of life. The article probes the cultural significance of the popular phrase ‘spiritual, but not religious’ and examines the emergence of New Age spirituality within the framework of late capitalism and postmodern culture. It offers a new perspective on the debate of the secularization theory and re-examines the notions upon which this debate hinges. The article also examines the assessment of New Age spirituality as disguised neo-liberal ideology and proposes that the disparaging condemnations of contemporary spirituality can be seen as a response to its challenge to the entrenched notion that the religious and the secular are universal distinct categories.*

Introduction

The term ‘spirituality’ is a key concept in contemporary discourse; it is widely used and new social practices and cultural products, usually referred to as New Age, are molded under the impact of this emergent new category. In the second half of the twentieth century, the term underwent a major discursive shift. The binary opposition of the spiritual on the one hand and the corporeal and material on the other, which was central to the earlier perception of spirituality, became blurred; instead, a new defining dichotomy emerged, juxtaposing spirituality with the category it was previously closely related to, namely the religious. Many people today, mostly those in the West, declare themselves to be ‘spiritual, but not religious’. The increasing popularity of this phrase, which received the acronym ‘SBNR’, comes to the fore in a Facebook page, a Wikipedia article, and several articles and books which carry this title,¹ including Robert C. Fuller’s *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*.

Notwithstanding the assertion of many practitioners of contemporary spirituality that they are ‘spiritual, but not religious’, Fuller claims they “should nonetheless be considered religious in some broad sense of the word” (4). In contrast to the perception that regards being spiritual as a form of religion, this article argues that contemporary spirituality challenges the division created in the modern era between the religious and secular realms of life and enables the formation of new lifestyles, social practices, and cultural artifacts that cannot be defined as either religious or secular. The emergence of contemporary spirituality corroborates the claim that religion and the secular are not essentially fixed categories and indicates that the modern dichotomy

between the religious and the secular is becoming less relevant and compelling in today's Western and Westernized societies. Instead of trying to fit the new cultural formations and social practices that are perceived to be spiritual into religious or secular templates, or disparage them for not fitting easily into any of these, I suggest to explore their historical and social significance and to question the familiar and entrenched suppositions which they challenge.

Genealogies of Spirituality

Before turning to examine the emergence of current notions of spirituality I want to offer a short survey of the genealogy of the term in order to highlight the significant changes which have occurred in its applications in the late twentieth century.

The origin of the term 'spirituality' is the Latin word '*spiritualitas*', which is derived from the noun '*spiritus*', meaning breath. In early Christian texts, the word '*spiritus*' was used to translate the Hebrew 'רוח' and the Greek 'πνεῦμα'. In the Old Testament, the term 'רוח' (wind) denotes a divine element (Genesis 1, 2) and the human life principle, received from (and returned to) God (12, 7). Similar meanings are attached to the word 'πνεῦμα' in the New Testament, where it is frequently juxtaposed to 'σὰρξ' (flesh), as in "the spirit (σὰρξ) is willing but the flesh (πνεῦμα) is weak" (Mathew 26, 41). According to Walter Principe, in Paul's epistles,

the 'spirit' within the human person is all that is ordered, led or influenced by the *Pneuma Theou* or *Spiritus Dei*, whereas *sarx* or *caro* or 'flesh' is everything in a person that is opposed to this influence of the Spirit of God (130).

The biblical and early Christian meanings of spirit governed the semantic field of spirituality (*spiritualitas*), appearing for the first time in the fifth century (Principe 130); the usage became prevalent in medieval Christian theology. Starting in the twelfth century, the Pauline opposition between the spirit and the flesh was expanded to a dichotomy between spirituality and corporeality (*corporalitas*) or materiality (*materialitas*). This opposition comes to the fore in the famous notion of 'spiritual exercises' by the founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556).

In the Middle Ages and early modern period, the term 'spirituality' was used mostly in theological and ecclesiastical contexts, describing proper Christian conduct and matters related to ecclesiastical jurisdiction, including priests and church property. Vernacular forms of the phrase in medieval English and French carried similar meanings (Principe 131).

The term 'spirituality' and its cognates were not widely used in the early modern and modern era, up to the late nineteenth and twentieth century. It carried the sense of a devout religious life and was juxtaposed with corporeality and materiality (Principe 133). In the nineteenth century, the term came to be perceived as denoting the essence of (Christian) religion. In the first edition of the Merriam-Webster dictionary of 1828, spirituality was defined as "Essence distinct from matter, immateriality, intellectual nature", "That which belongs to the church, or to a person as an ecclesiastic, or to religion, as distinct from temporalis" as well as "the quality which respects the spirit or affections of the heart only, and the essence of true religion".

The term 'spirituality' became more widespread only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, both in French and English. Although the term still carried its biblical and medieval meaning, its semantic field was expanded beyond Christian theological and ecclesiastical discourse, to refer to the individualistic and subjective core of universal religion (Fuller 5). Although spirituality was still perceived to be related to, and sometimes identical with, religion, the notion that spirituality can exist outside the realm of religion, which, as we shall see, will become extensive in the late twentieth century, already appears in this period. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, spirituality was often associated with oriental, especially Indian culture, which was recurrently portrayed as more religious and spiritual than the secular and materialistic West (Carrette and King 39–41).

The term 'spirituality' as used in the late nineteenth and twentieth century retained its reference to the metaphysical, un-corporeal, and immaterial but also came to refer to the core or quintessence of universal religiosity. Thus spirituality was perceived not only as the binary opposite of the carnal and the material, but also as the reverse of the secular, as it was construed in the modern era. Spirituality was connected to the religious, metaphysical, moral, subjective, private, and experiential realms of life and juxtaposed to the physical, material, public, social, economic, and political arenas.

New Age Spirituality

In the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the last decades of this century, the term 'spirituality' underwent a major discursive shift. It became widely used and its semantic field changed in a radical way; new practices, institutes, and cultural products, mostly related to the New Age, came into being and were molded under the impact of this emergent new cultural category.

The increasing popularity of the term went hand in hand with significant transformations in its definition and uses. Although it is hard to find an accepted categorization of the term today and many claim that spirituality is no more than a vague and fuzzy term (Carrette and King 30–1; Zinnbauer et al. 549–50), there are some common elements recurring in its contemporary understandings and application. As Wade Clark Roof (*Spiritual* 35) observed, the themes encompassed in spirituality today include: a source of values and meaning beyond oneself, a way of understanding, inner awareness, and personal integration. According to Fuller (6), spirituality is viewed as a journey which is intimately linked with the pursuit of personal growth and development. Robert Forman (48) observed that spirituality (according to interviews with participants in what he calls the 'grassroots spirituality' movement) points to the intuitive, non-rational meditative side of ourselves, the side that strives for inner and outer connection and a sense of wholeness. These new understandings of spirituality come to the fore in the Wikipedia definition of the term (access date: 12 February 2011):

Spirituality can refer to an ultimate or immaterial reality; an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of their being; or the "deepest values and meanings by which people live". Spiritual practices, including meditation, prayer and contemplation, are intended to develop an individual's inner life; such practices often lead to an experience of

connectedness with a larger reality, yielding a more comprehensive self; with other individuals or the human community; with nature or the cosmos; or with the divine realm. Spirituality is often experienced as a source of inspiration or orientation in life.

The recent understandings and applications of the term are closely related to New Age culture. The main characteristics of the New Age, as defined by scholars, include the expectation or experience of profound transformation (Hanegraaff, *New Age* 331–61; Melton, Clark and Kelly xiii), an inward turning in search for meaning, and the sacralization of the self (Hanegraaff, *New Age* 224; Heelas, *New Age*). These characteristics overlap to some extent with the contemporary import given to spirituality and scholars often refer to the New Age as a form of spirituality (either ‘self-spirituality’, ‘inner life spirituality’ or simply ‘New Age spirituality’). Although participants in New Age activities do not necessarily attach to them any holistic or spiritual significance (Heelas and Woodhead 30; Bruce, “Secularization” 41), the term ‘spirituality’ is prevalent in New Age movements and many practitioners prefer to use it to describe their practices and beliefs rather than refer to them as New Age.

The new definitions and applications of spirituality are significantly different from its modern and pre-modern uses. Although the concept retains, to a certain degree, its earlier reference to the metaphysical and un-corporeal realms of life as well as to the essence of religion, new definitions of spirituality are now prevalent, some of them standing in contrast to former applications. The binary opposition between the spiritual on the one hand and the corporeal and material on the other has become blurred in the current definitions and usages of the term; instead, a new defining dichotomy has emerged, juxtaposing spirituality with the category it was previously closely related to: the religious.

As observed above, the biblical and early Christian term ‘spirit’ stood in contrast to the body; in both medieval and modern use, ‘spirituality’ is applied to metaphysical and non-material realms. In contemporary definitions and uses of the term, the dichotomy between spirituality and corporality/materiality is much less distinct. The perception that spirituality is related to non-materialistic reality is at times still retained, as, for instance, in the Wikipedia definition of spirituality (“Spirituality can refer to an ultimate or immaterial reality”). Yet, it is significant that, in the above quoted contemporary characterizations of spirituality, ‘immaterial reality’ is mentioned only once and in-corporeality is not referred to at all. Not only is spirituality today no longer opposed to materiality and corporeality, it is frequently associated with physical and corporeal domains. As Roof (*Spiritual* 105) observed, “The body figures prominently in contemporary spiritual quests.” Forman cites an interviewee who defines spirituality as “a kind of physical knowing, and internal body thing. It lives in my gut, radiating a sense of light and energy.” (46) The phrase ‘mind-body spirituality’ is quite prevalent today (Heelas and Woodhead 69) and spirituality is often applied to physical activities, such as Yoga, martial arts, health, sport, and even to gardening (Heelas, *Spirituality* 4). In medieval terminology, spirituality was occasionally connected to physical activities (such as the spiritual exercises mentioned above); yet, such physical-spiritual practices were intended to subdue the physical, in order to increase

the power of the spiritual. Today, the term is regularly applied to physical and material activities, which are perceived as having spiritual aspects and values.

Spirituality today is related not only to health and physical exercise, but also to other realms which are perceived as secular, such as business and education (Heelas, *Spiritualities*). Wouter Hanegraaff speaks about the emergence of “secular spiritualities” (*New Age* 152) and Paul Heelas observed the ‘this-worldly’ orientation of spiritualities of life today, maintaining that a considerable number of contemporary spiritual activities are directed to secular ends (Heelas, *Spiritualities* 170). These new perceptions and applications of the term ‘spirituality’ are closely related to the holistic and monistic worldview of New Age movements, which rejects the dualism between God and nature, spirit and matter (Hanegraaff, *New Age* 119–27).

As spirituality has become increasingly related to realms that were previously regarded as belonging to the secular and profane, the notion that it is linked to religion—indeed, that it is perceived to be the core of religion—is fading away. The link between spirituality and the Divine (and especially, between spirituality and a personal God), which has been inherent in the use of the term since its biblical origins, does not appear in most contemporary definitions of spirituality, as George Gallup and Timothy Jones wrote in *The Next American Spirituality*: “amazingly, almost a third of those in our survey defined spirituality with no reference to God or a higher authority” (49). In present-day usage, spirituality usually focuses not on God, but rather on the self, a fact which was captured by Heelas’s description of the New Age as self-spirituality (Heelas, *New Age*).

The most striking semantic shift of the term is found in its juxtaposition to religion. Spirituality today is not only connected to the physical, material, and secular aspects of life, and disconnected from realms which are perceived as religious, but it is often described as the binary opposition of religion.

According to Robert Wuthnow, “the most significant impact of the 1960’s for many people’s understanding of spirituality was a growing awareness that spirituality and organized religion are different and indeed, might run in opposite directions” (72). Fuller who observed that a large number of Americans identify themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’ estimated that about 20% of Americans would describe themselves in this way (5, 180).²

Spirituality, as suggested above, does indeed create novel taxonomies and shape new lifestyles, social practices, and cultural artifacts that blur and undermine the modernist distinction between the religious and the secular. These practices and products constitute a different social and cultural realm that cannot easily be defined inside the boundaries of either religious or secular culture.

Spirituality as a Discursive Construct

Most scholars see religion and spirituality as universal phenomena, which exist, in different forms, in all human cultures. Scholars use these terms as analytic etic categories in order to describe, classify, and explain diverse forms of human social behavior. The idea that religion is a universal, *sui generis* phenomenon is still very prevalent and underlines the academic disciplines and sub-disciplines that study religion as an immanent feature of human culture, such as religious studies, history, sociology, and psychology of religion.

Spirituality does not yet feature as a defining category of academic disciplines. However, it is frequently professed to be a universal, immanent feature of humanity. As Roof observed, "it is assumed by many scholars that spiritual quest is rooted in biological, psychological, and linguistic conditions of human life and culture without which religion itself would be inconceivable" ("Religion" 138).

Notwithstanding the practitioners' claim to be 'spiritual, but not religious', some scholars consider spirituality as a component or type of religion. Heelas states that "Spirituality or spiritualities are widely reported within different mainstream forms of religion" (*Spiritualities* 54). As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, Fuller asserts that, notwithstanding the claim of unchurched Americans to be 'spiritual but not religious', they "should nonetheless be considered religious in some broad sense of the word" (4).

Some scholars who regard spirituality as a universal phenomenon offer a taxonomy of different types of spirituality. Wuthnow identifies two major forms in the world's great religious traditions: spirituality of dwelling, which emphasizes habitation, and spirituality of seeking, which emphasizes negotiation (3–4). His main thesis in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* is that "a traditional spirituality of inhabiting a sacred place has given way to a new spirituality of seeking" (3). Heelas distinguishes between inner life spiritualities, which are "spiritualities of life", and "spiritualities associated with the God of transcendent theism ... which are spiritualities for life" (*Spiritualities* 27–8). Like Wuthnow, he regards the present cultural situation as indicating a transition from one type of spirituality to another.

Unlike scholars who regard spirituality as a universal entity, I suggest to regard it as defined, applied, and practised, since the last decades of the twentieth century, as a new discursive construct—a novel cultural category which is used to classify and interpret human practices, both in the past and in the present. As Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman have shown in "Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality", contemporary spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted, and reinforced. It regulates new forms of social behavior and produces novel cultural commodities. Instead of using spirituality as an analytic 'etic' term which refers to and explains universal realities, I propose to study spirituality as an 'emic' notion whose genealogy, applications, and significance should be investigated and analyzed.

In this approach I follow scholars who maintain that the modern term 'religion' (as well as its perceived binary opposition, the secular) should not be regarded as a universal category which exists in every human culture, but rather as a modern discursive construct. The modern notions of religion and the secular (and the same goes for the sacred and profane) are based on medieval Christian theological terms (developed from previous Roman terms) which in the early modern era were expanded and applied, in the context of Western imperialism and colonialism, to non-Christian European cultures (Asad; McCutcheon, *Manufacturing*; Fitzgerald; Mandair). As Timothy Fitzgerald observed, the establishment of an ideologically laden distinction between the realm of religion and the realm of non-religion or the secular "has been a part of a wider historical process of western imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism" (8). These new discursive constructs played (and still play) a central role in modern discourse, constituting and shaping modern life forms, social institutions, and cultural practices, which are perceived as either religious or secular.

Spirituality, I maintain, should similarly be recognized not as a universal constant domain existing in every culture, but rather as a recently constituted cultural category. The contemporary use of the concept 'spirituality' is a new discursive construct establishing current ways of classification and different modes of understanding the world and acting within it. This novel category shapes a variety of innovated institutions and cultural productions, by and large known as 'New Age', in which the newly constituted notion of spirituality plays a central and defining role.

Spirituality, Neo-liberal Ideology, and the Postmodern Condition

As observed above, the increasing popularity of the term 'spirituality', the major shift in its semantic field, and the onset of the New Age culture in which the present-day concept of spirituality is prevalent occurred in the last decades of the twentieth century. The emergence of spirituality as a new discursive construct coincides with major economic, social, and political processes which took place at that time and, I argue, should be seen as inherently connected to them.

The recent understandings and applications of the term 'spirituality' and the emergence of New Age culture are global events, especially prevalent in Western societies among professional, urbanized, upper- and middle-class sectors. The appearance of this cultural category and of New Age social practices coincides with the profound social and cultural changes that came about in the late twentieth century. Scholars who perceived these changes as constituting a major break from modernity described them as a move from a modern to a postmodern cultural condition (Lyotard; Jameson; Harvey). Others described the social and cultural changes of the last decades as less radical and preferred to see the new era as a sequel to modernity, describing it as late modernity, the second age of modernity or reflexive modernization (Giddens; Beck; Beck, Giddens and Lash). The emergence of second-age modernism or postmodernism is related to the development of late, post-industrial, global capitalism. David Harvey's argument in *The Condition of Postmodernity* is that "there is some kind of necessary relation between the rise of postmodernist culture forms, the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of 'time-space compression' in the organization of capitalism" (vii). Fredric Jameson famously characterized postmodernism as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'.

The contemporary concept of spirituality and the emergence of New Age do not play a major role in the academic discussions and analysis of late twentieth-century social and cultural changes. Yet, a number of researchers have noted the connection between New Age spirituality, postmodernity, and the neo-liberal ideologies that lie behind global capitalism (Hanegraaff, "New Age" 249–50; Carrette and King 28).

The contemporary notion of spirituality and New Age culture shows various commonalities with other postmodern categories and cultural productions (Huss 116–21). The free recycling, combination, and adaptation of religious ideas and practices, which is characteristic of the New Age, can be regarded as part of the hybridization of postmodern globalized culture (Pieterse 45). Similarly, the simplicity and popular structure of a great number of the cultural products of New Age spirituality, often condemned by scholars as

superficiality (Hanegraaff, *New Age* 105, 382), are characteristic of the 'depthlessness' of postmodern culture (Jameson 9). The practical perception of spirituality today as primarily a way of improving one's life, with its emphasis on spiritual practices, such as meditation and healing—rather than on theories and doctrines—emblematic of New Age movements, is part of the postmodern decline of belief in grand narratives and the practical and utilitarian perception of knowledge typifying the postmodern condition (Lyotard). The centrality of the self in New Age spirituality is related to the same centering on the self figuring in late modern cultures. Self-spirituality is part of the late capitalist cultural shift "from the collective norms and values that were hegemonic in the 1950s and 1960s, toward a much more competitive individualism as the central value in an entrepreneurial culture that has penetrated many walks of life" (Harvey 171). New Age entrepreneurialism is an expression of the integration of the present form of spirituality in the economic system of late capitalism. The spiritual practices and productions of New Age are marketable commodities, integrated into the global commodity production of late capitalism (Hanegraaff, "New Age" 258–9). The evolvment of the contemporary spiritual marketplace and the commodification of New Age practices and cultural products are part of the postmodern commodification of culture (Jameson 4). "Postmodernism", affirmed Harvey, "signals nothing more than a logical extension of the power of the market over the whole range of cultural production" (62). Contemporary spirituality and New Age are clearly included in the range of postmodern cultural productions that are governed by the power of the market.

The postmodern (or late modern) social and cultural conditions developed out of modernity and yet they defy and undermine some of its entrenched categories and values. As a postmodern cultural dominant, the new concept of spirituality emerged from the semantic field of the term as shaped in the modern era; however, it undermines the central dichotomies that governed the significance of the term until the end of the twentieth century—first and foremost, the binary opposition of the secular and the religious.

The coming into being of spirituality as a new cultural dominant, defying the binary opposition of religion and the secular and creating new cultural and social realms which are neither religious nor secular, expresses the decline of these terms as compelling cultural categories. The construction of the terms 'religion' and 'the secular' as universal categories was dependent on various events and processes which shaped the modern era, including the Protestant Reformation, the discovery of the new world, European colonialism, and the rise of capitalism. The categorization of religion and the secular was instrumental in the formations of new political regimes, social institutions, and cultural productions, both in Europe and America as well as in non-Western countries which were under the control and influence of modern European culture. As Fitzgerald observed:

By constructing religion and religions, the imagined secular world of objective facts, of societies and markets as the result of the free associations of natural individuals, has also been constructed ... the invention of the modern concept of religion and religions is the correlate of the modern ideology of individualism and capitalism. This ideological product was assumed to have its analogue in colonial cultures, and if religions could not be found then they were invented, along with western individuals, law courts, free markets and educational systems. (8–9)

Following Fitzgerald and other scholars who studied the connection between 'national-colonial capitalism' and the emergence of the category of religion, Teemu Taira suggested investigating the "connection between global imperial capitalism and the category of spirituality" (241). Accepting Taira's suggestion, I propose that the emergence of contemporary spirituality is dependent on the diminishing cultural power of the categories 'religion' and 'the secular' under the conditions of late capitalism. The division of the world into religious versus secular spheres, which had played such a central role in the framework of Western colonialism and modern liberal capitalism, became much less compelling under the re-structuring of late, post-Fordist capitalism, with the weakening of the nation state and the advent of globalized network societies. As the divide between religion and the secular becomes less compelling in contemporary Western societies, a new cultural category appears which defies this division and expresses the logic of postmodernism. The rise of spirituality as a postmodern cultural category as well as the formation of the typical New Age social activities and products are part of a new historical moment that developed out of modernity, but disregards and challenges some of its most entrenched categories and values.

Spirituality and the Secularization Debate

The emergence of spirituality as a new cultural formation offers a fresh perspective on the debate about the secularization theory. This theory maintains that modernity constitutes a differentiation of the secular from the religious sphere, which leads to a progressive decline of religion or at least to its privatization and marginalization within its own differentiated sphere (Casanova 19; Bruce, *Secularization* 1–23). Opponents of this theory deny the equation between modernity and secularization and argue that modernity does not necessarily imply the weakening of religion, but rather offers new adaptations and transformations of religion, which is a constant, enduring domain of human culture (Hadden).

Contemporary spirituality poses a challenge to both sides of the secularization debate, as it discounts the very boundaries whose delineation and significance are debated. Because it cannot be easily defined as either secular or religious, it is used by scholars both to refute and to corroborate the secularization thesis. Thus, while Steve Bruce regards spirituality as a type of religion, he does not believe that its emergence refutes the theory, not only because he thinks that the size and growth of this phenomenon have been exaggerated, but also because he claims that "this new form of religion is itself a secularizing force. It is not an alternative to the secularization paradigm: it is a major component of secularization because it contains the seeds of its own destruction." (*Secularization* 112) Heelas on the other hand maintains that the growth of 'New Age spiritualities of Life' challenges (or rather 'puts in its place') the secularization theory ("Challenging"). Heelas and Linda Woodhead accept that conventional forms of religion (which they describe as 'life-as religion') are indeed declining but assert that these are being replaced by increasing forms of 'subjective-life spirituality' (149). Although they distinguish between religion and spirituality, they see them both as "forms of the sacred" (6). Similarly, Houtman and Aupers claim

that what we see today is not so much a disappearance of religion, but rather a relocation of the sacred. Gradually losing its transcendent character, the sacred becomes more and more conceived of as immanent and residing in the deeper layers of the self. At least in many places, religion is giving way to spirituality. (315)

José Casanova addresses the challenge which contemporary spirituality poses to the secularization thesis. The fact that “the majority of Americans tend to be humanists, who are simultaneously religious and secular”, he says, requires a reformulation of this theory “in such a way that this empirical reality ceases to be a paradox” (38). Following my suggestion that spirituality is a new cultural category which undermines the secular/religious dichotomy, I suggest that this apparent paradox should not lead to a reformulation of the theory of secularization, but rather to the re-examination of the very notions upon which the debate hinges.

The theory of secularization assumes that a new delineation of the boundary between the religious and the secular realms stands at the core of modernity. Following Talal Asad and other scholars who claim that the secular and the religious are not essentially fixed categories, I maintain that the modern division between the secular and the religious should not be seen as a new division of turf between two universal phenomena, but rather as a formation of two historically constituted categories. Similarly, contemporary spirituality should not be seen as an expression of either religion or the secular, but as a newly constituted cultural category. This historically dependent category challenges the division created in the modern era between the religious and secular realms of life and enables the formation of postmodern modes of operating in the world, which are neither religious nor secular. Following the major social and cultural changes in the second half of the twentieth century, the modern categorical distinction between the religious and the secular has become less compelling. Although this distinction still plays an important role in many social and political institutions, a growing number of people today, mostly in middle- and upper-class Western and Westernized societies, are taking part in new forms of life, engage in new social practices, and produce and consume new cultural products which are neither religious nor secular, but rather—spiritual. Following Colin Campbell’s thesis in *The Easternization of the West*, it could be argued that contemporary spirituality does not defy the boundaries of religion but merely exchanges a dualistic Western religion for a monistic Eastern one. Yet, in recent years, scholars have questioned the applicability of the term ‘religion’ in Eastern cultures and emphasized that the supposedly universal opposition between the religious and the secular and between the sacred and the profane has no place in pre-modern and non-Western cultures (Balagangadhara; McCutcheon, *Manufacturing*; Asad; Fitzgerald). The emergence of contemporary spirituality corroborates the claim that religion and the secular are not essentially fixed categories and indicates that the modern dichotomy between the religious and the secular is becoming less relevant in contemporary Western and Westernized societies. The growing scholarly awareness of the contingency of the concepts of religion and the secular should be understood in the same context. The erosion of the gripping cultural power of these fundamental concepts of modernity in the late modern

era enabled both the scholarly critique of these concepts and the development of a new cultural category that supersedes them.

The Politics of New Age Spirituality

Contemporary spirituality is perceived to be detached from the political realm and New Age practitioners often declare their disdain for political action and describe their stance as a-political. Yet, several scholars maintain that New Age spirituality—and its claim to be politically neutral—has political import. The close relation between New Age spirituality and capitalistic and neo-liberal ideologies has been noted and often been criticized (Taira). Some scholars disparage the New Age as capitalistic consumerism and regard contemporary spirituality as an expression of neo-liberal ideology. Kimberly Lau's *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden* discusses the "serious cultural and political consequences of New Age capitalism for a democratic society" (2). Jeremy Carrette and Richard King attempt "to uncover what amounts to a silent takeover of 'the religious' by contemporary capitalist ideologies by means of the increasingly popular discourse of spirituality" and seek "to challenge the contemporary use of this concept as a means of reflecting and supporting social and economic policies geared towards the neoliberal ideals of privatization and corporation" (2).³

As suggested above, contemporary spirituality and the New Age emerged in the context of Western, globalized consumer culture and express the cultural logic of late capitalism. Since the onset of contemporary spirituality and neo-liberal ideology was within the same historical, economic, and social framework, they share ideological commonalities (such as individualism, entrepreneurship, and freedom of choice) as well as a significant social overlap. Both neo-liberal ideology and New Age spiritual practices are prevalent mostly among the professional middle and upper classes in the West. Undoubtedly, many people who adhere to neo-liberal ideologies engage in contemporary spiritual practices and vice versa. Yet, I do not think that New Age spirituality should be identified as a disguised neo-liberal ideology. Although contemporary spirituality was shaped by the very economic and social processes valorized by neo-liberal ideologies, people who engage in New Age practices do not necessarily accept neo-liberal values. New Age spirituality emerged in the context of the 1960s counter-cultural movements and shares the latter's criticism of capitalistic consumerism (Hanegraaff, *New Age* 96–7; Hedges and Beckford 365). Although the New Age has become part of Western mainstream culture in the last decades, scholars have shown that it still maintains some of its counter-cultural character (Heelas, *New Age* 68; Höllinger) and that contemporary spirituality does not only enhance neo-liberal and capitalistic principles, but also offers alternative ways to subvert and resist such ideologies (Lynch; Heelas, *Spiritualities* 208–10).

Contemporary spirituality and the New Age are criticized and disparaged in very strong terms for their alleged superficiality, hedonism, and consumerism: "Much of what passes as spirituality is as thin as chicken soup and as transparent as celestine profits", declares Roof ("Forum" 138). Carrette and King assert that "Privatized spirituality emerges ... as the new cultural Prozac bringing transitory

feeling of ecstatic happiness and thought of self-affirmation, but never addressing sufficiently the underlying problems of social isolation and injustice" (77).

Scholarship is always written from an explicit or implicit political and ideological perspective and scholars cannot always eschew value judgment of their objects of study. Yet, such evaluating can also be critically questioned and indignant moral denunciations should not be confused with historical analysis. As Jameson observed in his discussion of the ideological critique of postmodernism, the attempt to conceptualize historical phenomena in terms of moralizing judgments amounts to a categorical mistake (46). A reflexive analysis of the denunciation of New Age spirituality, on the other hand, may contribute to our understanding of the cultural significance of this phenomenon.

New Age spirituality is criticized and disparaged for being part of late capitalistic consumer culture and for enhancing neo-liberal ideology. This critique involves not only opposition to neo-liberal and capitalistic values, but also an implied assumption that 'true' spirituality should be detached from the economic and materialistic realm. The opponents of New Age spirituality base their moral verdict on an idea of 'authentic' religion and spirituality, from which the New Age deviates. As Taira observed (233), Carrette and King juxtapose the wisdom of traditional world religions to neo-liberal and individualistic spirituality.⁴ Their condemnation of 'selling spirituality and the silent takeover of religion' implies that spirituality should not be sold and religion should not be commercialized. Critics of the New Age accept the modernist perceptions of religion and spirituality as the binary opposition to the secular and the profane and the assumption of sociologists such as Durkheim and Parson that economic activity is the secular activity *par excellence* and that consumption is the exemplary manifestation of the profane (Heelas, *Spiritualities* 114). The straightforward commodification and entrepreneurial nature of New Age spirituality which promotes conjunctions such as 'spirituality and business' is anathema for scholars who still adhere to the modernist perceptions regarding religion and spirituality.

The moralizing condemnation of New Age spirituality is a response to the latter's challenge to the notion of religion and the secular as universal distinct categories. The vehement and disparaging criticism of contemporary spirituality is stimulated by the threat that this new cultural category poses to entrenched scholarly assumptions and research practices. As we have seen above, much of the academic discussion of New Age spirituality revolves around the question of what kind of religion it represents. The blurring of the boundaries between religion and the secular by this new cultural category undermines the very *raison d'être* of academic disciplines and sub-disciplines, which are based on the notion of religion as a universal, *sui generis* phenomenon and which use it as an etic, analytic term.

The emergence of contemporary spirituality as a new cultural category challenges one of the main discursive constructs of modernity: the fundamental binary opposition between religion and the secular. Instead of trying to fit the new cultural formations and social practices that are perceived today as spiritual into religious or secular templates or disparaging them for not fitting easily into these categories, I suggest to explore their historical and social significance and to question the familiar and entrenched suppositions and categories that they challenge.

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NOTES

1. See <http://www.facebook.com/SBNR.org> (access date: 20 August 2012); http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritual_but_not_religious (access date: 20 August 2012); Erlandson; Martin; Daniel.
2. Similar results are found in the study by Zinnbauer et al.
3. See also Zygmunt Bauman's (70) criticism of the deployment of "the postmodern version of peak experience" as a driving force of intense consumerism.
4. See also Russell McCutcheon's (*Discipline* 8–9, 233–40) critique of the notions of authentic religion and spirituality in Richard King's *Orientalism and Religion* and Carrette's *Foucault and Religion*.

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