



The religion of the heart: “Spirituality” in late modernity

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Abstract

In this article I delineate the cultural structure underlying much (if not most) of what goes by “spirituality” in the popular discourse of twenty-first century liberal democracies—which I call the *religion of the heart*. I begin by reviewing the disparate academic literatures relating to the shift from “religion” to “spirituality,” explicating why the study of spirituality remains both marginalized within the sociology of religion and deeply fragmented. I then lay out the theoretical foundations of a cultural sociological approach to the study of religion, which I use to synthesize the existing sociological and historical literature on “spirituality.” I supplement this synthesis with data from my own empirical research in order to offer a systematic representation of the religion of the heart’s ten core tenets and how they relate to one another. I then conclude with a reflection on the implications my analysis holds for the sociology of contemporary religion.

Keywords Spirituality · Religion · Sociology of religion · Late modernity · Self-help

Introduction: from “Religion” to “Spirituality”

The term “spirituality” has a long history; arguably originating in the Christian tradition it derives from the Greek noun *pneuma*, signifying the spirit of God (Sheldrake 2013, p. 2). Yet over the centuries its meaning has morphed, changing with its surrounding social context. Boaz Huss (2014, p. 15) remarks, “The most striking semantic shift of the term is found in its juxtaposition to religion.” Indeed, since the 1960s North Americans and Western Europeans have increasingly preferred “spirituality” to “religion.” Sociologist of religion Reginald Bibby (2019, p. 57) recently found that in the U.K. twenty-seven percent of the population identifies as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR), thirty-three in the U.S., and forty-one in Canada. Similarly, Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers (2007) have observed a “spiritual turn”

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spreading across Western European countries, while Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) have spoken of a “Spiritual Revolution.” As a recent article in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* put it, “we are awash in discourse about spirituality” (Steenland et al. 2018, p. 450).

Despite agreement that a semantic shift has taken place there remains widespread confusion regarding how best to conceptualize it (Rose 2001). This is, in part, because there exists little in the way of an agreed-upon definition of “spirituality” as distinct from “religion.” As Courtney Bender (2010, p. 5) notes, “spirituality is bedeviled not by a lack of definitions but by an endless proliferation of them.” At the same time, most scholars agree there exists an implicit normative opposition at the core of the SBNR moniker, which can be summed up: *negative institutional religion* versus *positive subjective spirituality* (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005). This polarization of “religion” and “spirituality” has become something like cultural common sense, at least among those who reject “religion.” Bibby (2017, p. 143) remarks, “While religion has been scorned and stigmatized and rejected by many, spirituality has known something of celebrity status.” Likewise, Lucy Bregman (2014, p. 3) observes, “the term glows so strongly that it is hard to say anything really *bad* about spirituality.” Yet despite this acknowledgement of an emic (insider) consensus regarding the nature of “spirituality,” there remains profound disagreement over how to conceptualize “spirituality” in etic (academic) terms (Streib and Klein 2017, p. 78). Indeed, the study of spirituality remains low on cohesion and high on Babel-like confusion.

There is no single cause for this; rather, it is the result of a confluence of factors, which have together served to produce a field that is deeply fragmented. Still, there is a simplified story we can tell: as a result of deep-seated theoretical presuppositions in the sociology of religion, “spirituality” has tended to be dismissed, devalued, or distorted by mainstream approaches (Edgell 2012, p. 248). For instance, secularization theorists—who equate religion with historically influential forms of church Christianity (Woodhead 2010)—have generally subsumed the popularity of “spirituality” into a narrative of religious decline, thereby eliding key areas of research (e.g., Bruce 2011, 2017; Voas and Crockett 2005; Crockett and Voas 2006; Voas and Chaves 2016). And while rational-choice or market theories have usefully associated religion with questions of ultimate meaning, they have also reinforced the impression that “spirituality” is culturally deviant and socially insignificant, thereby legitimating its marginalized status in the sociology of religion (Stark and Bainbridge 1979; Stark et al. 2005). This has forced scholars interested in studying the spiritual turn to the margins of the study of religion, thereby splintering the study of spirituality across a host of subfields and disciplines. As a result of this disciplinary siloing, insights and innovations produced in one subfield have rarely been synthesized with those from others. Indeed, the study of spirituality resembles a puzzle whose pieces have been scattered chaotically across the many corners of academia. As a result, the larger picture to which these pieces belong has been obscured. I seek to rectify this.

In this article I bring clarity to the cultural structure underlying much (if not most) of what goes by “spirituality” in late modern liberal democracies—which I call the



religion of the heart.¹ I aim to reorient the sociology of religion away from what Thomas Luckmann (1967, p. 26) once called the "sociography of the churches," instead adopting a cultural sociological approach to the study of religion. I use this theoretical approach to synthesize an array of disparate sociological and historical studies of "spirituality,"² whilst supplementing my analysis with data from my own empirical research with SBNR and neo-Pentecostal millennials in Canada, as well as a discourse analysis of best-selling "spiritual" and self-help books.³ No doubt, in offering such a synthesis of the existing literature, I retrace steps and cover tracks that have been tread before. This may throw into doubt the originality of my analysis. I hope to demonstrate that such a synthesis, given the insights it affords, is both sorely needed and an original contribution in itself.

I begin by reviewing a number of recent sociological studies of "spirituality," which, while theoretically promising, nevertheless serve to downplay the degree to which the religious landscape of late modernity is both distinctive and cohesive. Second, I look beyond the sociology of religion where the study of spirituality has flourished, albeit in disjointed form. I review the varied academic literatures relating to the shift from "religion" to "spirituality" across subfields and disciplines, explicating why the study of spirituality remains extremely fragmented. Third, I outline the methodology to which my comprehensive synthesis of this literature is indebted: the strong program in cultural sociology. Fourth, I offer a systematic breakdown of the religion of the heart's ten core tenets and how they relate to one another. I conclude with reflections on the implications my analysis holds for the sociology of contemporary religion.

"Spirituality" in the sociology of religion

Given its empirical prevalence, it is striking how little attention has been paid to the shift from "religion" to "spirituality" in the sociology of religion. Penny Edgell (2012, p. 248) notes that as a result of the hegemonic status of secularization and market approaches sociologists of religion have tended to dismiss "spirituality" as a subject, considering it unworthy of serious study. Still, a number of recent studies have emerged from within the sociology of religion, bucking this trend. These approaches seek to establish what "spirituality" signifies by means of classifying forms of self-identification or particular emic associations (e.g., Berghuijs et al. 2013; Ammerman 2014; Bibby 2017, 2019; Marshall and Olson 2018; Steensland et al. 2018). While such approaches have contributed much to the study of spirituality, their lack of historical analysis and failure to theorize the deep cultural logics informing the spiritual turn have led them to produce a more disjointed and divided picture of today's religious landscape than is warranted.

¹ For an extended explanation of why I call this cultural structure "the religion of the heart" see Watts (2019).

² I draw primarily from Anglo-American scholarship.

³ For more on the nature of my empirical research see the Note on Research Process and Methodology below.



To give some examples: sociologists Brian Steensland et al. (2018) identify a range of emic meanings associated with the term “spirituality,” concluding there exists little consensus on the ground regarding what it means to be “spiritual.” Similarly, Bibby (2017, p. 72) observes that, “a majority of individuals who say they are ‘spiritual and religious’ are inclined to embrace religion and seldom reject it.” Finally, Nancy Ammerman (2013) argues that, at least among a large percentage of Americans, “spirituality” and “religion” are not viewed as wholly at odds, but rather, as complementary. According to these sociologists the emic distinction between “religion” and “spirituality” is not so clear-cut, for many continue to identify as “religious and spiritual,” especially in the U.S. This would suggest the shift from “religion” to “spirituality” is less substance than mere semantics.

Unfortunately, these studies tend to confound more than they illuminate because they fail to make a crucial distinction—that between the concept “spirituality,” and the cultural structure that underlies it. Indeed, while asking individuals what they mean by “spirituality” may be the only means we have to discern its underlying cultural structure, this does not make it foolproof. This is for two reasons: first, it is a rare individual who can articulate, in systematic terms, their theological or philosophical commitments and how they fit together. Second, as Ammerman (2014, p. 52) rightly notes, the SBNR label “reflects moral and political categories more than analytic ones.” This leads her to conclude that when individuals make distinctions between “spirituality” and “religion” they are merely drawing boundaries around those whom they disagree with morally or politically. There is no doubt some truth in this. However, it obscures two fundamental points: first, those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” and those who identify as “spiritual and religious” may share a religious orientation while nevertheless diverging in their moral and political views. Indeed, sociologists Michael Hout and Claude Fischer (2014, p. 430) have recently suggested identification with “religion” in America has to do with political polarization, not secularization. And second, while some may reject the binary distinction between “spirituality” and “religion” few would suggest that these concepts are synonymous with one another (Steensland et al. 2018, p. 468). Thus, I would argue that such boundary drawing is *itself* less substance than semantics, and that giving attention to whether or not individuals identify as “spiritual but not religious,” or “religious and spiritual,” (or something else entirely) may obscure more fundamental similarities.

The study of spirituality beyond the sociology of religion

Though the dominant approaches within the sociology of religion have marginalized the study of spirituality this has fortunately not prevented the production of serious scholarship on the spiritual turn. Since the 1960s, an array of studies have sprouted up across a host of subfields and disciplines, yielding tremendously fertile insights into the shift from “religion” to “spirituality.” The problem, however, is that these studies have rarely been placed into conversation with one another, thereby leading to a vicious siloing effect. In this section I outline how and why this process unfolded. I also review these myriad studies, highlighting their theoretical and methodological insights.



The hegemonic status of the secularization paradigm began to wane in the 1970s, primarily as a result of the emergence of a panoply of what became known as New Religious Movements (NRMs). In turn, a number of fascinating sociological studies emerged which tangentially discussed the shift from "religion" to "spirituality," though often under the guise of advancing in-depth social scientific accounts of distinct NRMs (e.g., Wuthnow 1976; Glock and Bellah 1976; Tipton 1982). Over time, the study of NRMs splintered into a series of disparate subfields, one of which became known (not uncontroversially) as New Age Studies. The early contributions to this field consisted of comprehensive sketches of the shared discourses that structured the rich and seemingly never-ending diversity of various NRMs that rose to prominence in the 1970s (e.g., York 1995; Heelas 1996; Hanegraaff 1996). What distinguished these analyses from those dominant in the sociology of religion were their sincere efforts to theorize "New Age" on its own terms. Thus, New Age served for these scholars as a useful category to capture a range of phenomena that, while different on the surface, exhibited strikingly similar discursive features. However, because the members of these groups seldom identified with the New Age label, and because the term was often used pejoratively by critics (e.g., Groothuis 1986; Marrs 1990), it came under sustained scholarly criticism (e.g., Sutcliffe 2003; Wood 2007). Meanwhile the shared discourses that the early New Age Studies scholars had identified were migrating far beyond the limited purview of a few curious NRMs. Indeed, at the beginning of the new millennium a number of large-scale studies made clear that New Age discourse was spreading far and wide, crossing national borders and becoming ever more mainstream (Houtman and Mascini 2002; Partridge 2004; Houtman and Aupers 2006, 2007; Campbell 2007; Knoblauch 2008). And when we trace the theoretical debts, we learn these early New Age Studies inspired a vast number of regionally specific studies, which have found that New Age discourse has swept across the North Atlantic and beyond (e.g., Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Kim 2006; Versteeg 2006; Otterloo et al. 2012; Watts 2018a; Possamai 2000; Guerriero 2018; Potrata 2004). These studies shed light on the truly global reach of the discourse that was once called New Age.

Regrettably, because a new term to replace the New Age label was never settled on, scholars inspired by, and indebted to, these early studies have been forced to come up with neologisms to describe what they observe. This has led to the unfortunate situation we face today, where there are literally countless terms used to describe what was once subsumed under New Age in the academic literature.⁴ Indeed, this proliferation of new terms used to capture what once went by New Age but which now goes by "spirituality" has played no small part in exacerbating the field's fragmentation—for unless one takes the time to trace theoretical debts it

⁴ Just a few examples: "self-religion," "self-spirituality," "subjective-life spirituality," "mind-body-spirit spirituality," "alternative spirituality," "holistic spirituality," "post-Christian spirituality," "contemporary spirituality," "expressive individualism," "religious individualism," "the invisible religion," "the American religion," "Marginal Christian spirituality," "liberal gnosticism," "spiritualities of life," "new spirituality," "panentheism," and "popular spirituality".



is not at all obvious that these studies are speaking of what is, in effect, the same discourse.

The situation is made worse by the fact that in recent years an independent literature on the SBNR category and cohort has emerged, which pays almost no mind to New Age Studies or the secondary literature it has spawned (e.g., Van der Veer 2009; Mercadante 2014; Gottlieb 2013; Bregman 2014; Cooper 2016). Not surprisingly, these studies observe strikingly similar discursive trends, yet use different language to describe them, thereby erecting yet another communication barrier between scholars studying “spirituality.”

At the beginning of the new millennium, historians of religion began responding to the spiritual turn by tracing the origins of the emic polarization of “spirituality” and “religion.” While the early contributions to New Age Studies made some progress on this task, in their wake a host of comprehensive and sophisticated studies have been published, which shed light on what goes by “spirituality” today and its historical entanglements with romantic liberal thought (e.g., Fuller 2001; Porterfield 2001; Albanese 2007; Bender 2010; Schmidt 2012; Hedstrom 2012). In addition to carving out a space to study rival religious traditions to historically influential forms of church Christianity, these socio-historical studies significantly challenge the splintering and siloing logic of post-1960s religious studies.

As I mentioned above, New Age Studies began as a branch growing off of the tree of the study of NRMs. Other branches included the study of secular self-help, humanistic psychology, or what is sometimes called therapeutic culture (associated with the Human Potential Movement), and the study of Pentecostalism and the wider Charismatic Movement. These three subfields have for decades existed independently of one another, with strikingly little engagement between them. No doubt, this has made good sense to many, given the glaring differences between their respective objects of study. But these socio-historical studies make evident that, while certainly distinct, the cultural logics undergirding these various discursive forms share much by way of origins. Moreover, studies produced within these respective fields demonstrate that these historical debts continue to exert a sizeable influence on contemporary expressions. For instance, a range of studies of self-help and humanistic psychology chart remarkably similar genealogies as those found in the socio-historical studies of “spirituality,” and also observe near identical cultural logics as those once discussed in New Age Studies and the secondary literature it has engendered (e.g., Meyer 1980 [1965]; Derloshon and Potter 1982; Anker 1999; McGee 2005; Travis 2009; Swan 2010; Lavrence and Lozanski 2014). Furthermore, a number of scholars of Charismatic Christianity—the popularity of which is global in scope—have charted similar cultural trends, and even remarked on the affinities shared between romantic expressivist forms of Christianity and that which was once called New Age (e.g., Hunt et al. 1997; Coleman 2000; Poloma 2003; Hunt 2000, 2002; Martin 2002; Bowler 2013). In turn, these socio-historical studies have collectively advanced a convincing argument for theorizing these various discursive developments alongside one another, viewing them as tributaries flowing out of the selfsame cultural structure.

New Age Studies not only inspired a vast secondary literature that carried forward their efforts to locate New Age discourse across national contexts, it also inspired a



growing literature which theorizes the relationship between "spirituality" and the economic structures and disciplinary regimes regnant in late modernity. These have tended to belong to one or other of the following subfields: critical sociology, critical religious studies, the study of biopolitics and governmentality, and cultural studies. Due to their sensitivity to issues of power and privilege these approaches have theorized "spirituality" synoptically, that is, as it relates to the distinctive social order of post-1960s liberal democracies. What these approaches demonstrate, contra the dominant approaches in the sociology of religion, is that "spirituality" is neither culturally incoherent nor socially insignificant. On the contrary, it signals a clear and unifying discursive logic, is institutionally supported, and plays critical social functions in late modern liberal democracies (e.g., Miller and Rose 1994; Nadesan 1999; Rimke 2000; Lau 2000; Possamai 2003; Carrette and King 2005; Martin 2014; Altglas 2014; Williams 2014; Binkley 2014; Crockford 2017; Pursuer 2018). In my view, these studies reflect some of the most important and innovative in the field. They have undeniably advanced our empirical understanding of the spiritual turn. And yet due to their expressly normative character, their empirical insights have been largely obscured. Moreover, while these studies have successfully theorized, in the tradition of New Age Studies, the specific discourses associated with "spirituality" they have failed to identify the more general cultural structure that underwrites these.

For these reasons, I argue a more cultural sociological approach to the study of "spirituality" is needed to synthesize these extant studies. Interestingly, the rubric for such an approach was offered some time ago in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Robert Bellah et al.'s (1985, p. 235) analysis of what they called "Sheilaism" is most promising, if normatively charged. Following Ernst Troeltsch, they characterized Sheilaism as a form of "religious individualism" that posits "personal religious experience as the basis of belief," and contended it tends to elevate the self to a cosmic principle thereby endorsing a kind of "pantheism." But they placed these claims in historical context, viewing Sheilaism as the heir of a well-worn American religious tradition, exemplified by the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. What makes the analysis offered in *Habits* instructive is the degree to which the authors framed the shift from "religion" to "spirituality" as the eclipse of one kind of religion by another, or as a change in deep meaning systems. My cultural sociological approach seeks to heed and refine these theoretical insights in light of existing scholarship on "spirituality" as well as my own empirical findings. Such a theoretical framework, I argue, holds great potential for both unifying the study of spirituality and setting a forward-looking agenda for the sociology of contemporary religion.

A cultural sociological approach to the study of religion

In recent years, cultural sociologists have tended to shy away from theorizing religion, instead concentrating on identifying, in Durkheimian fashion, the religious elements of modern social life (Alexander 2010, p. 83). In turn, some have critiqued



the strong program for dissolving the distinction between “religion” and “culture” (Smith et al. 2013, p. 909). On this issue, I am somewhat ambivalent. I can see reasons for distinguishing categorically between these two concepts, but I am also sensitive to critiques (advanced by critical religious studies scholars) of this distinction (e.g., Fitzgerald 2015; Martin 2015). Ultimately, I have chosen to describe what informs talk of “spirituality” today as a *religion* because I think the recent trend of using “spirituality” as an etic category is far more problematic, given that it obscures fundamental similarities between what goes by “spirituality” and what goes by “religion” in late modernity (see Streib and Hood 2011). Moreover, I am not satisfied with using the term “culture” as a substitute since, as just mentioned, this cultural structure is pervasive in milieus generally considered “religious.”

Accordingly, I follow the advice of Philip Gorski and Ateş Altinordu (2008, p. 75) and use religion as an analytic variable. That is, I use this category in a particular way because it allows me to capture a dimension of cultural life that I wish to understand (not because I believe it to be universal). In turn, I do not consider myself advancing a cross-cultural definition, to be applied any and everywhere. On the contrary, mine is a conception of religion which emerges from, and is quite specific to, the liberal democratic contexts that I study. Moreover, it has been formulated with both the pragmatic aim of synthesizing the extant literature on “spirituality,” and bringing attention to what I take to be important theoretical and substantive issues.

As I understand it, a cultural sociological approach to the study of religion returns to, rereads, and synthesizes, the thought of two pioneers of sociological thinking, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. As Luckmann (1967, p. 12) reminds us, both Weber and Durkheim “sought the key to an understanding of the social location of the individual in the study of religion.” Moreover, both believed “the problem of individual existence in society is a ‘religious’ problem.” Indeed, I think that a pragmatic synthesis of Weber and Durkheim’s social thought provides us with a more expansive and therefore useful conception of religion, which enables us to delimit, and make sense of, the cultural structure undergirding the spiritual turn. In what follows I outline the nature of this theoretical synthesis.⁵

Max Weber’s contribution: the human need for meaning in disenchanting modernity

As Chris Shilling and Philip Mellor (2001, p. 73) write, “Max Weber’s vision of modernity is perhaps best known for its analysis of self-determining human subjects struggling to invest their actions with meaning in an increasingly rationalised world.” Indeed, as Robert Bellah (1970, p. 7) observes, central to Weber’s sociology of religion and modernity are “problems of *meaning*—of evil, suffering, death, and the like—that are inescapable in human life but insoluble in purely scientific terms.” By meaning, cultural sociologists refer to “a conception of teleological purpose in the cosmological sense” (Alexander 2013, p. 34). That is, we mean a *theodicy*, which enables an

⁵ For an extended explication of this paradigm as it relates to the sociology of religion see Houtman and Aupers (2010).



individual to situate herself in a horizon of meaning that both transcends her and gives meaning to "the world's imperfections" (Weber 1991 [1922], p. 139). According to Weber, modernity is distinctive as an epoch insofar as it dissolves the solid grounds upon which a plausible theodicy might emerge. In a famous lecture entitled "Science as a Vocation," Weber (1946 [1922]) argued that with the systematic application of modern science and instrumental rationality to technological and governance systems—which produces mechanization and bureaucratization—as well as everyday practices—which erodes the plausibility of religious presuppositions—comes the inevitable disenchantment of the world. Weber's is therefore a tragic and pessimistic account of liberal modernity; humans require transcendent or ultimate meaning, but rationalization makes this impossible. However, cultural sociologists have employed Weber's own theoretical framework to come to a quite different conclusion about religion in modernity (see Houtman and Aupers 2010). While Weber may have diagnosed the modern world as disenchanted, he nevertheless contended that humans exhibit a basic drive toward ultimate meaning, and that such a drive cannot be extinguished (Parsons 1991 [1964], p. lvii). A revised version of Weber's theory therefore seeks to identify how this drive manifests in late modernity.

Émile Durkheim's contribution: the sacred and the symbolic in modern life

Rather than conceiving of religion as bound to the individual need for meaning in an imperfect world, Émile Durkheim took a wholly sociological approach—he insisted on viewing religion as an "eminently social thing" (Durkheim 1995 [1912], p. 9). He produced the following definition of religion: "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 moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (*ibid.*, p. 44). A number of things follow from this. First, according to Durkheim, every society has a religion, whether "secular" or not. Thus, Durkheim rejects Weber's disenchantment thesis, and his view of the shift to modernity as marking a radical epistemological break. Second, as W. S. F. Pickering (1984, p. 73) observes, "Durkheim's theoretical argument rests on the proposition that at the heart of every society there are collective representations which are necessary for its existence." Indeed, for Durkheim, collective representations or symbolic systems are what make social life possible. However, it is not simply that symbols enable individuals in society to communicate; they also underwrite social cohesion by being classified as either sacred or profane. Those that are deemed sacred, are "set apart and forbidden," that is, they are viewed and experienced by the community as having a special aura and being authoritative. In turn, religion, for Durkheim, refers to the cultural system of beliefs and rites that circumscribe a society's sacred forms.

The strong program in cultural sociology

Durkheim has played a pivotal role in shaping what has come to be known as the strong program in cultural sociology, or what Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith (1993) conceive as a late-Durkheimian cultural studies. Outlining the basic tenets



of the strong program Alexander (2013, p. 3) writes, “At the foundation of cultural sociology is the anti-historicist claim that structures of meaning—cultural codes, symbols, and narratives—are a permanent, not transitory element of consciousness and society.” The strong program in cultural sociology therefore assumes the centrality of meaning in social life. While it acknowledges the role of “hard” factors such as the economy and politics, it nevertheless rejects the claim that these are wholly determinant of social life. In other words, it conceives of culture as relatively autonomous (Kane 1991). By relatively autonomous, strong program cultural sociologists mean that cultural structures have an independent causal role within the construction of social life, that they play an independent part in a “multidimensional and complex whole” (Alexander and Smith 2005, p. 21). For this reason, they grant analytic autonomy to culture, arguing that we must first identify and articulate the meaning systems alive in society before we can establish their causal roles (Alexander and Smith 2010, p. 20).

In what follows I offer a strong program cultural sociological analysis of “spirituality” in late modernity. Crucial to it is the distinction between *cultural structures* and *discourses*. By the former I refer to implicit hidden codes or deep structures which order and organize distinct discourses, whereas the latter I think of as concrete meanings which instantiate implicit codes in discursive form.⁶ In this sense, we can think of cultural structures as ideal types, or analytic abstractions, which are only made manifest through specific discourses (Simko and Olick 2020). Indeed, cultural structures, while deeply constraining and enabling of social life, are often invisible to their adherents (Rambo and Chan 1990). This is why Alexander (2003, p. 4) analogizes the strong program in cultural sociology to a “social psychoanalysis,” the goal of which is “to bring the social unconscious up for view.” I say this distinction is crucial because, as outlined above, even the most innovative studies have failed to identify the deeper *cultural structure* that informs specific *discourses* associated with “spirituality.” Thus, scholars studying New Age, Charismatic Christianity, and humanistic psychology, and the movements they have spawned, while occasionally noting shared affinities between them, have generally highlighted their theological or philosophical differences, thereby obscuring the *more basic symbolic framework* upon which these discourses collectively rest—and with it, the cultural coherence of today’s religious landscape.

The religion of the heart: ‘Spirituality’ in late modernity

As an ideal type, the religion of the heart consists of ten logically interrelated tenets, which together form a coherent cultural structure upon which distinct discourses may be erected, organized, and made meaningful. They are as follows:

- (1) Experiential epistemology
- (2) Immanence of God or the superempirical

⁶ This distinction closely mirrors that made by Christina Simko and Jeffrey Olick (2020) between “implicit-discursive culture” and “explicit-discursive culture”.



- (3) Benevolent God/universe
- (4) Redemptive self as theodicy
- (5) Self-realization as teleology
- (6) Self-ethic (voice from within)
- (7) Virtue is natural
- (8) Sacralization of individual liberty
- (9) Mind, body, spirit connection
- (10) Methodological individualism

Experiential epistemology

The religion of the heart is fundamentally characterized by an *experiential epistemology*. To quote Neale Donald Walsch (1995, p. 3), "*Feeling is the language of the soul.*" This "Romantic stress on emotive experience" (Troeltsch 1992 [1912], p. 169) is commonly accepted by my SBNR and neo-Pentecostal informants, despite their disagreements over theology. We can classify this epistemic stance as "the belief that there is no authority external to the individual qualified to judge the nature of truth" (Campbell 2007, p. 134). While individuals might vary in the weight they give to reason, or abstract principles and doctrines in other spheres of social life, as regards "spirituality" nothing trumps direct personal experience. For instance, an SBNR engineer who dabbles in Buddhist meditation asserted, "For me, it's your own truth," while a member of a Twelve Step group stated, "I found it was more encouraging to find the truth within myself." This helps to explain why the religion of the heart so often leads its adherents to gravitate towards, and find inspiration in, testimonies, personal narratives, and autobiographical anecdotes; where and when individuals can "identify" or "relate" to other's experiences the religion of the heart is strongest. Shared experiences are the basis upon which the religion of the heart finds commonality and builds community.

Margaret Poloma (2003, p. 23) observes that Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians "tend to be anticreedal, believing that 'knowing' comes from a right relationship with God rather than through reason or even through the five senses." She therefore concludes, "the P/C worldview is experientially centered." Giving credence to this claim, in a sermon at C3 Church—of neo-Pentecostal ilk—one of the pastors declared, "God's love cannot be taught. It cannot be understood. It cannot be theologically grasped. It can only be experienced." Moreover, my neo-Pentecostal informants made clear in interviews that they joined their church primarily because they *felt* God's presence there—this shared experience of God's presence legitimated their continuing commitment. As regards the religion of the heart, the more intense, ecstatic, and effervescent the experience, the more authoritative.

For SBNRs, "spirituality" is signaled in moments of quiet contemplation or unexpected bliss—be it while in meditation, climbing a mountain, or dancing at a rave. While for my Charismatic informants, God's presence is most often felt in moments of praise and joy. Their form of worship—which excites the emotions and encourages a letting go of inhibitions—becomes a primary gateway into God's presence



(Luhrmann 2004). For instance, following an extended period of worship, comprising a six-person band, flashing stage lights, and collective singing, the pastor announced during a Sunday service, “do you feel *that* warm feeling? That is God. He is here with us!”—which was met with resounding approbation.

Furthermore, among all of my informants—both SBNR and Charismatic alike—“spiritual” or “God” moments stood for those times when everything in one’s life seems to align, as if unfolding according to a divine plan. These experiences are interpreted as evidence for the existence of “something more,” and it is these moments which, as one Charismatic informant put it, “cannot be ignored,” that encourage the adherent to pursue their “spiritual” interests—to read more, to talk to others about these experiences, to delve deeper into their “spiritual journey.” What this means is that such experiences serve as plausibility structures for the religion of the heart.⁷ In this, we begin to see how the religion of the heart receives legitimation among individuals who view themselves as “rational” and “scientifically minded” (Besecke 2001). In an attempt to explain her attraction to the religion of the heart one SBNR informant responded, “because the rational scientific mind doesn’t like unexplainable things. And there is so much unexplainable that happens when you enter the world of spirituality.” For this individual, as for others like her, these experiences—of absolute joy, of self-transcendence, of synchronicity—contain within them, if not proof, then at least the possibility of a greater force in the world, or a larger order. And for those who do not accept the idea that such experiences can be adequately explained by scientific materialism, they become a catalyst for a growing attraction to the religion of the heart. Thus, ecstatic and effervescent experiences play a crucial role in legitimating the religion of the heart.⁸

Immanence of God or the superempirical⁹

In light of the importance of ecstatic or effervescent experiences and their connection to the religion of the heart, it should come as no surprise that, from within this cultural structure, the superempirical—however it might be described or labelled—is something that can be *experienced*. In other words, God or the superempirical is conceived as not categorically separate from humans, but rather as accessible *through* the self. In this, the religion of the heart not only encourages a thirst for a “direct communion with God,” but also assumes its potentiality (Troeltsch 1992 [1912], p. 731).

⁷ Peter Berger (1967, p. 45) defines a “plausibility structure” thus: “each world requires a social ‘base’ for its continuing existence as a world that is real to actual human beings. This ‘base’ may be called plausibility structure”.

⁸ Indeed, I would argue that any discourse or life narrative which emerges out of the religion of the heart relies fundamentally upon experiences such as these being interpreted as supportive of its basic premises. What I mean by this is that because personal experience is given pride of place, how individuals *interpret* their experiences is a critical factor in giving credibility to the religion of the heart, and the discourses it makes possible.

⁹ I use the term “superempirical” as opposed to “supernatural” because the latter implies that the “spiritual” cannot be a part of nature, and that nature solely consists of physical matter (see Smith 2003, p. 98).



Colin Campbell (2007, p. 66) argues that, "belief in a transcendental, personal god is giving way to belief in an immanent and impersonal one." While I agree that the religion of the heart entails an ontology that is more monistic than dualistic, what one finds, especially among Charismatic Christians, is not so much a rejection of a transcendental, personal God in favor of an immanent and impersonal one, but instead one that is simultaneously transcendent, immanent, and personal (Poloma and Pendleton 1989; Richter 1997). As anthropologist Simon Coleman (2000, p. 235) observes, "These Christians worship a God who is both within the self and a permanently moving force on the earth as a whole." To give a brief illustrative example: a young Charismatic Christian shared in an interview, "God likes to talk to me in nature. That's where I feel His presence the most." For this woman God exists in everything and is everywhere, ever-present.

This harkens back to John Wesley's Methodism whose "primary and original sphere of action was finding the supernatural in the fabric of everyday life" (Martin 2002, p. 7). We can therefore say that the religion of the heart postulates a *God within* insofar as one can access God or the divine through the self, but also a *God without* insofar as the superempirical permeates the universe. This is why I have described it as the immanence of the superempirical. Indeed, this is a crucial aspect of today's religion of the heart because it is what informs the background symbolic framework upon which adherents interpret their ecstatic and effervescent experiences. As one SBNR informant put it, "spirituality is like being aware of one's spirit and its connection to all things." While another said, "I just get charged from the forest. I think it's the energy, the ions." Thus, when SBNRs speak about "feeling energies"—be they in other persons, or in the natural world—they are affirming the immanence of the superempirical.

This is of course a central theme in much New Age literature, and has been a crucial feature of the religion of the heart for some time. For instance, Walsch (1995, p. 26) writes, "We are composed of the same stuff. We ARE the 'same stuff'," while Wayne Dyer (1995, p. 139) proclaims, "Everything in life is energy." And though Charismatic Christians may not use the terms "impersonal spirit," "energy," or "life force" we should not assume they do not subscribe to this cultural structure. Much like SBNRs, these Christians also assume a "continuity of the self with [an] ever-present divine reality" (Fuller 2001, p. 85)—although they speak most often in terms of the "Holy Spirit." Indeed, according to C3 Church members, God may be "up there" but what matters most is that He is "in us."

Benevolent God or universe

For adherents of the religion of the heart, whatever it is that informs the "something more"—be it God, Nature, a cosmic energy, the divine feminine, or simply the Universe writ large—it is good. That is, the religion of the heart breeds what William James (1990 [1901], p. 79) once called the "optimistic type," for whom, the divine, "if you will only trust her sufficiently, is absolutely good." In an essay examining the writings of Rousseau, Emerson, and Whitman—all proponents of the religion of the heart—James approvingly wrote, "One can but recognize in



such writers as these the presence of a temperament organically weighted on the side of cheer and fatally forbidden to linger, as those of opposite temperament linger, over the darker aspects of the universe” (ibid., p. 81). According to James, these men preached what he called the “religion of healthy-mindedness,” committed to exploring and mapping the “wonderful inner paths to a supernatural kind of happiness” (ibid., p. 77). They championed, in one form or another, what historian Sydney Ahlstrom once called “harmonial religion,” wherein “spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person’s rapport with the cosmos” (Fuller 2001, p. 51). The religion of the heart carries forward this legacy.

This is especially clear in the accounts of my SBNR informants. For instance, when asked what her conception of “God” was, a woman who was raised Anglican replied, “It’s not the God of my childhood—the ‘I’m watching over you God’. It’s something that takes care of our souls.” Similarly, a young trans activist shared that they rejected the religion of their youth because of how judgmental and hateful God seemed: “Because I thought God was supposed to be one of love ... unconditional love.” While another credited the Catholicism she was raised in with engendering in her “uncomfortable and disturbing feelings.”

Interestingly, I heard similar claims made by Charismatics. For instance, many of these Christians chose to move from the denomination of their youth to a neo-Pentecostal style church because the former, as one informant put it, “didn’t want me to prosper,” and was “too strict.” Kate Bowler (2013, p. 59) describes the prosperity gospel as an “institutional expression of Holy Spirit-filled positive thinking.” I once heard prosperity preacher and lead pastor of C3 Church Global, Phil Pringle, proclaim at a conference, “The Christian God is not a bad God. He wants you to find life. He wants you to find fulfillment.” He then counseled, “Get out of cynicism, defeat, discouragement, and depression.” Indeed, it is common to hear from Charismatics that they are not about “religion,” but rather all about “faith”—which in many ways parallels the emic distinction between “religion” and “spirituality” advanced by SBNRs. This boundary-construction illuminates how the religion of the heart is oriented toward positivity, tolerance, and kindness, rather than negativity, judgment, or criticism.

Furthermore, the religion of healthy-mindedness is a staple of much contemporary “spiritual” literature. In *The Amazing Results of Positive Thinking* Norman Vincent Peale (1959, p. 81) asks, “Why do people insist upon making religion stilled and unnatural, and above all, getting pained looks on their faces when it is mentioned. When you’ve got the real article, you can hardly contain yourself, you’re so happy. You are walking toward the sun.” Joel Osteen (2004, pp. 76, 57)—known colloquially as the “smiling preacher”—assures his readers, “God wants you to have a good life, a life filled with love, joy, peace, and fulfillment,” adding, “individuals who view themselves as God sees them are usually happy about who they are.” Joyce Meyer (1995, p. 80) preaches, “The mind should not be filled with reasoning, worry, anxiety, fear and the like. It should be calm, quiet and serene.” Echoing these ideas in New Age parlance, Neale Donald Walsch (1995, p. 5) asserts, “The Highest Thought is always that thought which contains joy.” And Wayne Dyer (1995, p. 296) writes, “Your higher self wants you to be at peace.”



In sum, the religion of the heart affirms the goodness of God, Nature, or the Universe (however they are discursively framed), assuring its adherents that subjective well-being and inner peace are the natural state of things.

Redemptive self as theodicy

The religion of the heart presupposes a theodicy. While ecstatic or effervescent experiences may serve as one of its plausibility structures, it is the character of its theodicy that sustains commitment to it. Drawing from Max Weber, Campbell (2007) contends theodicies are comprised of three components, which serve to meet distinct needs for meaning: cognitive, emotional, and moral. The religion of the heart's conception of an immanent superempirical force supplies *cognitive meaning* to its adherents by offering a descriptive account of the reality they experience. It assures them that they are in contact with an immanent reality that transcends them, and which they can access through their bodily senses and intuitions. It offers *emotional meaning* by means of a teleology of self-realization which encompasses a moral framework that orients daily interactions and long-term goals (I examine this in the following section). And finally, the religion of the heart meets the human need for *moral meaning* by providing an account of why suffering exists.

Fundamentally, the religion of the heart postulates that *all suffering is redemptive*. In this, today's religion of the heart shares much with what narrative psychologist Dan P. McAdams calls the "redemptive self." As McAdams observes, the redemptive self is a narrative one uses to tell the story of one's life—it encourages a particular stance towards one's past, present, and future. Similarly, the religion of the heart, as a cultural structure, animates a particular stance towards the events in one's life, ordering them according to its theodicy. This can be summed up: "Negative emotional scenes will often lead directly to positive outcomes. Suffering will consistently be redeemed. Redemptive sequences will help to move the plot forward and ultimately help give [one's life] story its *progressive* form" (McAdams 2006, p. 9). Moreover, this is not an otherworldly redemption—it does not presume redemption will only (or ever) come in an afterlife. Rather, the religion of the heart presupposes redemption in *this* life.¹⁰ As a result, adherents are encouraged to find meaning in their darkest moments, to extract lessons from their pain, and to appreciate how their suffering fits into a larger divine or cosmic plan.

For instance, self-help coach Tony Robbins (1991, p. 285) writes, "our disappointments may truly be opportunities in disguise." Norman Vincent Peale (1959, p. 209) counsels, "You can be strongest in your weakest place." Joel Osteen (2004, pp. 170, 204) urges: "the greater struggle, the greater reward," and "God has a divine purpose for every challenge that comes into our lives." Wayne Dyer (1995, p. 7) writes, "The starting point to your sacred quest is understanding that the universe and our participation in it are not haphazard things." He goes on, "If it is true that we are part of an intelligent system, we can assume that we go from no-where to

¹⁰ I have always been struck by how little reference is made within neo-Pentecostal churches to hell or the afterlife.



now-here for some purpose. With this realization you can stop doubting that you are a divine creation with purpose and just accept that you are. You are part of this intelligent system *and* you are here for some divine reason” (ibid., p. 10). While these authors may have quite different theological or discursive understandings they nevertheless share the conviction that our lives and the events we experience are not meaningless.

By postulating that all experiences and events unfold according to a larger plan, they enable their readers to both make sense of, and cope with, the existence of suffering. Accordingly, the religion of the heart provides an interpretive lens, or symbolic filter, through which to experience one’s life. No longer do mundane or ordinary moments pass by without significance. Instead, they are imbued with great personal (even cosmic) consequence and value. While my informants may differ in their understandings of this phrase, I have found that *everything is meaningful* when it comes to their own lives. For some, this means that setbacks always contain within them some life lesson that they needed to learn in order to realize their potential. While for others, events are interpreted as being divinely orchestrated.

For instance, an SBNR interviewee relayed, “the biggest choices in my life I didn’t make consciously. They are moved from some deeper force within me.” For this young man the most important life-decisions he has made were not of his own volition, but were directed by the larger forces of the universe. Another SBNR informant, an aspiring singer, described experiencing “the weirdest coincidences” whereby specific persons would come into her life at “just the right time.” These synchronicities she interpreted as giving credence to the religion of the heart. Furthermore, one hears similar accounts from Charismatic Christians. For instance, a pastor at C3 Church preached, “If you are in a dark place you have to understand that God has made a way for you.” As Poloma (2003, p. 23) observes in her research on Charismatics, “God is seen as active in all events past, present, and future that work together in a kind of master plan.”

Self-realization as teleology

We have seen that the religion of the heart narrates the self in redemptive terms. But it remains to be explained how redemption is understood. What ultimate end does suffering serve? Simply put: *self-realization*, that is, suffering is necessary to *actualize one’s potential* and *realize one’s true self*. Thus, the religion of the heart entails an *expressivist ethic* or an *ethic of authenticity*—it remains a core precept in both my informants’ accounts, as well as popular “spiritual” literature, that we all have within us a “true self” which reflects *who we truly are*, and which it is our life’s goal to realize.

Charles Taylor (1991) refers to this as a *romantic expressivist* conception of human life. “This is the idea which grows in the late eighteenth century that each individual is different and original, and that this originality determines how he or she ought to live.... Each person is to be measured by a different yardstick, one which is properly his or her own” (Taylor 1989, p. 375). On this view, the ultimate purpose



of life is to fulfill one's own nature, which means espousing the "inner élan," or the *voice within*—however these are understood (347).

We see this theme repeated time and again in the literature on "spirituality." For instance, Deepak Chopra (1994, p. 97) writes, "Each of us is here to discover our higher self or our spiritual self." Wayne Dyer (1995, p. 5) directs people to locate their "sacred self." Esther and Jerry Hicks (2004, p. 5) tell us, "Your life is about the continuing expression of who you truly are." Joel Osteen (2004, pp. 91–92) counsels, "learn to be happy with who God made you to be," and, "Be an original, not a copycat." Of course, while this rhetoric may seem foreign or esoteric to some, the religion of the heart finds expression in "secular" counterparts, psychological and self-help discourses. For example, Tony Robbins (1991, p. 431) writes in *Awaken the Giant Within*, "I believe our *true* identity is something that's indefinable and greater than anything that's describable. We are soul; we are spirit." And Carl Rogers (1961, p. 109), the pre-eminent humanistic psychologist, in outlining his approach to client-centered therapy asserts, "I find I am more effective when I can listen acceptantly to myself, and can be myself," and that when a client "drops the false fronts, or the masks, or the roles" he "appears to be trying to discover something more basic, something more truly himself."

It follows that from within the religion of the heart, "'personal growth' can be understood as the shape 'religious salvation' takes ... it is affirmed that deliverance from human suffering and weakness will be reached by developing our human potential, which results in our increasingly getting in touch with our inner divinity" (Hanegraaff 1996, p. 46). Indeed, Rogers based his entire approach to therapy on the belief "that every person has an innate, biologically grounded impulse toward wholeness and actualization" (Fuller 2001, p. 141). This is as true of Charismatic Christians as it is of those who are heirs to the New Age and Human Potential movements. As Coleman (2000, p. 197) observes, "Believers are supposed to both guard against doubt and to seek evidence of continuous personal growth in God, the source of all prosperity." Thus, a Charismatic informant confidently declared, "We should never feel bad about wanting growth because God wants us to personally grow." It is for this reason that one scholar has suggested, "evangelicals have Christianized the self-help movement" (Nadesan 1999, p. 24).

Moreover, it is generally believed by both Charismatics and SBNRs that one ought to engage in a constant process of work upon oneself in order to actualize one's potential. For example, an SBNR grad student shared that her "spirituality" is "demanding in that you always feel accountable.... You don't really get any holidays from spirituality." And a Charismatic Christian informant similarly explained, "spirituality" means, "always wanting to grow and expand and be a better version of myself." For these adherents, the "spiritual" life requires work—self-work.

We can now make the connection between "secular" psychological and self-help discourses and those that are emically viewed as "spiritual" or "religious." Most self-help and popular psychology literature is written with the assumption that the reader already has ends they would like to achieve; there is little explicit discussion of what one *ought to do*, how one *ought to live*, or what *ultimate reality is like*. Self-help books are written as practical manuals, programs, or guides, replete with techniques and advice on how to achieve one's predetermined goals. This is also true of much



contemporary psychotherapy, which seeks not to impose external standards on clients, but presumes answers already lie within individuals. In this, both self-help and psychotherapeutic discourses can appeal to a wide range of persons who may hold quite dissimilar beliefs and values. This was made clear to me when a church leader told me in our interview, “Self-help books are taking Kingdom principles and re-writing them.” This Christian leader *read into* self-help books his *own* understanding of Christianity, rooted fundamentally in the religion of the heart. Psychotherapeutic and pop psychological discourses therefore assume the expressivist ethic endorsed by the religion of the heart, but also often presuppose the theodicy and teleology it propagates (Parsons 2010, p. 17). For instance, Don Browning and Terry Cooper (2004, p. 61) argue that the metaphor of growth reflects an “organic model of self-actualization,” which was both secularized and systematized by humanistic psychologists such as Rogers and Abraham Maslow. In agreement, Peter Morea (1997, p. 66) contends, “Secular humanistic psychology maintains that individuals can find values which give meaning to their lives by actualizing their true selves [sic].” Of course, self-help and humanistic psychological discourses are certainly coherent without the background metaphysical picture provided by the religion of the heart. Indeed, they take on little in the way of religious meaning for a great many persons. Nevertheless, the fact is they become *existentially meaningful* when combined with this picture. And it is in these instances when these “secular” discourses suddenly become carriers of the religion of the heart.

Self-ethic (voice from within)

What follows from this teleological conception of human life is what Heelas (1996, p. 23) deems a *self-ethic*. The basic idea “is that what lies within—experienced by way of ‘intuition’, ‘alignment’ or an ‘inner voice’—serves to inform judgments, decisions and choices required for everyday life.” In short, “The ‘individual’ serves as his or her own source of guidance” (Heelas 1996, p. 23). Thus one of my SBNR informants asserted, “Spirituality is something *you* believe in, whereas I feel like religion is imposed upon you.” While another proclaimed, “I need to look within myself to do anything.”

Robert Fuller (2001, p. 143) argues that all iterations of today’s religion of the heart, “point to a psychological process whereby individuals can apprehend, and become inwardly connected to, an immanent divinity.” Indeed, the religion of the heart presents the true self as a conduit of the superempirical or God. And we can find this idea echoed in a wide range of popular “spiritual” literature. Deepak Chopra (1994, p. 3) celebrates, “the divinity within us.” Dyer (1995, p. 5) contends, “there dwells within all human beings a divine energy.” Joseph Murphy (1977, p. 3) describes, “the Presence of God within you.” And translating it into a theistic frame, Norman Vincent Peale (1959, p. 37) laments, “The pathetic fact is that many of us do not live as people who have the Kingdom of God within us. We do not really use the great forces the Almighty God has put into us.” And similarly, Phil Pringle of C3 Church preaches, “The God inside of you is bigger than anything you are facing.”

In assuming a mystical access to divine power, the religion of the heart teaches its adherents that they need not suffer hesitation, self-doubt, or ambivalence about how



to lead their lives, nor need they seek inspiration outside of themselves, since they have everything they need already within themselves. Of course, the "voice from within" is framed differently across contexts and persons. For SBNRs—who borrow primarily from the New Age and Human Potential Movements—the voice is generally spoken of as one's "Higher Self" and understood as a byproduct of Nature or the Universe. Whereas for Charismatics, the voice from within may be equated with the "Holy Spirit." Nevertheless, once again, the rhetoric belies the similarities.¹¹

In *On Becoming a Person* Rogers writes (1961, pp. 166, 169) that the ultimate goal of client-centered therapy is, "to be that self which one truly is." For Rogers, this necessarily requires "moving away from what the culture expects [one] to be." Crucially, then, according to the religion of the heart the true self is *presocial*, and therefore *not constituted by society*. It follows that to the extent that one is self-consciously taking on external roles, or trying to live up to expectations derived from society, one is not being authentic to oneself. Thus, in our interview an SBNR Twelve Step member relayed that when she feels the "least spiritual" is when, "I'm conscious of myself as the external me." While another SBNR interviewee iterated, "I feel terrible pretending to be something that I'm not." And channeling Rogers, Chopra, and Osteen, a Charismatic informant explained, "'spirituality' is stepping away from social cues, social norms, and social expectations."

Finally, the voice from within, interpreted as one's true self, encourages the development of self-awareness, for if the ultimate end of life is to achieve the self that one truly is, then one must first become aware of *who that is*. This may be achieved through a variety of practices, but fundamentally it requires *going within* in order to *delineate* those parts of the self that are understood as byproducts of society and culture, from those which are authentic to oneself.¹² Of course, how the socialized self is discursively framed varies—SBNRs are more likely to speak in terms of one's "ego," whereas Charismatics might instead speak of one's "worldly identity" or "the enemy." The problem for both of these groups, however, remains the same: societal norms and institutions stifle the true self by hemming it in, manipulating it, or repressing it.

Virtue is natural

How does the religion of the heart conceive of the source of virtue or moral action? If not society, then what encourages individuals to be good? The religion of the heart proposes that if one is living as one's true self *one will naturally act virtuously*. Again, we can trace this to the eighteenth century Romantics, according to whom "human beings are endowed with a moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong" (Taylor 1991, p. 26). As a young SBNR queer woman put it, "to be human and alive is to feel spiritual. Like it's just a natural state." An SBNR

¹¹ Paul Heelas (2002, p. 370) has noted that the "Higher Self" in New Age discourse, and the "Holy Spirit" in Charismatic discourse operate as functional equivalents—which he calls the "HS factor."

¹² It is for this reason that reflexivity is such a central dimension of today's religion of the heart (see Roof 1999).



engineering student said, “I think ethics is just how you act. So for me it’s not creating any change in me, because being spiritual just means being yourself.” And an SBNR entrepreneur explained, “When I’m spiritual I can get along well with anyone.” Similarly, Wayne Dyer (1995, p. 17) writes, “Every problem—be it with relationships, finances, health or self-image—has a solution in the sacred self. When you are peaceful, experience silence, meditate and listen, really listen to God, you will be directed away from the worldly and toward the divinity that is within you. You will know what you need to do.” Becoming virtuous is ultimately a byproduct of realizing one’s true self.

This illuminates something important about the way the religion of the heart conceives of morality. Rather than speak in terms of “good and evil,” its adherents are far more comfortable speaking in terms of “healthy and ill.” Exemplifying this shift from sin to sickness, Carl Rogers (1961, p. 26) argues, “persons have a basically positive direction.” Accordingly, what leads individuals to cause harm either to themselves or others is, on this view, either oppressive social structures or psychological trauma. This helps to explain the focus on “healing” in the accounts of both my SBNR and Charismatic informants. As Wayne Dyer (1995, p. 359) puts it, “transcend the false self that we call the ego. That is when healing will occur.” And similarly, Norman Vincent Peale writes, “You have to give God a chance to reach into your soul with His healing power” (Peale 1959, p. 149). Becoming whole, healing, realizing one’s true self—these are all synonyms as regards the religion of the heart (see Bowman 1999, p. 181). It follows that *all healing entails moral reform*.

Lastly, not only is virtue the natural result of achieving one’s true self, but one is also promised happiness, understood as subjective well-being or inner peace. An SBNR artist submitted, “When I feel a state of permeating calm, that to me feels spiritual and it feels like the true self.” Another remarked, “Spirituality is very peaceful.” And Eckhart Tolle (1995, p. 5) writes, “the unhappy and deeply fearful self ... is ultimately a fiction of the mind.” The idea is that in realizing one’s true self, one simultaneously becomes moral and achieves subjective well-being. In other words, the religion of the heart promises *a perfect harmony between authenticity, virtue, and inner peace*.

Sacralization of individual liberty

There is perhaps no value more sacred to today’s religion of the heart than *individual liberty*. What this amounts to in practice is, first and foremost, a commitment to allowing individuals to “listen to the voice within” and “follow their heart”—that is, *negative freedom*. In other words, adherents of the religion of the heart demand that individuals be granted a sphere within which they cannot be interfered with, where they have *freedom from* external obstructions and constraints.¹³

This derives from the expressivist ethic at its core. Moreover, today’s religion of the heart is fundamentally egalitarian. As Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead (2008,

¹³ On the distinction between negative and positive freedom see Carter (2019).



p. 273) suggest, the religion of heart recognizes "the uniqueness—and unique worth—of each and every individual." Evincing the Protestant principle, and sharing in the Emersonian celebration of "individuality" (Schmidt 2012, p. 33), its adherents reject all attempts to order, tame, or control the true self.

This is especially evident among SBNRs. For instance, a trans activist, when asked why they left the church of their youth replied, "So I could actually determine my own freedom." Similarly, a psychology major shared that while she enjoys visiting different religious communities, what she detests is when they "put an ultimatum on me." Another relayed, "from my understanding, there is no legitimate way of praying to God. Everyone can pray to God in his own way." Adherents of the religion of the heart rail against what they perceive as external norms and regulations. Because they hold self-realization in such high esteem, they give great weight to *self-expression*, that is, the ability to express, and be recognized as, one's true self. Thus, an SBNR informant explained, "When I think of religion, it's very obviously ... tainted and very limiting; placing limitations on life and life experiences, whereas spirituality to me is a bit more about exploration and freedom, and just being who you are."

Again, one hears strikingly similar claims among Charismatic Christians. For instance, it was common to hear that my informants chose a neo-Pentecostal church because it offered them more freedom than others to express and find themselves. Nevertheless, this commitment to negative freedom derives from a more fundamental commitment to *positive freedom*. By this I mean a *freedom to* realize one's true self, which Harold Bloom (1992, p. 26) aptly describes as "a purely inner freedom." This inner freedom requires shedding all external attachments—only the individual who lives as their true self is truly free (see Keane 2002). Thus, Wayne Dyer (1995, p. 48) encourages readers, "Begin by making your decision to be free by letting go of your personal history." Similarly, Robin Sharma (1997, p. 170) warns, "Never be a prisoner of your past." And Eckhart Tolle (1999, p. 18), for whom "mind" represents society and culture, writes, "you can free yourself from your mind. This is the only true liberation." Of course, much psychotherapy is premised upon a similar ideal. For example, Phil McGraw (1999, p. 48) encourages his readers to "adopt the attitude of questioning and challenging everything in your life that you can identify as having been accepted on blind faith or as having been adopted out of tradition or history." Fuller (2001, p. 138) sums up this ideal of freedom as representing "humanity's drive to transcend biological and social determinisms and express ourselves in free and creative ways."

In sum, adherents of the religion of the heart sacralize individual liberty in the following senses: because they view social institutions and norms as stifling individuals' authenticity, they challenge and contest external constraints which they believe regulate and deform the true self. However, because they conceive of social institutions and norms as *aspects of the self*—the "ego" or "the world"—they endorse a conception of positive freedom that requires individuals to shed these aspects in order to become truly free. We therefore can conclude with Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers (2010, p. 15) that the religion of the heart "can be understood as a veritable religion of modernity because its participants collectively sacralize the long-standing



modern value of individual liberty, and especially the ideal of an authentic self that distances itself from allegedly alienating institutions and traditions.”

Mind–body–spirit connection

There is arguably no more complicated concept as regards the religion of the heart as the notion that the mind, body, and spirit are in some sense intimately connected. Yet, at its most basic, we can safely assert that the mind–body–spirit connection implies a *general hostility to dualisms*. In agreement, Campbell (2007, p. 66) writes, “all dualisms are being rejected, whether that of god and mankind, mankind and nature, mind and body, or body and soul, in favor of generally holistic assumptions.” However, as far as I can tell, there exists no consensus as to which of these dualisms are necessarily opposed by the religion of the heart, and which should be left intact. For instance, within the accounts of my informants these dualisms are sometimes challenged, and at others, not.

Yet what is abundantly clear is that the religion of the heart presupposes some version of the idea that *thought shapes reality*. Deepak Chopra (1994, p. 31): “thought has the power to transform.” Phil McGraw (1999, p. 178): “There is no reality; only perception.” Tony Robbins (1991, p. 75): “Beliefs have the power to create and the power to destroy.” Joel Osteen (2004, p. 121): “Our words are self-fulfilling prophecies.” Robin Sharma (1997, p. 63): “the quality of your thinking determines the quality of your life.” Joseph Murphy (1977, p. 37): “the law of life is the law of belief.” And Esther and Jerry Hicks (2004, p. 18): “You *do* create your own reality.”

And should one think only well-known authors make these claims, I heard variations on this theme from nearly all of my informants. For instance, a young SBNR grad student asserted, “I believe in the power of the mind.” Another said, “I’ve learned that as long as you believe you can do something, you can.” An SBNR artist declared, “We’re creating the reality that we’re experiencing.” And an SBNR law student made clear, “I’ve always believed some element of ‘perception is reality’.” Furthermore, one hears strikingly similar claims among Charismatics, albeit framed in more theistic terms. For instance, Phil Pringle preached the following at a Sunday service: “You will reproduce what you repeat,” “If you want to see blessing in your world, you need to speak blessing into your world,” and “You need to be speaking about the good things that God is doing in your life.” In his research on Charismatics, Coleman (2000, p. 28) writes of “positive confession” whereby “words spoken ‘in fact’ are regarded as objectifications of reality, establishing palpable connections between human will and the external world.” Similarly, Bowler (2013, p. 2) observes that neo-Pentecostals often speak of “*faith* as an activator, a power that unleashes spiritual forces and turns the spoken word into reality.” She explains, “Believers conceptualize faith as a causal agent, a power that actualizes events and objects in the real world. Faith acts as a force that reaches through the boundaries of materiality and into the spiritual realm, as if plucking objects from there and drawing them back into space and time” (ibid., p. 141). I saw many examples of this while studying Charismatics. For instance, a member of the worship team informed me, “If we



want to activate the power of God, sometimes we just need to speak His words." While a congregant shared in an interview, "If I ever need God, I just pray and He shows up in my life. It never fails."

What remains puzzling is how best to interpret all of these statements. As I remarked above, I do not believe there exists a consensus on this. Thus, it would seem the meaning of the mind–body–spirit connection—its generally holistic orientation—remains open to multiple interpretations. It is worth noting, then, that adherents of the religion of the heart can give credence to all of these interpretations without needing to commit to any one of them.

Methodological individualism

One way or another, for all of my informants, the "spiritual" life involves taking responsibility for themselves. Whether it is one's own happiness, success, past trauma and pain, or simply one's daily attitudes, the religion of the heart locates responsibility in the individual. For my SBNR informants "religion" is a kind of crutch—a form of negative dependency that keeps one from being truly independent, free and self-reliant. Thus, one asserted, "for me, spirituality is an individual task," adding, "one of my main personal philosophies is that, if you want to be happy, *you* have to work for it." One finds quite similar views among Charismatic Christians. The idea that "God helps those who help themselves," is a staple at C3 Church, and these young Charismatics often criticized other Christians who failed to take responsibility for themselves. Across the board, my informants emphasized the importance of self-reliance, that is, relying on the voice within, or the true self, in order to determine courses of actions, and they stressed the need to avoid blaming others for one's own failures and troubles.

It follows, as Susannah Crockford (2017, p. 41) correctly points out, that from within the religion of the heart, "the individual self, not society, is the locus of change and power." Accordingly, the religion of the heart adheres to a strict *methodological individualism*. As a result of its hostility towards social norms and institutions, it has trouble conceiving of collective action in anything but spontaneous gatherings formed on the basis of shared feelings and/or experiences. Society's troubles are ultimately individualized, that is, conceived as existing fundamentally in people's "egos," "the devil," or their "worldly identities." As a result, the religion of the heart prescribes mass self-transformation, or mass self-realization to combat the ills of the world. The good society, whatever it might consist of, is to be achieved by each and every individual taking responsibility for their own healing, and thereby seeking to realize their true self. This vision was articulated clearly by one of my SBNR informants: "I think moving people close to their potential is their spirituality, and if more people approach that as their spirituality, as finding their passion and working through that passion then I think the world is definitely going to improve. Not by one man's action, but by everybody's smaller actions." Another longingly described her ideal world in which "people were more present, self-aware, more mindful of their thoughts, feelings, sensations, and their interactions in the world." We see this vision outlined in popular "spiritual" literature as well. Wayne Dyer



(1995, p. 347) writes, “The world is encountering a spiritual deficit that reflects our need to consciously get on the path of our sacred quest. The solution to individual global problems is to overcome the spiritual deficit. When you make the shift in consciousness allowing yourself to be an agent of heightened awareness, you are contributing to the transformation of our world.”

Bringing clarity to the contemporary religious landscape

As we have seen, from within the religion of the heart any activity, event, or experience can potentially be interpreted as “spiritual” in nature. In fact, what makes an event or experience “spiritual,” fundamentally, is not whether it conforms to “religious” or “secular” boundaries and conventions, but rather *its quality* (ecstatic/effervescent) and the *purpose it serves* (self-awareness, self-expression, self-realization).

This explains why scholars have observed the tendency towards religious bricolage—that is, “the joining together of seemingly inconsistent, disparate contents” (Wuthnow 2007, p. 15)—among many people today. Indeed, the contemporary religious landscape has been described variously as replete with “do-it-yourself-religion” (Baerveldt 1996), “pick-and-mix religion” (Carrette and King 2005), “religious consumption à la carte” (Possamai 2003), and characteristic of a “spiritual supermarket” (Lyon 2000). There is certainly truth in these statements. For my informants, exercising, dancing, or hiking can be considered “spiritual,” as what matters foremost is whether they *experience* a connection to a force greater than themselves—be it God or the Universe—and whether or not it helps them to grow personally, heal, or realize their true self. As we have seen, adherents of the religion of the heart do not respect traditional semantic boundaries. Because the super-empirical pervades everything, it can be connected with anywhere, and at anytime, provided one is open to it. Similarly, among neo-Pentecostals, bricolage is also common—if always interpreted *within* a theistic frame. Charismatic Christians do not draw clear boundaries around what is “spiritual” and what is not, and if they do, the boundaries they draw often fail to correspond to what social scientists have conventionally deemed “religious.” Thus, bricolage is an inherent feature of the contemporary religious landscape. But where many scholars have so often gone wrong is in assuming that the existence of bricolage suggests a lack of cultural coherence. This is summed up in Robert Wuthnow’s (1998, p. 198) claim that the religious landscape of late modernity is characterized by a fundamental “messiness.” The problem with this assertion is that it reproduces emic understandings, and ultimately fails as sociological analysis; that is, it fails to capture both the cultural structural coherence of what goes by “spirituality” and the degree to which this cultural structure pervades the religious sphere of twenty-first century liberal democracies. Of course, this is not solely the fault of sociologists. What has made the religion of the heart so difficult for sociologists to study is that its participants deny adhering to it; they prefer to view themselves as nomadic traditionless seekers in touch with a universal



spiritual core that cannot be captured by language (Watts 2018b).¹⁴ Yet a closer look reveals something quite different.

Conclusion

While the language of “spirituality” might seem esoteric or fuzzy to some, the cultural structure it signifies is coherent and pervasive. Still, one might argue this analysis raises more questions than it answers. What are the historical predecessors of the religion of the heart? How might we trace its lineage? Where does it find institutional support in liberal democracies? What carrier groups or social classes does it most appeal to? How might we relate the rise of the religion of the heart to wider societal developments in late modernity? Does this cultural structure encourage rugged individualism, as Bellah et al. (1985) feared, or can it serve as a source of solidarity? And, more broadly, what are the social and political implications of this sea change in the religious landscape?

These are all important questions, but they cannot be answered here.¹⁵ My aim has been purposefully narrow: to delimit what I take to be the cultural structure underlying talk of “spirituality” in late modernity. I have therefore sought to map out the implicit code that structures a common pattern of symbolic meanings in the religious sphere of twenty-first century liberal democracies. In so doing, I have followed in the footsteps of Alexander and Smith (1993) who, some time ago, identified an entrenched cultural structure—what they called the “discourse of civil society”—which pertains to the civil sphere in modern democracies (see Alexander 2006). They perceptively noted, “It is one thing to lay out the internal structure of cultural order and quite another to say precisely what role this cultural structure plays in the unfolding of real historical events or in the creation or destruction of empirical institutions” (Alexander and Smith 1993, p. 159). I could not agree more. Yet until these scholars had identified this cultural structure the latter inquiry remained impossible.

Having identified what I take to be an enduring cultural structure in the religious sphere of late modern liberal democracies I believe a clear research agenda presents itself. For one, the disciplinary siloing that has long plagued the study of spirituality must end. It is high time scholars working across subfields and disciplines began to engage each other’s insights. Second, we must study how the religion of the heart takes distinct discursive forms across social and historical contexts—be they “secular” or “religious.” This will require case studies of local sites where the religion of the heart is institutionalized and encoded, not to mention filtered through unique group styles (Simko and Olick 2020). While there is clear unity in the diversity of today’s religious expressions we must also attend to their variety, and the social and political consequences that follow therefrom. But perhaps most important: if the religion of the heart has become a (if not the) dominant cultural

¹⁴ This is not true of Charismatics; but in their case the Christianity they espouse is dramatically different from the Christianity traditionally preached in mainstream denominations.

¹⁵ I address all of the above questions in Watts (2020).



structure institutionalized in the religious sphere of liberal democracies, sociologists of religion must adjust their theoretical frameworks accordingly. In other words, the sociology of religion must avoid privileging historically influential forms of church Christianity, and instead broaden its scope to include insights garnered by the strong program. When we analyze late modernity through such a paradigm we see that religion is far from dissipating. Rather, we are entering a new religious era, one where the old categories no longer apply and the old boundaries are no longer respected. We need a cultural sociological approach to the study of religion if we are to come to grips with the rise of the religion of the heart and its repercussions.

Note on research process and methodology

Between 2015 and 2016 I conducted qualitative research consisting of in-depth semi-structured interviews with twenty SBNR Canadian millennials in order to discern the meaning of “spirituality.” I also read a significant amount of “spiritual” and self-help best-sellers. Upon conducting an extensive review of the academic literature in the sociology of spirituality I identified what seemed to be a minority position but fit well with what I was observing in my interviews. According to proponents of this position what goes by “spirituality” is not as diffuse as many have suggested, but rather exhibits a striking underlying unity (see Heelas 1996; Hane-graaff 1996; Houtman and Mascini 2002; Houtman and Aupers 2006, 2010; Lynch 2007; Otterloo et al. 2012). With this cultural sociological framework in mind, I was able to make sense of my empirical data in a sociologically coherent way. Confirming, while refining, this framework, I argued that the SBNR cohort largely subscribes (albeit unknowingly) to a particular discourse or metanarrative, which gives cultural coherence to both their choice of activities and experiences, and their ultimate meaning. Following Paul Heelas (1996) I called this discourse “self-spirituality” (Watts 2018a).

At the end of 2016 I decided to enlarge my interview sample size, increasing the total number of informants to fifty. Thus, from 2016 to 2018 I interviewed another thirty Canadian millennials who self-identified as SBNR. Conducting these interviews allowed me to further develop the cultural sociological framework I had earlier devised. I was now able to discern strong cultural patterns from weak ones, and separate what was essential from what was merely contingent. I was developing a much clearer cultural sociological picture of what lay behind the SBNR moniker. However, something occurred in early 2017 that served to expand the scope of my research to include the worlds of evangelicals and neo-Pentecostals, groups I had no intention of researching when I initially set out. By 2017 I was able to articulate the nature of self-spirituality. When out and about I knew what to look for, and sought to identify traces of it beyond the limited confines of my interviewees’ accounts. One day, while perusing an Indigo Bookstore in downtown Toronto, I happened upon one of the main display tables, labeled, “Self-Help.” A quick glance at the titles on display revealed books by “spiritual” authors such as Deepak Chopra, Neale Donald Walsch, and Eckhart Tolle, as well as secular life coaches such as Tony Robbins and Phil McGraw—all names that had come up at different points



in my interviews—sitting next to titles by authors I had never heard of, like Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer. I would eventually learn that these authors are famous evangelical Christian pastors, and that they preach a gospel that, in uncanny ways, resembles what I had become accustomed to hearing from my SBNR informants, if only framed in a more theistic register. In turn, I began conducting an extensive literature review of scholarship on Charismatic Christianity. Although I found the field to be relatively insular (much like that of New Age and the study of therapeutic culture), I nevertheless came across scholars who had picked up on the affinities between Charismatic Christian and New Age discourses. For instance, Paul Heelas and Dick Houtman (2009) have suggested the rising number of evangelical, Charismatic, and neo-Pentecostal churches can be explained by the deep cultural affinities shared by these forms of Christianity and self-spirituality. Additionally, Colin Campbell (2007, p. 346) has argued, “just like New Agers, Pentecostals and charismatics believe in the reality of a spiritual realm that is distinctly yet parallel to the physical world of our senses, one that is capable of breaking through into the latter.” With these insights in mind I decided to undertake research on Christian Charismatics, and include a fieldwork component to my research. Admittedly, it took some time to determine where to conduct fieldwork. However, in the Fall of 2017 I began conducting participant observation at three sites in downtown Toronto: an Alcoholics Anonymous or Twelve Step group, a nondenominational neo-Pentecostal church (belonging to C3 Church Global), and a Toastmasters International public speaking club. I chose these sites because after conducting multiple site visits it became clear that something resembling the discourse of self-spirituality was present in both overt and covert forms at each. Admittedly, this was initially quite a surprise. I had simply assumed that “religious” spaces (neo-Pentecostal churches), “spiritual but not religious” spaces (Twelve Step groups), and “secular” spaces (Toastmasters club meetings) were categorically different. My fieldwork taught me this was mistaken. Of course, it took time to work out precisely how the language of “spirituality” was institutionalized at each site, and how each group privileged a particular discursive expression. Indeed, it was only after spending more than a year conducting participant observation at each site that I was able to confirm that what I was calling “self-spirituality,” is only one version of a more general cultural structure. And it took many formal and informal interviews with members of each of these groups, in tandem with extensive reading in religious history, (not to mention countless conversations with friends and colleagues) for me to distill the contours of what I now call the religion of the heart.

Of course, the generalizability of my empirical findings is limited by the size of my sample—which includes interviews with fifty SBNR Canadian millennials, and the membership of the three groups I studied in downtown Toronto. In order to achieve more generalizable findings my cultural sociological analysis of the religion of the heart is supplemented with a discourse analysis of materials drawn from popular “spiritual” and self-help literature, as well as an array of existing sociological and historical accounts found in the academic literature. My choice to combine interview and fieldwork data with discourse analysis of best-selling “spiritual” and self-help literature is derived from my observation that for many today it is books that serve as the primary sources of socialization as regards the religion of the heart.



While individuals may be introduced to the religion of the heart through a friend, teacher, therapist, film, or online video, if they decide to pursue their initial interest it almost always ends up being by means of reading books (see Hedstrom 2012). Accordingly, while I agree wholeheartedly with historian Robert Fuller (2001, p. 155) that “bookstores have emerged as the most important centers of unchurched spirituality,” I think this is also true of much church-ed “spirituality” as well.

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