"The Massive Subjective Turn:"
Sociological Perspectives of Spirituality

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Abstract

The rapid rise in the number of persons who identify as "spiritual but not religious" is one manifestation of what Charles Taylor described as "the massive subjective turn of modern culture." However, due to its elusive character, sociology has struggled to define spirituality as it is claimed and practiced both inside and outside religious traditions. Empirical research, such as the famous Kendal project, nevertheless shows a pronounced turn away from religiosity toward spirituality. Sociological theories of cultural change provided by religious outsiders help explain that turn at the macro level, while contrasting Christian evaluations provided by religious insiders offer perspectives of what it signifies about Christian faith.

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The editors of *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Flanagan and Jupp 2007) explicitly stated that their choice of the indefinite article "a" in their title, in contrast to the definite article "the," reflected an intentional, self-conscious hesitancy about how to characterize the elusive phenomenon addressed in their compendium. How can the preverbal and unfathomable even be theorized, much less be subjected to empirical inquiry? How can what is by definition indeterminate be measured with any degree of validity and reliability, even indirectly, much less directly? How can it be measured even qualitatively, much less quantitatively? Naturally, such formidable theoretical and methodological challenges have made sociology cautious and at times seemingly reluctant to address the topic, until recently. When claims of spirituality

became common in Euro-American culture, the sheer prevalence of such claims begged and even demanded scrutiny and at least some analysis, tentative and tepid as it may be. This is the honest current state and stage of "the" sociology of spirituality, especially when separated out from the sociology of religion.

What is spirituality, in essence, and what might it all entail? What of spirituality can be experienced, or even practiced, and at least to that extent known? What trends in personal religiosity, faith, and spirituality are evident in Euro-American culture? How might those trends be understood in the context of the larger vectors of culture? And what might it all mean for the practice of Christian faith now and in the future?

A. Definitions

If the aforementioned *Sociology of Spirituality* anthology is authoritative by virtue of combining the views of multiple international scholars on the topic, its joint working definition of spirituality should be a worthy starting point. However, one searches the text in vain for a straight forward definition. In the Introduction, Kieran Flanagan offers many eloquent rhetorical flourishes describing what *characterizes* spirituality, and what spirituality *does*:

> [S]pirituality does not only relate to supernatural forces; it bears on the recognition and pursuit of matters of ultimate concern that lie beyond the limits of the corporeal and the social…. Spirituality is not only about what is beyond human limits; it is the sensibility of incompleteness in the journeying…. Those with spiritual powers know what it is to be touched by them. Yet, oddly, those who come closest to the realms of spirituality seem to be struck dumb in articulating adequately what they feel they discerned…. [I]s its authentic location in the hinterland of the individual where the self finds its ultimate destination, its own unique source of transcendence?... As a phenomenon, spirituality is something subjective, experiential, non-rational, unverifiable, and serendipitous in its eruptions…. Spirituality partly overlaps with theology…it relates to what is proper to metaphysics…it realizes emotions…it inheres in the social…it is available to some but then decidedly unavailable to others. (Flanagan 2007:1-2)

But Flanagan never explicitly delineates what exactly spirituality *is* apart from what it *does* and what characterizes it. In the perennial debate between functional and substantive definitions, his is a functional definition of spirituality, not a substantive one, much like Emile Durkheim's (1912) classic definition of religion. Functional definitions of religion identify functions such as the provision of meaning and belonging, social control and social cohesion, without suggesting a distinctive element of religion that distinguishes it from other phenomena. Substantively, Flanagan leaves the reader with only the understanding that spirituality is rife with "paradoxes, mysteries, and conundrums" (2007:2), and that "the trouble with spirituality is that its opacity

admits too much but precludes too little" (2007:11). Seemingly, spirituality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Other scholars have been somewhat more definitive and delimiting in conceptualizing spirituality. Donald Swenson (2009) summarized spirituality as the sacred *within*, in contrast to religion which is the sacred *between* or *among*. Durkheim, of course, provided the seminal definition of the sacred, differentiating it from the profane. The sacred is that which is set apart from everyday life to be honored beyond questioning and defended above all, calling out reverence, awe, and obligation. The profane is everything else, that is, the ordinary, mundane, and merely instrumental. While the sacred usually implies the higher powers of the divine or transcendent, virtually anything can be deemed worthy of veneration or reverence, including what is material as readily as what is non-material. "[B]y sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called Gods or Spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred" (1912:52).

Equating spirituality with religiousness, as does Christian Smith (2017), Donald Swenson (2009) defined and elaborated spirituality under the broader category of individual religious experience. Spirituality "refers to those aspects of religion and religiosity or religiousness that have an internal presence to the individual. It includes such elements as feelings, moods, attitudes, beliefs, attributions, and the like" (2009:43). Spirituality is thus internal to the individual, whereas religion is external, the latter residing in social institutions. But even this is a statement more about the location of spirituality than about its essence.

If Flanagan's introduction to "a" sociology of spirituality was too avoidant of definition, an equally authoritative summative source, venturing the definite article in "The Sociology of Spirituality," posed the opposite problem of a definition reduced to a single word. Matthew Wood (2010) defined spirituality simply as self-authority. Underlying the various sociological definitions of spirituality, Wood noted, is the commonality of people exercising their own authority. Here again is the problem of characterizing a phenomenon without actually stating what it is. Ignoring the possibility that a higher power beyond the self might actually be operative authoritatively on or in the self, self-authority may be one aspect of spirituality, but there are surely many forms of self-authority that have nothing to do with and make no claim to anything spiritual. Arrogance and narcissism are two good candidates. Wood was also highly critical of such a conception of spirituality on the grounds that it presented people as autonomous individuals, not as social actors, and therefore failed to address the social practices, social interaction, and social contexts of spirituality. Smith's sociological description, if not definition of spirituality, serves well as summary.

> By spirituality I mean that dimension of human life that concerns the most profound, meaningful, and transcendent visions of human existence, feeling, and desires. Spiritual matters…concern…the greatest and highest good, truth, rightness, value, vitality, meaning, and beauty… Things spiritual of this nature have a quality that transcends

instrumental means-ends rationality. They sustain and guide people…in ways that actually pre-rationally and a-rationally govern, rather than are governed by, preferences, rationality, and calculated choices. (2014:2)

B. Public Patterns

Talk about spirituality in the streets, workplaces, playgrounds, media – everywhere – has spiked in the last generation, and whenever it is discussed, it is typically understood, explicitly or implicitly, in the context of or in contrast to religion. The two appear to be permanently tethered. Traditionally, spirituality was presumed to occur within religious parameters, but increasingly it is as readily pursued and experienced outside religion. This creates a fourfold matrix of self-identification – religious, spiritual, both, or neither. Comparative North American national percentages of self-identification are as follows:

	Americans in 2017	Canadians in 2015
Both religious and spiritual	48%	24%
Spiritual but not religious	27%	39%
Religious but not spiritual	6%	10%
Neither religious nor spiritual	18% (Pew 2017)	27% (Angus Reid 2015)

Apart from those who self-identify as traditionally religious, three categories of the irreligious have been labelled and researched by social science.

Nones
First, the rapid recent rise of religious "nones," those atheists, agnostics, humanists, and others who claim no religion or religious affiliation, is well documented and well known. In America, they rose from 16% of the population in 2007 to 23% in 2014, an increase of 7% in 7 years (Pew 2015). In Canada, they rose from 4% in 1971 to 26% in 2015, an increase of 22% in 44 years (Angus Reid 2015). And in Britain, they rose from 48% in 2015 to 53% in 2017, an increase of 5% in just 2 years (NatCen 2017). Nones are "the fastest growing 'religious' group in much of the modern Western world" (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017), and have been described as "The World's Newest Major Religion" (Bullard 2016). Fully one quarter to one half of Euro-Americans now reject religion, or are at best indifferent to it.

But it's not that simple or clear-cut. Just as in the realm of politics, where the term "none" originated and signified no political party affiliation but not necessarily political apathy or inactivity, so too in the realm of religion. For example, on several common measures such as prayer and belief in God, nones in the United States exhibit nearly equal levels of spirituality to self-identifying Christians in Western Europe (Pew 2018). In *Choosing our Religion: The Spiritual*

Lives of America's Nones, Elizabeth Drescher (2016) documented how, in their everyday lives, many nones are not substantially different from "somes," those with some affiliation with traditional religion. Most nones also believe in a higher power, pray in order to connect with transcendence and the sacred, engage in rituals that mark sacred space and time, and ground ethical action in Good Samaritan care for others. However, they take interpersonal relational intimacy to be the starting point of spiritual life, maintaining that caring compassion, not ideology or theology, is the core of meaningful spiritual life. Spirituality for them is less about believing, behaving, and belonging (Bass 2012), and more about being and becoming. "In contrast to the thin, internalized, self-referential quality that is often ascribed to spiritualities pursued outside institutional contexts, a spirituality of being and becoming includes a number of robust practices that unfold in the context of everyday life" (2016:14).

Throughout the process of her qualitative research via focus groups and personal interviews, Drescher refined a compilation of the 25 most spiritually meaningful practices of nones, ranked according to survey results. The top four were what she termed and elaborated as the Four Fs: enjoying time with family, friends, food, and fido (pets). Other activities included specific ways of enjoying nature, art, physical activity, reflection, and service, as well as traditional religious activities such as praying, studying sacred texts, and attending worship. Notably, the data showed little difference between the nones and the somes, suggesting that both experience spirituality similarly in everyday life. Drescher concluded that the construct of spirituality is more fluid than fuzzy, and more horizontal than vertical. But "the boundaries between the affiliated and the unaffiliated are remarkably porous… the spiritual paths of the Nones and Somes parallel and intersect on a regular basis" (2016:10).

Dones

Second, the "dones" are a more recent category of people more reactive to religion. They are persons of deep Christian faith who have reluctantly despaired of the organized church and become de-churched. They are simply done with church, but not their faith. Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope coined the term "church refugees" to describe those

> who've been forced from their homes – where they'd prefer to stay – for fear of persecution…. [who] tell stories of frustration, humiliation, judgment, embarrassment, and fear that caused them to leave…. [who] worked diligently for reform within the church but felt the church was exclusively focused on its own survival and resistant to change…. They're people who've made an explicit and intentional decision to leave organized religion. They didn't drift away casually. (2015:15-6)

Nonetheless, Packard and Hope found that the dones were mostly not angry with the church. Instead, most were just bored and feeling stunted spiritually, convinced that they had to get out if they were to survive spiritually. Church refugees wanted the interpersonal relationality of community, but got judgment instead. They wanted meaningful activity in the

life of the church, but got bureaucracy instead. They wanted authentic conversation, but got didactic doctrine instead. They wanted meaningful engagement with the world, but got moral prescriptions instead. When dones leave churches, they take with them their often freed and deepened belief in God, their love of community, and their need to be actively engaged in community. "We expected to find a lot of overworked, stressed-out people opting out of leadership responsibilities so they could take a break. This could not be further from the truth. The de-churched are, as a general rule, leaving to do more, not less" (2015:133).

The Barna Group terms these people those who "love Jesus but not the church," and placed their number at 10% of Americans in 2017, up from 7% in 2004 (Barna 2017). Their biggest differences from evangelicals in spiritual practices were that 32% spent time in nature for reflection compared to 13% of evangelicals, 26% read scripture compared to 82% of evangelicals, 20% practiced meditation compared to 5% of evangelicals, 10% practiced yoga compared to 1% of evangelicals, 9% read books on spiritual topics compared to 35% of evangelicals, and 0% attended groups or retreats compared to 31% of evangelicals.

SBNRs

A third category of religiously unaffiliated persons, likely the most claimed and controversial on the irreligious end of the spectrum, is more accurately understood as a sub-category of the nones. It is also even more recently emergent than the nones as a whole, and rising more rapidly. The "spiritual but not religious" are rooted in the early 19th century theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the early 20th century psychology of William James, the counter culture of the 1960s, and the New Age movement of the 1980s. First named in 2000 (Erlandson 2000), they are by now simply identified by their initials: SBNR. In America, they rose from 19% of the population in 2012 to 27% in 2017, an increase of 8% in 5 years (Pew 2017). Characterized as cultural progressives driven by frustration with the institutional and hunger for the mystical, they have also been criticized as superficial patrons of consumer culture disinterested in and probably incapable of the sustained dedication and asceticism of classical mysticism, casual dabblers in feel-good practices that do not challenge their self-interested priorities, and narcissists who have descended into spiritual navel-gazing.

Yet Linda Mercadante's (2014) qualitative research into the minds of the SBNRs in turn contests such superficial critique with a more nuanced, sympathetic, and even-handed corrective. For one, she differentiates five sub-types of SBNRs. First, "dissenters" take issue with the theology of organized religion, intentionally embrace contrary positions, and are comprised of three further sub-sub-types. "Protesting dissenters" have been turned off by negative personal experiences, "drifted dissenters" have simply fallen out of touch, while "conscientious objector dissenters" are overtly skeptical of all religious institutions. Second, "casuals" engage in spiritual practices occasionally and functionally for therapeutic benefits in times of trouble, or for meaningful leisure activities. Spirituality neither captures their attention

nor organizes their lives. Third, "explorers" are "spiritual tourists" with a strong "spiritual wanderlust" and an "unsatisfied curiosity" about the diversity of options in the religious marketplace. Seeking novelty and new experiences, they find fulfillment in the journey, and have no intention to commit to a home destination. Fourth, "seekers" are eager to find a completely new religious identity or alternative spiritual group to which they can commit. They actively pursue a new spiritual home. Finally, "immigrants" are "trying on" a radically new spiritual home, but are still adjusting to their new environment, and often struggling with its demands.

At the same time, Mercadante teases out a common, emerging set of beliefs and even latent theologies of SBNRs concerning transcendence, human nature, community, and the afterlife, though they are often unaware of the commonalities they share. Framing it all is a firm rejection of religious exclusivism and a warm acceptance of religious syncretism, reaching toward what Wayne Teasdale (2001) termed the "interspirituality" that could potentially result from interfaith dialogue, and be approached through mystical experience.

As the data show, half of Americans identify as both religious and spiritual, and presumably sense no tension between the two. Their spirituality is experienced within traditional religion. But more than one quarter of Americans, and significantly higher percentages in other Western nations, identify as spiritual but not religious, sensing clear conflict between the two, and siding with the former. Their spirituality is experienced outside traditional religion. The fundamental facts then are that, for the general population, the two are separable and one is preferable. Neuroscientist Sam Harris, one of the four horsemen of the New Atheism, is a high-profile example of someone evangelistically opposed to religion, yet paradoxically a practitioner of spirituality. In *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (2015), he adopted a "rational approach to spirituality" and reported on his own spiritual quest, advocating for meditation and mindfulness in Buddhist forms. Though consciousness is real, the self, he asserted, is an illusion that can be extinguished through meditation, leading to compassionate and ethical behaviors toward others. Attempting to find a middle way between the pseudo-scientific and the pseudo-spiritual, he inexplicably legitimated his own spiritual experience even as he de-legitimated spiritual experience that is religiously informed and framed.

One other survey serves well as summary. Claiming no scientific rigor, church historian Diana Butler Bass (2012) asked various focus groups comprised of clergy and active church members across North America to "play a word association game" with the words "spirituality" and "religion." Though different in order and emotional connotation, the lists generated were remarkably similar in content. Her summary list is as follows:

Spirituality	*Religion*
experience	institution
connection	organization
transcendence	rules
searching	order
intuition	dogma
prayer	authority
meditation	beliefs
nature	buildings
energy	structure
open	defined
wisdom	principles
inner life	hierarchy
inclusive	boundaries
doubt	certainty (2012:69)

This word association is some empirical evidence that over the course of the 20th century, "the word spirituality gradually came to be associated with the private realm of thought and experience, while the word religious came to be connected with the public realm of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal ritual, and adherence to official denominational doctrines" (Fuller 2001:6).

As all the forgoing qualitative social scientific researches demonstrate, it is imperative that, whatever scholars conclude spirituality is or is not, they first listen to the meanings given to spirituality by those who claim and practice it. Observing actions and practices is an important means of comprehending spirituality, but observation alone is inadequate. Until the meanings of actions are accessed, understanding is shallow, and the only means of accessing meanings is through the words of practitioners themselves. Collective actions and meanings can then no doubt be interpreted, assessed, and systematized by scholarship, but the reality of subjective experience dare not be trampled. Social science itself is called to humility, because it is probable that

> any scientific operational definition of spirituality is likely to differ from what a believer means when speaking of the spiritual. Scientists study beliefs or feelings or perceptions about spirituality, or they study behavioral practices and effects related to religion, all of which, from the believer's perspective, are essentially physical manifestations that fall far short of representing or comprehending the real thing, the essence of what is experienced as spirituality. Although scientists frequently conceptualize and are interested in that which is not directly observable, scientific constructs are generally assumed to correspond, albeit imperfectly, to physically real entities. The believer, on the other hand, is surely not meaning anything like an underlying neurobiological event

or structure when speaking of what is spiritual. This difference of meaning creates an inherent definitional if not a procedural tension in the study of spirituality. (Miller and Thoresen 2003:27)

With this caution fully in mind, sociological perspectives of spirituality are nevertheless able to provide further insight.

C. The Kendal Project

Perhaps the most significant recent sociological field study of spirituality was conducted by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead and reported in *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (2005). This landmark study has provided guiding concepts subsequently employed in the sociology of spirituality, although their particular terms, while descriptive, remain rather awkward. Their hypothesis was that traditional religion has suffered secularization, and has been eclipsed by a new spirituality enjoying sacralization in a "holistic milieu." As Carl Jung put it earlier, "We are only at the threshold of a new spiritual epoch" (1976:476). To make sense of both the decline of religion and the rise of spirituality, Heelas and Woodhead offered a "subjectivization thesis" that resonates with what Charles Taylor called "the massive subjective turn of modern culture" (1991:26). This is "a turn away from life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties, and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005:2). In the terms that Heelas and Woodhead generated, it is a turn away from 'life-as' in which

> people think of themselves first and foremost as belonging to established and 'given' orders of things which are transmitted from the past… What matters is obeying, heeding, pursuing ways of life which stand over and above the individual self and bestow meaning upon life… The most extreme examples of 'life-as' can be found in military contexts (where, to quote Tennyson in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', it is 'Theirs not to make reply/Theirs not to reason why/Theirs but to do and die'), or in the religious life (where, to quote the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuit should become 'a corpse which suffers itself to be borne and handled in any way whatsoever'). (2005:3)

The corresponding turn toward 'subjective-life' is toward finding one's own unique source of significance, meaning, and authority in

> states of consciousness, states of mind, memories, emotions, passions, sensations, bodily experiences, dreams, feelings, inner conscience, and sentiments – including moral sentiments like compassion… Thus the key value for the mode of 'life-as' is conformity to external authority, whilst the key value for the mode of 'subjective-life' is authentic connection with the inner depths of one's unique life-in-relation. Each mode

has its own satisfactions, but each finds only danger in the other, and there is a deep
incompatibility between them. (2005:3-4)

Heelas and Woodhead referenced marriage to illustrate such incompatibility. Seeing marriage
as a sacred institution, a 'life-as' spouse is called to sacrifice personal happiness for marital
duty. Seeing marriage as 'subjective-life' prevents undermining and potentially damaging the
inner realities of who spouses are as persons in themselves.

The application to religion and spirituality is obvious; religion sacralizes 'life-as,' while
spirituality sacralizes 'subjective-life.' Yet Heelas and Woodhead were careful to nuance their
conceptual distinction when it comes to Christianity.

'[S]pirituality is often used in Christain circles to express devotion to God or Christ – as
when spirituality is thought of as 'obedience to the will of God' with the believer
entering into an intense relationship (involving self-surrender) with the divine. Such
spirituality is subjective in the sense that it involves often intense experiences (of joy
awe, sorrow, gratitude, etc.), but objective in the sense that it is focused on something
which is and remains external to and higher than the self. This is experience of the
sacred as transcendent, higher life – whether directly by way of the inspiration of the
Holy Spirit, or indirectly by way of the scripture and tradition. It is not an experience of
the sacred as integral to, inseparable from, and flowing through one's own 'subjective-
life.' As such, it might be called 'life-as spirituality.' (2005:5-6)

The research hypothesis which Heelas and Woodhead tested empirically, both qualitatively and
quantitatively, and verified in what has come to be known as the Kendal Project because of the
small city in north-west England in which it was conducted, was as follows:

1. Life-as forms of the sacred, which emphasize a transcendent source of significance
and authority to which individuals must conform at the expense of the cultivation of
their unique subjective-lives, are most likely to be in decline;
2. Subjective-life forms of the sacred, which emphasize inner sources of significance and
authority and the cultivation or sacralization of unique subjective-lives, are most likely
to be growing. (2005:6)

In assessing "the winners and losers in the contemporary spiritual marketplace" (2005:10),
Heelas and Woodhead brought to light the central importance of culture on matters of religion,
faith, and spirituality. While expressly avoiding "some sort of paean of praise for the self-
centered self" (2005:11), they did describe in detail the holistic nature of 'subjective-life'
spirituality that involves self-in-relation rather than self-in-isolation.

Of course, not all were convinced by Heelas and Woodhead's analysis. For example,
David Voas and Steve Bruce (2007) criticized the conflation of leisure and therapeutic activities
with the sacred, disputed the significance of the "holistic milieu," and concluded that its
flourishing confirms rather than challenges secularization. Assessing the "spiritual revolution"
as another false dawn for the sacred, they maintained that "unconventional spirituality is a

symptom of secularization, not a durable counterforce to it" (2007:43). They also questioned how a distinctively spiritual element can be isolated and identified in therapeutic activities such as yoga, massage, Reiki, or acupuncture. Overall, they questioned the magnitude, depth, and staying power of the spirituality Heelas and Woodhead observed, and suggested that the significance of the phenomenon had been exaggerated. "[E]vidence that holistic concepts are becoming part of the culture do not show that a spiritual revolution is coming, any more than the strength of the Christian heritage shows that a religious revival is just around the corner" (2007:59).

D. Theories of Culture

The shift from 'life-as' to 'subjective-life' is but one characterization and labelling of a change from a former cultural ethos to the current cultural ethos, one that many theorists have observed and attempted to describe, label, and explain. Few would dispute that significant cultural change has transpired in Western societies in the last fifty years. Fewer would dispute that momentous cultural change has transpired in Western societies in the last two millennia.

It is currently conventional to distinguish eras of human history in terms of premodern, modern, and postmodern cultures, though their character, time-span, and very existence are constantly debated. The three aspects of the three historical eras perhaps most pertinent to the analysis of spirituality are that, first, discrepant realities were deemed to be mysteries in premodernity, but were deemed to be contradictions in modernity, and are deemed to be paradoxes in today's postmodernity. Second, religion and God were deemed to be authoritative in premodernity, whereas logic and science were deemed to be authoritative in modernity, and the self or group in postmodernity. Third, the nature of the self was deemed to be embedded and unseen in premodernity, autonomous and fixed in modernity, and relational and adaptable in postmodernity. Intriguingly, advocates of transpersonal psychology have suggested that "the driving force behind a transition to transmodernism is spirituality" (Burns 2006:166).

In *A Secular Age* (note again the indefinite article), Charles Taylor (2007) described the three distinct historical epochs as nonetheless having in common a desire for connection with the transcendent. In the *ancien regime* (pre-modernity), relation to the transcendent came via a pre-ordained cosmic order. In the *age of mobilization* (early modernity), that relation came via engagement with the social institutions and practices in which the transcendent had been subsumed. Humans were then tasked with realizing the divine plan in their everyday activities and relations of mutual obligation in what Weber termed the new "this-worldly" re-orientation of religion.

Today in the *age of authenticity* (1960s – present), expressive individualism and authentic selfhood are given preeminence as means of connection with the transcendent. An outgrowth of 19th century romanticism, this focus on the individual leads to conflict with

traditional, institutional forms of religion, and with the needs of religious communities. Some individuals then leave religion while others re-invent it, seeking new ways to find meaning in the transcendent. As Taylor opined, "[I]f we don't accept the view that the human aspiration to religion will flag, and I do not, then where will the access lie to practice of and deeper engagement with religion? The answer is the various forms of spiritual practice to which each is drawn in his/her own spiritual life" (2007:515). Nevertheless, Taylor argued that the collective dimension of religion that Durkheim emphasized, and the component of collective effervescence in particular, remains important. "Thus, Taylor concludes that while the new frame for religious practice is individualistic, it is not necessarily individuating. People still seek others with whom to pursue their chosen belief in the transcendent" (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2018:554).

Just prior to the phrase "spiritual but not religious" entering popular parlance, the famous case of Sheila Larson became iconic in literature on religion. Sheila was a pseudonym for one of the interviewees in the chapter on religion in Robert Bellah et al.'s landmark *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1985). She was presented as an exemplar of the privatization of religion, and what the research team conceptualized as expressive individualism, in contrast to instrumental individualism.

> Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and who describes her faith as "Sheilaism." "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilasim. Just my own little voice…. It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other." Like many others, Sheila would be willing to endorse few more specific injunctions. (1985:221)

Though Bellah and his colleagues speculated on the subsequent possibility of each person then having their own religion, today Sheila would likely have described her personal faith, however vague and vacuous, as spirituality, not religion.

To Taylor's point, Sheilaism may well have been individualistic, but it would prove to be less than individuating by the turn of the 21st century. Twenty years after Bellah's work, in the massive National Study of Youth and Religion, Smith and Denton distilled the *de facto* creed of what they termed "moralistic therapeutic deism" which had become the *de facto* faith of most American youth.

- a God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and most world religions.
- the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.

- good people go to heaven when they die. (Smith and Denton 2005)

Scarcely more substantive than Sheilaism, moralistic therapeutic deism nevertheless includes a moral dimension traditionally associated with, if not derived from religion, a therapeutic dimension currently more coupled with spirituality, and a theological dimension inherited from Christianity, the deism of a transcendent (versus immanent) distant divine. Thus it contains the primary ingredients of the *de facto* spirituality of many who would not identify as religious.

Two 20ᵗʰ century sociologists developed theories of culture that offer insight into the 21ˢᵗ century turn from religion to spirituality without necessarily addressing it directly. Though most known as a micro-sociologist, Georg Simmel also focused extensively on the cultural level of social reality, what he termed "objective culture" (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2018). Culture is clearly created and constantly re-created by people, taking on a life of its own, becoming reified, growing ever larger, more elaborated, more intertwined, and more powerful, and exerting ever more coercive force on the lives of individual actors, what Simmel termed "subjective culture." Thus the growth of collective, objective culture threatens the growth of individual, subjective culture. According to one of Simmel's general principles, "The total value of something increases to the same extent as the value of its individual parts declines" (1907:199). This impoverishment of subjective culture by the expansion of objective culture is what he termed "the tragedy of culture." As culture gets thicker, individuals get thinner, leading them to alienation, cynicism, blasé attitudes, impersonal relations, and cultural malaise.

Religion, according to Simmel, is part of objective culture, and the recent rise of spirituality can be understood in part as pushback from subjective culture against objective culture, attempting to reverse and rectify the tragedy of culture. "In his assessment of modern culture, Simmel points out that there is an overarching struggle between life and form, and says that one 'can find the same tendency in contemporary religion'" (Varga 2007:157). He states that "mystical tendencies suggest that life's longing may be frustrated by objective forms in themselves… Mysticism aspires toward a deity which transcends every personal and particular form; it seeks an undetermined expanse of religious feeling which does not conflict with any dogmatic barrier, a deepening into formless infinity, a mode of expression based only on the powerful longing of the soul" (Simmel 1968:23). Simmel postulated that the more traditional religions are rigidified, the greater the emergent need for spirituality to transcend them would become, and the greater the likelihood that spirituality would revitalize religion.

The possibility of revitalization is also germane to Pitirim Sorokin's theory of cultural change, in which change is seen as cyclical, or more accurately pendular, instead of linear in the premodernity-modernity-postmodernity sense. All cultures tend to swing back and forth between the opposite extremes of what Sorokin termed "sensate" periods and "ideational" periods (1937). Sensate periods are materialistic, viewing true reality as sensory – only the material world is real. The dominant values are wealth, health, bodily comfort, sensual pleasures, power, and fame, most of which are pursued via science and technology. Religion is

considered a relic of the past, with what remains of it tending toward either fundamentalism or fideism. At the other end of the pendulum, ideational periods are spiritualistic, viewing true reality as super-sensory and transcendent. Mysticism and revelation are considered valid sources of truth and morality, leading to asceticism and moralism. Even economics is conditioned by religious and moral commandments, such as laws against usury, and religious art flourishes, such as Gothic cathedrals. However, each extreme carries the seeds of its own decay, neither is sustainable indefinitely, and both reverse into the other.

As the cultural pendulum swings from one extreme to the other, cultures pass through an integral period which Sorokin termed "idealistic" culture, and which he described as a harmonious balance between sensate and ideational tendencies. Desirable as it may be, it is nonetheless seemingly impossible for cultures to maintain the ideal balance. As for Sorokin's assessment of the culture of his day, mid-twentieth century Western culture was, in his detailed historical comparisons, the third and most sensate in history, and "overripe" for reversal. Employing Sorokin's concepts and confirming Sorokin's theory in his own overview of Western history since 800 BCE, Frederic Baue (2001) argued that 21st century Western culture is now transitioning from that overripe sensate mode back to an ideational mode, resulting in another spiritual revolution. Furthermore, Baue argued that Christianity is a paradoxical blend of the spiritual and the material, an integral, idealistic balance of sensate and ideational tendencies, in contrast to what he critiqued as the vague and vacuous postmodern spirituality "lurking" in the current swing back toward an ideational culture. "An ideational culture can be spiritual without being Christian. In fact, it can be positively antagonistic toward Christianity" (2001:54).

E. Contrasting Spiritualities

Based on in-depth interviews of people across the religious spectrum and large-scale surveys, Robert Wuthnow (1998) brought finer distinctions to the spirituality that arose in the second half of the 20th century in America. Like Sorokin, Wuthnow identified two dysfunctional extremes, with a potentially more functional, integral combination centered in between. The conservative 1950s were characterized by a "spirituality of dwelling" that "inhabited" the sacred places and spaces of established religious institutions. Since then, this spirituality has become a refuge for fundamentalism's crusade against the secular. Its failing was that it fostered dependence on communities that were inherently undependable, and encouraged idolization of particular places.

The radical 1960s and following were characterized by a "spirituality of seeking" that "negotiated" movement beyond religious institutions. The journey became more important than arriving or staying in any one place, the spiritual quest more meaningful than the religious community. The sacred took up residence in the inner self, not in traditional establishments.

The boundary between religion and therapy become ever more porous. Wuthnow highlighted the obsession with angels in the 1990s as one exemplification. When angels visit, they do not demand church attendance, lasting spiritual commitments, or change in behavior, and encounters with them are brief, subjective, and almost always therapeutic, like much spirituality of the 1990s. The failing of this spirituality of seeking was that it was too unstable to provide social support, or to nurture growth into spiritual maturity. Recognizing the opportunity, established religious organizations adopted seeker-sensitive programming in an attempt to win people back.

As a middle way forward, Wuthnow advocated an alternative "spirituality of practice" for those who want more than endless seeking. Involving both individual and communal dimensions, it included prayer, devotional reading, service to others, contact with the divine, discernment, orderly ritual, sharing experiences and stories with others, and attention to ethics, among other practices. Such a spirituality, he suggested, is best fostered by practice-oriented religious organizations that both ground their members in the essentials of their tradition, and yet at the same time encourage an open, holistic spirituality. They pay attention to "specific spiritual practices by those who desire to live their whole lives as practice… the point of spiritual practice is not to elevate an isolated set of activities over the rest of life, but to electrify the spiritual impulse that animates all of life" (1998:198). This may be the best that organized religion can do or hope for currently, though it is surely less organizationally advantageous than the spirituality of dwelling of the 1950s.

But could a spirituality of practice fostered by practice-oriented religious organizations be healthiest for all individuals, especially those who are no longer interested in being, or even capable of being either spiritual dwellers or spiritual seekers? Why must it be either/or? Why must spirituality be pitted against religion? Have modern religious organizations really driven authentic spirituality out of their midst? Have the prescribed practices that constitute religion according to Smith's definition (Smith 2017) really nullified a spirituality of practice? Surely an authentic spirituality can flourish as readily within a religious tradition as it can outside of a religious tradition. The entire history of Christian spirituality attests to the rich legacy of dweller spirituality within traditional, institutional Christianity. But can there also be a Christian seeker spirituality outside of traditional, institutional Christianity? Do the respective failings of the spirituality of dwelling and the spirituality of seeking mean that all Christians are better off with a spirituality of practicing? How can Christianity allow for and foster a spirituality of practice, without requiring a spirituality of dwelling, or condemning a spirituality of seeking?

F. Christian Cultural Theories

The emic perspective of the subjective religious insider sees cultural change pertaining to religion differently than the etic perspective of the objective social scientific outsider

described above (Harris 1976). Indeed, adherents of a religion do not see their worldview, beliefs, and prescribed practices as religion at all. Theirs is simply the truth of reality; it is all other worldviews, beliefs, and resultant prescribed practices that are mere religion. In a sense, the very concept of religion arises only in pluralist contexts where more than one are present to each other. Only when confronted with an "other" is there need for an overarching term describing alternatives. Yet when Christian insiders track the turn from religion to spirituality, the analysis sounds remarkably similar in the dispassionate details. But of course the tone takes on a passion that social scientific outsiders lack, because the insider's collective self is at stake. The insider is invested in ways that the outsider is not, which typically colors the analysis with a decidedly evaluative hue. Some are unabashedly explicit about their assessment of the cultural turn as positive or negative, progressive or regressive, optimistic or pessimistic, triumph or disaster.

James Herrick (2003) is representative of evangelical Christian scholars who view the turn from religion to spirituality critically, even alarmingly, and at times disdainfully. In his polemic against what he termed the "New Religious Synthesis" that has displaced the "Revealed Word" tradition, he surveyed an impressive array of disparate movements and advocates that have arisen in the wake of the Enlightenment, and together conspired against Christianity, colonizing Western religious consciousness. Herrick spelled out seven components of the New Religious Synthesis, summarized by Baer as follows:

> 1) an ahistorical spirituality that denies the necessity and value of grounding religion in actual time and space, 2) the spiritual centrality and indeed divinity or potential divinity of human reason (or mind, consciousness, imagination, or intellect), 3) a pantheistic infusing of nature with divinity or a life force that animates all matter with "divine energy or soul," thus warranting its "study by science as a source of spiritual knowledge"; 4) the consequent "spiritualization of science" in a monistic universe; 5) a Gnostic focus on secret or occult knowledge as the key to spiritual enlightenment and human progress; 6) spiritual evolution leading to individual human divinity; and 7) mystical experience as the universal bedrock of human religiosity, thus uniting all religious expressions in shared mystical wisdom, validating religious pluralism, and undermining Christian exclusivity. (Baer, 2005).

In his conclusion, Herrick emphasized that the New Religious Synthesis "promises to secure the soul's triumph over external restraints including time, space, evil, other people, conventional morality, and especially religious tradition" (2003:279). As such, Herrick demonized all that he took as other than strict historical orthodoxy. His was certainly a staunch defense of defined Christian tradition (which he also summarized in seven points) against the heresy of all else.

On the other hand, Phyllis Tickle (2008) is representative of Christian scholars who view the turn from religion to spirituality approvingly. Whereas Herrick's attention was focused more on the Western cultural context of Christianity, Tickle's attention was more on what has

evolved within Christianity itself. Yet as she recognized and overviewed, developments within the church have been impelled by the monumental cultural disruptions of the 20th century, exacerbated now by postmodernity and its economic, political, technological, and scientific correlates that have brought into question basic presuppositions. She conceptualized spirituality, simply defined as "experiences and values that are internal to the individual" (2008:36), to be braided together with corporeality and morality to form religion, further evidence that orthodoxy has given way to orthopraxy and orthopathy.

Her "big theory" is that about every five hundred years the church feels compelled to clean out its attic and hold a giant rummage sale of outworn items. Old dogmas and practices are cast off to make room for teachings and practices that speak more directly to the new age, as Christianity renews itself in 500-year cycles. In the sixth century, following the fall of the Roman Empire, Gregory the Great guided Christianity into the monasticism that would protect and preserve it through the five hundred years of Dark Ages to come. In the Great Schism of 1054, Rome and Constantinople exchanged their anathemas and bulls of excommunications and split Christianity into its Western and Eastern brands. In the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century, Protestants and Catholics did much the same. Today, in the Great Emergence, the emergent church movement is forging a way forward, as a renewed cultural imagination takes hold. The question underlying every re-formation is about the location of authority, the most recent being the Reformation's understanding of scripture. Though it may be premature and rather presumptuous to grant it such historical significance, Tickle is effusive in her praise and enthusiasm for a vibrant, reconstituted Christianity. "If… the Great Emergence really does what most of its observers think it will, it will rewrite Christian theology – and thereby North American culture – into something far more Jewish, more paradoxical, more narrative, and more mystical than anything the Church as had for the last seventeen or eighteen hundred years" (2008:162).

G. Conclusions

The two most pressing questions about the turn away from religion toward spirituality concern its magnitude and its consequences. Perhaps only the first can be answered with any accuracy and confidence at this point in history. If we are in fact in the midst of a full-blown spiritual revolution, the magnitude can hardly be overstated. What the consequences will be cannot yet be fully determined, as most of those effects still lie mostly in the future. What will Christianity in particular look like when the loss of basic biblical literacy, theological acumen, and institutional authority is more acute than what is already evident? One could argue that such conditions have already existed in previous historical eras, and that lack of biblical literacy, theological acumen, and institutional authority has in fact characterized the personal Christian faith of the average feudal serf working the fields, the average industrial laborer working the

mills, and even the average self-taught clergyman working the pulpit (Stark 2000). But though they may share some similar characteristics, practicing that kind of Christian faith in pre-modern, pre-Christendom cultural conditions, where the biblical text has never been read by the average adherent, theological doctrine has never been understood by the average believer, and church authority has never been decisive for the average follower, is nonetheless a profoundly different experience than doing so in post-modern, post-Christendom conditions where those practices are relics of the past now spurned.

Two more questions are also pressing. Third, and more interpretively, what does the turn toward spirituality mean? Is it another stage of religious evolution, another manifestation of secularization, or a counterforce to secularization? Were he updating his account of his five historical stages of religious evolution, Robert Bellah (1964) may simply cast the present age as the next, sixth, postmodern stage of religion. Yet others see it not as benign religious transformation, but rather as malignant religious decline, now in its terminal stage. Steve Bruce (2002), for one, sees the displacement of institutional dogma with individual subjectivity or self-authority as the basis for religious legitimacy as "the last gasp and whimper of concern with the sacred in the West, an inconsequential dabbling that is doomed to disappear almost as quickly as it appeared" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005:2).

Fourth, and more evaluatively, is this turn toward spirituality a positive development or a negative development, a good thing or a bad thing? For whom? According to whom? And by what criteria and measurements? Just as a correlation coefficient indicates both the magnitude and direction of relationship between two variables, is this cultural turn a +.1 or +.9, a -.1 or -.9? Whereas "value-free" social scientists writing from an etic perspective aspire to avoid e-value-ation, Christian scholars writing from an emic perspective aspire to no such aversion. Of those of the latter already reviewed here, Herrick was thoroughly critical of the turn, as implied by his title: *The Making of the New Spirituality: The Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition*. In contrast, both Tickle and Bass were enthusiastically affirming of the turn, as trumpeted in Bass's title: *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*.

Regardless of its consequences, its meaning, or its evaluation rendered by Christians, the magnitude of the turn away from religion toward spirituality is as massive as Taylor's "subjective turn of modern culture." Tickle equated it with only three other great movements in Christian history: Gregory the Great, the Great Schism, and the Great Reformation. Harvey Cox (2009) equated it with only one other age transition, the first being from the Age of Faith to the Age of Belief, and now from the Age of Belief to the Age of Spirit. The widespread appeal of spirituality "constitutes a sign of the jarring transition through which we are now passing from an expiring Age of Belief into a new but not yet fully realized Age of the Spirit" (2009:14). In Christian history, it is the "most momentous transformation since its transition in the fourth

century CE from what had begun as a tiny Jewish sect into the religious ideology of the Roman Empire" (2009:2).

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