

REVIEW ESSAY

The Spiritual Turn: The Religion of the Heart and the Making of Romantic Liberal Modernity

by Galen Watts

New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, 256 pages

Dennis Hiebert, University of Manitoba, Canada

The sociology of religion is one of the oldest sub-disciplines of the social science. Each of the primary founders of the discipline gave special attention to religion—Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms*, Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic*, and Marx’s famous critique of religion as “the sigh of the oppressed creature” and “the opium of the people.” The secularization of the twentieth century then delivered their foretold decline of religion at the public macro and meso levels of society, but surprisingly not at the private micro level. In the past fifty years, “lived religion” (Ammerman 2021) has morphed from institutionalized religiosity into personal spirituality, as evidenced by the rapid rise of the “spiritual but not religious” (SBNRs). Thus, the American Sociological Association may well soon need to expand the title of its sub-section to the Sociology of Religion and Spirituality, as will courses taught in university sociology departments.

With his first book, *The Spiritual Turn*, young Galen Watts has vaulted into being a leading scholar of what philosopher Charles Taylor termed “the massive subjective turn of modern culture” (1991:26). Currently on the faculty at the University of Waterloo, Canada, and Associate Director of their Institute for Religion, Culture, and Societal Futures, Watts is a cultural sociologist who describes himself as “wholly agnostic regarding the question of religious truth. For, as I see it, whether the cultural structures and discourses we study correspond to anything not socially constructed is simply not a question the sociologist *qua* sociologist can answer” (31). Notably, he writes in the first person throughout the book.

Watts prefaces his analysis by acknowledging the formative impact Robert Bellah et al.’s classic *Habits of the Heart* (1985) had on his life and work, especially their explication of the moral traditions of expressive and utilitarian individualism which he references throughout this book, their rejection of the simplistic “subtraction version” of secularization, and their elucidation of liberal democracy’s experience of religious transformation as much as religious decline. He also acknowledges Durkheim as his guide and interlocutor, especially Durkheim’s

sensitivity to two pathologies associated with the moral individualism of liberal modernity, namely anomie (lack of social integration) and egoism (lack of moral regulation).

The book is comprised of three parts derived from its title. Part I addresses the spiritual turn by characterizing spirituality and the cultural turn toward it, overviewing the history of the “religion of the heart,” and identifying its ten tenets. Part II addresses romantic liberal modernity by rooting the unprecedented alliance between romanticism and liberalism in the 1960s counterculture, advancing an institutionalist analysis of that counter-culture, mapping the array of social institutions that now comprise the romantic liberal institutional order, and engaging its critiques. Finally, using the semi-structured interviews and participant observation of qualitative field research, Part III addresses romantic liberal persons by providing three in-depth, “cultural sociological case studies of distinct moral communities where the religion of the heart is institutionalized” (14). Atypically, and very effectively, instead of first presenting research data and then theorizing about it, Watts first presents theory and then provides empirical data validating it, using grounded theory and interpretivist sociology.

Watts begins by positing that the polarization between “bad” institutional religion and “good” subjective spirituality is “sociologically vacuous” because “this binary presupposes what needs to be explained” (23). Nevertheless, after critiquing the secularization paradigm, he also acknowledges that “there exists little consensus on the ground regarding what it means to be ‘spiritual’” (28), and settles for Weber’s human need for meaning in disenchanting modernity (theodicy) and Durkheim’s sacred collective representations and morality.

Watts then tracks the religion of the heart—a phrase first coined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau—from the eighteenth century onward through the early nineteenth century Romantic Era and the later American Transcendentalists, followed by the early twentieth century triumph of the therapeutic in William James and Carl Jung and the later humanistic psychology of the New Age Movement and the Human Potential Movement. Embodying Troeltsch’s mystic religion, the religion of the heart summoned personal authenticity, the primacy of affective experience (feeling and intuition), preoccupation with the inner life, and unrelenting self-discovery, self-expression, and ultimately, self-actualization. Most salient to this journal, Watts tracks how all these cultural forces gave rise to the Charismatic Christian Movement, leaving open the question of how said forces impact other expressions of Christianity as well.

Watts postulates that spirituality now in the twenty-first century consists of ten logically interrelated tenets:

- 1) experiential epistemology
- 2) immanence of God or the super-empirical
- 3) benevolent God or universe
- 4) redemptive self as theodicy

- 5) self-realization as teleology
- 6) self-ethic (voice from within)
- 7) virtue as natural
- 8) sacralization of individual liberty
- 9) mind-body-spirit connection
- 10) methodological individualism (48)

Part II of the book locates the religion of the heart in time and space. Spurred by the disenchantment of the rationalism and materialism of modernity, the Romantic movement pursued the exercise of personal freedom that constitutes liberalism not just in the public sphere, but more significantly in the private sphere, where it facilitated realizing the “true self” that was “pre-social” by elevating the heart over the head and self-expression over self-control. This was accentuated and accelerated by the counterculture of the 1960s which brought “epochal moral, social, and political change [via] second-wave feminism, gay liberation, the environmental movement, mass religious disaffiliation, and the spread of multi-culturalism” (68)—in effect, another Great Awakening beyond personal freedom.

Turning to a more sociological, institutional analysis, Watts then recounts how the 1960s counterculture mobilized an ultimately unsuccessful challenge to several major social institutions, yet “served to inscribe and naturalize the moral tradition of expressive individualism” (84). The counterculture challenged the economic sphere’s utilitarian ethic, the legal-political sphere’s rationalist and authoritative ethics, and the private sphere’s authoritative ethic operative in families, voluntary associations, and religious organizations. Indeed, “the very institutional reforms that brought about the decline of Christendom simultaneously created conditions conducive to the flourishing of the religion of the heart” (90). Watts discusses four fields that were profoundly altered: 1) morally, expressive individualism triggered a rights revolution, particularly pertaining to personal identities, 2) politically, romantic liberalism provided philosophical justification for self-realization and the enchantment of private life, 3) epistemologically, liberal modernity facilitated multi-cultural pluralism and subjective, inner authority, and 4) economically, neoliberalism remade the world into a religious marketplace.

Furthering his institutional analysis, Watts maps

the seven institutional fields that collectively constitute the religious sphere of romantic liberal modernity. These comprise 1) the holistic milieu, 2) the charismatic wing of the congregational domain, 3) popular culture and entertainment media institutions, 4) arts institutions, 5) healthcare institutions, 6) educational institutions, and 7) certain dimensions of the economic sphere. (98)

He argues that social pathways to the religion of the heart include the historical and universal need to find meaning in suffering, and the modernity-induced need to cope with the disenchantment of utilitarian individualism as well as the equally modernity-induced struggles with self-identity. Notably, he highlights the move from traditionalist Christianity to seeker-sensitive evangelicalism.

Acknowledging that he “cannot deny that my feet find themselves planted firmly within that of romantic liberalism” (115), Watts then engages five problematic concerns of its critics by offering a Durkheimian reformulation of each. First, he recasts the ascent of subjectivism and irrationality by balancing rationalist and expressive institutions. Second, he recasts the decline of community and the weakening of moral commitment by re-thinking the anomie and egoism endemic to romantic liberal modernity. Third, he recasts the crisis in civic membership and political solidarity by noting that religion is a source of private enchantment, not civic virtue or political solidarity. Fourth, he recasts the triumph of neoliberalism by explicating religion as a counterforce to egoism. And finally, he recasts the movement’s new form of social control and source of collective unfreedom by balancing the need for moral community with the need for shifting involvements.

In summary, Watts boils down the core challenges to the following:

- 1) To what extent does the religion of the heart mitigate or exacerbate the pathologies of romantic liberal modernity—*anomie* and *egoism*?
- 2) Does the religion of the heart lead to a colonization of competing social spheres, thereby impeding shifting involvements and the adoption of rival social perspectives and moral traditions? (136)

In a marked shift from theory to empirical research, Part III of the book details three voluntary associations in Watts’ hometown of Toronto, where “the religion of the heart is discursively encoded, enfolded, and imbued with moral authority” (137) despite their superficial diversity across both “religious” and “secular” contexts. Indeed, each “instantiate a distinctive collective identity on the basis of a shared conception of the ‘true self’” (138). Impressively marshaling existing scholarship and exhibiting his structured and intersectional style of writing, each field site is examined in terms of its history, its exemplification of the ten tenets of the religion of the heart, and its institutionalized collective rituals. Watts’ conclusion is that the spirituality of the religion of the heart is not the atomistic individualism feared and critiqued by many, but rather is culturally coherent and institutionally rooted.

First, New Life Fellowship (NLF) is a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, a branch of the Oxford Group, an American evangelical and ecumenical movement founded in the early twentieth century. Replete with a distinctive normative aesthetic, NLF’s *idioculture* embodies a queer subcultural identity which epitomizes the ten tenets in its overtly religious discourse and

Twelve Step self-help programming. Its meetings are collective rituals of collective effervescence that erect symbolic boundaries between insiders and outsiders, demarcate a distinct and enclosed private setting, use performative storytelling, and practice self-cultivation. It is a safe space where alcoholics can imbue suffering with meaning within a community of redemption, where they can re-learn to be effective persons so as to become effective citizens again.

Second, C3 Toronto (C3T) is a neo-Pentecostal church, one site of the recent global C3 Church movement that promotes a prosperity gospel by “utilizing the most innovative and up-to-date methods in digital marketing” (166). Also characteristic of the movement is its strict authority hierarchy; “all decisions are ultimately made by pastor Sam and his wife, Jess” (167). But in its own way, it too epitomizes Watts’ ten tenets in its discourse. Via its ecstatic worship services, proselytization through storytelling, and relentless positivity, “the collective conscience of C3T reflects a combination of celebrity culture, market values, and a strain of social conservatism” (178). And whereas NLF challenged egoism, C3T legitimates it, while staving off the threat of anomie by enchanting a market mentality. Provocatively, Watts describes C3T as a “greedy institution” of enchantment seeking total allegiance and undivided loyalty from its members.

Third, Tomorrow’s Leaders (TL) is a Toastmasters International public speaking club with the liberal Protestant heritage of the YMCA, but is now the expression of humanistic psychology, the latter being the current unchurched source of American self-help spirituality. While its discourse differs from NLF and C3T in that “there exists little in the way of a canonical text or oral tradition” (194), it too manifests, in its own ways, Watts’ ten tenets. Collective ritual is based primarily on pre-existing social attachments and moral commitments, shared social norms, and revealed personal narratives in public performances. Interestingly, Watts notes how TL is capable of promoting both Benjamin Franklin-style neoliberal and Ralph Waldo Emerson-style left-liberal visions of the good society.

In summary, Watts’ luminous treatise seeks to “defend romantic liberal modernity against its detractors” (216), elucidate how the similarities of the “spiritual” and “nonspiritual” are far more substantial than their differences, and “see that the pursuit of authenticity does not—cannot—entail an escape from norms and institutions, for the true self is not antithetical to society, but rather its creative expression” (223).

As with any work of scholarship, more references could have been cited—one sociology textbook is entitled *The Myth of Individualism* (Callero, 2023)—but the bibliography is already 22 small-font pages of the most erudite works in the field. And there are times when the text becomes slightly repetitive, but that is a byproduct of how supremely well-structured it is, how thorough the introduction, exposition, and conclusion of each section is, providing great clarity and connections; admittedly, this review is mostly merely a listing of its excellent organization

and outline. Its weighty, abstract content combined with its sophisticated vocabulary and eloquent rhetoric probably render *The Spiritual Turn* graduate level reading.

For Christians in particular, it constitutes a solemn, compelling call to examine the extent to which their faith is enculturated and not purely “biblical.” For example, cultural sociologists of Christianity could scrutinize further the Protestant proclivity for an individualistic social imaginary compared to that of Catholic or Orthodox social imaginaries. Or they could study why and in what cultural conditions conservative expressions of Christianity are both more self-focused and other-world oriented, while progressive expressions are both more other-focused and this-world oriented. If truth be told, for many persons of Christian faith today, their “lived religion” may well be more enculturated spirituality than creedal religiosity.

While I acknowledge the bias of my academic interests and personal perspectives aligning with Watts’ brilliant tome, it is one of the best books I have ever read.

References

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Direct correspondence to Dennis Hiebert at dennishiebert28@gmail.com