

What is spirituality?

Dr Andy Letcher

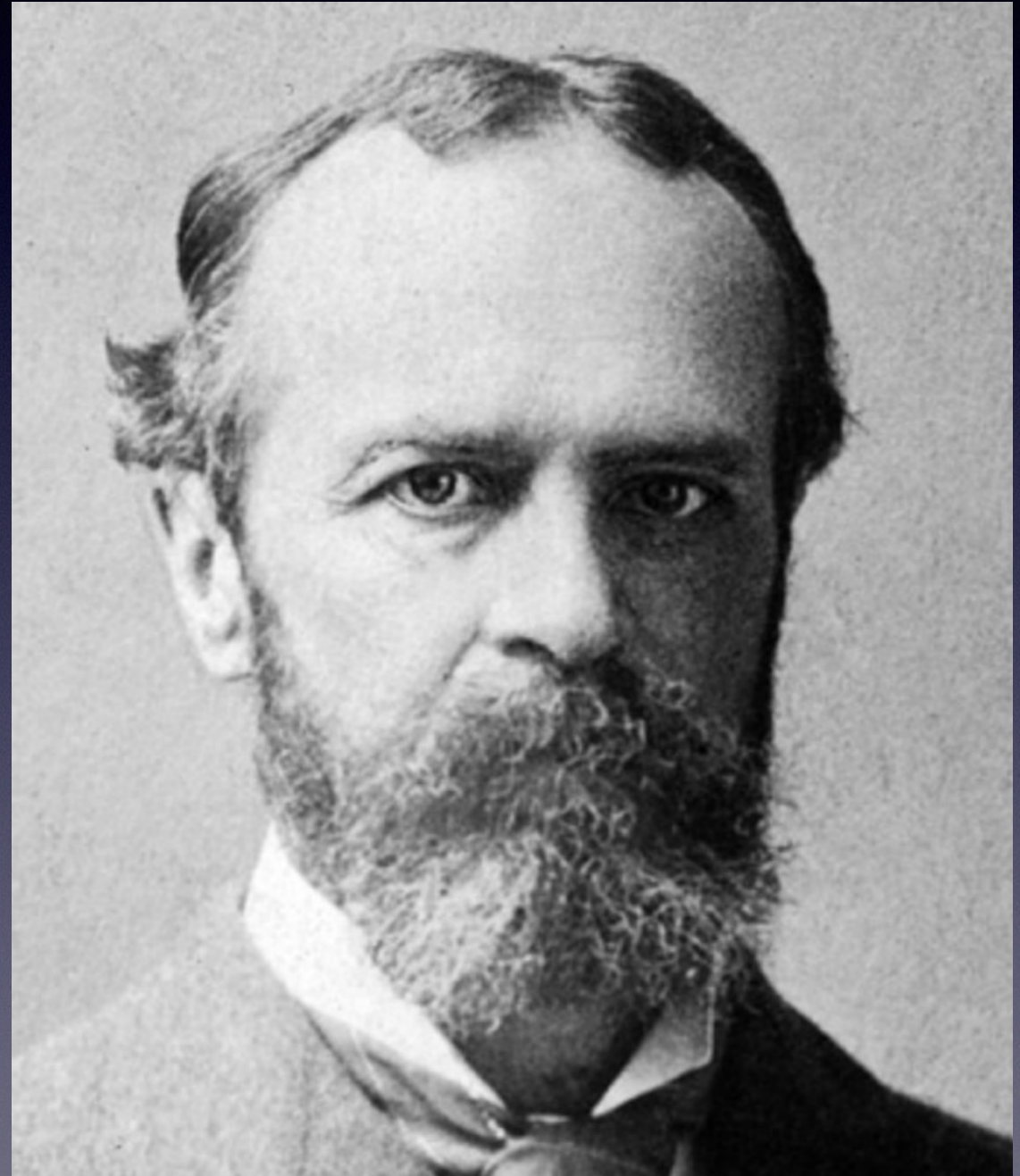
Definitions of religion

- Commonly held view is that religion is: “belief in supernatural beings”



William James (1842-1910)

- “feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine”



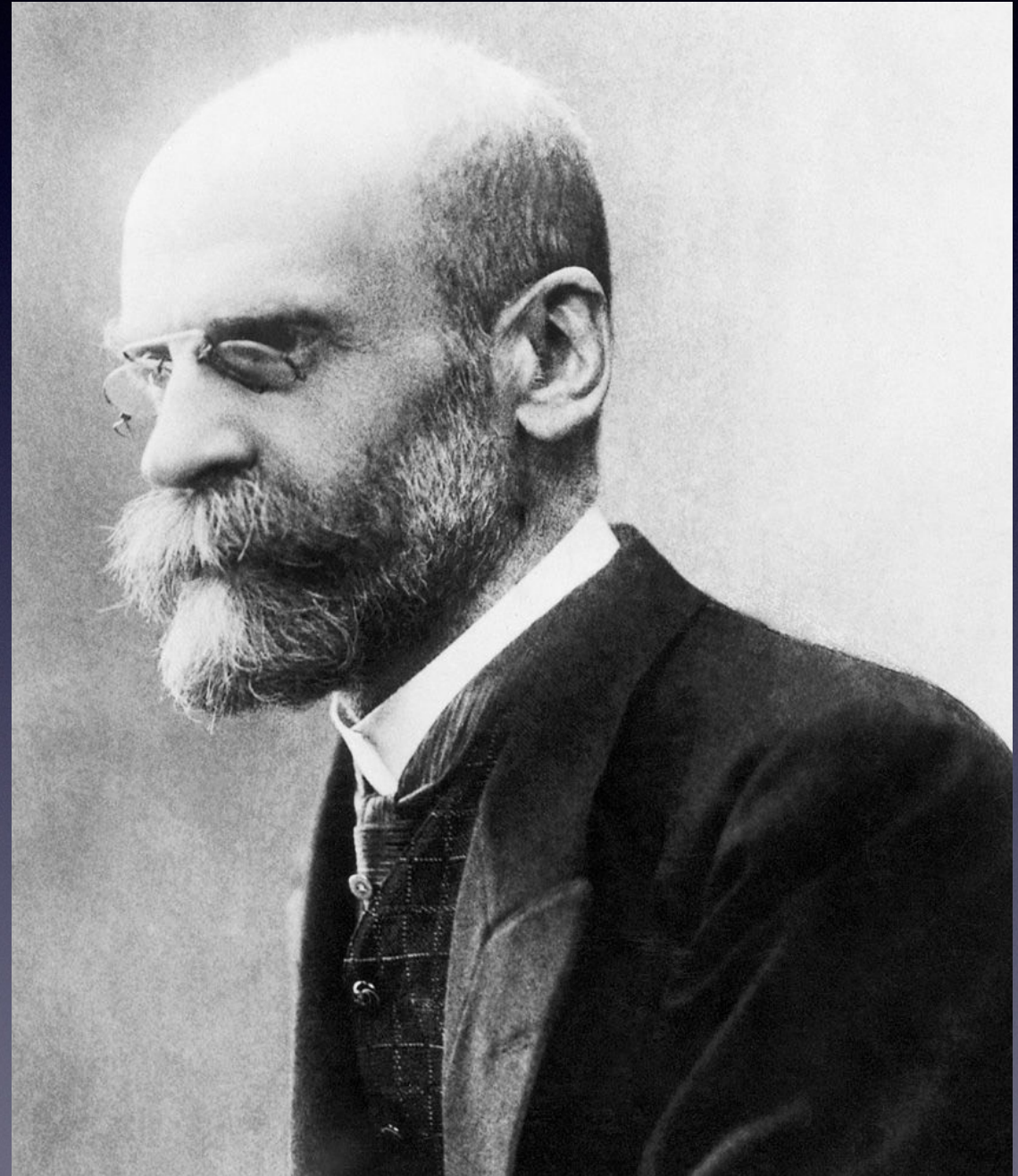
Rudolph Otto (1869-1937)

- *The Idea of the Holy* 1917
- “*mysterium tremendens et fascinans*”
- the **numinous**
- ‘non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self’



Emile Durkheim

- “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single community all those who adhere to them.”
- *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* 1912



We can distinguish

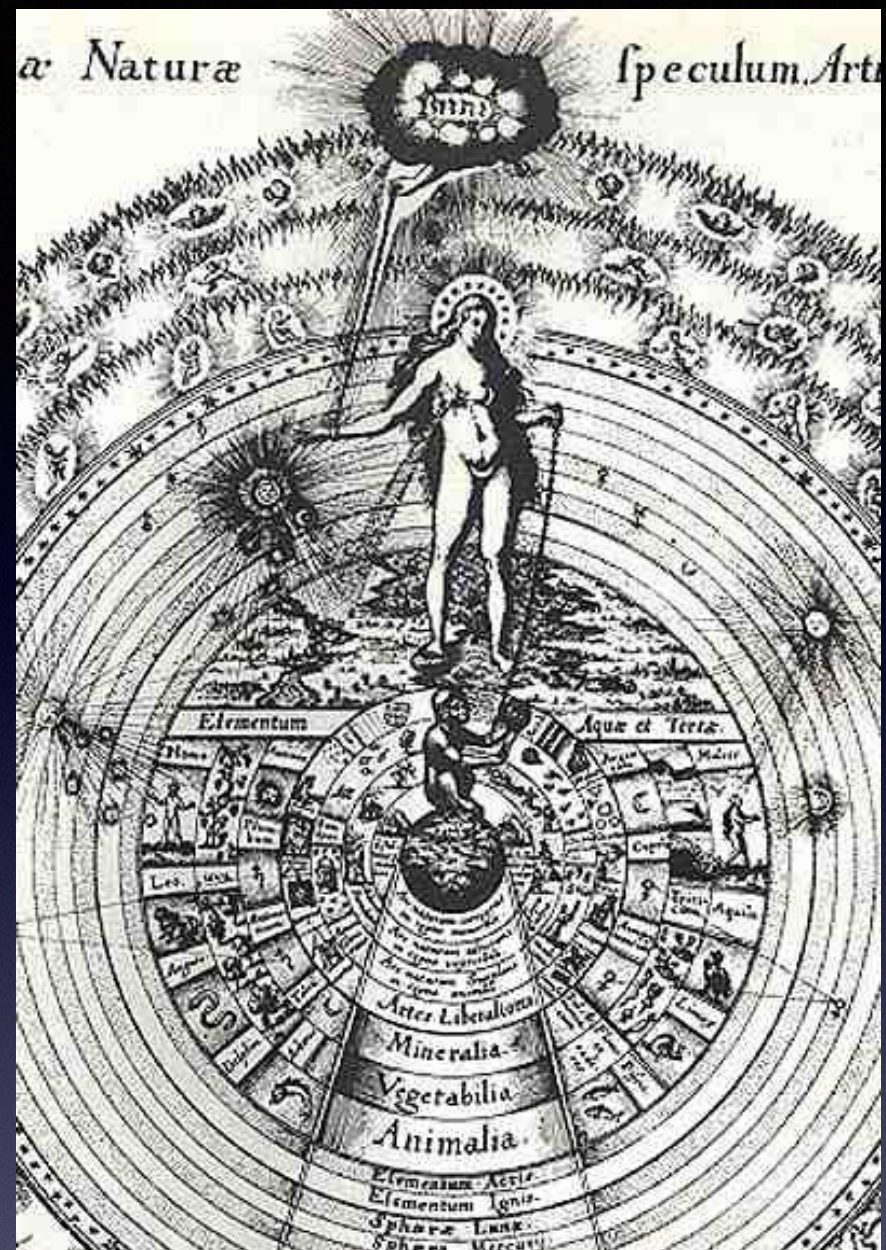
- **Substantial** definitions (an essence) – what religion *is*
- **Functional** – what religion *does*

How then to define spirituality?

Spirituality

- From Latin *spiritus* breath
- c.f. Greek *pneuma*
- **Middle Ages:** contrasted with the body/materiality/corporeality
- e.g. “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” Mathew 26: 41





The Medieval view
The Great Chain of Being

In modernity

- the meaning has changed



“Spiritual but not religious”

- no longer **spiritual vs material**
- but **spiritual vs religious**

Religion

- dogmatic
- mired in worldliness
- corrupt
- sclerotic



Spirituality: “a source of values and meaning beyond oneself, a way of understanding, inner awareness, and personal integration.”

–Wade Clark Roof

Spirituality: “points to the intuitive, non-rational meditative side of ourselves, the side that strives for inner and outer connection and a sense of wholeness.”

–Robert Forman

“I refer to spirituality as involving doctrines and practices that help facilitate lived transformations of self and community towards fuller alignment with or expression of what is ‘sacred’.”

–Donald Rothberg

“Such transformation typically occurs through the cultivation of qualities such as love and compassion, wisdom and deep understanding of the human condition, ethical integrity, personal and social liberation, harmony, and justice.”

—contd.

- He contrasts spirituality with religion, which is “the organised forms of doctrine, ritual, myth, experience, ethics, and social structure that together constitute the world in relation to what is deemed sacred.”

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Why the change?

- 1960s revolution: sex, drugs, rock 'n roll
- Post-war reaction to old institutions
- Oral contraception
- Vietnam
- LSD



Aldous Huxley

- Psychedelics can occasion genuine mystical experience





Secularisation

Modernity

- Industrialisation
- Urbanisation
- Detraditionalisation
- Rationalisation (based on calculation)
- Scientific explanation



Post/late modernity

- consumerism
- commodification of culture



Secularisation

- modernity separates secular from religious spheres
- leads to a decline in religious adherence
- or the privatisation of religion



Max Weber (1864-1920)

- Modernity separates science, religion and morals
- In premodern world, these were united



Modernity sunders

Science

Intersubjective

Subjective

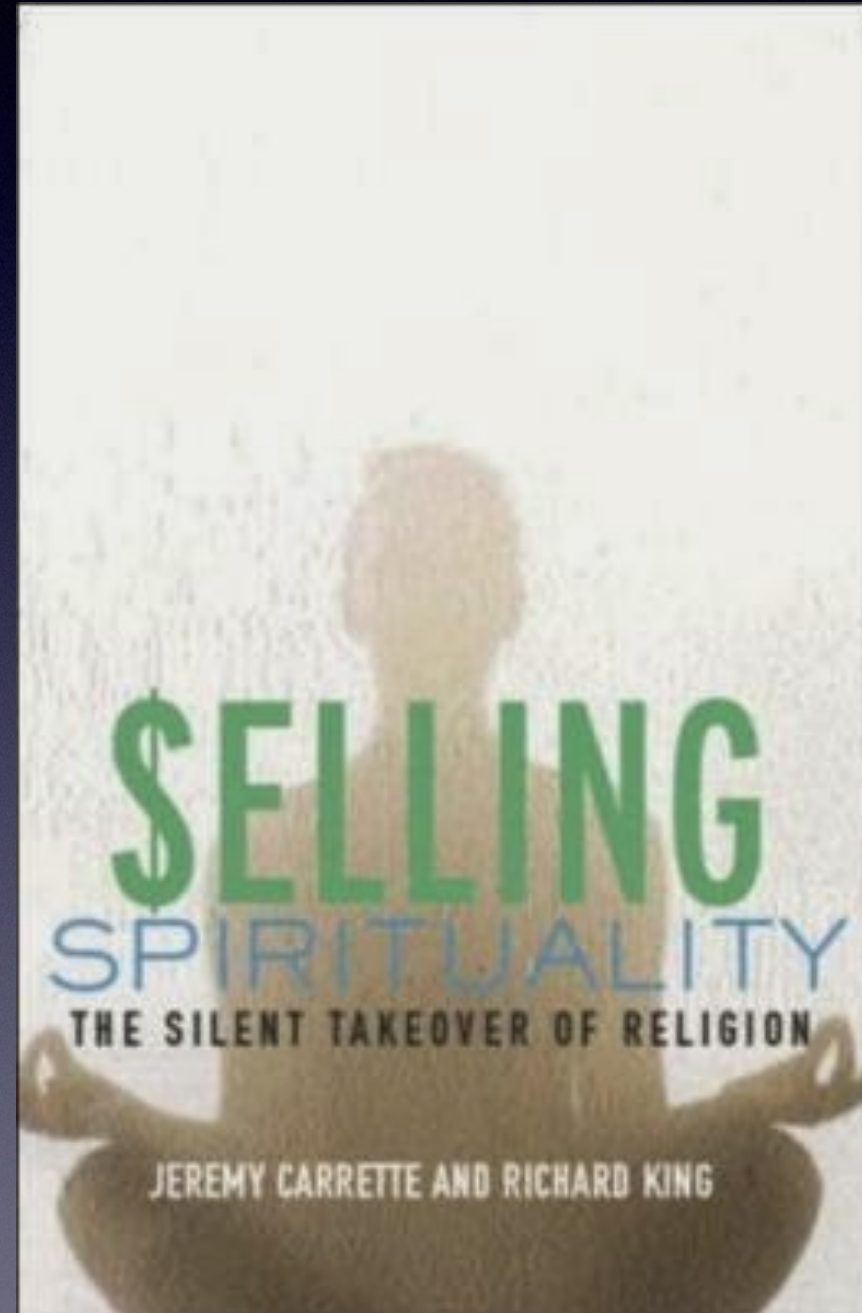
Spirituality

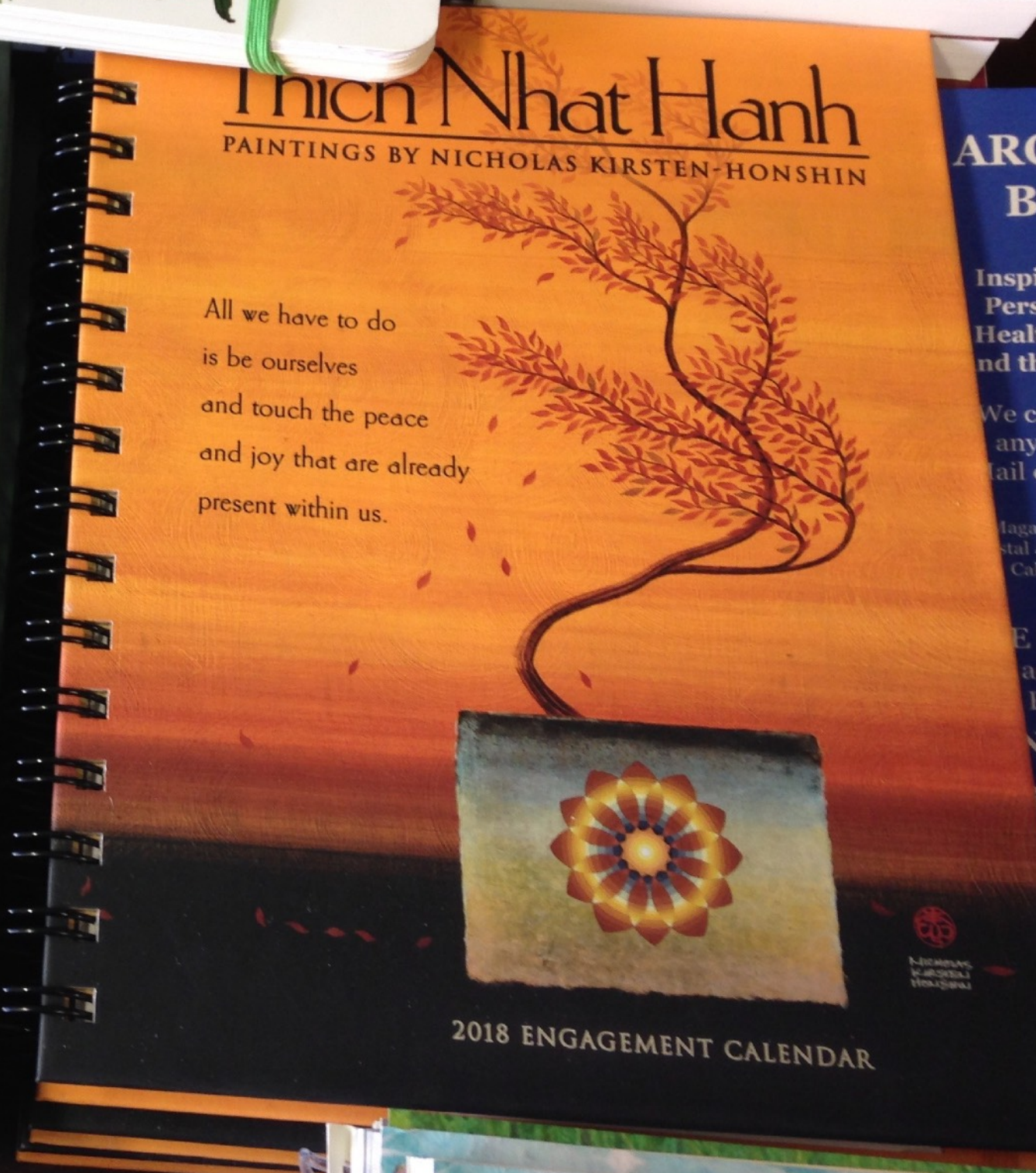
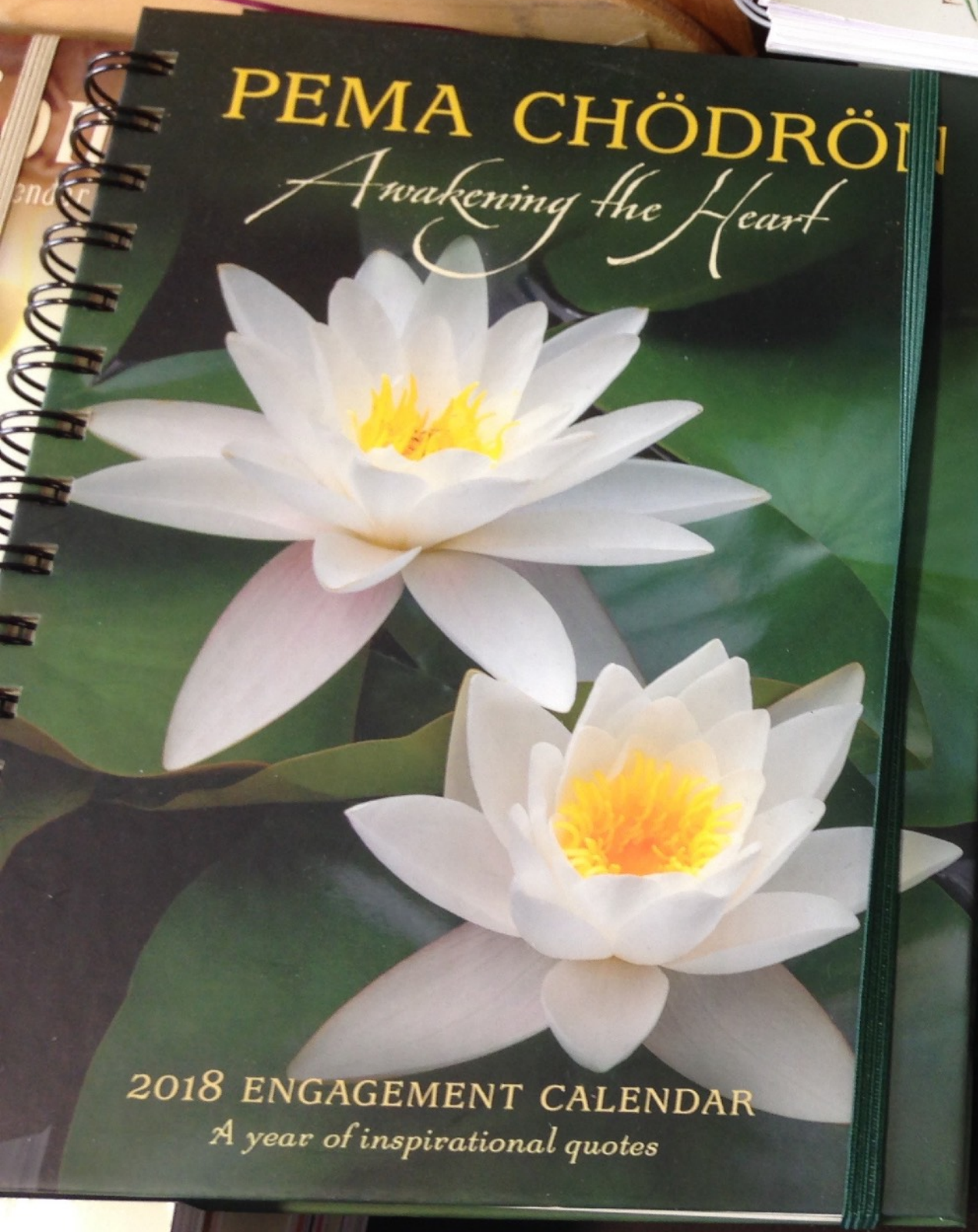
- seeks to unite these spheres



Criticisms

- spirituality a product of, and expresses, late capitalist neo-liberal ideology
- “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.”





gaia.com

- Global digital video streaming
- Mission is to serve the “conscious consumer” or “cultural creatives”
- “educated consumers who make purchasing decisions based on their values”



Anthony Giddens

- In late modernity, the self becomes a reflexive project
- We constantly update and maintain our biographical narratives
- (note: he was writing 20 years before the hashtag and the selfie)



Jorge Ferrer

- Spiritual narcissism



Answers

- Boas Huss: spirituality has emerged from same forces as late capitalism
- But contains a critique of capitalism - counterculture
- It is a new category that defies the **religious/secular** dualism
- why should “authentic” religion be antithetical to money?



Bron Taylor

- Trying to define religion or spirituality is futile
- Better to look for family resemblances
- With this approach, the distinction between religion and spirituality evaporates...



Wait a minute!

- Religion
- Spirituality
- Ecology
- Nature
- Culture etc...



Questions

- is spirituality “self-religion”?
- if so, where does that leave the social dimension?
- can we define spirituality?