

The Globalization of Spirituality¹

John Drane

Introduction

The thesis that I wish to propose here can be summed up quite simply: the globalization of spirituality is not a new thing, and can in fact be traced very far back in the history of Western civilization. In particular, I want to suggest that the promotion of a globalized spirituality has always gone hand-in-hand with imperialism, and has been a characteristic of all major empires throughout the ancient world, and on into Christendom and colonialism. This trend still continues, and I shall further propose that the agglomeration of therapies and belief systems that are widely marketed under the banner of ‘spirituality’ today are simply the latest twist in this story. The mix-and-match approach that is so evident in today’s spiritual landscape is both a symptom and a cause of the declining confidence in the inherited Western worldview, but the stated intention of acknowledging diversity and learning from other cultures is not the main driving force here. On the contrary, much contemporary spirituality is motivated by the very philosophy that it claims to disdain, and has become an arm of western imperial ambitions, this time being pursued not so much by military means as through marketing and communication, with the aim being world domination through economic rather than narrowly political power.

Some definitions

Both of the key words in my title are somewhat ambiguous. The debate is very much in process as to what, exactly, globalization is. At the moment, however, there can be

¹ A lecture delivered at Regents Park College, University of Oxford, in November 2006 as part of a series on globalization; and subsequently repeated at a meeting of the Religion, Culture & Communication Group of the Tyndale Fellowship, in Cambridge July 2007. John Drane is a free-lance consultant to UK churches, and distinguished professor of New Testament & Practical Theology at Fuller Seminary, California. This article is © John Drane 2007, and may not be reproduced without written permission.

little doubt that while transnational processes are moving in many different directions, it is still the case that its defining characteristic is an orientation in favour of issues that are of central concern in the West, and the accompanying notion that the rest of the world has no choice but to become increasingly westernized. There is much legitimate debate as to whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, or indeed whether this will continue to be the form that globalization takes in the future.² Whatever the answer to that question, it is beyond doubt that we live in a world where we are being drawn inexorably toward some homogenization of culture and attitudes, and that globalization will therefore continue to be dominated by increasing capitalism, rationalization and McDonaldization,³ regardless of which cultural influences may find themselves in the ideological driving seat in decades to come.

But what is ‘spirituality’? It is not hard to discern examples of things that might be described in that way today. The ubiquitous appearance of roadside shrines constructed at the site of fatal accidents, not to mention the rapid expansion of sections headed ‘mind, body, spirit’ in High Street bookstores and the growth of interest in complementary therapies are all manifestations of a turn to the spiritual in the culture of the Global North. At one time, it would have been taken for granted that spirituality was more or less coterminous with ‘religion’, and it is in fact a recent word when used by itself. Most people, when asked, would now identify the word and its cognates with something like the essence of meaning, transcendence, mysticism, and in general terms all the attributes that were traditionally identified as

² For an overview of all these issues, see Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction* 2nd ed (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2005); David Held & Anthony G McGrew (eds), *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate* 2nd ed (New York: Polity Press 2003).

³ For the classic definition of McDonaldization, see George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press 1993), and his *McDonaldization: the Reader* 2nd ed (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press 2006). On its consequences for the life of the church, see my *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2000).

the heart or inner core of religious institutions, their practices and beliefs. Bono speaks for many when, in an interview for beliefnet.com, he questioned the connection between religion and the spiritual, observing that ‘I often wonder if religion is the enemy of God. It’s almost like religion is what happens when the Spirit has left the building ... The Spirit is described in the Holy Scriptures as much more anarchic than any established religion credits.’⁴ Hollywood star Shirley Maclaine expressed similar sentiments in her autobiography, complaining that ‘Your religions teach religion – not spirituality’.⁵

Academics prefer to be more precise about such things as definitions, and a good deal of ink has been spilled in the process of trying to get a handle on whatever it is that passes as spirituality today. The reason for this is not far to seek: the language of spirituality is now being used so widely, and to indicate such disparate entities and experiences, that trying to define it ontologically is a lost cause. The most useful way of approaching the subject is to accept the diversity, and define it empirically, by reference to the multiple ways in which people are actually using the concept. In my 2004 London Lectures in Contemporary Christianity, I suggested that there is now a spectrum of discrete, though interconnected, notions that now constitute the popular understanding of what it means to be spiritual, and that this spectrum has three main points on it, which I designated respectively discipline, enthusiasm, and lifestyle.⁶ On this understanding, religion can be categorized within the scope of things that are now regarded as ‘spiritual’, though the reverse is not also invariably the case, for everything that is now regarded as ‘spiritual’ is not necessarily ‘religious’. In my forthcoming book, *After McDonaldization*, I have developed this taxonomy further,

⁴ http://about.beliefnet.com/story/67/story_6758.html

⁵ Shirley Maclaine, *Out on a Limb* (London: Bantam 1986), 198.

⁶ John Drane, *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual? The rise of New Spirituality and the mission of the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2005).

connecting it to different people groups within the Global North, and different ways of being church.⁷ This is not the place to expand on any of that, except to note that I propose to accept this sort of distinction between religion and spirituality, rather than argue for it – not least because it allows me to be quite precise about the nature and limitations of the topic. I will not therefore consider the globalization of religion or faith traditions that is also a significant feature of today's world, exemplified through the global spread of Islam on the one hand, and of Pentecostal Christianity on the other – though both of those are undoubtedly worthy of further consideration and would complement what is presented here.

Historical Angles

By way of setting the scene, we can trace several different stages in globalized spirituality, which together span more or less the entire story of Western civilization:

- Though there is much difference of opinion as to the extent and scope of it, there is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that in the world influenced by ancient Mesopotamia, there was what, in today's terminology, we would call a globalized set of spiritual traditions and worldviews. The precise relationship between the Genesis creation stories and the so-called 'Babylonian Genesis' has been much debated, but the evidence is overwhelming that, at the very least, the two existed side-by-side within the same contextual worldview, and do indeed have some sort of connection.⁸ Beyond the formal theological statements of the Genesis creation narrative, there are passages in the psalms which portray creation in terms of a cosmic struggle between the forces of chaos and order (e.g. Psalm 74:12-17; 93:1-5), as well as allusions to a similar narrative in elsewhere (e.g. Isaiah 27:1). My own mentor in Semitic

⁷ John Drane, *After McDonaldization: how not to be church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, forthcoming 2007).

⁸ Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1942) was the first to compare Genesis 1 to the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*.

languages was the late Professor John Gray, who traced this universal spirituality not only in ancient Mesopotamia, but also (and especially) in the religion of Canaan and, in a more or less undiluted version, in the Old Testament itself.⁹ Only a handful of other scholars ever supported his opinions, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that at the earliest period of Israelite history, the perceived tensions between what could be regarded as authentic Israelite belief and the indigenous spirituality of the region (whether that be Canaanite, Egyptian, or Mesopotamian in origin) was, in effect, a tension between globalized spirituality (what Aldous Huxley called ‘the perennial philosophy’) and a more localised, historically specific belief system.¹⁰

- Within the historical period covered by the Hebrew scriptures, this struggle between Israelite belief and globalized spirituality is a constantly recurring theme. Significantly, the major underlying agenda was not a spiritual argument *per se*, but a matter of political reality. Control of the land of Palestine has always been central to Middle Eastern politics, and as different empires annexed it for themselves a significant component of military dominance over many centuries was the imposition of their own spiritual traditions on subjugated nations. From this perspective, the entire Old Testament story is shaped by the way in which different waves of empire-builders sought to impose a globalized spirituality as a way of creating one world that would be more amenable to centralized political control. The Syrians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans all, to varying degrees, adopted the same approach. The story of the tense and usually hostile relationship between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah was both dominated and determined by the extent to which the globalized spirituality of the day was either embraced or resisted. Even after the demise of the northern kingdom, the fate of the

⁹ Cf John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: the Ras Shamra texts and their relevance to the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill 1957); also his *Near Eastern Mythology* (London: Hamlyn 1969).

¹⁰ Cf Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers 1945).

southern kingdom, and the future of its temple, continued the same story. Likewise in the post-exilic period, when the concerns of people like Ezra and Nehemiah for a re-establishment of what they regarded as pure worship was motivated by the same desire to resist participation in a globalized spirituality, while the struggles of the Maccabean (167-164 BC) period highlight the same theme in an even more extreme way, if only because the Hellenistic ruler of Palestine, Antiochus IV, was himself one of the most zealous advocates of globalized spirituality as an integral aspect of political subservience.

- Though the Romans adopted a more *laissez-faire* approach in relation to the forcible imposition of a globalized spirituality that would enhance the cohesion of their empire, it is no coincidence that the ultimate end of the Jewish state in AD 70 came to be symbolised by the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, as the last remaining bastion of opposition to the globalization of faith. And, of course, the phenomenon of emperor worship offered an incredibly powerful statement of the intrinsic connection between spirituality and global political domination. At the same time, the rise of Gnosticism can also plausibly be regarded as an alternative, subversive spirituality with its own global reach – a spirituality, indeed, which in one form or another has continued to play that role in Western culture right up to the present day.
- The conversion of Constantine in 312 introduced another phase in globalized spirituality, and this time it was Christianity that was recruited in the service of imperialism – a process that eventually led to the thousand-year dominance of Christendom as a key instrument in the worldwide spread of European civilization and culture. I have argued elsewhere that the behaviour of the church during this era was the rough model on which the sort of globalization we see today is based. For

that reason I will not rehearse these arguments here.¹¹ While it is by no means the whole story, a significant component within the Crusades of the Middle Ages or the colonial adventures of the Conquistadores in South America was undoubtedly a self-conscious intention not only to create a global spirituality but to impose it on other cultures and peoples. Subsequent generations espoused the same ideology, if not the same methods, and India and the Caribbean are both littered with actual church buildings that were physically transported from Europe to these other countries.¹² The fact that this was all motivated by a specific worldview can be documented from many sources. Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) declared that ‘religion and true Christianity shall in every respect be uppermost in the world ... one holy city, one heavenly family, men of all nations together’¹³ In 1898, G C Lorrimer encouraged the Baptist Missionary Society to believe that the combined efforts of British and American cultural exports could change the world for the better, and for ever: ‘As the flags of the two living nations blend together, let us bathe them in the splendour of the cross of Christ; and as they move together about the globe, let us see to it that between them and over them ever gleams the cross.’¹⁴ Hymn-writers, including luminaries such as Charles Wesley had already played their part in spreading the same message, and by the time of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910 commercial interests had been co-opted as part of this endeavour, and some church leaders were openly connecting mission with industrialization, celebrating the fact that ‘steam and electricity’ were uniting the disparate cultures of the British

¹¹ Cf John Drane, ‘From Creeds to Burgers: religious control, spiritual search, and the future of the world’, in James A Beckford & John Walliss, *Theorising Religion: Classical and Contemporary Debates* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2006), 120-131. An abbreviated version of the same article is in George Ritzer (ed), *McDonaldization: the Reader* 2nd ed (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press 2006), 196-202.

¹² For an account of one such church in Jamaica, see Olive M Fleming Drane, *Clowns, Storytellers, Disciples* (Oxford: BRF 2002), 95-97.

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (London: Westley & A H Davis 1834), vol 2, 297-8.

¹⁴ G C Lorrimer, *Missionary Sermons 1812-1924* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press 1925), 182.

empire and creating an environment in which globalized spirituality could flourish and grow, as the church 'has well within her control the power, the wealth, and the learning of the world'.¹⁵

In conclusion of this part of my argument, then, I think we can say that the globalization of spirituality is nothing new, and that historically it has tended to consist of the imposition of the religious values and ideologies of powerful nations on other peoples. In other words, the globalization of spirituality has always been the other side of the coin of imperialistic ambition.

Contemporary developments

The rise of the so-called New Spirituality ('New Age'), with its mix-and-match approach with little, if any, conceptual connection with established faith traditions, may seem to challenge that paradigm. It is certainly not as straightforward a matter as the imposition of their own deities by Assyrian kings on Israel or Judah, or for that matter the forcible conversion of the Incas to Christianity. There are of course fragments of content drawn from mainline religious traditions, and it is a simple matter to identify components within contemporary spirituality that may be drawn from sources as diverse as Kabbalah, Sufism, medieval Christian mystics, Hinduism, Buddhism, Native American spirituality, ancient paganism, and so on. But it would be impossible to characterize what passes for 'spirituality' today as representing any of these things in a recognizably authentic form. Indeed, the spiritual can often be presented as a form of psychological therapy with no apparent connection to *any* recognizable faith tradition.

There is no question, though, that this is a globalized spirituality both in the sense that it is drawing on global spiritual traditions, and also in the sense that it is being actively

¹⁵ J I MacDonald, *The Redeemer's Right* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott 1910), 231.

promoted worldwide. It is also being presented as an aspect of the Western lifestyle that other peoples may learn from. At an earlier period, the raw materials of industry were transported from the majority world to the Global North, to be turned into goods that were then sold back to the suppliers of the raw materials. Today, there is a different sort of commercial flow in the same direction, only now it is the component elements of traditional spiritualities that are being brought to the West, to be recycled, reinvented, and remixed into new shapes and sizes, before being repackaged and sold in a global marketplace.

Those who promote this exotic spiritual mixture often claim that it is based on a Western openness to other cultures, and a growing recognition that they may have something to teach us. I want to suggest, however, that the reality is almost the exact opposite of this, and that the adoption of elements of global spiritualities is just the next stage in the Western exploitation of other cultures. It is no longer a simple matter to create political empires, so instead of annexing other people's lands we now ransack their traditional belief systems, recycle them, package them in novel ways, and then sell them to whoever will buy them – without stopping to reflect on the fact that they were never ours to sell in the first place.

None of this could have happened a hundred years ago, for Western people were firmly convinced of the rightness of their own ways of doing things. In the meantime, our culture has undergone a significant loss of confidence in itself – not least because the promise of world peace at the beginning of the 20th century turned out to be hollow, and as time passed every horror surpassed what had gone before in brutality and inhumanity. By the 1960s, the self-confident worldview that had driven the Western mind for a thousand years or more looked decidedly shopworn, if not altogether discredited. Thomas Oden is right when he claims that

Not some theory but actual modern *history* is what is killing the ideology of modernity ... While modernity continues blandly to teach us that we are moving ever upward and onward, the actual history of late modernity is increasingly brutal, barbarian, and malignant.¹⁶

Because that worldview was ultimately based on a rational understanding of the universe, rationality itself came to be increasingly sidelined, a trend that has opened the door for taking more seriously ideas that in a previous age would have been dismissed without a second thought as primitive and nonsensical. If we add to this mixture the growing awareness of cultures other than our own, brought about by the expansion of the mass media and the growth of cheap travel, then throw in a dash of natural human curiosity, we have the soil in which a new form of globalized spirituality can not only take root, but flourish.

In reality, of course, the groundwork for all this was laid in an earlier period, most notably through the work of speculative thinkers such as Swedenborg (1688-1772), and popularized by romantic poets like Wordsworth (1770-1850), Shelley (1792-1822), and Blake (1757-1827), as well as (in America) the Transcendentalists.¹⁷ The 19th century fascination with Indian culture as being allegedly more ‘advanced’ than that of, say, Africa, also played its part. In fact, Western interest in Indian spirituality offers an interesting case study for a pattern that runs deep through much of the New Spirituality:

- Questioning or rejection of certain aspects of one’s own culture
- Forming of ideas representing the opposite of what is being rejected

¹⁶ Thomas C Oden, *After Modernity – What?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990), 51

¹⁷ The leading lights in this movement were Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), and Margaret Fuller (1810-1850). Others associated with them included Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, A. Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, George Ripley, F. B. Sanborn, Jones Very, T. W. Higginson, O. B. Frothingham, William Ellery Channing, Lydia Maria Child, Moncure Conway.

(hierarchical attitudes, male-dominated structures, left-brained thinking, and so on)

- Projection of these ideas onto a culture or movement removed in time and space from one's own (quite often in a fairly naïve way along the lines of 'modern Western thinking has created the mess we are now in, therefore the resolution might be found in ancient Eastern ways').
- Using the projected image - now dressed in the garb of some other culture - as legitimation for one's own counter-cultural ideas, and as a basis for attacking or reforming the prevailing culture

The fascination with 'Celtic' spirituality operates this way¹⁸ but more significant, perhaps, is the fact that the same approach to American history has been adopted by the Religious Right, in furtherance of their argument that the country has been subverted by abandoning its allegedly Christian origins which were supposedly characterized by acceptance of Biblical inerrancy and the integration (not separation) of church and state – a historical reconstruction which then claims to offer a platform from which the United States can be called back to the moral and spiritual purity that characterized the pristine faith of the founding fathers.¹⁹ The fact that Westerners can reimagine their own culture in such an obvious way makes it highly unlikely that they would have any qualms about doing the same with the traditions of other nations,

¹⁸ And for that very reason causes some scholars to dismiss it as irrelevant and historically inept. Cf Donald E Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press 2000); Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: making myths and chasing dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1999). However, this opinion ought to be set in a wider frame of reference. For when a culture finds that the metanarrative that it once took for granted is either untrue, or merely unserviceable in changed circumstances, it is natural that we look back into our own story in the effort to identify new paradigms that might inspire us for the future. Faced with the diminishing prospects of the people of God, the Hebrew prophets repeatedly looked back to more ancient times and reinterpreted an old story (usually the exodus narrative) for new circumstances. The historical knowledge of the exodus available to Isaiah or Jeremiah must have been just as flimsy as our certain knowledge of the Celtic era, but that never stopped them reshaping the story. In a different way, and on the basis of more certain historical knowledge, the New Testament evangelists did something similar with the stories of Jesus.

¹⁹ Described by Randall Balmer as 'the Religious Right's shopworn narrative of the supposed Christian origins of the United States and its subsequent lapse into moral decay' (Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come* (New York: Basic Books 2006), 105.

something which in turn gives greater credence to the proposal that the driving agenda behind the globalization of spirituality in the West is not actually a rediscovery of other cultures – still less an appreciation of them – but a further exploitation of them founded entirely on Western premises.²⁰

Though this new spirituality presents itself as a form of openness to ‘the Other’, and therefore postures as a force for global liberation,²¹ the underlying reality is quite the opposite: ‘a new wave of domination riding on the crest of colonialism and modernity’.²² The reason why such a claim can be made is not far to seek. For the rise of the current form of globalized spirituality has not only coincided with, but is an outcome of, the emergence of a post-modern mindset that regards the meaning of all cultures to be provisional and relative. In a word, if nothing means anything, it is an easy matter to appear to accept everything. For if everything is relative, then by definition everything is ultimately equally unimportant and meaningless. Robert Ellwood puts his finger on this with his graphic description of the way in which we are now turning spiritual culture into a consumer product, as:

... a virtually unprecedented level of spiritual independence and commercialism together. People get fragments of Tibet or Chaldea in an enlightenment emporium and practice it on their own at home, apart from any living priest or temple, with a confidence both wonderful and appalling, with an attitude less of credence than of, Let’s check it out, and I’ll take from it

²⁰ Some devotees of New Spirituality have questioned this approach, but Starhawk is in a definite minority when she claims that Westerners thereby ‘unwittingly become spiritual strip miners, damaging other cultures in their superficial attempts to uncover their mystical treasures ...’, cf Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1979), 21

²¹ A typical statement would be the following, in David Spangler & William Irwin Thompson, *Reimagination of the World* (Santa Fe: Bear 1991), xvi: ‘we are reimagining our world ... taking hunks of ecology and slices of science, pieces of politics and a sprinkle of economics, a pinch of religion and a dash of philosophy, and we are reimagining these and a host of other ingredients into something new: a New Age, a reimagination of the world’

²² Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other* (London: Pluto Press 1998), 13.

what I can use.²³

There is an intrinsic connection between the fact that Western people have begun to take seriously other cultures and their spirituality only at the point when the Western worldview is trivializing and relativizing all culture. Interest in other spiritualities offers no moral or spiritual challenge to a generation that believes nothing has any intrinsic value anyway but can be bought and sold to satisfy capitalist consumerism. That is not quite the whole story, of course – for we do believe that there is intrinsic and ultimate value in the opinion that declares everything else to be relative, meaningless, and available for commercial exploitation. In the age of colonialism and empire-building, the prevailing ideology of modernity assumed its own rational superiority, and worked to replace other cultures by itself. Today, the prevailing Western ideology encourages the appropriation of non-Western cultures as an integral facet of its own history and identity, and does so in a particularly insidious way by redefining in its own terms the belief systems and worldviews of other people. In the process, the much-vaunted diversity of the world is actually being replaced by a uniformity inspired by the forces of globalization, westernization, and McDonaldization. At the same time, and as part of this process, the West has lost its own spiritual vision and is becoming increasingly aware of its own inner emptiness. In this situation, the West has only two options: either to admit to its own vulnerability and spiritual bankruptcy, or seek ‘to maintain the status quo and continue unchecked on its trajectory of expansion and domination by undermining all criteria of reality and truth.’²⁴ So far, expediency and pragmatism have been given a higher priority than truthfulness, and as a consequence we have ended up with the scenario that is so eloquently described by George Ritzer as *The Globalization of*

²³ Robert S Ellwood, *Islands of the Dawn: the story of alternative spirituality in New Zealand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1993), 246.

²⁴ Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other* (London: Pluto Press 1998), 15.

Nothing.²⁵

Perspectives and Challenges

I want now to briefly indicate some of the factors that can be cited in support of this opinion, before concluding with some observations as to how Christians might relate to this scenario.

According to research carried out by Opinion Research Business, over the last 40 years in Britain there has been a persistent, if gradual, decline of belief in God, and a corresponding rise in belief in a soul.²⁶ The decline consists entirely of an erosion of belief in a personal transcendent God. Belief in a spirit or life-force has not only been maintained, but has increased. Alongside this change in beliefs about God and the soul there has been an even more dramatic falling off of traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs about heaven and hell (or indeed any sort of dualistic universe), and this is paralleled by the significant number of British people who now believe in reincarnation (something like 30% of all Britons, and a much higher percentage among young people).²⁷

But it is too simplistic to claim, as some do, that ‘the traditional Western cultural paradigm no longer dominates in so-called ‘Western’ societies, but ... has been replaced by an ‘Eastern’ one.’²⁸ Western people have, of course, been fascinated by Indian spirituality ever since the discovery and translation of traditional Indian scriptures into English, going back to the time of the British East India Company.

²⁵ George Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press 2004).

²⁶ For an accessible account of this research, see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/htmlContent.jhtml?html=/archive/2000/05/28/nbelief28.html> Also David Hay & Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham Centre for the Study of Human Relations 2000).

²⁷ Cf Erlendur Haraldsson, ‘Popular psychology, belief in life after death and reincarnation in the Nordic countries, Western and Eastern Europe’, in *Nordic Psychology* 58/2 (2006), 171-180. The figures are even higher in some other European nations, most notably in the Baltic states but also many eastern European countries.

²⁸ Colin Campbell, ‘The Easternisation of the West’, in Bryan Wilson & Jamie Cresswell (eds), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response* (London: Routledge 1999), 41.

These directly influenced both the romantic poets in Britain, and the Transcendentalists in the USA, as well as the early leaders of Theosophy. This trend accelerated with the arrival of Indian religious teachers in the West at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, most notably Swami Vivekananda's appearance at the World's Parliament of Religions (Chicago, 1893) and Swami Paramhansa Yogananda's visit to the International Congress of Religious Liberals (Boston, 1920) and his subsequent founding of the Self-Realization Fellowship. The second half of the 20th century witnessed increasing physical contacts with the Indian sub-continent, not only through migration from east to west but more especially through the pilgrimages of cultural icons such as the Beatles from West to East.

This process is a good illustration of the trend identified earlier, of Western people identifying shortcomings in their own culture, which are then projected onto other cultures that are then remodeled so as to offer a solution to the West's concerns.

Beginning in the 1960s, Westerners wanting to reinvent their own civilization unwittingly bought into an idealized image of Indian history that had actually been the invention of the colonial era, as British empire builders tried to reconcile the reality of Indian life with what they imagined the ideal to be, from their reading of classical texts. In a previous era, the Raj had used this dislocation to justify itself as the only hope for the restoration of a cultural glory that had long since disappeared.²⁹

Paradoxically – and to a large extent against the stated attitudes of the day – when Western people today appropriate Asian philosophies as a way of correcting what is

²⁹ A misrepresentation of the culture which in turn (and in spite of its inaccuracy) became a convenient image for Indian nationalists, who were able to portray the British as chaos-creators and claim an independent India as the restoration of the 'classical' spiritual culture that had only ever existed in the British imagination! Cf the opinion of Andrea Grace Diem & James R Lewis, 'Imagining India: the influence of Hinduism on the New Age Movement', in James R Lewis & J Gordon Melton, *Perspectives on the New Age* (Albany NY: SUNY Press 1992), 50: 'There are 'actually two "Orients". One is made up of real people and real earth. The other is a myth that resides in the head of Westerners ... a convenient screen on which the West projects reverse images of its own deficiencies.'

perceived to be wrong with the West, something similar is happening. An example of this is found in the way that a key Western characteristic such as ‘instrumental activism’ has been incorporated into an apparently ‘Eastern’ worldview.³⁰ One of the major defining forces in traditional Eastern culture is a sense of fatalism: no-one can escape their *karma*. But when this is adopted in the West, that is often replaced not only by an optimistic outlook that says you *can* escape your *karma* – but even more, a claim that (because we are all recycled souls) we can actually choose the *karma* that will suit us. Psychology professor J L Simmons is typical of this outlook:

the decision to be reborn is self-determined by each being in consultation with familiar spirits and, often, a small group of more knowledgeable counsellors. The rebirth is planned ... Such plans include the circumstances of birth and a blueprint outline of the life to follow, so that certain experiences might provide the opportunity to learn certain lessons.³¹

and

We create the realities we experience ... The universe ultimately gives us what we ask for ... Since we construct our own lives, it is false and misleading to blame others for what we are experiencing ... The buck stops with us. And change is in our hands.³²

Not only does this raise significant ethical questions about suffering, poverty, and injustice – but it also answers them by asserting that since we have all chosen the *karma* we carry with us through this life, no-one should feel sorry for anyone else’s plight, because they have chosen it for themselves and therefore no individual has any responsibility for anyone other than him or herself. And by projecting this onto the

³⁰ ‘an attitude of active mastery toward the empirical situation external to the society ...’ (Talbot Parsons, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies* New York: Free Press 1965, 172) – i.e. a feeling that ‘things don’t have to be like they are’, things can and should get better.

³¹ J L Simmons, *The Emerging New Age* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co 1990), 69-70.

³² J L Simmons, *The Emerging New Age* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co 1990), 83.

worldview of those who are most likely to be suffering marginalization, we arguably undermine the only hope they might otherwise have. To say that a Western metaphysic has been replaced by an 'Eastern' one' is not the whole story – and arguably, not the most significant part of the story.

More recently, Richard King and Jeremy Carrette have argued that the current obsession with 'spirituality' is not only abusing other cultures, but is also exploiting consumers in the West as well. They claim that the existential *angst* experienced by many has largely been engendered by big business which, having created socially oppressive circumstances, is now making money by selling the panacea for the resulting ailments in the form of pre-packaged 'spiritual' goodies that not only fail to offer anything of value but are also potentially addictive. In the process of analyzing how and why this has happened, they not only critique the popular spirituality now on offer as 'cultural prozac' and 'genetically modified religion', but criticize the churches for having allowed themselves to become 'a lifestyle commodity rather than an ethical response', and having contributed to 'the act of selling off the assets of 'old time' religion'.³³ There is a lot of truth in all this, but it is overstated. It is hard to sustain the argument that the burgeoning market for spirituality is the result of some Machiavellian plot on the part of multinationals, not least because those who are cashing in on our cultural insecurities in this way are mostly individual therapists, rather than corporations – and far from having deliberately engineered this marketing opportunity, they are inhabiting a niche that has resulted from the failure of traditional spiritual institutions such as the churches to offer meaningful access to their own historic resources. At the same time, however, it is hard to deny that Western politicians have found the rise of New Spirituality to be a valuable tool in their efforts

³³ Jeremy Carrette & Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: the silent takeover of religion* (London: Routledge 2004). The phrases quoted are to be found, respectively, on pages 77, 132, 126, 125.

to marginalize the importance of faith traditions to the world's peoples, while there are many websites that demonstrate quite clearly how this concoction of spiritual goodies taken from different sources but reshaped according to Western values is corroding the traditional lifestyles and aspirations of people across the world. For New Spirituality tends to take what is familiar, to reimagine it from a Western perspective, and then to present it as the panacea for all ailments, whether physical, mental, or economic, and the key to a healthy lifestyle, a designer body, fulfilling sex life, and loving relationships. Who would not want all these things, especially if they seem to derive from traditional values and worldviews, albeit in a radically reimagined form?

In addition to such reflective questions, there is also a more obvious pragmatic one: namely, does any of it work? The answer to that seems to be largely negative, for there is little evidence to suggest that the world and its peoples are happier and more fulfilled today than they were back in the 1960s. The solution preferred by Carrette and King is that 'religions themselves ... provide the best hope for humanity'³⁴, but their inclination to accept the post-modern relativization of the truth claims of all faiths prevents them from explaining how that might happen. The fact is that the opportunity for the commercial exploitation of the contemporary search for meaning is itself a natural spin-off of the emergence of a post-modern mindset. On the one hand, though the meaningfulness of metanarratives has been questioned,³⁵ the very existence of New Spirituality is evidence that the personal search for some bigger story that might be worth giving one's life for has not diminished but has actually intensified. On the other, the hermeneutic of suspicion, which has placed a question

³⁴ Jeremy Carrette & Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: the silent takeover of religion* (London: Routledge 2004), 179.

³⁵ Most notably by Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993), xxiv.

mark against the motives of all previous generations of religious leaders, has so devalued the spiritual wisdom of the past that we are indeed cast adrift on a sea of consumer choice as the only possible way forward. If Christians are to make any serious contribution to the future of this globalized spirituality, we will need to discover how we might subvert (‘redeem’) the very mindset that gave birth to it, while at the same time recognizing the reality of the dislocation and fragmentation of contemporary culture as it is experienced by those who seek spiritual solutions for life’s big problems. To engage in detailed discussion of that option would take us beyond the scope of this lecture. But for those who might be inclined to reflect further on such questions, I would express the opinion that a way forward that is culturally contextualized, historically well grounded, and redemptive, may be found in a reorientation of Christian thinking to focus first of all on doctrines of creation and incarnation, recognizing that there is no aspect of human life that is untouched by the activity of God – and that must, by definition, include the contemporary spiritual search. Moreover, I believe we can identify significant Biblical models for how to do that, not least in the Creation stories of the Hebrew scriptures, in the Wisdom literature, and in some key narratives in the book of Acts, most notably the accounts of St Peter and Cornelius Acts 10:1-48), and of St Paul’s encounter with the globalized spirituality of his day in the city of Athens (Acts 17:16-34).³⁶ But to turn this into a lecture of Biblical exegesis would definitely be a step too far, and must await a future opportunity.

³⁶ On St Paul at Athens, see my *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual?* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2005), 111-120.