

SPIRITUALITY AND SECULARITY

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THIS ARTICLE WILL BE AN exploration of the relations between spirituality and secularity, and it will pursue this end by considering the phenomenon of secular spirituality. In adopting this strategy I clearly assume the meaningfulness of ascribing a spiritual dimension to some secular beliefs and behaviours. Two types of considerations motivate this judgement. The first is simply the sociological observation that there are persons who describe themselves, their beliefs, and their behaviours as spiritual even though they acknowledge no bond of doctrine or community with any historical religion. The second consideration is philosophical and follows from the definition of spirituality assumed here: it allows that being religious is not a necessary condition for being spiritual. A secular spirituality is neither validated nor invalidated by religious varieties of spirituality. Its status is related to them but separable, and because of this relative independence, its meaning is somewhat problematic.

Thus further specification of the crucial notions of spirituality and secularity is required; especially, it needs to be demonstrated that a secular spirituality is at least theoretically distinguishable from both a religious spirituality and a conception of secular life that is not spiritual. Hypotheses about the nature of secular spirituality offered here will not be dogmatically asserted nor will they be proleptically substantiated; they will simply be given sufficient conceptual precision to serve as a provisional framework for the diverse varieties of contemporary secular spirituality.¹

Briefly stated, the spiritual aspect of human existence is hypothesized to have an outer and an inner complexion. Facing outward, human existence is spiritual insofar as it engages reality as a maximally inclusive whole and makes the cosmos an intentional object of thought and feeling. Facing inward, life has a spiritual dimension to the extent that it is apprehended as a project of one's most enduring and vital self, and is structured by experiences of sudden self-transformation and subsequent gradual development. An integration of these inner and outer characterizations may be

achieved by expressing them in a more dramatic idiom: in this language the spiritual dimension of life becomes equatable with the lived task of realizing one's truest self in the context of reality apprehended as a cosmic totality. It is the quest for attaining an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is; it is a quest that can be promoted by apt regimens of disciplined behaviour.

The spiritual dimension of human life can be more fully characterized by supplementing the above definition with collateral resources. Philosophical ethics and phenomenological psychology provide them. The Scottish-born philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has recently provided a theory of virtue which includes a notion of practice quite relevant to discussions of spiritual life. With precision, but little elegance, MacIntyre defines a practice as being

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.²

Among the practices cited by MacIntyre are scientific inquiry, musical artistry, and expertise at games like chess. All of these are likewise examples of activities that may be accorded a spiritual significance, that is, they may bear the special meaning of relating their practitioner to the world as a cosmic whole and of transforming them in the direction of enhanced vitality. What is de-emphasized in this latter context is the relation of these activities to others which lay claim to human obligation. They are not viewed within the purview of a systematic moral theory.

Clearly MacIntyre is indebted to Aristotle's conception of practical wisdom as good action having itself as its own end (*Nicomachean ethics*, 1140b). When appropriated for the description of spiritually disciplined practices, MacIntyre's definition has the felicitous implication that such practices are not validated by some otherworldly reward. In this respect the spiritual and the salvific are clearly distinguishable; this distinction is a crucial presupposition for any conception of secular spirituality. Spiritually disciplined practices are not necessarily competitors with traditional religions which promise salvation. For instance, meditation may be part of a Christian regimen of

prayer, and as such it may be theologically construed to be a penitential act occurring within a sacramental system whose ultimate end is the communication of divine grace and eternal life. Meditation as a disciplined practice expressive of a secular spirituality does not share this ultimate end, and so its practitioners will regard the distinctive good of its practice as something intrinsic, having itself a unique capacity for enhanced vitality and human excellence. If a regimen of meditation is undertaken purely for practical reasons, e.g. to increase a person's job performance or lower his or her blood pressure, then, by the definition offered above, it loses its claim to being spiritual in any sense.

Psychological accounts of optimal experience are similarly relevant to the spiritual aspect of human life. The University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has recently provided such an account. He identifies optimal experience with a human phenomenon he calls 'flow' and, in a book of this same name, he describes eight elements common to profound experiences of human enjoyment. The flow experience, says Csikszentmihalyi, is chiefly constituted by (1) a challenging activity for which skills are needed and for which there are (2) clear goals and ample feedback that make success measurable. To do the activity well (3) great concentration is needed, so much so that (4) a loss of self-consciousness is effected and (5) one's sense of time is transformed. Also, (6) actions and awareness of those actions become merged, and a paradoxical sense is engendered that (7) control over one's actions is exercised without conscious effort. Finally, Csikszentmihalyi concludes a summary description of flow by noting (8): 'An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous'.³ This last element is the autotelic quality that Aristotle and MacIntyre highlighted in their respective theories of virtue.⁴

Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges that many activities productive of flow experiences had their origins in religious behaviours, and that the excellence achieved in flow experiences has frequently been accorded a moral significance. Yet he is careful not to make flow experiences accountable to religious or moral criteria. He even allows the soldier's fury in hand-to-hand combat to count as a flow experience! On the basis of his empirical research he does, however, make this pregnant remark: 'As contemporary flow activities are secularized, they are unlikely to link the actor to powerful meaning systems'.⁵ The systems alluded to here are religious traditions, moral

systems and political ideologies. This remark, I believe, is helpful in identifying secular spirituality because it is often the intent of describing a secular behaviour as spiritual to relate that activity to a larger system of meaning. Secular spirituality reflects an attempt to locate optimal human experience within a non-religious context of existential and cosmic meaning.

A definition of the spiritual life which includes reference to an enduring self and cosmic totality will be received cautiously by many philosophers. This is so because such notions figure prominently among the ideas that Immanuel Kant treated under the rubric of 'transcendental illusion'.⁶ When reified in Platonic fashion as the individual soul and transcendent God, Kant believed that these notions transgress the limits of possible experience and are therefore rationally insupportable. Yet he also said that they are the product of 'a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason', such that when undogmatically entertained, they are capable of legitimately serving as regulatory ideals.⁷ For instance, they can enliven the study of nature, and provide transition and support for the comprehension of moral ideas. It is primarily as imaginative ideals of this sort that truest selves and cosmic wholes are enlisted for the identification of the spiritual life. It is especially apt in a project concerned with secular manifestations of spiritual life that spirituality be understood with consideration of Kant's qualification of Platonic idealism.

All religious life may be presumed spiritual; defining the spiritual aspect of life is not offered as a means for judging which religions are most genuinely spiritual. Thus the biblical God who is not directly identifiable with the world, but who is its transcendent creator, may be said in this latter capacity to be that which a Muslim or a Jew encounters as a maximally inclusive reality. Likewise, a Buddhist's belief that there is no self which undergoes suffering may be construed as a truer way of understanding human agency than the common sense view it challenges. Yet not everything spiritual must be religious; the idea of secular spirituality implies that there are ways of understanding the world as a cosmic whole and the self as an enduring agent that are not directly indebted to religion.

This last point pertains to the meaning of secularity. It is proposed that human existence is secular to the extent that it is undertaken according to conceptions of the world and self which are not directly indebted to religion, and which, moreover, promote the organization of society in ways that permit its participants to pursue both religious and irreligious paths to fulfilment. A historical judgement is made

that scientific beliefs, behaviours, and institutions—mostly originating in European civilization but now no longer confined there—have been most successful in challenging religion's traditional role of providing cosmologies and anthropologies. The intellectual achievements and liberal temperaments of figures like Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein exemplify this scientific variety of secularity. Karl Marx certainly deserves mention along with Darwin and Einstein, though his case is more problematic given the resistance of academic economists to grant scientific status to many of his theoretical pronouncements and the tendency of Communist governments to propagandize atheistic materialism in his name. Yet Marx's influence was multiform: for instance, it gave a dimension of historical universality and prophetic urgency to the African-American radicalism of W. E. B. Dubois and to the feminism of Simone de Beauvoir. These latter two figures inaugurated trends in secular thought which many have found rife with spiritual meaning.

While a generous historical assessment of the role of science in the constitution of secularity is assumed, no philosophical judgement is made that viable challenges to religion must be scientific. A second tradition of Western secular thought rejects the explanatory projects of scientists and religionists alike. The account of the spiritual aspect of human existence given above relies heavily on the relation of wholes and parts, and the distinction between truth and illusion. Postmodern advocates of a deconstructionist aestheticism reject the rationalization of the whole/part relation accomplished by mathematicians and logicians; for the sake of the inexhaustible possibilities of artistic creativity they resist all speech about metaphysical totalities. Similarly they renounce the rationalization of the truth/illusion distinction effected by the experimental methodology of empirical scientists; in fidelity to an unending project of textual interpretation they resist all claims to established truth. Philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida, and social theorists like Michel Foucault and Mary Daly are the proximate sources for these views among Western intellectuals.⁸ They have vehemently criticized all forms of Platonism, but especially its religious forms, and have at least indirectly charted a spiritual path by means of their equally vehement decial of scientific positivism. It should be noted, also, that spirituality born of radical scepticism is not an exclusively Western phenomenon. There are arguably more ancient and pervasive antecedents for this type of secularity in the naturalistic and undogmatic views of certain Oriental sages.

The relation between the theoretical and practical characteristics of secular spirituality is well illustrated by the case of ecological activism. Groups like the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society work for a more healthy environment through programmes of public education and political lobbying; more radical groups like Greenpeace also employ acts of civil disobedience. These practical strategies were inherited from a former generation of political activists who demanded civil rights for African-Americans and American disengagement from the war in Vietnam. Yet, unlike these forebears, ecological activists are united, not only by prescriptive beliefs, but also by a purportedly empirical account of the natural world.

An influential articulation of this ecological vision is J. E. Lovelock's provocative 'Gaia hypothesis'. (A writer in *Scientific American* says that it 'has almost become the official ideology of "Green" parties in Europe'.)⁹ The hypothesis claims that 'the biosphere is a self-regulating entity with the capacity to keep our planet healthy by controlling the chemical and physical environment'.¹⁰ Lovelock's use of the name of an ancient Greek earth goddess involves more than a learned way of naming his theory. He actually posits the existence of a collective living entity in which human beings and all living things participate. He describes Gaia as 'a complex entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil: the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet'.¹¹ Under criticism by more traditional biologists, Lovelock has modified his initial claims; however, the precise scientific status of the theory is not crucial here. What is important is how clearly the hypothesis gives articulation to the belief of many ecological activists that it is incumbent upon people to adopt a personal relationship of appreciation and responsibility to the whole natural world. This accent on wholeness is what makes ecological activism pregnant with spiritual meaning. Also, the claim that the natural world is actually Gaia—a living organism, is less important than the insistence that it should be treated as if it were a living being, capable of self-regulation, but still needful of care. In Kantian language, this 'as if' characterization suggests that the Gaia hypothesis, though perhaps empirically unfounded, may still be valuable as a regulatory idea.

Practitioners of holistic medicine advocate a conception of human selfhood complementary to an ecological vision of the natural world. They eschew a view of the body as a mechanical assemblage of parts

best nurtured and healed by medical specialists with technical expertise in individual organs or diseases. The holistic alternative sees the human organism as a living system whose parts are interconnected and interdependent. This holistic account of health as a dynamic balance of forces—including mental and physical, and organismic and environmental forces—has ancient precedents in Western medical writings from the *Corpus Hippocraticum* and in Chinese medical texts like the *Nei ching*. Yet Western religions, unlike the religions of China, have generally adopted anthropologies emphasizing hierarchy and control more than balance and compensation. Hence many advocates of holistic health practices have identified themselves as opposed to the dominant traditions of both Western biology and theology. Certainly this was true of Andrew Taylor Still, the founder of osteopathy and the inspirer of chiropractic medicine.¹² It is also true of herbalist practitioners of natural healing. In the West these persons have mostly been women, and specifically, women who have been excluded from professional medicine but who have been allocated primary responsibility for food preparation and service.

An implication of holistic interconnectedness is that a living organism has resources for healing itself, as when its immune system comes to the aid of an organ impaired by infection. If complete healing is not possible, an organism can still work to remedy a lost balance, as when damage to one sense organ is partially compensated for by the increased acuteness of other senses. Especially stressed in holistic medicine is the power of a vital mind to heal an ailing body. Excessive claims in this regard have drawn harsh criticism from traditional physicians. Yet the genuinely spiritual aspect of holistic medicine is attributable less to its postulation of extraordinary mental powers than to its affirmation that health requires release from a false conception of self. Like Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, holistic medicine's value as a regulatory ideal is somewhat independent of its particular empirical claims.

Environmental activism and holistic medicine are just two of the many varieties of secular spirituality. The scheme of categorization mentioned above (in footnote 1) serves a heuristic purpose and claims no metaphysical status. For instance, individuals and activities may exemplify more than one of the categories listed. This is the case especially for artists. Consider Walt Whitman's poetry. Whitman's verse eloquently gives voice to the experience of engaging reality as an encompassing whole, and it does so in a way beholden to no religious orthodoxy. Early in the original 'Song of myself', he writes:

Urge and urge and urge,
 Always the procreant urge of the world.
 Out of the dimness opposite equals advance . . . always substance
 and increase,
 Always a knit of identity . . . always distinction . . . always a breed
 of life.
 To elaborate is no avail . . . Learned and unlearned feel that it is so.
 Sure as the most certain sure . . . plumb in the uprights, well
 entretied, braced in the beams,
 Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,
 I and this mystery here we stand.¹³

Striking here is the contrast between the abstract generality of the first stanzas and the sensual particularity of the concluding self-description. Whitman's intent is to communicate his exuberant celebration of all of reality. This encounter does not leave him unchanged. Toward the conclusion of this same poem he wrote these famous lines:

Do I contradict myself?
 Very well then . . . I contradict myself.
 I am large . . . I contain multitudes.¹⁴

What others regard as contradictions, as flaws, Whitman proclaims to be fulfilment and freedom. A specific expression of this freedom was the frank bisexual feelings evident in the first version of *Leaves of grass*. The world's 'procreant urge' is a force of love, and, for Whitman, this love is not constrained by heterosexual strictures. Hence his poetry is both an aesthetic creation, but it is also a social vision of a new way of people relating to one another in community—one very much spiritual in the sense defined above, but not at all religious in the estimate of Whitman's Christian contemporaries.

A second artistic achievement rife with an alternative social vision is African-American 'blues' music. The theologian James Cone has written:

The blues are 'secular spirituals'. They are **secular** in the sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are **spirituals** because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience.¹⁵

The blues effect a transformed valuation of worldly experience, including human sexuality; they share this power with Whitman's

poetry. Yet the blues, says Cone, also give expression to unique elements of black experience. They do so especially in their affirmation of black identity amidst a culture that mostly obscures black people's presence; they do this also in their achievement of excellence despite an ambient society that presents African-Americans with many obstacles and few opportunities; and preeminently they do so in their sustenance of the capacity of black people to love even while being the object of much hate. Blues music, continues Cone, manifests and effects an 'historical transcendence' in which black people overcome worldly restrictions and realize 'a being not made with hands'.¹⁶ In doing so the blues deliver protest, enliven hope, and point the way to an alternative way of human beings living together amidst their diversity and commonality.

From these several examples it is evident that as a descriptive rubric 'secular spirituality' encompasses important traditions like ecological idealism, holistic medicine, and visionary art. It applies to important figures like Hippocrates and Darwin, and Whitman and Bessie Smith, and Nietzsche and Einstein. As different as these figures were from one another, they were all willing to speak about a spiritual aspect of life while declining to cast such reflection in the language of any traditional religion. The rubric excludes significant options also. It excludes expressly religious spiritualities. It also excludes artists too venal to aspire to anything more than diverting entertainment; and it excludes secular figures more positivist than Einstein and more historicist than Nietzsche. For instance, the physicist Steven Weinberg has said that the more he learns about the world as a cosmic whole, the less meaning it seems to have for the lives and hopes of individual human beings.¹⁷ The contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty criticizes Nietzsche for harbouring a residual Platonism, because, says Rorty, while rejecting all forms of idealism, Nietzsche nevertheless fled from the radical contingency of life in his search for some variety of personal wholeness.¹⁸ By the definitions just given Weinberg and Rorty are fully secular, but not at all spiritual.

The examples of scientists, philosophers, and artists are somewhat unrepresentative of the social phenomena of secular spirituality which includes the views and practices of persons who are not intellectuals and aspects of culture which are not prestigious. For instance, the spiritual dimension of sports concerns perhaps the most pervasive leisure activity of contemporary popular culture, and the spiritual meaning of social justice struggle emerges from a social

phenomenon not rooted in the middle classes. Also, providers of holistic health practices and radical forms of psychotherapy are often regarded as eccentric, if not dangerous, by the professional establishments to which they are related. Some expressions of secular spirituality are viewed askance even by many religious intellectuals. Much 'New Age spirituality' is dismissed by orthodox theologians as obscurantist combinations of religious exotica and ersatz science. Such strictures are not binding for the rubric of secularity offered here; its aim is simply to denominate the diverse forms of secular activity that have been widely accorded spiritual significance.

Many practitioners of secular spirituality will be themselves religionists rather than secularists. Thus part of the significance of secular spirituality concerns what followers of established religious spiritualities might learn from their relatively more innovative secular counterparts. Different religious traditions respond differently to influences emanating from secular quarters, some traditions being more receptive than others, all receiving such influence in ways peculiar to their intellectual styles and institutional processes. In the most general terms, such influence comes in two varieties. It occurs in one way when a religious tradition appropriates aspects of what is most celebrated and powerful in secular culture. The institutions and theories of natural science certainly have this standing today, and when a religious spirituality learns from a spirituality of scientific inquiry it does so on the premise that excellence in religion and science share some root similarity. Thomas Aquinas and subsequent Thomists have been quick to affirm that the various modalities of truth have a common source, which, for them, is God—the creator of the entire world.

Yet the secular world can influence religion in a quite opposite way. Protest and resistance to what secular society most highly esteems and most severely enforces may be expressions of a secular spirituality that warrants comparison with the radical nature of many religious values. Socialist political movements, especially those of a revolutionary character, have certainly been anathematized by established financial interests, yet in some contexts they have also been forces for revitalizing traditional biblical visions of social justice and traditional Confucian values of cohesive community life. In this second variety of influence, religious persons learn from secular criticism of social evils and shortcomings, and perhaps they learn most from secular criticisms of religion itself.

These two manners of influence are not incompatible; for instance, they have a certain sort of dialectical complementarity in the

Christian thinking of persons like Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.¹⁹ Each was deeply critical of Christianity as an institutional religion, and each was receptive to the possibility that God's grace is present in quite humble, secular ways. The considerable contrariety with which these Christian theologians assess religion is attributable to their profound sense of how Christian persons and institutions have forfeited claim to the deeper meaning of that appellation. An equally profound apprehension of God's freedom and grace, specifically as manifest in the humble but potent ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, motivates them to allow secular beliefs and behaviours to be vehicles of sacred meaning.

This last point is suggestive of a second way in which secular spirituality figures in the lives of contemporary men and women. Instead of occurring in a relatively pure form, as the only variety of spirituality that an individual is willing to affirm, it often occurs as part or moment within a more traditional religious spirituality. In the West this is especially the case for ecumenical Christians and liberal Jews. Elements of feminist and ecological spirituality, for instance, are embraced by many such persons who know full well that they contradict aspects of their own religious tradition and that they find their most direct inspiration from principles primarily secular in origin. An especially important secular principle of this sort is the ethical enjoinder to respect the integrity of other cultures and religions. When this respect is interpreted actively, as encouraging conversation with others and even change in oneself, then this aspect of secular spirituality comes to serve as a bridge between different religious traditions. Although there are enjoinders in most religions to respect and learn from others, secular forms of spirituality are more intrinsically pluralistic and undogmatic, and so perhaps their most crucial service to contemporary society is their profoundly committed celebration of both diversity and civility.

NOTES

¹ For the book *Spirituality and the secular quest*, a projected volume in the Crossroad Publishing Company series on *World spirituality*, I use the following categorization of the various types of secular spirituality:

Nature	Culture
Scientific Inquiry	Arts
Ecological Activism	Sports
Naturalistic Recreations	Games

Society

Social Justice Struggle

Feminism

Alternative Forms of Community Life

Self

Radical Psychotherapy

Twelve-Step Programmes

Holistic Health Practices

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue: a study in moral theory*, 2nd ed (Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p 187.

³ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990), p 71.

⁴ For a direct acknowledgement of kinship with MacIntyre's *After virtue*, see: *Ibid.*, p 246 (p 20n).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 77.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of pure reason*, trans Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St Martin's Press, 1965), pp 297ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 300.

⁸ For more on Nietzsche as a radical philosopher and as a proponent of secular spirituality, see my article: 'Nietzsche on solitude: the spiritual discipline of the godless', *Philosophy today* 32.4 (Winter 1988) pp 346-358.

⁹ Tim Beardsley, 'Gaia: the smile remains, but the lady vanishes', *Scientific American* 261.6 (December 1989), pp 35-36.

¹⁰ J. E. Lovelock, *Gaia: a new look at life on earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p xii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 11.

¹² *The autobiography of Andrew T. Still with a history of the discovery and development of the science of osteopathy* (Salem, N.H.: Ayer Company, Publishers, 1972).

¹³ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of grass: the first (1855) edition*, ed Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Press, 1961), pp 26-27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 85 (51).

¹⁵ James H. Cone, *The spirituals and the blues: an interpretation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), p 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 127.

¹⁷ Note Weinberg's concluding reflections in his popular text: *The first three minutes: a modern view of the origin of the universe* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), p 144.

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p 43.

¹⁹ For more on Bonhoeffer's conception of 'Christian worldliness', see my article, 'Bonhoeffer, Nietzsche, and secular spirituality', *Encounter* 52.4 (Autumn 1991).