

*A Sociology of Spirituality*, edited by Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp

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This volume is a collection of papers presented at the annual conference of the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group, held in 2004 at the University of Bristol. The theme of the sociology of spirituality is a timely one, and appears as a response from sociologists of religion to the growing phenomenon of individuals in contemporary societies seeking a spiritual life outside of the institutionalized religions. But while the emergence of “spirituality” in academic discourse reflects a contemporary cultural trend, it also opens the possibility for the sociological study of fundamental but previously neglected aspects of human life. Indeed, a tension runs through this book, between authors who take at face value the self-identification of growing numbers of people in Western countries who posit a dichotomy between “religion” and “spirituality”, and describe a move away from religion toward more spirituality, and other authors who take a more historically grounded approach to the notion of spirituality and explore its expressions within institutionalized religious traditions.

The first approach is exemplified by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, whose 2005 book *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford:

Blackwell) spells out the terms around which much of the book's debates revolve. This major study of religion and spirituality in the small English town of Kendal concludes that regular practitioners of "holistic spirituality" (the contemporary expression of what was previously known as the "New Age" movement) are growing in number and seem set to match, within the next four decades, the dwindling population of regular church goers. This study is the subject in Chapter 2 (pp. 43-61) of a thorough rebuttal by David Voas and Steve Bruce, who, after casting doubts on the methodology, question whether the activities listed as "holistic spirituality", such as yoga, dance or massage – which they consider to be simply "recreation" and "pampering" (p. 50), merit being called "spiritual" at all. They argue that this trend does not represent a move toward more spirituality, but is merely a sign of secularization, in which religion is watered down to the point of becoming nothing more than a fuzzy sense of emotional and physical well-being (p. 53). These and other points are vigorously refuted in the next chapter by Heelas himself. While one can argue about how "spiritual" yoga or tai chi practitioners may be, this is perhaps beside the point, or rather, that is the point itself: as I have discussed elsewhere, the very indeterminacy of body-centred techniques such as yoga, meditation or tai chi, allows the practitioner to consider them as a purely physical type of exercise, or as a form of spiritual practice, and to easily oscillate from one to the other. This indeterminacy allows such techniques to spread within secular institutions, while they can become gateways to more intense forms of spiritual or religious engagement, with potential socio-political implications (David Palmer, Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China, London: Hurst, 2007).

The Kendal study is again the subject of chapter 6, perhaps the most sociologically illuminating contribution to this collection, in which Linda Woodhead uses a gendered approach to ask why the holistic spiritual milieu is largely made up of women. Her answer is

that in the gendered division of labour prevailing since the 1950's, while men can compensate the alienating aspects of their primary, work-based identities by turning to family and leisure, women find less room for subjective satisfaction: although they have careers, family care-giving remains their primary identity, but one which is given low status and reward, while they have little time for leisure activities which are designed for men. Therefore, they are more likely to “turn to spheres and activities which enable them to escape from constricting roles and expectations and explore deeper satisfactions and alternative forms of identity... within the more traditionally female (albeit male-controlled) spheres of beauty, healthcare and religion”, which they reshape into holistic well-being and spiritual practices with a strong emphasis on subjectivity and self-development (p. 123).

Several chapters (4, 5, 7, 11 and 12) shift the terms of the debate by looking at spirituality within institutionalized religious communities, whether Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam or the Orthodox Church. These cases illustrate the tensions and ambiguities which come into play when Christian spirituality adopts a focus on the self and packaging of courses and workshops in a market overlapping with that of holistic spirituality (Versteeg, chap. 5); when the headscarf, worn by Muslim women in Europe as an expression of inner spirituality, is interpreted by the society and the state as an “affront to the normative values of the majority general population” (Chambers, chap. 7); and when young American “Post-Boomers”, through reclaiming the experience of church liturgy or innovating through artistic compositions, create a new form of embodied spirituality (“expressive communalism”, Flory and Miller, chap. 11). Chapter 12, by Flanagan, drawing on insights from both sociology and a Catholic sensibility, offers a searing critique of the visual, and indeed *spiritual* poverty of holistic spirituality, arguing that its practitioners “live off the ‘sacred capital’ of the Christianity they abandoned” (p. 233), consuming the symbolic and

practical content of the religions they reject, without replenishing the spiritual capital they are depleting.

Each of these contributions serves as a useful counterpoint to the tendency to take New Age paradigms or anti-religious individualism as the normative models of “spirituality”. However, while many interesting theoretical options are explored, drawing on Simmel (Varga, chap. 8), the Catholic tradition (Giordan, chap. 9), or notions of social, religious and “spiritual” capital modified from Bourdieu (Guest, chap. 10), more work clearly needs to be done before an operational sociological definition of spirituality is elaborated. Different authors often use definitions which lack in specificity (“the human search for meaning”, p. 24; “a belief that there are forces or there is a God or there are gods beyond the experienced reality of the individual”, p. 145). The editors delight in the fact that “because spirituality is such a difficult term to define, it can provide a broad junction for many concepts of sociological interest to pass across” (p. 5), while Holmes, in his survey of the literature on spirituality in a range of academic disciplines (chap. 1), concludes that it is unlikely that a single domain definition will ever be agreed on. The risk here is that without making a rigorous effort to devise an operational concept, academic discussion of spirituality may uncritically follow popular conceptions, and become as fuzzy as the mixtures of practices, feelings and “pamperings” which typically go under its label. Such an effort, however, would need to take into account data from the East and South, and not be limited by Euro-American regionalism.

This book does an excellent job of bringing to light, through interesting case studies and theoretical essays, some of the key issues in what promises to be a growing theme in the sociology of religion.